

## Mental Practice Plans

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By Alan Jaeger



### *How adding 10 minutes to your daily practice can turn a good season into a great one*

This is not Football, Basketball or Hockey -- it is Baseball. And of the four “major” sports in the United States, baseball is by far the most mentally challenging and demanding. Demanding, because there is so much dead time compared to these other sports. Dead time gives baseball players lots of time to think, and thinking is often at the root of tension, pressure and anxiety. Challenging, because baseball players spend most of their time on physical preparation and little or no time on the one area that is going to impact their career the most. Yes, the mental game is being talked about a lot more these days, but talking isn’t good enough. It’s time to cut to the chase. Doing something about it is where the rubber hit’s the road.

### **Addressing The Mental Game: Prioritizing Your Practice Plan**

Practice plans have been passed down for generations, and they of course have plenty of merit. But at what point (and what cost) are we going to continue to center our practice plans around physical preparation when we know that between the lines, the game is at least 90 percent mental? Hitting, throwing and running bases are all indispensable, as is bunt defense, pitchers fielding practice and first and third run downs.

But this is the 21st century -- times have changed. People in all walks of life are looking deeper for answers. Major corporations are putting a ton of money into creating a (mentally) healthier work environment by putting time aside for “self improvement”. Among other things, motivational speakers and yoga instructors are being brought in to help people relax and be more effective. When it comes to big business, they understand the bottom line...performance. Sacrificing some time out of an employees busy work schedule for “mental health” is viewed as a necessity. Yet, somehow this hasn’t seemed to translate into the baseball community. Not that some teams (The University of San Diego has incorporated relaxation exercises prior to every practice) and individual players haven’t made the adjustment, but quite frankly, it’s a drop in the bucket.

The good news is that society is changing for the better. More than any other generation in the past 50 years, this generation is privy to the reality that Mental Training is not only a credible field, but it’s application to sports and life is a essential. Which begs the question -- what are you doing to act on this reality? Until coaches start recognizing that Mental Practice is also an indispensable part of their daily practice plan, players are going to be deprived of developing the single most important asset in their career (their life), which is their mind.

The goal of this article is not to suggest that coaches have to go back to school to get their Master’s Degree in Sport Psychology. It is to give coaches a deeper understanding into why players perform a certain way, and more specifically, what can be done on a daily basis to support the players both from a strategic (terminology) point of view, as well as a practical point of view.

Because there are so many good books currently on the market that do address the strategy or psychology of the game, I will only touch on that at the end of this article (see Side Bar). Therefore, the remainder of this article is going to

address the role of mental practice. Done as a precursor to practice each day, each coach will be given enough information to lead his players through a 10 minute, mental training exercise or session that revolves around breath work.

Ultimately, whether we call “mental practice” relaxation, meditation or mental focusing time, the application of these exercises on a daily basis will have the greatest and most profound effect on your players minds. For without practice how can you expect any skill to be developed and maximized.

### **Understanding Where We Want To Be: The Zone, Locked In, Unconscious**

Having a great mental game is as much about understanding where we want to be, as where we don't want to be. When things are going well it seems like the mental game is simple. And when things aren't going so well the game can be very frustrating and complex. Understanding “how” we go in and out of these states of mind is extremely valuable.

In sports, we actually have many terms for this “optimal” state of mind. It's been referred to by many names, including “The Zone”, being “Unconscious” and being “Locked In”. The technical term for this state of mind is called a Peak State, and has very specific attributes, including: 1) the absence of thought, 2) a complete immersion with the action, 3) a sense of being process oriented, 4) a sense of calm or peace, and maybe most importantly, 5) a detachment from the outcome.

By understanding the components of a peak state of mind, we can better understand ways to train the mind in order to put it in alignment with this ideal state.

### **Identifying the Problem: Consequential/Result Oriented Thinking**

To better understand how to access this peak state, we have to first ask a very important question -- what is the current state our mind is in? To do this, we need to look further into those factors that are responsible for the infrastructure of how we think.

The most logical place to start with is the environment we're raised in. If you were raised in the United States chances are that you were exposed to a culture that breeds a state of mind that in many ways is the antithesis of the components of a peak state of mind. What I mean by this is that most people have been “programmed” by a society that places a great deal of emphasis on thinking and a preoccupation with the consequences or results of their actions. This preoccupation with thinking as opposed to reacting, and attachment rather than detachment from the outcome have become part of our psychology, and on a physical level, our neural pathways.

