

Meeting The Man That Started It All

What I Learned From A Day With Dorfman

By: Brian M. Cain, MS, CAA – Peak Performance Coach

Special To *Collegiate Baseball*

Richmond, VT

Thursday, August 09, 2007

During the summer of 1998 I was pitching for the Eastern Tides (Connecticut) or the New England Collegiate Baseball League. I was a struggling pitcher from The University of Vermont, trying to find my pitching abilities that had seemed to vanish since I had graduated from high school. My roommate was Mike Leavy, a catcher from Dartmouth College. The book he left on the table that changed my life forever was *The Mental Game of Baseball* by H.A. Dorfman.

I remember picking up *The Mental Game of Baseball* and not being able to put it down. That was a first. *The Mental Game of Baseball* was the first book I remember reading from cover to cover. It grabbed me and held my attention like no other book had up to that point in my life.

I was looking, looking for something or someone that would help me turn my career around. Unfortunately for me, I got injured and my career was over shortly thereafter. A career in which maybe could have had a more successful outcome, had I been turned on to the Mental Game by a coach at an earlier age.

I had a great work ethic. Was a good teammate and wanted to succeed more than most. That was the biggest problem. I wanted it TOO much. I wanted to be so good that I could not get out of my own way. I was a mental midget, but have come to realize that there are no mental midgets, only people who are mentally trained and people who are not.

Reading *The Mental Game of Baseball* inspired me to explore the psychological and mental aspects of the game. I read Dorfman's four other books, *The Mental ABC's of Pitching*, *The Mental Keys To Hitting*, *Coaching The Mental Game*, and his autobiography *Persuasion of my Days*. These books captivated me and motivated me to pursue a degree in Sport Psychology with the author of another tremendous Mental Game book called *Heads-Up Baseball*, by Ken Ravizza and Tom Hanson.

Ken Ravizza remains to this day the single most influential person in my life. I owe him everything. He has been a true friend and a mentor that I only hope all aspiring coaches have an opportunity to come in contact with. But Harvey Dorfman and *The Mental Game of Baseball* was my first taste of the psychological aspects of baseball.

Ten years after first reading *The Mental Game of Baseball*, through a mutual friend, I was able to spend a day with Dorfman. Below are the highlights and inexpensive experience I gained from meeting one of my greatest heroes and from meeting a man solely

responsible for providing me with my life's mission of being a successful Mental Game of Baseball Coach, and to giving back to the game what it has given me.

Awareness – Strategy – Implementation

One of the foundations of the Mental Game that Dorfman talked about was “developing an awareness in the athlete”. An awareness of what their self-talk and thoughts are and an awareness of what situations tend to put players into a state where they perform at less than their best.

He said, “Once athletes have an awareness of what they are thinking and feeling, they can do something to change it. What you are aware of, you can control. What you are unaware of will control you. Getting athletes and coaches to become aware of what they do to perform at their best is equally important as to get them to know what they are doing when they perform at less than their best.”

Once the coach or athlete has an awareness of what is hurting their performance, the next step is to develop a strategy to get you back into your peak performing state.

“Once the athlete is aware, they then can develop strategies to use to shift their thinking to something that is going to be task relevant and help their performance,” Dorfman said. “Once athletes are aware, the goal is to educate them on a strategy they can use to perform better. There is not one strategy that will work for all in every situation. There is no cookbook approach to sport psychology. It is about knowing the athlete and finding a strategy that works for them.”

“Once the athlete has an awareness and a strategy to use, the final piece of the performance puzzle is for them to IMPLEMENT the strategy. I often use the example: $K-A=0$. Knowledge minus action equals no change. ACTION must take place for there to be any performance improvement. Implementation of the strategy must happen.

“When an athlete has awareness and a strategy they must USE the strategy that they have. As a Mental Game coach, once the athlete has developed the awareness and we have worked with them to develop a strategy, the responsibility becomes theirs to implement it,” Dorfman said. “Nobody can do that for them. It is the responsibility of the man in the arena to use what he knows.”

Others Trying To Take Credit For Athlete Success

When an athlete reaches the pinnacle of their career, the major leagues, people will come out of the woodwork to try and become a part of their success. One thing that successful athletes need to learn is who they should listen to and who they should let go in one ear and out the other.

“Many times coaches will try to change a pitcher's or a player's mechanics to do something the way the coach wants them to because then the coach can satisfy his ego by taking some of the credit for the success of the athlete,” Dorfman said. “If a player is good enough to make it to the upper echelon of sport, they have found a way that works

for them. It may not look great, and it may not be the most 'economical way' scientifically, but if it works for the athlete and it is the athlete's natural mechanic, why change it?"

"Athletes and coaches need to use a filter when listening to others who have their own best interest in mind, not the best interest of the athlete."

