

Mental Toughness

By Michele Smith

How do pitchers develop mental toughness? How important is it for pitchers to be strong mentally? What exactly is mental toughness? In my opinion, mental toughness is the ability to stay calm, remain in the moment, be aware of the game around you and yet—at the same time—be in the “zone.” Another way of putting it is to be in total control of yourself and your abilities while performing at your highest level. When athletes are not mentally tough, they tend to under perform not only mentally, but emotionally and physically as well. The littlest things become the biggest problems and distractions. When that happens, pitchers never quite reach their potential and therefore the team doesn’t either. So, how important is mental toughness? Very! Let’s take a little bit of time to talk about a couple of new things that you can add to your practice to help make you mentally stronger. And Coaches, don’t be afraid to sit down with an athlete and discuss this issue. Chances are your athlete knows they could be stronger mentally and when given a plan of action, the future can be much brighter for your team and your pitcher.

So, what can be done during pitching practice to build mental toughness? One of the first things you can do is to make everything harder on yourself. That’s right, like the saying goes, “iron forges iron!” Challenge yourself in EVERY situation that comes up. Challenging yourself in practice will make games seem like a “walk in the park.” I would rather be stressed in practice, learn from my mistakes in practice, and have better results in games. So how do you do this? During practices, I would use worn or slick balls a couple times a week. These balls will be harder to pitch with, harder to control and more difficult to make move. If you can make a ball with flat or no seams move, then you will really be able to make a ball with good seams dance. There will be many times that you’ll get a “bad” ball thrown into a game. When that happens, you’ll need to be able to adapt to that situation. So, learn how to pitch with them in practice and then games with “bad” balls will be no big deal.

Good performance is about good preparation. Be prepared for anything and everything and you will have half the battle won. Remember, softball is a head to head sport. If you are more prepared and perform better than your opponent, chances are—more times than not—you will win. It might not be your “ideal” performance, but a win is a win. And learning to win in less than ideal moments will take your level from good to great. Another practice idea that will help you is to do “at bats.” At bats are game-like situational pitching where you are working to fool the batter and play out each situation as if it were a real game. This is good practice for everyone: the pitchers, the batters and the defense. While doing at bats, have your catchers or umps—if you have them—call a very small strike zone to challenge you. If the ball is half on the corner and half off, call it a ball. Start the count with one ball and no strikes. This will make you have to work harder for strikes. Give the batter all the breaks you can and still work as hard as you can to get her out. This will make you work harder, but you will learn where you can put the ball and where you can not. It will also teach you how to make a ball look like a strike to the batter, while really being out of the strike zone. The best pitchers in the world get batters to swing at balls. It sounds very simple, but it’s definitely an art to learn. Another variation is to do “at bats” in a lot of pressure situations. Put runners at 3rd with no outs or bases loaded with no outs and make your pitcher and defense work out of it. Keep track of how many runs are scored each time you do this practice. After a couple of weeks of working these types of pressure situations, the pitchers and the team should improve. When they get into this type of pressure situation in a game, it will be ‘been here—done that.’ The attitude of the team should be, ‘No big deal. We know how to get out of it.’ This is the type of mental response we want from ourselves and from our team.

Remember, in order to improve, what we need to do is stress ourselves. And that means physically, mentally and emotionally. We never really get better by working on what we already do well. But, isn’t that human nature! We love to work on what we are good at, and we avoid—like the plague—what we struggle with. If you want to improve, I mean really improve, you need to work and practice your weaknesses. Write them down, be

honest and find time in practice to work on them. Before you know it, they will no longer be your weaknesses, and you will have fewer targets for your opponents to attack.

Another way of improving your mental abilities is to add auditory distractions to your practice. It really isn't too hard to do this. You could play music or crowd noise so the pitcher and defense learn to block it out and focus only on the catcher or coaches voices. I know in big games, when you are in the zone, it is like no one else is at the stadium. In the Olympic Games, I had no awareness that there were 10,000 fans screaming for me—or maybe against me. Learning to block out what you don't need is very important. The flip side of this is to learn to hear your coaches' and teammate's voices in all situations. So when I suggest playing music, I am not talking about music to 'listen' to, but rather to NOT listen to. After a while, you will learn to block it out, and hear only what you need to hear. This will allow you to get into the zone and focus only on what you should be focusing on: your play and how to win the game.

The last thing I would like to mention is fear of failure. So many athletes fail because, ironically, they are afraid to fail! Therefore, they sabotage their own abilities before they even get a chance to succeed. Mentally this can be a huge hurdle to clear. This could be a whole topic on its own. The reason I am mentioning it in closing is because I want to share a quote from the great Yankees closer Goose Gossage. We were talking about pitching in pressure situations and how to remain in a good place mentally; he was a master of it during his career. So he looks at me and says, "Just remember the Frozen Snowball Theory." According to Goose, in two thousand years the earth will be a frozen snowball hurling through space and no one give a darn how we pitched in certain situations! I loved it! Since then, I always remind myself, "Softball is just a game, so try not to get so worked up over it." (I'm not saying it always works... just that I keep reminding myself of that!)

You keep reminding yourself of that too. Practice hard, give your best—and then some, lead by example and remember the Frozen Snowball Theory. Softball should be fun. Remember that and you will be able to PLAY FREE... AND TO WIN!