Attachment to the outcome is what is referred to as consequential, or “result oriented thinking”. Due to the nature of society most people are exposed to a great deal of this programming at an early age, including how we are “graded” in school, and how we are judged by our peers. Couple that with the culture of sports, where we are constantly measured by our statistics, our wins, losses and teammates, and you can see why it would make sense that our minds are conditioned to think about the results of our actions, rather than the action itself.

More so, these behaviors are more likely to be prevalent in game situations, where a greater premium is placed on performance. Though a peak state of mind tells us that we would like to stay in the present and be detached from the outcome, the mind tends to default to it's old programming, because this is what it knows -- this is what it's familiar with.

### **The “Default” System**

Thus, you can see how vital a mental practice would for the typical player who's default system is trending him away from a peak state of mind. This is where the role of mental practice becomes vital. Though good advice and mental strategies can be very effective toward changing the mind for the better, mental practice is at the root of “unearthing” old programming, and replacing it with new programming. Ultimately, we want the mind to be well practiced at being

clear, relaxed and process oriented...we want the mind to default to a “peak” state...a state devoid (or at least minimized) of consequential or result oriented thinking.

This is perhaps the most critical concept to understand about making a change in your mental game for the better. For without understanding this “default system”, players may continue to put thousands of hours of hard work into physical practice and not understand why it’s not translating into game situations; why being “immersed in the present moment and detached from the outcome” is the exception, rather than the rule.

Understanding why the mind tends to default into consequential thinking when our sole objective is to be in a non-thinking and process oriented state, is crucial.

### **Creating A New Default System**

One question I can hear being asked is, “Why is mental practice necessary if we could just tell our minds not to think about results or consequences, and just think about the “process”? Well, that would be a good start, but the mind has years of old programming, and to change the default takes a consistent and committed practice. Ultimately, it is the practice that leads to the change of old ways of thinking, old behaviors and new neural pathways.

### **Breath Work: The Core Ingredient Of Your Mental Practice**

Mental Practice is a very broad field that includes breathing exercises, imagery, visualization, affirmations, and so on. You can also get forms of mental practice from among other things, Yoga, Martial Arts and being in Nature. Anything that brings the mind into a state of “presence”, a state of peace and quiet can be categorized as mental practice. But the most common element that I’ve found in mental practice revolves around the breath.

There are many reasons why the breath is at the center of mental training exercises universally, including several physiological benefits (relaxation, lower blood pressure, oxygenation), but some of the other profound benefits may be more subtle. For example, the breath is always happening now, which symbolically, can be extremely helpful in teaching the mind how to be present. The breath is not a thought, thus, the more time you spend with your breath, the more time you are training your mind how to be in a “no-thought” state. Again, the absence of thought and being present are two major characteristics of a Peak State of mind. Thus, the breath alone can be a catalyst in changing the mind from a result oriented default, to a process oriented default.

Other benefits that can often be associated with breath work include calmness of mind, improved concentration, focus, patience, discipline and inner trust. Inner trust, which is similar to the term confidence, is a by product of spending time in a relaxing and comfortable space each day, and getting to know your self and your inner workings. Considering that your breath keeps you alive 24 hours a day, it’s safe to say that a lot can be gained simply by spending time, appreciating and understanding our breath.

### **A Daily Mental Practice**

*“Peak Performance is like an accident...the more mental practice is done, the more accident prone you become”*

#### **Zen Saying**

The remainder of this article will provide you with enough information to take your players through a daily, mental training exercise or session. The session, outlined below, is based on 4 Steps and is gauged to last approximately 10 minutes (though, it’s ideal to allot for some extra time at the end in the event that your players are very relaxed, and are in what may be a very productive place). You’ll also notice that each Step has an “explanation”, followed by an “implementation”.

Remember, it’s not about being perfect -- it’s about showing up each day to do the best you can, and being consistent as the guide. Because the session is designed around “keeping it simple”, you’ll hopefully find a

sense of comfort and ease in no time.

