



# Mental Game: Mound Management

By Alan Jaeger

## Introduction

(Part 1 of a 2 Part Series)

### Mental Game Management: In Game Strategies for Pitchers and Hitters

Process Oriented: To be consumed by your current action independent of the consequences of your action

The “Mental Game” may be a rather broad topic, but ultimately, it can be broken down into two fundamental categories: “Game Management” and “Mental Practice”.

In a recent Collegiate Baseball article entitled “Mental Practice Plans” (January, 2012), I specifically addressed the importance of implementing Mental Practice on a DAILY basis as part of any player or coach’s Practice Plan. Though I still feel that Mental Practice (e.g. Relaxation, Visualization, Meditation) is where the rubber hits the road for a player’s Mental Game development, how players strategically “Manage” their mental approach in “Game situations” is also paramount to a player’s performance between the lines.

This concept of “Managing the Game” naturally has many aspects (pitching, hitting, defense, throwing, base running). However, for the purpose of this article I am only going to address two of the most primary aspects of baseball: Pitching (Mound Management) and Hitting (Batters Box Management).

## Part 1: Mound Management

*“Be great at Committing to your Process — everything else is secondary”*

Being “Process Oriented” (as opposed to Result Oriented) is the single most important principle to understand about a player’s Mental Game approach. Being Process Oriented means that you are so committed to this action that the results of your action no longer exist. The present moment is all that matters. And the instinctive nature of an athlete can take over because “thoughts” cease to exist.

This state of mind, which has also been characterized by being in The Zone or being Unconscious, allows the athlete to feel a sense of relaxation, freedom and trust because the only thing that matters is NOW — the mind is no longer concerned with what happened, or what may happen because it is too preoccupied with what is happening.

The irony is that this state of mind seems to be more familiar in practice situations because there tends to be little “real” consequences at stake in practice, and little to think about. However, in game situations, when the uniform goes on, statistics count, wins and losses are at stake and peers and scouts are watching, this environment tends to invite a lot more “variables”. Because

things begin to matter, players seem to be more vulnerable to focusing on the consequences of their actions, rather than the actions themselves. And these “variables” can bring elements that didn’t exist in the practice environment, like stress, tension, distractions and over thinking.

In the case of a Pitcher, these variables may include: the “consequences of my next pitch”, “thinking about what may happen or what did happen”, “worrying how my coaches/teammates are judging me”, “who’s in the stands”, “statistics”, “mechanics” and so on. These variables are countless and have nothing to do with a pitcher’s ultimate goal — to identify what his or her Process (approach) is, Commit to it and Trust it.

## Constant Versus Variables

The only time you see obstacles is when you take your eyes off of your focus

Whereas consequences and results can have countless “variables” the Process is more of a “constant” — it is a few, predetermined components that each individual pitcher identifies as their key to executing their best pitch possible.

For example, the following basic elements illustrate what a typical pitcher’s Process could look like: 1) Take a Deep Breath, 2) Look for a Focal Point (Intent), 3) Have a simple mechanical cue, and 4) Attack the Focal Point (Commit). Because these four elements (in this example) are both tactical and knowable it will tend to be very relaxing to the mind. Also, because they are constants, ANYTHING else that may come up in a pitcher’s mind outside of these constants (e.g. the future or past, the consequences or results of their action), can now be considered a “variable”. Thus, your Process keeps things simple — it is based on a few predetermined elements that you have identified as putting you in the best position possible to execute your most ideal pitch; elements that are intrinsically motivated, repeatable, and independent of the variables going on around you.

The beauty of having this Process Oriented plan in place is that whatever components you choose, they are yours and they are knowable. Again, it is a relief (and advantageous) to the mind to know that there are just a few constants in place that can be relied on rather than having to worry about innumerable “variables” that may come up in game situations.

Conversely, without a Process in place for the mind to focus on pitchers may be vulnerable to over thinking simply because baseball has so much “dead time” (30 seconds between pitches, 30 minutes between at-bats), and because it’s a statistics driven sport (e.g. Batting Average/ERA). It’s probably not unusual for players to focus on things in game situations like, “how many hits do I have”, “how many innings have I thrown”, “what inning is it”, “what’s the score”, “where’s my batting average or era at now”, and so on. Dead time and Statistics are two factors that can put players in a vulnerable position in game situations. And performing independent of “thoughts and statistics” could be seen as quite challenging — thoughts that may have nothing to do with a player’s ideal approach or Process — thoughts that have nothing to do with putting a player in the best position possible to execute their plan.

## Defining A Typical Pitchers Process

From my experience of working with pitchers over the years I

have found that the characteristics of their Process tends to be very similar. For example, in the previous section, where we defined the Process with four checkpoints — 1) Deep Breath, 2) Look for Focal Point, 3) Mechanical Cue, and 4) Commitment to Focal Point — I have found that most pitchers eventually identify with a similar approach. And it makes sense because all four of these checkpoints are reliable, tactical and chronological with regard to a pitchers bottom line.

