

Coming
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INTANGIBLES

Big-League Stories and Strategies for
Winning the Mental Game—
in Baseball and in Life

Geoff Miller



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www.ByteLevelBooks.com

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Foreword

By Vince Gennaro

The success of any athlete depends upon some difficult-to-define qualities that go well beyond his or her physical capability or talent level. How many times have we seen examples of the athlete who had all the physical “tools” but just didn’t have the “head” or “heart” to realize his or her full potential on the field of play? These *intangibles*, as Geoff Miller so aptly calls them, include confidence, focus, will, desire, and preparation. The ability to command positive thoughts and confidence at critical moments of competition are important underpinnings of any successful athlete. One’s intangibles are equally capable of breeding failure for those who struggle with confidence, cannot focus, or are under-prepared. In our Twitter-obsessed, instantly connected culture, the penalty of an athlete’s failure and the rewards of success seem greater than ever before. As the stakes rise, an athlete’s intangibles are becoming even more of a difference-maker.

My personal example of my intangibles failing me relate to a golf match. On a recent trip to Ireland with twenty-three other fanatical golfers, I found myself embroiled in a Ryder Cup–style singles match on the last day of our weeklong competition. I was faced with a treacherous, three-foot downhill, sharply breaking putt on the final

hole to win my match. As I stood over the putt, my mind began to dart back and forth from thoughts of fear to the consequences of failure. In my mind, I dwelled on all the wrong questions: Should I be *expected* to make the putt? What will *my teammates think* if I miss it? Is the overall competition still hanging in the balance, and how much will this putt matter? It occurred to me that a miss could easily trickle four feet beyond the hole! I even recalled a friend once saying to me, “You should enter into golf tournaments more often so you can be better prepared to make a big putt—competitive golf is a whole different world!” With every negative, counter-productive thought, my pulse rate was accelerating and my mind was screaming at me incoherently. I felt my body quickly losing control of my muscles, my hands were shaking, and I kept hearing an inner voice chirping, “Hurry up...just hit the putt.” Everything I did in the three minutes prior to striking the putt was pointing in one harmonious direction—failure. Fortunately, my passionate opponent conceded my *next* three-foot putt to tie the match, and my crisis ended.

Maybe you’ve experienced a similar situation, or perhaps you’ve experienced the opposite reaction during competition—that sensation you feel when everything happening around you slows down, you feel in complete control of your emotions, you are able to calmly and clearly process information, and your confidence level is sky-high. *Intangibles* is all about personal stories like these, in the context of the great game of baseball. These personal stories can often translate into teaching moments that convert failure into success. *Intangibles* goes beyond abstract concepts to draw on real-life experiences, practical examples, and tools to help ingrain success, make it a repeatable process, and eventually a habit.

In order to control your own destiny and get the most out of your personal capabilities, it’s helpful to understand *what* is going on inside you during these pressurized moments, but it’s even more useful to understand the *why*.

Intangibles

Intangibles discusses both the *what* and the *why*, including the role of preparation in building self-confidence. For a hitter, it's not enough to know *what* a pitcher is expected to throw. You also need to know *why*. The *why* gives the hitter insight into the mind of the pitcher—his motivations, level of confidence, fears, and the pitcher's personal assessment of his own strengths and weaknesses. By knowing *why*, a hitter acquires a certain intellectual intimacy with the pitcher, which may provide a competitive edge and raise his probability of success.

Intangibles is a personal training guide for the mind. Its message goes far beyond baseball or sports. The concepts and framework come into play in everyday life. The same principles that determine whether a hitter's or pitcher's mind contributes to his success or failure apply to someone faced with making a presentation at work, or taking a test in class, or interviewing for a job, or dealing with personal relationships. If you are interested in being an even better version of *you*, or if you just want to better understand the role the mind and heart play in one's success and enjoyment in life, you're in for a treat.

Vince Gennaro is the author of *Diamond Dollars: The Economics of Winning in Baseball* and is a consultant to Major League Baseball teams. He appears regularly on MLB Network's *Clubhouse Confidential*, presenting various topics from the viewpoint of baseball analytics. Vince is also the president of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) and teaches in the graduate Sports Business Management programs at Columbia University and Manhattanville College.

BEFORE WE BEGIN...

What Are Intangibles?

Intangibles are such mental game factors as focus, confidence, commitment, intensity, discipline, character, and heart. They are typically called *intangibles* because they are difficult, if not impossible, to measure quantitatively and objectively. The term itself has become a pop-culture catchall phrase, used in sportscasts, in draft rooms, and on playing fields as an explanation for any effect not directly related to a physical act in sports.

