

# LEADERSHIP TRAINING for SOFTBALL

**2<sup>nd</sup>  
Edition!**

USING  
MENTAL SKILLS  
TO DISCOVER  
YOUR POTENTIAL

BY AARON WEINTRAUB  
FOREWORD BY MIKE CANDREA

# FOREWORD

By Mike Candrea

I have had the honor to coach for the past 37 years at the junior college and Division I levels. The past 28 years I have been at the University of Arizona and have had the opportunity to watch our game grow in leaps and bounds. As I began my career, the game was dominated by pitching. We pitched from 40 feet and used a white ball with white seams and an aluminum bat. Since then, we have moved the mound back to 43 feet, used an optic yellow ball with red seams, and a composite bat that has heightened the performance of hitters today. The one constant in the game is the ability of our greatest performers to have a quiet mind and strong mental skills. Back in the day, these skills were severely overlooked and the knowledge and resources to help build them were hard to find. We all agreed that we played a game of relaxed skills, but how often did we give our athletes the tools and knowledge to play the game without distractions and to deal effectively with a game built around failure? I have constantly seen the greatest physically skilled athletes unable to perform at a high level and average players excel in our game due to their mental skill set.

I had the honor of coaching our 2004 and 2008 Olympic softball teams and probably witnessed one of the greatest performances by any team in Olympic history in Athens in 2004. This was a team of our very best softball players in the world and the common thread that I found in these players was their emotional stability and quiet minds. This team full of leaders had outstanding physical skills, but their ability to perform consistently under pressure was directly related to their ability to play the game one pitch at a time, embracing the opportunity to perform on the biggest stage. There are many distractions that come with the game, but these girls knew how to block them out. In today's athletic arena, it is a must for any coach to have an understanding of the distractions that enter our athlete's performance on a daily basis. We would all agree that everyone has potential to perform, but to actually do it, we must eliminate the interference – tension and distractions!

Aaron Weintraub has done a remarkable job in this book to give coaches and athletes a wealth of knowledge and tools to both discover and help others discover their mental skills. This book will improve your ability to lead and perform without distractions, once again having fun working at and playing this game with your teammates. I have

found that the most important step is being aware of those negative thoughts, tension, and the fears that performing can bring, and then finding simple solutions to overcome the negative chatter in our mind that keeps us from a fluid performance motion. In the pages that follow, Aaron provides the details and tools to develop this awareness and proven strategies that work for the greatest athletes in the world. His style is impressive because it is in-depth and sophisticated while remaining easy to read and understand.

This book will not only help you perform in softball, but more importantly it will guide you to tap into your leadership skills that will help you reach your full potential in life! I love it when I have a team full of leaders and I am looking forward to giving each member of my team a copy of this book!

*Mike Candrea*

# PREFACE

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius,  
power, and magic in it. Begin it now.  
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Poet

Success is the peace of mind that comes from knowing you did your best.  
—John Wooden, Basketball Hall of Famer as both a Player and Coach

As much as we pump iron and we run to build our strength up, we need to build our mental  
strength up...so we can focus...so we can be in concert with one another.  
—Phil Jackson, Basketball Zen Master (and 13-time NBA Champion)

**Q**uality leadership is commonly sought but seldom achieved. Everyone talks about it. The need for it seems omnipresent. Almost everyone claims to want to be a leader, yet effective leaders are rare. In short, superior leadership is easy to talk about and difficult to achieve.

At the risk of giving away the golden ticket before this book officially begins, leadership is a simple four-step process:

1. Have a clear vision
2. Lead by example
3. Connect with empathy, and
4. Take action to make teammates better.

This is not a step-by-step process, but rather a constant pursuit of all four elements. It cannot be achieved without interminable, subtle adjustments. Deficiency at any step in the process threatens or even terminates a leader's effectiveness. The most common misstep is leading by example. The others are not easy, but they do not require as much courage and relentlessness as giving your best effort one step at a time, accepting whatever happens, and then doing it again and again...

Many athletes today want to lead and are willing to work, but they lack the mental toughness that equals the consistency of a leader. When you achieve consistent excellence, others will want to follow. This book provides the details for how to discover and display your potential, setting you up to be the ultimate competitor and leader. It is about leading others by first leading yourself effectively through the inevitable trials and tribulations of elite level sports. In the course of clarifying how to achieve this, it also provides the means to develop a clear vision, empathize with others, and find the resources (e.g. confidence, energy, time) left in your tank required to make your teammates better, too.