Let's briefly go over each one of these checkpoints and see if any of these components resonate with you.

#### **Checkpoint #1**

Taking a Deep Breath is a good reminder to slow down and relax — most people in this day and age have a better understanding of the beneficial role breathing plays in our physical and mental health (especially if you have a daily mental practice that may involve breath work, tuning into your breath may be a natural fit and starting point to your Process).

#### **Checkpoint #2**

Having a Focal Point is great because pitchers ultimately want to know where they are going (Intent/End Point), and this gives the mind somewhere tangible to go (“energy follows attention”). In the natural course of events, once you have given the mind a specific place to go, you have positioned it to “complete” this intention.

#### **Checkpoint #3**

A Mechanical Cue can be a great “physical” reminder as part of your process. I personally liked the feeling of hitting my balance point or “checking in” before I went to the plate. For others, it may be something about your front side, direction, and so on. This physical cue can be a great link between your Focal Point/Intention, and your last step, your Finish.

#### **Checkpoint #4**

Your Commitment/Conviction to “finish” the job is very important because the mind not only wants to know where it's starting point or Intention is, but equally important, the completion of this Intention. This sense of Intent (where do I want to go) and Finish (Commitment/Conviction) are fundamental to most, if not all pitchers, consciously or unconsciously.

(Note regarding Mechanics): If you feel a mechanical checkpoint is helpful to your Process, that's great. Ultimately, just know that your Process may be as simple as having a Focal Point (Intention), and Attacking your Focal Point (Commitment/Conviction). Therefore, don't feel a need to have a mechanical checkpoint in place. I've been told by a number of pitchers that one of the reasons they love this approach is because the feeling of seeing and attacking their focal point actually eliminates their need to focus on their mechanics in game situations. Again, try a few different checkpoints and see what works for you.

The point is, whatever feels right for you is YOUR Process. It could be one element, like, “take a deep breath and go”, or it could be “see my focal point and attack”. Regardless, your Process is simply about controlling the 1, 2, 3 or 4 keys to executing your best pitch possible. Once you know this, it is very empowering because you realize that pitching now comes down to being GREAT at what you can control, your Process, as opposed to trying to control countless, changing variables that may arise simply because you are in a game situation.

#### **Identifying Your Process**

Control what's controllable — Let the rest go

If you are a pitcher, I'd suggest that you take a few moments and think about a few, common characteristics that occur when you execute the perfect pitch. Generally speaking, less is more, so 1 to 3 components is probably ideal. It could be something physical, mental or visual — it could be a feeling or a sense. Whatever feels right is all that matters. It is YOUR Process — those components that you know will put you in the best position possible to execute the most ideal pitch, repeatedly.

You will probably find it very helpful to start with what I call your “bookends” — where you start, or your Focal Point (Intention) and how you Finish, or your Commitment/Conviction. If so, figure out if your starting point or Intention is a general area (catchers glove), or a specific area (E in Easton). Next, figure out what kind of word works for you with regard to your Finish. For example, I happened to love the word “Attack”. Other suggestions: Conviction, Commitment, Aggressive, Explode.

Once you've identified your Intent (opening the door) and your Finish (closing the door), fill in the blanks with other pieces, like the Role of your Breath and possibly a Mechanical Checkpoint. Perhaps it feels good to take a deep breath before each pitch — perhaps you like the idea of one mechanical checkpoint (balance point, front side, direction, etc). The bottom line is to establish those elements and/or feelings that are reliable, repeatable and give you a sense of knowingness that these components are the key to executing the best pitch possible.

#### **The Role of the Breath and Visualization with your Process**

The Breath is always happening now

Though a great deal of time was spent on “mental practice” in the previous article (January 2012, Collegiate Baseball), I'd like to revisit the topic due to the influence that Breathing and Visualization can have on your Process.

Much has been written about the role and benefits of the Breath over the past several years. Among other things, the breath can be very calming, relaxing and quieting to the body and mind. But it has other great benefits that can be especially helpful for an athletes “process” in a performance setting. For example, because the breath is always happening now, taking a deep breath is a reminder to not only bring your attention to the present moment, but it's a great way to initiate your Process.

Also, the breath is not a thought. Therefore, if your mind does start thinking of things that are outside of your process, taking a deep breath is a reminder to come back to a non-thinking place. Remember, your Process is designed around checkpoints that are ultimately feelings, not thoughts. Therefore, a deep breath can really help you reconnect to your Process if you find that your thoughts are trying to take your attention somewhere else. Lastly, if you have a regular mental practice in place that involves breath work, the familiarity of taking a deep breath can reconnect you unconsciously to a calm, clear and focused place.