Intangibles become tangible when we measure them in ourselves. Each of us has felt the impact of confidence. Each knows the difference between being focused and being distracted. We have all heard the voice of doubt in our own minds; we all know how pressure can produce physical symptoms such as shortness of breath and sweaty palms. I don't claim to have a scientific method for quantifying the intangibles in sports. However, I do believe that by giving intangibles a human context, we can understand the role they play in each athlete's life and career. And by focusing on the intangibles in ourselves, we can improve our performance on and off the field.

This book is a collection of stories about professional baseball players at different stages of their careers. Within each story, you'll learn about the intangibles that were most important to that player's performance.

At the end of each chapter covering individual performance and

life management techniques, I've included a summary with advice on how you might apply a technique or metaphor used by one of these players in your own life. Individual Performance Techniques are grouped as such because they are more directly related to thinking that happened on the field or in preparation for games. Individual Life Management Techniques describe off-field issues that proved to be distractions to players or burdened them in one way or another. In finding their solutions, these athletes may have returned to their normal production levels on the field, but the topics themselves were more about life than the game.

When you reach the Team Strategies and Programs section, you'll read about the methods we used in the Pittsburgh Pirates organization for teaching, developing, and using intangibles on a regular basis. In these chapters you'll see how we used movie clips to provide visual context and comic relief as a bridge to conversations about teamwork, adaptability, and believing in ourselves. Baseball IQ and the chapters on leadership and character development offer simple tools to measure how much players know about the game and themselves. In these sections, intangibles become more than tangible; they become teachable. If you are a coach interested in implementing the Baseball IQ program or Character Development Inventory (CDI), you can visit the book website at bytelevelbooks.com/books/intangibles.html for printable copies of each of these forms.

This book is a collection of learning moments that have had the most value in my years of teaching the mental game in baseball. Its purpose is to bring intangibles to life by demonstrating their importance in the lives of real professional baseball players. Some of these players made it to the big leagues, some of them didn't, and some were already in the big leagues when I had my conversations with them. Not all of these stories will be exactly right for you, but as you go through them, you'll see some universal truths that can be applied to your situation. Your job is to pick out the lessons that mean

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the most to you and apply them to make yourself better at what you do.

You might read *Intangibles* searching for a way to measure what can't be measured and realize that understanding how they exist in you is more important. Nothing could be more real.

Who This Book Is For

When I began writing a book about intangibles, my purpose was to help baseball players (and their coaches) improve performance through new approaches to mental training. By the time I finished writing, I realized I had an additional audience in mind as well. I wanted casual fans and baseball purists to read this collection of stories for the characters, the moments on and off the field, and for the life lessons.

In many instances, I address my writing to “you,” the reader. Since I have written a book for two different, albeit potentially overlapping, populations, I thought it important to explain that “you” is an aspiring baseball player hoping to make it to the major leagues someday. Directing the book to a specific audience allowed me to retain the focus and richness of the message, which I felt nonetheless a larger audience looking in might appreciate.

If you happen to be a current major league player, I expect these chapters to provide just as much assistance to you as to minor league and amateur players, recognizing that you have obviously found a way to survive and flourish in order to achieve the success you have in your career.

If you are involved in the game in another capacity—as a coach, a scout, part of a baseball operations staff, or as a dedicated fan—I hope that you’ll enjoy getting to listen in on some of my conversations with real major league and minor league baseball players. You may

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discover a few tips you can apply to your own life, you may find an opportunity to reflect upon your own involvement in the game, or you may just read to appreciate the psychological struggle each player endures in his own way as he competes against great odds and talented peers.

And while throughout the book I use the pronoun “he” while referring to players, this is for the purpose of simplicity only and isn’t meant to limit its audience only to male baseball players. While much of the book is specific to the game in which I’ve spent my own career, many of its principles may also be applied to women’s softball—or any sport, for that matter, as well as to life itself. Winning the mental game is ultimately about what an athlete brings to the sport rather than to any one specific sport itself.

Please read on knowing it has been my absolute pleasure to produce this work for each of you, regardless of whether you’ve played or not.

An Introduction to the Mental Game

I met Bobby Kingsbury on my first day as the mental skills coach for the Pittsburgh Pirates. I had been hired halfway through spring training of 2005, and there were only two weeks left in camp, so my first objective was simply to get to know as many major league and minor league players as I could before they left Florida to begin playing their respective seasons. The Pirates minor league field coordinator, Jeff Banister, had been introducing me to coaches and players, and we shook hands with Bobby outside one of the batting cages.

“Hey, when can I schedule some time with you?” he asked, as if he were ordering a sandwich or arranging to have his car detailed.

Bobby had a cocky grin and an even cockier walk, but he had some substance to him as well. A native of Cleveland, he was selected in the eighth round of the 2002 draft out of Fordham University in New York. He was equal parts sharp guy and wise guy, and I couldn’t quite tell whether he’d picked up his New York swagger during his three years at Fordham or whether it was a personality trait that had drawn him to a school in the city.