Constant Reminders

One of the things I hear all the time in my work with athletes is "Cain, you always tell us the same things." As a young Mental Game coach I often will then try to find new ways to teach the same material or will try to find other areas of the Mental Game for us to explore. However, the reason I am having the conversation with the athlete in the first place is because they are not doing what they know.

"The two words I hear the most are 'I Know'. I hear that all the time," Dorfman said. "The athlete has to understand that it is not *what they know* that matters it is *what they do* that counts. If they know what to do, but don't do what they know, they are no better off than the person who has no clue about what to do."

It is the constant repetitions of the basic Mental Game fundamentals that lead to success over the course of the player's career. I think Rod Delmonico, former head coach at The University of Tennessee and Dave Serrano, head coach at UC Irvine, said it best when they said: "baseball is a marathon, not a sprint."

Many athletes know what to do, but over the course of running their marathon and playing their season, they forget some of the fundamental Mental Game skills, such as routines and deep breathing, that all they need is often a quick "brain tune-up" or reminder of what they already know but are not doing.

Compete in the moment, live in the big picture

One of the concepts that Dorfman stressed to me is that athletes play at their best when they play in the present moment. When you live in the moment and play one pitch at a time you give yourself the best chance for success. However, with the pressures of moving up through the minor leagues or through the college recruiting process, players can often get pulled mentally in all different directions.

"One of the common faults I see with baseball players is that they get caught thinking about things that are outside their realm of control," Dorfman said. "When players are doing great they are playing in the moment, but live in the big picture. They understand the politics of professional baseball and realize that so many factors are outside of their control."

"When athletes struggle they will play in the big picture of things and see statistical situations such as 'If I go 2 for 3 today I will be hitting over .300.' And they live in the moment which can cause stress. For example they overanalyze when one of their teammates gets called up and they wonder why they were not the one to get the

promotion. Athletes perform at their best when they play in the moment, pitch by pitch and live in the big picture, focusing on the long term goals of their career, and don't get caught up in the day to day politics and things outside of their control."

Relaxed Muscles – Aggressive Mentality

When baseball players struggle it can often be linked to two factors: the player is competing with tension in their muscles or are playing with a passive mentality. The best players in the game compete with relaxed muscles and an aggressive mentality.

"When players struggle they will often be looking for the perfect pitch or try to make the perfect pitch and can compete with a passive mentality," Dorfman said. "That is a recipe for disaster. Athletes want to play with a relaxed intensity. They want aggression in their mind but relaxation in their bodies. The athletes that look like they are playing with an ease about them have figured this out."

Important To Have The Right Enemies

One of the statements that Dorfman made that I thought was excellent was, "it is important to have the right enemies."

"All too often coaches, especially young coaches, try to be friends and try to be liked by all the players and other coaches, etc.," Dorfman said. "The problem with that is when you try to be everyone's friend and get along with everyone, you can often lose sight of what you truly believe in."

"There are a lot of people out there that are self-serving and only have their best interests at heart. Those are the people that I would consider to have as enemies. When everyone else thinks that this person is a dink, and they truly are, why would you sacrifice your true beliefs to become friends with that person anyway? All you are doing is jeopardizing your credibility and backing down from what you truly believe."

Be Painfully Honest

One concept that truly described Dorfman was his encouragement to be painfully honest. There is not enough time to beat around the bush and tip toe as not to piss people off. If you want to be effective you must get to the core quickly and be willing to call people on their bull sh*t.

"There just is not enough time to dance around the issues. You need to call a spade a spade and get right to the point," Dorfman said. "Athletes want and need that. They will respect you as a coach for saving them the time and cutting through the crap. Get to the core of the issue. Get to the point and when you are dealing with the point is the only time that progress can be made."

Anticipation is worse than Participation

When athletes have to wait around for a competition to start they can often psych themselves out by overanalyzing due to the anticipation of the competition. Often you

will see this manifest in a pitcher struggling in the first inning only to turn it around and have a great rest of the game. The only problem with that is, it may already be too late.

“The anticipation for the athlete can often be more stressful and tiresome than the actual game,” claims Dorfman. “Athletes need to develop strategies and skills that they can use to take their mind off the game and off of things that they can’t control.”

“Once you get into the flow of the game it is easy. Having a routine in place that you go through to help you separate and segment from being the athlete to being the person outside of the athlete will help to minimize stress, minimize the pressure and anticipation, and allow you to play at your best when it is needed most.”

*Brian M. Cain, MS, CAA is one of the Top Peak Performance Coaches specializing in the Mental Game of Baseball. For a limited time he is offering a **FREE** Inner Circle for coaches looking to gain an edge on coaching The Mental Game. Log on to www.firstroundmentalcoaching.com www.briancainblog.com and www.briancain.com for more information.*

Also, be sure to check out Harvey Dorfman's great books The Mental Game of Baseball, The Mental ABS's of Pitching, The Mental Keys to Hitting, Coaching The Mental Game and his autobiography, Persuasion of My Days. On sale at your local bookstores and on the web.