#### **The Benefits of Visualization, Pitching Lanes**

What you can imagine is real  
Pablo Picasso

Because a pitchers Process will tend to entail a starting point and end point (lane), it can be very valuable to teach your mind how to make this connection and strengthen this pathway through Vi-

ualization. Visualization is the practice of seeing (feeling) and executing in your mind's eye an ideal action that you would want to promote or reinforce. And because the body doesn't differentiate between physical practice (muscle memory) and the mind visualizing the physical practice (muscle memory), you can actually get a lot of work done to strengthen these pathways and improve your pitching accuracy without even picking up a baseball. In fact, one could argue that you could reinforce optimal muscle memory by executing 10 out of 10 perfect pitches in your mind, as opposed to actually being on the mound physically, where it would be considered successful to execute approximately 6 out of 10 perfect pitches (thus, the other 4 pitches could be considered "mixed" muscle memory).

Thus, you can really make a difference in your pitching accuracy by seeing specific visuals or "lanes" that reflect the exact, desired path of the ball from your release point to the end point. These "lanes" are typically the length of the pitch, and the diameter of a baseball (though some players may see a tunnel, track, string or white light). It is helpful to make everything as realistic as possible, so try and see the lane the same color as the baseball (white with red seams), the natural flight of the ball, and see yourself throwing through the lane, and not just getting on it (to simulate a real throw and the "finishing" aspect of your Process).

These lanes can be straight for a four seam fastball, and bend for breaking balls. Thus, the focal point and end point are the same for four seamed fastballs. But for most other pitches, the focal point and end point will be different. For example, if you wanted to work on your curve ball, you could try a focal point like the catchers left ear (focal point) and find that this starting point leads to the catchers right shin, on the outer third of the plate (for a right handed pitcher). As long as the Focal Point is in place (constant) and your Conviction to the focal point is the same (constant), this will lead to a repeatable end point. Experiment with these focal points until you get to a point where you find your ideal end point (Note: experiment first on a physical mound with a catcher to find out where your ideal lanes start and finish on anything that bends).

Once these lanes have been practiced in your mind it's like putting files in your computer — the mind will tend to look or hunt for these lanes whenever you are on the mound. Thus, in game situations, having a focal point will serve two important purposes: 1) it can initiate your Process, and 2) it can trigger your mind to hunt for the those lanes that you have worked on in your visualization.

Ultimately, all pitchers are going "somewhere", and are hopefully "committed" to that somewhere. Visualization is a very powerful tool because your mind, body, arm and fingers react as if it is actually making the pitch. It's neural programming, and the more you groove these lanes the more they can become a part of your "muscle memory". This muscle memory can really help to strengthen your identity and intimacy with your Process.

## Summary

### Be Great At Your Process

At the end of the day, the mind wants to keep things simple. It wants to know what the plan is, and follow through with it. It doesn't want to try and control the countless variables that may arise in game situations because people are in the stands and wins, losses and statistics are at stake. It wants to know a few constants that are both knowable and repeatable.

When pitchers are Process Oriented, they no longer have to worry about anything that's out of their control. The Process is something that has been identified based on predetermined elements that puts you in the best position possible to execute your most ideal pitch. Alas, pitching becomes all about Mastering Your Process — Being GREAT at your Process, and everything else really becomes secondary. With this approach, there's nothing else to think about. What a relief.

Ultimately, it starts with awareness — understanding the difference between being Process Oriented and Result Oriented. Once you've identified and built your Process the next step will be to practice your Process. It will probably make sense to start this practice in your bull-pens, but don't be surprised if you find that there is a smooth and natural transition to the mound. The idea that you've given your mind a precise and knowable game plan that feels true to you can carry over into game situations quickly. And this feeling can be very sustainable for the long run because it's components are known, consistent and reliable.

But keep in mind that if the mind has had years of "practice" at being result oriented from the past, it may take some time to get used to shifting your attention away from the old patterns (worrying about things that are out of your control) that have come with the variables of game situations. This is where having a daily mental practice (relaxation, visualization, meditation) can be paramount to helping you not only clear your mind, relax your body and practice your pitching lanes, but provide a consistent space that is moving you away from old patterns and more deeply into your Process.

Alan Jaeger has consulted with several high school/college programs including UCLA, Arizona and Cal State Fullerton, and MLB Organizations including the Texas Rangers, Los Angeles Angels and Cleveland Indians. For more information about Jaeger Sports and their products ("Thrive On Throwing 2" DVD or Digital Download, J-Bands and Mental Training Book, "Getting Focused, Staying Focused"), please visit their website at [www.jaegersports.com](http://www.jaegersports.com) or call 310-665-0746. You may also download additional articles/videos at [http://www.jaegersports.com/press\\_articles.php/](http://www.jaegersports.com/press_articles.php/), and Youtube, keyword jaeger sports. Twitter: @jaegersports