I only knew of one major league player who had gone to Fordham—Frankie Frisch—and I only knew that because he had been nicknamed “The Fordham Flash.” I asked Bobby if he had ever

heard of Frisch as we sat down to start our conversation.

“Who, the Flash?” Bobby said with a confident smirk. “Yeah, I’ve heard of him.”

I asked Bobby to give me a brief history of his career, which included some impressive accomplishments. He had just established career highs in doubles (twenty-four) and home runs (nineteen) while contributing to a Hickory team that won the South Atlantic League Championship. He had also taken time out of his season to play for the Greek Olympic Team at the 2004 Summer Games in Athens. Host countries are allowed to field a team in every sport without having to qualify, and because there was only one baseball field in Greece and there were hardly any Greek nationals who even knew how to play the game, the Greek Olympic Committee allowed any American-born player of third-generation Greek heritage to be considered. Bobby had been one of the stars of the team.

After getting some background, I asked him a simple question: “What can I do to help you?”

Bobby’s face changed from cocky to desperate, and his eyes softened from their piercing focus. His body slumped in his chair.

“I know I can do better.”

My conversation that first day with Bobby Kingsbury is a perfect example of what I have found to be the hardest part of my job—the emotional highs and lows I end up experiencing with each and every player. Every baseball player dreams of making it to the big leagues, and while it isn’t difficult to identify which players have the most physical talent in a minor league game, every single player in uniform is holding on to the dream that someday it’s going to happen. Someday, he’ll get his 400 at-bats in a season and show everyone what he can do. This year, he’ll stay injury-free and finally realize all his potential. One of these days, he’ll turn the Rubik’s Cube of his talent in exactly the right combination, all the colors will line up, and he’ll be able to command his fastball on every pitch. Every player

in the organization, from AAA to rookie ball, has his own dream. I have the honor and privilege of getting to share that dream with each of them. Even though I know most of their dreams won't come true, I can't help them if I don't believe that each one of them will.

Sometimes those dreams do come true. Sometimes someone like Shane Youman makes the decision that he's tired of being ignored, that he's tired of having other people decide his fate, that he's tired of wasting time, and that he's going to the big leagues. That's what Shane told me at the beginning of spring training in 2006. He had spent the entire 2005 season in the bullpen at AA Altoona, and he began 2006 in the same place, only he was now twenty-six years old, a forty-third-round draft pick, never a prospect, with no clear path to the big leagues. A month into the season, he got a spot-start and he never looked back. He went 7–2 with a 1.51 ERA and started the AA All-Star Game that year, then got promoted to AAA Indianapolis, where he went 4–0 in seven starts. In September, he was added to the forty-man roster, then called up to Pittsburgh, where he had a 2.91 ERA in five appearances. He started the final game of the season, having gone from the bullpen in AA to starting in the big leagues in one year.

Most of the time, though, the dreams don't come true. Sometimes all I can do to help a player is to stay with him until his dream has died—a virtual “hospice care” for terminal dreams. It wouldn't be so hard to deal with if it was apparent who was destined for greatness in the big leagues from the time he was in A-Ball and who was going to hang around for a while until he went home to search for something else to do with his life.

This is what my experience has been with sports psychology. It hasn't been breathing techniques and visualization and positive self-talk. For the most part, it hasn't been trying to “fix” players who have problems throwing strikes or throwing to first or getting out of slumps. Most often, my work with baseball players has been getting

into the complex details of helping them understand themselves so that they can take advantage of the tremendous talent that they possess. It's not that I don't believe in the traditional techniques that are prescribed in most of the literature devoted to peak performance. It's just that I believe those traditional techniques are only short-term fixes. Let me explain what I mean...

When most players and coaches talk about the mental game of baseball, they are really talking about two basic principles: knowledge and performing under pressure. To have a strong mental game, you have to know what to do and then be able to execute that knowledge when it counts. Most books on sports psychology offer strategies for staying focused, controlling emotions, and developing positive thinking, but they miss the big picture for maximizing talent. When you are comfortable, confident, and in control on the field, you don't need help staying focused, controlling emotions, or staying positive—that just happens on its own. Instead of learning tricks to help you overcome the tough times, the real key to successful performance is to learn and understand where, when, why, and how you experience pressure. If you can know the conditions that make you feel pressure, you can get to the root causes that get you off track, and then you won't need the short-term fixes.

Unfortunately, it takes time to sort through the complexities that make us feel pressure. We all come to the field with our own life experiences, habits, personalities, families, and preferences. And sometimes we don't *want* to know what's really making us feel the way we feel. Learning to understand why we make the decisions we make and training our minds to move toward long-term success is a process that requires patience and practice.