Many smart athletes believe that all it takes to win is talent and hard work, but experience teaches us that:

### Talent + Hard Work $\neq$ Performance.

Why do athletes perform well at certain times but poorly at others? Why do many work hard and have talent, but still fail to consistently get the results that they expect and deserve? Are they practicing efficiently? Do you know specifically what to do to guarantee a successful performance in “clutch” situations?<sup>1</sup> The solutions exist not in athletes’ physical skills or abilities, but in their mental skills. This book will guide any athlete or coach who wants to learn how to bridge the gap between potential and performance and consistently give his best effort. You will want to be clear about what you want, develop your self-awareness, and anchor successful thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This book discusses leadership in baseball, though mental skills training breeds leaders in any performance situation.

Mental skills training significantly improves both rate of learning and performance under pressure. As the level of play increases, the impact of the mental side of the game increases, in large part because the differences in athletes’ physical skills diminish. The physical mechanics of sports are often taught with impressive skill, but baseball is typically a sink-or-swim world when it comes to mental skills. This is odd since mental toughness is the mark of every great leader. However, it is also good news because it means that you can get an edge over your competition by practicing your mental skills.

Most coaches know that attitude, focus, teamwork, self-control, confidence, courage, and other mental skills are the keys to leadership, execution, and fun times on the

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<sup>1</sup> Yes, this is very possible, though you have to be willing to define success and “failure” in abnormal ways, pursue how to give your best effort, and follow through on what you know.

diamond. Still, many do not dedicate much time to teaching these skills. Some coaches teach them haphazardly and some figure that the cream naturally rises to the top. It is not uncommon to hear a coach request (or demand) confidence and focus, but it is unusual for them to tell their athletes *how* to achieve these skills.

Top coaches get their edge through the four steps of leadership listed above. They have a clear vision about where their team is headed and how they will get there. They lead by example, because confidence, poise, focus, courage, and tenacity are required of them every bit as much as they are required of athletes. They connect with empathy because they know that most athletes do not care how much they know until they know how much they care. Finally, they have the resources to help their players give their best effort. They are not overwhelmed by the busy-ness of their jobs; they make time for what is important, including providing guidance for improving mental skills. When athletes are well trained in mental skills, they are able to coach themselves effectively and get better, faster.

Many coachable, hard-working athletes consistently perform far below their potential because they are unaware of their deficient mental skills. They hear comments like, “If we could just turn his brain off, he would be one heck of a player,” but they have no strategies for keeping thoughts out of the way. They know that focus is desirable, but they have no strategy in place to get locked in. Professional and Olympic athletes have formal mental skills training readily available. Now you do, too!

The lucky athletes are the ones who have parents and coaches who teach leadership skills effectively, usually without using labels like “sport psychology” and “mental skills training.” (John Wooden is a great example.) Some universities now have a sport psychologist on staff or an undergraduate course related to coaching the mental game. This is progress, but there is still a long way to go. Poor coaching suggestions such as “RELAX,” “We need...,” or “Don’t...[make this mistake]” are commonplace. Some coaching personalities make it harder rather than easier for athletes to maintain an ideal attitude and focus.

I wrote this book because I want to help you, whether you are a coach or an athlete, increase the enjoyment you get from your investment in baseball. If you have the courage and motivation to be uncomfortable, honest (synonym: aware), and persistent, I want to accelerate your process of approaching your potential. I love helping athletes give their best effort now! You are an impressive person if you are really trying to approach your potential; most people prefer a safety net for their ego. I am honored if you find that my words aid your journey.

Sport psychology and leadership training may seem confusing and complex. They should not. This book will open up the world of mental skills training to you in an easy-to-understand manner. The principles are straightforward and logical, so when you combine desire with discipline, acquiring these skills is inevitable. This book will guide that quest with clear definitions, common examples, relevant quotes, challenging ideas, intriguing stories, clarifying figures, action steps, and written exercises.

I began thinking of this book while in college in the early 1990s and began to actually write it in graduate school in the late 1990s. Many revisions followed. I love the question “Why?” “Why did that individual or team win?” Focusing on what is controllable, these questions follow:

- Why did that team or individual perform at that level in that situation?
- Why does one person break down under pressure while another breaks through?
- Why does the athlete who played so well one day play so poorly on another?

After a good deal of research, thought, trial-and-error, discussions with experts, and participation as an athlete or coach in literally thousands of ball games, I have a fairly good understanding of how the combination of an athlete’s mental and physical skills leads to his performances, which in turn leads to outcomes such as scoring and winning. This book is designed to share that understanding with you. It will also provide strategies to develop leadership skills so that your outcomes can more likely be the ones that you have always dreamed of.

