

The Dangers of G.I.G.O

*By Dr. Alan Goldberg
Sports Psychologist*

How come Sean is "Mr. Heat & Control" in the bullpen, wowing the coaches with his considerable talent, yet when he makes it to the mound he mysteriously transforms into "Sir Wild Thing," walking batters left and right? What causes Sandra to lose her incredible arm behind the plate and consistently throw the ball in the dirt or over the second baseman's head whenever a runner tries to steal second? What's going on when good batters with solid mechanics slip into a month-long slump and can't even buy a hit?

There's no question this game is incredibly mental. Throwing problems, choking, batting slumps and repetitive fielding difficulties are just a few examples of the powerful effect your mind can have over every aspect of your game. There's no question you must have decent physical mechanics to play good ball. However, talent, strength, speed and skill by themselves are not enough to be the best you can be. If you truly want to go as far as possible as a ball player then you also have to develop solid "mental mechanics."

What are solid "mental mechanics?" Here's a vitally important list:

- 1) Staying calm under big-game pressure
- 2) Having "reboundability" or the skill to quickly bounce back from errors, bad at-bats and failures
- 3) Concentrating-knowing how to focus on what's important and blocking out everything else regardless of what's going on around you
- 4) Avoiding psych-outs and intimidation
- 5) Maintaining a positive, winning attitude
- 6) Mastering negative thinking and self-doubt
- 7) Mentally preparing yourself for success through imagery
- 8) Maintaining self-confidence and a positive belief in yourself

These "mental skills" make up your level of mental toughness. If any of these mental mechanics bring your game down, don't despair! You can learn to systematically build your "mental muscles" just as you would your physical ones, with a little time, patience and hard work. Are you ready?

Let's start with these important mental toughness "facts." Games are won and lost before they start. You make that great defensive stop or boot the ball before the pitcher even releases the ball. You get a hit or strike out before you leave the on-deck circle.

What I'm talking about here is that your performance is always affected by what goes on between your ears. If you have the wrong thoughts bouncing around in your head before or during a game, those thoughts will sabotage your play. This is the concept of G.I.G.O. or Garbage In, Garbage Out. That is, if you program negative thoughts or "garbage" into your computer-brain you'll get "garbage" back out in your performance. The "garbage" comes in the form of low confidence, excessive nervousness, poor concentration and bad play. Here's how the concept of G.I.G.O actually works:

Negative thinking gets instantly transformed into your body as nervousness. When you get nervous, three major physical changes happen inside:

- 1) Your muscles tighten
- 2) Your breathing gets faster and shallower.
- 3) Your hands and feet tend to get cold as the circulation moves away from the fingers and toes into deeper muscles groups.

These three physical changes can mess up almost every aspect of your physical game. Tight muscles slow down your reaction time and both your foot and bat speed. They also destroy your hitting and fielding mechanics by shortening your swing, limiting your follow through when you throw and shortening your reach with your glove hand. Shallow, faster breathing will further tighten your muscles, causing you to tire quicker and making it impossible for you to think clearly under pressure. If your hands are cold, you will lose that all-important feel in the field and up at the plate.

Specifically, what is this "garbage?" Part of it is definitely the "what ifs": What if we lose, what if I throw the ball away, what if I get cut, what if I don't get a hit.

Garbage also comes in the form of thoughts like, Don't hit the ball to me, What will coach/Dad/Mom say if I strike out here, I've got to get a hit, This pitcher is unhittable, or It's too cold to play well today.

Basically, anything negative is "garbage."

The first step to building mental toughness is to develop an awareness of your performance-related thoughts or "self-talk." In other words, you have to know what kind of thoughts you're programming into your brain. I call the dialogue of your self-talk your "inner coach." If your "inner coach" is consistently negative, you'll be left without confidence and too uptight to play well. If your "inner coach" is mostly positive, you'll feel good about yourself and be able to perform to your potential under pressure.

So what kind of "inner coach" do you have? Do you put yourself down when you mess up or remain positive and encouraging? Here's how to find out. Review 2-3 really great games from your past and write down what you were thinking about before and during these performances. What did you say to yourself before that big hit? What did you think right after your error or strike out?

Next, review 2-3 bad games where you played way below your potential. Reflect on a few at-bats and defensive situations and recall what you said to yourself both before and after these. What kind of "inner coach" did you have operating in these situations? Finally, compare the difference in your "inner coach" when you play well vs. playing poorly.

This should help you develop an awareness of the dialogue of your inner coach. From here, you want to discipline yourself to only use the inner coach that is present when you play your best. If you're struggling, try to use the positive inner coach. This will not be easy in the beginning. However, with practice you can learn to coach yourself positively through the rough times. Keep in mind that being negative and hard on yourself, "Garbage In," will only get you feeling terrible about yourself and playing badly, "Garbage Out."