In my work with players, I offer short-term and long-term approaches to developing knowledge and abilities to perform under pressure. In the short term, you need to have some weapons to help you stay on track when you're not feeling confident, comfortable,

and in control while playing the game. And in the long term, you need to be able to know who you are, what you want, and what to do if you don't get it.

The two approaches take the forms of simple concepts that are familiar to all baseball players:

- Knowledge
- Goals
- Dealing with failure
- Short-term skills for performing under pressure

These topics are laid out in this sequence so the following can be answered:

- Know who you are
- Know what you want
- Know what to do when you don't get it
- Know what to do in the meantime before you've mastered these concepts

How are the stories in this book different from the breathing techniques and visualization and positive self-talk you might be used to reading about? On the surface, they might not be that different at all. They are, after all, triggers, reminders, and mindsets that help players break through performance blocks. But the depth of the stories is in how they get to the root of what the players are dealing with, rather than simply helping them get through a tough time. My goal has always been to help players address their realities with honest conversation.

You might find that some of the stories take unique paths to get to their points. But they all end with the player understanding more

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about who he is, or what he wants, or what to do when he doesn't get what he wants, or what to do in the meantime while he's figuring those things out. Bobby Kingsbury was brave enough to face a reality many cannot—he was able to be honest with himself that he could do better. He was even braver when he asked me for help. I owed it to him to help him find the answers to those big questions.

INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCE
TECHNIQUES

The Job Paradox

Imagine you are a minor league baseball player. You're at the Pittsburgh Pirates spring training complex in Bradenton, Florida, also known as Pirate City, and every day involves fierce competition with your peers. You collect your thoughts as an energized crowd watches your every move, waiting to explode in cheers, hanging on the drama of the moment as you try to keep your focus and track the little white ball whizzing toward you so you can make solid contact with your...paddle!

Yes, the white ball with seams on it is the most important one to a baseball player, but most of the players I've worked with in the Pirates organization take an awful lot of pride in their skills at the Ping-Pong table as well. Some Major League players use table tennis as a way to keep themselves loose between batting practice and game time. They believe that by tracking a ball moving so close and at such high speeds, they can keep their pitch recognition skills sharp. Indeed, if you walk into any major or minor league clubhouse with a Ping-Pong table on a game day between the hours of 2:00 and 6:30 p.m., you'll find a crowd of players gathered and waiting for their chance to rally for serve.

The players' lounge at Pirate City has always had a Ping-Pong table in the center of the room, just a few feet away from the main walkway that leads from the office lobby back to the training rooms

and clubhouses. Any time someone walked from the front offices to the fields and locker rooms, he had to walk past a frenzied battle, spectators hooting and hollering in English and Spanish, and would sometimes have to dodge a stray serve or a lunging participant trying to track down one more point. During spring training one year I made a connection between table tennis and baseball that has led me to the concept that I call the “Job Paradox.”

I was talking with a Latin pitcher who had been in the organization for a number of years and had made decent progress but hadn’t fully realized his potential. A number of pitching coaches and minor league managers had repeatedly told me that this pitcher was good enough to be in the big leagues, but he wasn’t translating his talent into results. There was a chance that he wouldn’t make the AA roster out of camp and that he would end up getting released.

Our conversation that day was mostly about this pitcher’s recognition that he was not performing as well as he knew he could, and this point was accentuated by the knowledge that when he went home to play Winter Ball, he was one of the most dominating pitchers in his country. When I asked him what the difference was between pitching in his home country and pitching in the United States, he said that he just played for fun when he was home, but when he was here, he needed to do well because this was his job. He was putting too much pressure on himself because he knew that his pitching wasn’t just about balls and strikes and wins and losses when he was in America. It was about moving up and making money; it wasn’t just a game. So I brought up the subject of table tennis to help him understand how he was caught in this Job Paradox.

I asked him if he felt pressure when he was playing table tennis.

“No,” he said. “When I’m playing Ping-Pong I’m just having fun.”

“So what happens to you when you make a mistake in Ping-Pong?” I asked, trying to help him see how his approach on the mound was hurting him. “Does it affect you on the next point?”

“No. I just concentrate on the next point.”

“And how about if your opponent beats you on a long rally, or if you battle him and he wins the game? Do you feel negative and defeated, or are you fired up and talking trash and telling him you’re going to get him next time?”

He started smiling. “I’m going to kick his ass next time!”

“Right! So that’s the same mentality you need to have when you’re on the mound. You have to play baseball like you’re playing Ping-Pong. You battle on every pitch and compete and have fun at the same time.”