The course of study herein is a progressive one divided into five parts. Part 1 (Top Jocks are Scientists) discusses the foundation skills of control, awareness, and discipline. Part 2 (Attitude, Meet Altitude) discusses how to optimize attitude, including confidence, for performance. Part 3 (Get Ready, Get Set) discusses the skills needed to have the best approach possible. Part 4 (Go!) looks at what to do when it is time to perform (preview: focus and trust your stuff). Finally, Part 5 (Now What?) addresses responses, thus completing the performance cycle. This includes responding effectively to both situations and other people. Effective responses lead to effective approaches, and then a quality approach and a “locked-in” focus lead to superior performances. These behaviors combined with a proper attitude throughout will guarantee success as it is defined in these pages. They will *also* ensure the best possible

chance of achieving all the positive outcomes that typically (in America's competitive culture) define success.

Sport psychology has been called the study of what successful athletes do. I am a quote fan, and I have included many sport psychology quotes that relate to the topic being discussed. These quotes demonstrate that many famous athletes have superb mental skills. You will own these skills if you have enough desire, patience, and persistence. Be pleased with small steps; developing mental skills is a process like any other. It takes time and effort. Take it one step at a time, for if you continuously make appropriate adjustments, you will continually improve. Occasional leaps forward in performance are likely, but no shortcuts exist. Continual improvement, itself, is the essence of success.

Before you begin, I am tempted to wish you luck in your pursuit of excellence. But since one point of all that follows is to take luck out of the equation as much as possible, I will resist. Instead, I wish you personal excellence and growth as you figure out more and more details about how to coach yourself and others towards peak performances. And I trust that because you are sincere in your motivations, disciplined in your approach, and courageous enough to know that your best effort is always good enough, the outcomes will work out for you quite well.

## **IT ALL COMES DOWN TO ONE PITCH (PART 1)**

Nobody who ever gave their best effort regretted it.  
—George Halas, Athlete, Coach, and Owner

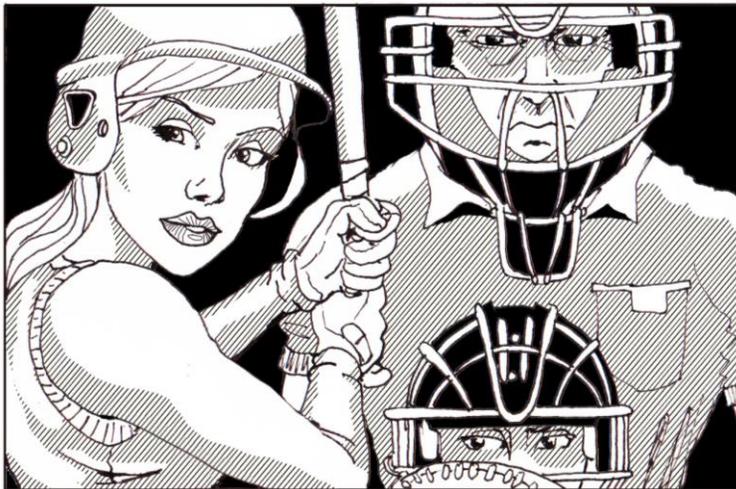
**I**t is the bottom of the seventh inning in the last game of the Super Regionals. A record crowd is on hand and fired up to watch two powerhouse teams duke it out in pure championship competition. It is “put up” or “shut up” time, because this will be the final game of the year for the loser, but the catapult to the College World Series for the winner. The first two games have been close, but this final game is the best one yet. In the bottom of the second inning, Ashley's team opened the scoring with a single run on a beautiful triple off the center field wall, but the visitors answered with a two-run home run in the top of the fifth. Since then, the pitching has dominated, keeping the

score at 2-1. Now it is the bottom of the seventh, there are runners on first and third, two outs, and one of the best hitters in the country is up to bat. It is “Do or Die” time. Ashley is on deck.

Ashley truly loves softball; her life has revolved around the game for the past 15 years. She is a senior who has had a solid collegiate career. She will probably not get a chance to play professional softball, however, because she stands only 5’2” tall and there are so few available jobs. The possibility that this will be her last game playing organized ball briefly crosses her mind as the count on the current batter goes to 3-2. In the stands, the fans love this excitement. Despite their confidence in the home team, which has already won 45 games this year, many hearts are pounding as though they are trying to escape from their cages. In the dugout and in the stands, palms are sweaty and stomach butterflies are jumping. Through the incredible tension of this moment, the pitcher throws a nasty rise ball...and the batter lays off of it. It is too high...ball four.

Now, Ashley must step into the batter’s box.