Step 1: Getting Present (2 Minutes)

Step 2: Connecting to the Breath (2 Minutes)

Step 3: Counting the Breath (5 Minutes)

Step 4: Transitioning out of the Session (1-5 Minutes)

### **Step 1: Explanation -- Getting Present: Get Into The Body And Out Of The Head**

The first goal of the session is to get your players present. Though being “present” sounds relatively simple, when you consider the amount of things that have gone on during the day or the amount of thoughts that most people have about the past or future, the act of being present takes practice. Therefore, be sure to start out the session by giving your players a chance to bring their attention to the present moment by “moving away” from their thoughts. The ability to get present is not only a skill, but is a great state of mind to establish in order to optimize the mental training practice.

The first thing I’ll do to get a player (or team) present is to remind them that any thoughts about the past or future can be “addressed or dealt with” once the session is over. In essence, you are giving your players “permission” to not have to think about anything except the session itself. Next, I will bring their attention to their body, starting with the feet, and slowly moving up to the head. Getting into the body is a great way to get “out of our thoughts”. This attention to their body also serves another great purpose because most people are not aware of what’s going on in their bodies. As each player focuses on each part of their body (starting from their feet and making their way up to the top of their head) you are able to bring awareness to areas of their body that may be tense. Learning how to bring stillness and relaxation to their body is another great way of bringing stillness and relaxation to their mind.

### **Step 1: Implementation (3 Minutes)**

To get your players present, start at their feet and guide them up to their head. I’ll start by asking the players to become aware of their feet, and “look” for any tension that they may have there, and “release” the tension by “flexing” the foot for a couple of seconds, and then letting the foot release. I’ll actually have them flex the foot on the inhale, hold for 3 seconds, and release the foot on the exhale, keeping the exhale slow and smooth. The exhale is the “relaxation” phase of the breath. I will gradually move up from the feet to the ankles, knees, thighs, core, back, chest, shoulders, arms/hands, neck and face.

Step 2: Explanation -- Deepening The Presence: Getting To Know Your Breath

Once the players have scanned their entire body and released any tension they may have been holding onto, I will next bring them to their breath. The breath is often at the core of mental training exercises for several reasons. As we talked about earlier, optimal breathing brings more oxygen to the cells (relaxation), helps remove stress, helps clear the mind and is conveniently located at the center of the body (the diaphragm is where the breath originates from) and away from the head. Again, because the breath is always happening now, it serves as a constant reminder to bring the players attention to the present moment and away from engaging their thoughts.

### **Step 2: Implementation (2 Minutes)**

Now that the players are positioned to be fully present they are ready to heighten this presence through their breath. Though you will be taking them through some actual “breath work” in Step 3, this part of the session is

designed to allot a couple of minutes for players to simply get acquainted with their breath. This may sound a bit funny, but our breath is such a fundamental, primordial and wondrous part of us -- it serves us with so many valuable functions, not to mention the fact that it's important enough to keep us alive. So, I'll actually have the players "investigate" the breath, get to know it, watch it, observe it, appreciate it and look for it's idiosyncrasies for a couple of minutes.

This is a very powerful exercise because people don't often watch their breath for the sake of watching their breath. A lot of insight can be gained through this little exercise. And ideally, it helps deepen the players state of relaxation.

### **Step 3: Explanation -- Counting the Breath/Allowing The Breath To Breathe You**

After the players have spent a few minutes getting present and acclimating themselves to their breath, Step 3 involves "breath work". In short, breath work is any one of a number of exercises that uses the breath as a focal point. The most basic exercise I teach is, "counting the breath". Eventually, when players get more skilled at counting their breath (or in some cases, may need more variety) I will integrate other forms of breath work, including "observational breathing" and "allowing the breath to breathe you".

Because each breath has two major phases (inhale and exhale), counting the breath simply means to attach a number to each of these two phases of the breath. As an example, when the player feels his first inhale, he assigns a "number 1". Likewise, when he feels his ensuing exhale, he would assign a "number 2". This counting would ideally continue on for 5 minutes or so, with the players reaching 50 or more. The goal is not necessarily to get to the highest number -- it's to stay completely present with the counting of each inhale, and each exhale, and not losing track.

After two weeks or so you may find that your players are able to do this exercise well, which means that they are ready for some more advanced exercises. Plus, like everything in life, diversity is important. Changing things up will help keep their interest. For weeks 3 and 4, you can add a new and more advanced form of breath work called "observing the breath", and possibly by weeks 5 and 6, you can work in another exercise whereby the individual would practice "allowing" the breath to dictate the pace, or in effect, allow the breath to "breathe them". In any case, each exercise is about quality, rather than quantity.