I asked a number of other players whom I’d seen playing a lot of table tennis some similar questions. Every one of them started smiling when they recognized where I was going with the conversation. Each admitted that he tried too hard to perform on the baseball field because it did mean more to them than just winning and losing. For some, it was about reinforcing their decision to keep playing, to keep their dream of making it to the big leagues alive. Others told me that they could handle getting beaten in table tennis because it wasn’t what they did for a living. And they all agreed that knowing that their financial futures depended on their success made playing baseball different now than it had been at other times in their lives. What’s interesting is that I’m sure if I asked a professional table tennis player how he or she felt after losing a game, the answer would be much different.

You could make the same analogy with another game that is popular among baseball players—poker. That same summer after I’d had all the Ping-Pong conversations, I spoke with one of the Pirates’ top hitting prospects, who had been having a miserable first half-season. I asked him if he ever played poker. He said that he did but that he wasn’t very good at it.

“Perfect!” I told him. “So you must lose a lot of hands then, right? Well, how do you feel when you lose a hand that you should have won?”

“I get mad for a minute,” he said, “but then I just keep playing. It’s not that big a deal to me to lose, and it isn’t even that big a deal to lose the money.”

But that’s because he didn’t earn his living as a poker player. He earned his living as a baseball player. Whereas he could get mad for a minute and then just keep playing poker, his mistakes on the field stayed with him longer. He took strikeouts into his next at-bats. He let an 0-for-4 night at the plate turn into an 0-for-13 series. If you asked any professional poker player, from Phil Hellmuth to Phil Ivey, or if you just watched their actions on any televised tournament, you’d see how wrecked they get when they play a hand poorly. Likewise, if you gave Phil Hellmuth a chance to take a few cuts in a batting cage, he probably isn’t going to care how many line drives he hits into the opposite field gap.

Think about that in terms of your own life, your career and interests. Would you put more pressure on yourself to maximize your portfolio if your only source of income was day-trading? Would you have fun on a fishing trip if you knew you had to catch enough to pay your rent?

Having fun. It’s not something most people can say to describe what they do at work because there are lots of jobs that just aren’t all that fun! But baseball players do have jobs that should be fun. However, the magnitude of the financial fortunes that await major league players makes it very serious. The difference between a minor league paycheck and a major league paycheck is unfathomable. For that matter, everything about being in the big leagues is better. The travel, the hotels, the food, the clubhouses, even the couches in the clubhouses! But if you want all those glamorous perks, if you want to make it to the big leagues and stay there a long time, you have to find a way to do your job as if there isn’t any money involved. I know it’s cliché to say it, but you really do have to play the game as you did when you were a kid. That’s why those corny sayings

about remembering how the game used to be when you were in Little League are so effective. Because they take you back to a state of mind in which you didn't care about anything but the game. You have to remember, while you are playing the game, to simply see it as competition. When your career and money become the focus, you add a different kind of pressure that is difficult to overcome.

Make It Tangible

If you are a baseball player, find a place in your pre-game routine and your in-game routines to remind yourself to play baseball as if you're playing table tennis. When you play a game like table tennis or another sport that isn't your profession, you play for fun, without worrying about making mistakes. Fear of failure is often a fear of the consequences that come along with failing. You aren't afraid to lose in table tennis because it doesn't mean anything if you lose. You don't lose money, or a chance to move up to the big leagues of table tennis, and you haven't pinned your dreams on making it as a table tennis player. That's why the Job Paradox is such a paradox. We put too much pressure on ourselves to be great at our best talents—because they mean more than the simple job performance. You can get more out of your abilities, in baseball or in any other profession you have pursued in your life, by simply letting go of what might happen if you lose and just playing the game.

Situational Thinking

The first time I remember noticing Nate McLouth was in the training room of the visitor's clubhouse in Durham. I was in my first season with the team, and Nate was playing in AAA for the first time, after having made a steady climb through the minors since being taken in the twenty-fifth round of the 2000 draft out of high school. It was May, and I hadn't been around many of the players at any level of the organization yet, so I didn't know more than a handful of the Indianapolis players when I joined them on a four-day visit to Durham. I was talking with one of the pitchers I had already met with during spring training while a steady stream of players stopped in for athletic tape, ice, Advil, or various treatments in preparation for batting practice.

As I continued my conversation, I heard another one happening in Spanish over by the desk that had the only computer in the room sitting on it. One of the Latin players was trying to check his e-mail, but he was having some difficulty with the web browser. Another Latin player was explaining what he needed to do to connect. As my eyes followed my ears to the conversation, I realized it was not another Latin player but blond-haired, blue-eyed Nate McLouth from Grand Rapids, Michigan, speaking Spanish with such perfect inflection and timing that he could easily have passed for a native Spanish speaker. Later that day, I asked Nate if he had played Winter Ball

before, thinking that he must have lived in Venezuela or the Dominican Republic in order to learn to speak Spanish so well. He answered that he had never been to either place; he'd just listened to his Latin teammates over the years and picked up what they were saying.

