

NFCA INSTRUCTIONAL CORNER

Mental Preparation Depends on the Individual

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When asked to submit an article for this month's publication, my mind began spinning. That "spinning" was my mind engaging in the process of mentally preparing for the task to come. I did not simply receive the request and then "do it." All too often athletes (and perhaps coaches too) focus disproportionately on that last part – "do it." Unfortunately, when someone focuses solely on the outcome, that outcome becomes more difficult to attain. We are "human beings," not "human doings." I'd like to address how we can embrace our inner "being," and how that translates into doing something better than ever before... this begins with mentally preparing for the task at hand.

First of all, mental preparation is different for different people. There is no one right way to "do it." However, there are some key concepts that most people find helpful. Goal setting is probably a good place to start. I look at goal setting as my "map" for how I am going to get where I wish to go. Goals need to be organized by long-term, intermediate, and short-term. Each intermediate and short-term goal should have a clear link with your long-term goals. An example of a long-term goal might be to have a .350 batting average at the end of the season. Then a short-term goal related to this might be to focus during the day's practice on keeping my hands in and my head down on EVERY at bat. These short-term goals most often should be based on discussions with your coach. That is, identify areas in need of improvement or strengths that you wish to sharpen. You will only be able to consistently perform a skill in a game if you do that skill consistently in practice.

Overall, the best goals are those that are concrete (i.e., do not keep your goals in your head – write them down), measurable, adjustable, and realistic. Vague goals that you cannot measure and are inflexible tend to be frustrating. And your goals need to be realistic! If you're 12-years-

old with a goal of batting .350, but you're up against a member of USA's National Team, your goal is likely unrealistic...

Mental preparation skills that can enhance a player's ability to reach their goals include emotional regulation and imagery. Emotional regulation includes getting "pumped up" as well as calming one's self. Each specific situation and how you are reacting to that situation will dictate which to choose. Therefore, knowing yourself is very important. What stresses you? In what types of situations do you find yourself being slow at the plate or reacting when in the field? Once you know yourself well, you will improve your ability to be proactive and choose to "rev up" or relax. Relaxation is most commonly used when one is tense or nervous. Breathing slowly and deeply is a common relaxation technique and can be accomplished best by learning to mentally focus your attention on yourself. Some people have found that an environment free of distractions, perhaps with soothing music or sounds of the surf, can be very helpful in allowing one to focus on slow, rhythmic breathing. Once deep breathing can be performed on command in a controlled environment, try it before stressful practice situations, then implement deep breathing before stressful game situations (e.g., an at-bat in the bottom of the seventh with two on, two out, and your team is down by a run). We don't want to get rid of those butterflies in your stomach (e.g., a nervous response to a stressful situation), we just want them to fly in formation.

As for imagery, there are some very important things to include, but as with many mental skills, each person needs to decide what works best for them. The aspect of imagery that seems to be applicable to most people includes the idea of using as many of your senses as possible during imagery. This makes imagery more elaborate than visualization. In visualization, an athlete only "sees" or "watches" themselves. Imagery, on the other hand, involves your mind's eye as you watch yourself (or in some cases you take the first-person perspective) while also imagining what the field, grass, and other game

day factors smell like. You also want to "feel" the heat (or coolness if you are from the North!) from the sun while you are in the dugout, on deck, in the batter's box, or in the field. The feel of your hands gripping the bat, or in your glove will help as well. If you wear a mouth guard, imagining the taste of that can be beneficial as well. Your ability to incorporate all five senses into your imagery experience has been shown to link with elevated performance. An athlete who is able to develop their imagery skills can find this technique invaluable during rehabilitation from when actual playing time is limited. You're essentially still able to "play" the game and practice within your mind. There is a tremendous amount of research that strongly supports the positive effect your mind can have on your physical performance. However, as with physical practice, you get out of it what you put into it. Mental skills require an investment. As your ability to perform up to your potential really does come down to your willingness to invest in yourself.

As a final thought, much of what you can control involves the acronym "ICE." You do not have much control over how fast your opponent is, the weather, or the umpires' calls. You do have quite a bit of control over your intensity (I), concentration (C) or focus, and enthusiasm (E). Be intense (I) but not tense. Focus (i.e., concentrate) on the present – the past only matters in so much as how it can help NOW, and your future results depend on what you do NOW! And finally, be enthusiastic. Happy players perform better than sad or angry players, and don't confuse angry with intensely focused – these are two different things. Intensely focused people aren't angry. They are the ones likely to perform to their potential and reach their goals. Learning how to best approach your ICE can help you achieve your goals, and these are all aspects of your mental game, things that help you mentally prepare to be the best softball player you can be.

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NCAA CONVENTION

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like "OMG" and "LOL" in presenting the proposal to the floor, and it was adopted by an overwhelming majority (418-44-5). The deregulation of social media also was considered but was withdrawn on the floor.

After other proposals were withdrawn on the floor, delegates had six proposals left for deliberation. In addition to the text-messaging proposal being approved, delegates referred a measure (Proposal No. 3) to require sickle cell testing to the NCAA Committee on Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports for further review.

Four other proposals were adopted:

- Proposal No. 1, clarifying the Division III philosophy.
- Proposal No. 2, aligning the membership requirements for a conference with the automatic-qualifi-

cation requirements for a conference.

- Proposal No. 4, specifying that a professional sports organization may serve as a financial sponsor of an intercollegiate competition event, under certain conditions.
- Proposal No. 5, requiring certified strength and conditioning coaches to maintain current certification in first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation and automatic external defibrillator use.

The closest vote of the day was the very first one, in which one of the delegates asked to defeat one of the noncontroversial legislative proposals previously adopted by the Management Council. The legislation (No. NC 2012-15 in the Official Notice) is permissive legislation that increases limits on the value of participation awards by \$100 for seniors and by \$50 for other awards as specified.

While those awards haven't been adjusted since 2006, opponents from the convention floor thought it was in-

appropriate to take such fiscal action during a national economic slump. The roll-call vote was 231-210-19 to support. Given the amount of dissent, the Management Council at its post-Convention meeting later that afternoon revisited the legislation and agreed to send it to the Division III Interpretations and Legislation Committee to review whether the new limits are appropriate (and to solicit more feedback from the President's Athletic Conference, which asked to rescind the legislation, and others). The Council stopped short of suspending the proposal, though.

Other highlights at Saturday's business session included an update on Division III's partnership with Special Olympics that was announced at last year's convention. Division III schools already have raised more than \$80,000 for Special Olympics this year and have held hundreds of interactive activities with local chapters. Events also are being conducted at every Division III championship this year.