### **Step 3: Implementation (4 minutes)**

Once the players have had a couple of minutes to get acquainted with their breaths, at this point, you will want to instruct them to begin to "count their breath" on the next inhale, starting with the number 1. Throughout this period of time, keep reminding the players periodically to "keep their attention on either the counting of the inhale or exhale". In the early stages, these reminders can be very helpful.

For the rest of the four minute period, the players goal is to either be counting their inhale, or counting their exhale. For those players who didn't lose count they will probably be able to get to at least 50 or so, which would be very impressive.

### **Step 4: Explanation -- The Practice Culminates: Transitioning Out Of The Session**

Once the players have spent 7-9 minutes getting present, connecting to their body and doing some form of breath work, it is time to cue them to finish up their mental training session. I will almost always do this by "reminding them to bring their attention to the breath if it is not already there". Once I feel that everyone is focused on their breath again, I will tell them to take a deep breath, filling up their stomach area, mid chest and chest, and holding that deep breath for 3 seconds. I will then instruct them to exhale the air, "slowly and smoothly", and suggesting to them that "they are beginning to feel completely refreshed, clear minded, focused and present (I will change these suggestion as well, using terms like peaceful, calm, confident, energized, alert).

I will ask them to repeat this deep breath for at least 4-5 more times, always reinforcing these cues that “they are beginning to feel completely refreshed, clear minded, focused and present”.

As you continue to repeat these affirmations (hopefully, this is how the players are actually feeling), use the last few breaths to remind the players to “bring” these positive qualities into the rest of their day (practice, game, life). In other words, the players have hopefully been in a great mental and physical space. Keeping this “connection” going and “bringing” these feelings into the remainder of their day is one of the most important elements of their mental practice. This is what is meant by meditation in action. Where the benefits of what has happened in a meditative environment can be maintained and reinforced away from this environment. Ideally, the mental practice becomes who we are. This is one of the main reasons why I have found that it takes me a long time to get players out of the session -- they are often in such a good place (which is a sign that the body and mind are often deprived of this mind/body nourishment), and they want to stay (connected) in this place.

#### **Step 4: Implementation (1-5 minutes)**

The session is coming to a close. Your job is to help transition them back to the present moment, feeling energized, clear minded, refreshed, present, etc., and help bring this connection into the remainder of the day. It’s also a time to not rush anybody, because the extra time that players will “stay” in their session can have an exponential effect.

#### Neutrality: A Tool For Dealing With Thoughts

One of the most common occurrences during a mental training session is the potential distractions of thoughts. Thoughts can take us out of our state of presence by vying for our attention. The single best strategy I know of to help neutralize thoughts is to allow them to be, without judging them, fighting them or pushing them away. Being neutral means just that. It’s to not respond, judge or converse with your thoughts. When you are in your session, avoid labeling your thoughts as good or bad, right or wrong. They just are. So, if you feel them trying to get your attention, simply allow them to be and return your focus back to your breath, for example. It’s like someone calling you names...if you respond to them, they’ll continue to chirp at you because you are “feeding” them. If you don’t respond, they tend to lose interest and go away.

#### Addendum: Lengthening The Session

In time, the exercises will tend to come easier to both the players, and to you as the facilitator. After a few weeks of “10 minute sessions”, players will probably want to stay in the session longer. This is where you can add another “step” to lengthen the session by an additional 5- 10 minutes. The ideal place to do this in Step 3, immediately following the “counting of the breath”. Once the players have spent a few minutes counting their breath, I’ll cue them to discontinue the counting. At this point, I’ll suggest to them to simply relax and “let go”. By letting go, you are giving the players an opportunity to not “have to do anything”. This is a very important part of the practice because people often feel a need to always be doing “something”. This is a practice of “trusting” that it’s okay to “not” have to do anything...to let go. Trust and letting go (as opposed to control and trying too hard) are two important attributes that can be worked on at this point, not to mention the opportunity for the players to enter and even deeper state of relaxation.

I will also give them a visual metaphor to help them “let go”. One of my favorite metaphors has to do with laying on a raft, because most people can identify with the feeling of drifting on a raft, and allowing the current of the water to guide them. These are both metaphors of letting go. In either case, the goal of Step 3 is to use some breath work to keep the players present by counting the breath, and then cue the players to culminate the counting of the breath so they can simply relax and let go, or get on their raft.