I speak decent conversational Spanish. I took four years of Spanish in high school, passed the Advanced Placement test, and took two more quarters of it in college. And after six seasons working one-on-one with Dominican, Venezuelan, Mexican, Colombian, Panamanian, and Nicaraguan baseball players, I still have trouble keeping up with conversations in Spanish when I'm around a group of Latin players. Nate McLouth was obviously a quick study.

The next time I noticed Nate was on the field during that same series in Durham. The AAA team that the Pirates had in Indianapolis was loaded with future major league talent. Zach Duke and Ian Snell were the top two starting pitchers. Bryan Bullington had been the top pick in the 2002 draft, taken ahead of BJ Upton, but he was third on this staff behind Duke and Snell. Brad Eldred was a monstrous power prospect playing first base. Chris Duffy was a speedy center fielder with remarkable range and defensive ability. Ryan Doumit was catching and would hit .345 with twelve homers in just two months. He would be the first of the young prospects to get called to the big leagues that summer, but they all arrived by August. Nate was on this list of prospects, but he wasn't the first or even the second player that scouts and pundits wanted to talk about when they reviewed the roster.

So I was not surprised on the night of the second game of the series when a ball was hit into shallow right-center field. It was one of those balls that isn't a pop-up or a line drive, that draws the center fielder, the right fielder, and the second baseman but doesn't look as if anyone has a chance to get to it in the air. As the teammates converged, a blur of an outfielder dove and rolled and slid across the grass, making the catch, popping up, and flipping the ball to the

second baseman, who had pulled up a few feet short of the landing area. The Durham crowd gave a standing ovation for the catch, as all were impressed and it didn't matter that their hitter hadn't reached base. I was thinking that Duffy was every bit as good as the reports had stated, until I saw that the man who had made the catch was jogging back to right field, not center. It was McLouth who had caught the ball.

It is easy to underestimate Nate McLouth. He is listed at five foot eleven, but it's hard to believe he's that tall. He looks diminutive on a big-league field until you watch him play, when you see him executing all the fundamentals properly, creating a perfect arc with his compact swing, taking extra bases with good anticipation and surprising speed. He is well remembered for extending the 2008 All-Star Game by throwing out Dioner Navarro at home in the tenth inning. And he has hit tape-measure home runs into the second deck in Colorado and into the Allegheny River in Pittsburgh. I had many formal and informal conversations with Nate during the five years I worked with him. I found Nate to be one of those rare players who can hear advice in one simple conversation and can immediately act upon that advice to change his perspective and his behavior. It was one such conversation we had on the first day of spring training in 2006 that led me to an idea that I call "Situational Thinking."

I had arrived to camp on the same day that pitchers and catchers reported. Nate had been in Florida for a few weeks already, wanting to escape the northern winter for a place where he could hit, run, and throw outdoors. I was just getting settled in one of the video rooms, which I used as a temporary office during spring training, when Nate stopped on his way from the training room to his locker. We caught up a bit on our off-seasons before he asked me in an eager tone, "When are we going to do our meeting?"

The quick study needed new ideas that he could put into play. "How about now?" I asked, pushing a chair in his direction.

Nate sat down with a grin on his face and an excitement that seemed more appropriate for a fan attending a fantasy camp than for an accomplished prospect who had broken into the majors the previous summer. I asked him if he had a plan in place for what he wanted to accomplish during camp. He explained that his goal was to impress his new manager, Jim Tracy, and all the new coaches on the staff. He wanted to do everything he could to show them that he deserved to be on the team. He talked about working hard, about playing hard, and about putting up some good numbers early in the spring. He spoke with energy and confidence, but he recognized that he was on the outside looking in on this twenty-five-man roster. It wasn't going to be easy to make this team. I listened to Nate describe his approach, and then I posed a situation to him.

"Let's say it's five years from now," I began. "You've been in the big leagues for at least four of those years, and you've been a starting outfielder for the last three. You know you're going to get close to 600 at-bats this season, and you know you'll be playing every day. You've signed a long-term deal and you're making plenty of money. What will spring training be like for you then?"

"Oh, man." He sighed with relief, looking as if he had just taken his last exam before graduation. "I would just come in relaxed, get my work done, get my timing down, and get ready for the season."

The light bulb appeared above his head before he could finish the sentence.

Nate realized in that moment that the approach he should use to make the team was the same one he would use when he was already on the team. If he really wanted to impress Jim Tracy, he should act as if he had been on the team for years, as if nothing were new to him, as if he belonged on the team because he was calm, patient, and expected to be going to Pittsburgh and not Indianapolis when camp broke. It was much more fitting of his natural approach anyway. I pointed out to him that he had always impressed his coaches just

by being himself, that his attention to detail and his well-polished fundamentals would be noticed if he just focused on executing them. By trying to impress his new coaches, he was more likely to try too hard and lose the easy, graceful way he played the game.

Situational Thinking is a simple process. All you have to do is think about how you'll feel as soon as you know that whatever you're trying to accomplish has happened. Then you act that way before it happens, and it becomes more likely that you'll get what you want because you've allowed yourself to let it happen. The word that most athletes use to describe this feeling is "relaxed."

Too often, I see baseball players with unwavering desire and work ethic. They are willing to do anything it takes to make it to the big leagues. Their greatest strength is effort, but, like all strengths, it becomes their greatest weakness when overused. Trying too hard can lead to worry and anxiety, especially when a mistake is made. Situational Thinking allows players to keep in mind how it feels when we know everything is going to be okay. That's really what we're all afraid of, isn't it? That we aren't going to get what we want. So we work and work and try and try to make sure that if we don't get what we want, it won't be because we didn't work hard enough. There is honor in this approach. It's impossible to put ourselves in positions to succeed without the hard work and preparation. But we can't sacrifice the confidence and easiness that comes with playing without fear of consequence. How would you approach each day if you knew that you were going to make it to the big leagues? How would you act if you were already the middle-of-the-order bat everyone expected you to be? What kind of urgency would there be to "have a good start" if you were 9-2 with a 2.45 ERA instead of 3-6 with a 5.42? How well do you think you'd pitch if you changed your "situation" and replaced it with what you wanted it to be when everything happened the way you imagined? Play like that now, and you'll have a better chance that it happens.

Nate McLouth worked hard during spring training in 2006. He didn't try to do anything he wasn't capable of, and he didn't try to create opportunities for himself. He didn't have to. Instead, he played with a relaxed, confident energy, and he performed well all spring. On the final day of camp, Nate McLouth made the team.

Most of the players I worked with in Pittsburgh moved on to other clubs, and I did, too. In the spring of 2010, I found myself working with the Washington Nationals at a turning point in their franchise. I was being asked to introduce a mental skills coaching program to the entire organization, specifically to help a number of talented young players they had targeted in player development. One of those targets was a pitcher named Collin Balester. I found the Situational Thinking process I'd discovered while working with Nate McLouth to be the right concept to start my work with Collin.

Collin Balester was selected by the Montreal Expos in their final draft before they became the Nationals at the end of 2004. He was a fourth-round pick out of Huntington Beach High School in Southern California. It took Collin only four years to rise through the minors, making his major league debut in 2008, at just twenty-one years old. But while Collin's performance in the minor leagues was spectacular, he hadn't been able to stick in the big leagues. He went back to AAA to start the 2009 season, going up and down a few times during the year. When I arrived in Nationals camp in 2010, Collin had just been optioned again. He was obviously good enough to pitch in the big leagues, but he wasn't able to consistently use his talent when he pitched on a big-league mound.

I'd known Collin before I started working with the Nationals. One of my best friends from childhood had been Collin's high school coach at Huntington Beach High School. Benji Medure and I grew up playing baseball together. We played catch together every day in practice, starting in Pony League, and we even coached together while we were in college. Benji was the first person I'd ever met

who knew he wanted to be a coach and planned to be one from the time he was a freshman in high school. He was a second baseman who stood just five foot eight, with parents of Mexican and Italian descent, so he had a dark complexion that made him look as if he had been at the beach all year round. He was a laid-back guy who made everything he did fun, but you had to be working hard for him if you wanted to be a part of the good time. He was an excellent teacher who knew the game, but Benji's magic was that he was youthful and cool. He got more out of his players because they wanted to play and work for him. Benji had been hired to be the head coach at Huntington Beach High School when Collin was just entering as a freshman. Collin was Benji's star attraction in a turnaround project that culminated in Collin's senior year. Like his coach, Collin was cool, laid-back, and liked to have fun. He got his work done, but he was the stereotypical Southern California surfer kid. His dad even made his living manufacturing surfboards. As Collin's Little League coach, he had taught the boys transcendental meditation and the power of positive thinking. But Collin had no use for those methods back then. He was having fun playing baseball, and he was really good at it. Why wouldn't he be positive and relaxed?

I had met Collin on a few visits to help Benji's teams in the past, including at a baseball banquet where we were both speakers a few months before I joined the Nationals. Collin knew that I might be coming to work with the team, but we hadn't spoken since that banquet. Collin had mentioned to me that night that he knew he was good enough to stay in the big leagues, but he needed to work on his mental game. He was excited that I might be working with the Nationals in the spring.