## Summary

Changing behaviors is work, especially if these behaviors have had a lot of “practice“. Therefore, a daily mental practice is at the core of replacing old programming with new programming; of bringing the attention to a place of presence rather than the future and past; of training the mind how to trust action in favor of analysis. However, these are all earned skills, and like any skills take time to understand and change. But change is good, and is the key to creating an approach that defaults us to a peak state of mind. This is where we want to be -- free to let our natural instincts take over without the superficial consequences of what may or may not happen get in the way.

## Side Bar

As we saw, Mental Practice is the catalyst to making changes to your mental game at the core level. But even with this foundation in place, it is crucial to “extend” this mind-set into your daily life, on and off the playing field. This is what Game Management is about -- having a game plan away from your mental training sessions so that your “practice” becomes an extension of you, wherever you go. Even though the new groundwork is being laid in your sessions, having Game Management strategies that “bring to life” your mental practice work is what will be addressed in the following section.

## Game Management -- Identifying Your Process

*Why not focus on the one thing that supports you (constant) rather than the 1000 thoughts (variables) that may be getting in your way*

Though there are many good strategies or “anchors” that can help manage the game the one principle that serves as our baseline is the principle of being process oriented. The idea behind being process oriented has been around for many years. By definition, being process oriented and being present are interchangeable. As we saw earlier, being present and detached from the outcome are two major components of a peak state of mind. Also, once a player establishes a “process”, it can become very reliable and consistent. Finally, being process oriented can replace all of the potential thoughts (old programming) that may be vying for your attention about something that seems very important, like the results, or who’s watching you. But, applying it, without a daily dose of mental training exercises can be tricky to a mind that tends to default toward a results oriented behavior.

## Identifying Your Process

Though there are many situations on a baseball field to manage the game, most players earn their keep in one of two places: on the mound or in the batters box. This isn’t to say that identifying a process for playing defense, running the bases, etc, isn’t important and applicable, because it is. Ultimately, pitchers really need to put their attention on pitching (mound management), and position players, on hitting (batters box management).

As an example, when I work with pitchers we usually identify 2 or 3 components to their mental approach or “process” in game situations. Not so ironically, they are almost always the same: take a deep breath, have a specific focal point (e.g. the E in Easton on the catchers glove), and commit/attack/finish through the focal point. In all cases, the goal is to simply pick a few “constants” that help the pitcher stay committed to his process. Thus, if the mind wants to think about anything else (consequences/results), the pitcher knows that he has a fall back system to rely on that is a constant. (As you will see, this works hand in hand with the mental practice because the core of mental practice centers around the breath. Because the breath tends to help relax us, bring us to the present moment, becomes a focal point and teaches how to stay committed to the practice, mental practice helps bring us to a place each day where our process can be identified and familiarized).

Just as a pitcher has his process, a hitter will have a process as well. When dealing with hitters, they too have similar elements in their approach. Taking a deep breath can often be the first element, feeling

grounded/balanced at the plate is usually another constant, seeing the ball clearly is often included as well, as is some form of commitment to hitting the ball hard. In any case, the hitter has his plan, or process. Thus, if anything comes into his mind about anything other than his process, he can quickly identify it as a consequential or result oriented thought.

In both cases, the process is the constant. It takes the thought process out of play. It simplifies the game because the mind can be very relaxed and free when it only has a couple of process oriented things to focus on. It keeps it very simple.

Ultimately, the process is very knowable. It helps us understand what two or three principles are supporting our process. By process of elimination, it also helps us get clear that anything outside of our process is probably going to take us into the past or future, or elicit a consequential or result oriented thought that can get in our way.

At the end of the day, having a constant to stay committed to rather than numerous variables to sort out is a relief to the mind. Having the discipline to stay committed to this process, despite old thoughts that may be vying for your attention, is the key. A daily mental practice is the key to having this discipline. It's also the key to creating a new default system that allows our hard work to express itself without anything getting in the way.

## **Summary**

Taking your players through a daily mental training practice is at the foundation of the mental game, but how you communicate with your players is also very important. Using terminology that "supports" their process, that places emphasis on their commitment to the present moment and pushes players into action and athleticism, rather than mechanics and thinking in game situations is essential. The players shouldn't know if it's a practice game or playoff game, an important at bat or an important pitch. They shouldn't know about anything but this moment, and this process. Then, when they realize that the game plays itself when they are consumed by the moment, they can let go of even that.