Collin and I officially started working together my very first afternoon in camp. He flopped down into a cushioned chair in the video room and started telling me how he had tried to be serious from the very start of big-league camp, wanting this year to be

different than the previous ones. He was going to put more thought into his pitches, he was going to quit joking around in the clubhouse, and he was going to make the team this season. But it hadn't worked. The more we talked, the more I could see that he had abandoned his identity while trying to develop a new approach. We talked about his strengths as a player and as a person—he was confident, he was easygoing, and he was positive. There wasn't a lot of complexity to Collin. He wasn't the driven, focused perfectionist that I commonly saw in pro ball. He wasn't an intellectual, he wasn't an ambitious team leader, and he wasn't a wild card who had to have his own way. He was just easygoing, always-smiling, confident-in-his-abilities Collin. But in trying to make the team that spring, he stopped expressing all of those qualities.

Collin had made some progress already, having met with a sports psychologist in LA during the off-season who had gotten him to tap back into the relaxation techniques his dad had taught him as a child. A veteran pitcher in big-league camp had left an impression on Collin, too; this teammate had been trying to squeeze one more season out of a successful career as a big-league reliever. And though Collin's teammate didn't make the team either, he told Collin that if he wanted to stay in the big leagues, he would need to start developing a routine, something he could do to prepare himself for practice and games every single day.

I encouraged Collin to put all of these ideas together, explaining that he could be organized and professional without sacrificing the key elements of who he was as a person. He could spend time doing progressive relaxation before he left for the ballpark, and he could start finding a way to get his work done, throw his sidelines, and prepare for his starts that would make him feel ready to pitch every five days instead of just wandering through life hoping that his talent would get him where he wanted to go. Then I introduced the concept of Situational Thinking that would help him use his personality

strengths to his advantage on the mound. The conversation was very similar to the one I'd had with Nate McLouth four years earlier.

"Collin, what is spring training going to be like for you ten years from now, when you've been an established veteran starter for years?" I asked.

"I won't have a care in the world. I'll be able to joke around and still get my work done. I'll be totally relaxed." Collin started shaking his head as he thought of that scene in the future.

Then he added, "Dude, that's exactly how I am over here." He was referring to minor league camp. "As soon as I get over here, I am loose and confident again, but over there everything is different."

The wave of enlightenment had overcome him, and if it's possible for facial hair to relax, I swear I could see Collin's thick, seventies-style mustache loosen and fall more naturally against his face.

"I've had some really good starts in the big leagues when I was relaxed and when I wasn't trying to pitch to stay up in the big leagues, and that's exactly what you're talking about." He was on a roll, so I just let him keep going. "All I have to do to stay in the big leagues is be the same person that I am all the time!"

"That's right." I picked up where he left off. "And that applies to who you are off the field, too, Collin. Think about who you are as a person when you're not playing baseball. You're laid-back, you have fun, you're confident in who you are. Do you worry about staying married to your wife?"

"No, of course not." He laughed. Another wave of enlightenment washed over him.

"So all you have to do to get everything you've ever wanted as a baseball player is just be yourself out there and approach each day like you will when you've been there for years."

"Man." He couldn't stop shaking his head and smiling. "It's so simple. I can't believe that's what I've been doing. That's so easy to change."

Make It Tangible

The easiest way to use Situational Thinking is to help you relax when you have a big moment looming. If you want to get more out of this technique, spend some time thinking about who you are as a person and as an athlete. Remind yourself of your character strengths, and make sure that your actions match your genuine personality, demeanor, and pace. It is hard enough to get to the big leagues without trying to reinvent yourself or stay in character in the process. When you are close to getting what you want, it can be difficult to trust that you don't have to do anything different to finish the job. Nate and Collin were able to get back to being themselves, which turned out to be good enough to be big leaguers. If you are good enough, you'll get there someday, too. If you're not, then trying to be better than you're capable of isn't going to work, no matter how hard you try.

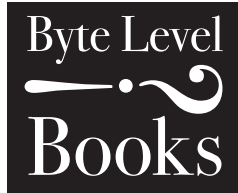
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Geoff Miller is a partner at Winning Mind, LLC, a San Diego–based company that helps elite performers in sports, business, and the military perform under pressure.

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Geoff has lectured at the national conferences of the American Baseball Coaches Association, the National Fire Protection Agency, the Golf Coaches Association of America, and the Gymnastics Association of Texas. He holds a bachelor of arts degree from the University of California, Riverside, as well as a master’s degree in sports psychology from San Diego State University.



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Tyler Wainright is a Memphis-based photographer who specializes in landscape, nature, and fine art photography whose work spans from California to the mountains of Tennessee down to the white, sandy beaches of Florida. His passion for photography was born on the side of a mountain, and more of his work can be found at <http://tylerwainright.com>.