Is she ready? Is she sufficiently prepared to not just try hard, but to actually give her best effort?



(At the book’s conclusion, you will find out more about Ashley and what happened next in “It All Comes Down to One Pitch: Part 2.”)

# INTRODUCTION

## DON'T TELL ME "NICE TRY"

Mental toughness is many things and rather difficult to explain. Its qualities are sacrifice and self-denial. Also, most importantly, it is combined with a perfectly disciplined will that refuses to give in. It's a state of mind – you could call it character in action.

—Vince Lombardi, Football Coach

Developing and refining my mental game has played a critical role in my success. For years, players have had to develop these skills on their own.

—Dave Winfield, Baseball Hall of Famer

Solid training in the mental game allows us to meet obstacles head-on and play with every ounce of our ability.

—Jim Abbott, (one-handed) Baseball Player

Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile.

—Vince Lombardi

“Nice try.”

It sounds like a compliment, but is it? Close only counts in horseshoes. No one says “nice try” after a best effort performance. They say, “Wow!” “Awesome!” or “You did it!”

After the game, when someone asks if an athlete or team tried hard, the answer is consistently “yes.” But was it truly their best effort? Probably not, because tapping into the personal power necessary to perform the best they are capable of at that moment in time requires a lot more than trying hard. Trying is a huge part of it, and the motivation to compete with consistent intensity is not something to take for granted. However, to

give a best effort performance, athletes also have to do the best they can now to create an ideal performance state, commit to their plan, and focus. To restate this foundational model of a best effort performance, leaders get their minds and bodies ready, know what they can control and want to do, and then avoid thinking too much by focusing completely on the task at hand so they can do it.

Implementing the leadership skills discussed in this book will literally guarantee that an athlete knows how -- and is able -- to give her best effort for each and every performance. It is a lofty goal...and achieving it is completely within every athlete's control. Unfortunately, most athletes will fall far short of this goal because doing so will require patterns of thoughts and actions that are neither normal nor natural. On second thought, perhaps this is not so unfortunate because a willingness to understand and do what it takes to give best performances will give leaders an edge over their competition.

A common misconception in the sports world is that if a person practices and trains hard enough physically, everything else will magically fall into place. Reality frequently teaches otherwise. Mountains of both anecdotal and academic evidence exist that support the idea that mental skills are critical for an athlete to perform up to her potential. A web search for the keywords "sport psychology" will reveal millions of links. Over 95 percent of American Olympians in the past 45 years have received formal mental skills training. Today, sport psychologists or mental skills coaches are employed by almost every NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL team, by most of the world's top professional golfers and tennis players, by IMG Academies, and even by some of the more progressive sports agents.

Mental toughness is the ability to do what needs to be done right now. Mentally tough competitors get more satisfaction from their time at practice and in competition than others because they know how to enjoy the game and its challenges. They have faith in the process that leads to great outcomes, so they do not worry about outcomes as much as most competitors do. Their consistency makes them a coach's favorite and somebody their teammates can rely on. They are leaders who always find a way to give their team a chance to win.

Leaders have the courage to do what is difficult and the confidence to be comfortable in a situation that would make others uncomfortable. They do not allow themselves to get frustrated because they will not accept the major ups and downs that most (overly emotional) athletes have. They find a way to keep their mind and body close to their ideal performance state. They find a way to do their job!

So how does an athlete acquire mental toughness? Can a leader be built? Athletes must know their job to do their job and no one is born with all the details. They must look for answers from many sources and also be willing to guess. Every time an athlete takes action with positive expectations (even through the inevitable adversities) and gives her best effort, she is practicing her mental skills and improving her mental toughness.

There are no shortcuts. However, there are many tools to help athletes accelerate the process of reaching their goals. The word “opportunity” is one example. Listen to the top professional athletes in interviews after they did well and you will find this theme: they were grateful for and thriving on the opportunities they had.

**"You can either find a way  
or you can find an excuse,  
but you can't do both."**

How mentally tough is each athlete? Does she know how to imitate the thought patterns of the greatest athletes in the world? Does she know how to move beyond normal, move beyond trying hard, to consistently giving her best effort? If she is going to get rewards from softball that most others will not get, she will have to do things that most others are simply not willing to do! (For example, most will not read this book and even fewer will do what it suggests, even though they will not doubt the efficacy of what follows.)

Performance comes from the combination of physical skills and mental skills. Physical skills include speed, strength, genetics, and mechanics. Mental skills is an umbrella term that includes everything else that affects performance such as attitude, focus, courage, teamwork, strategy, imagery, and confidence. How important is the mental side of the game? Most professional athletes say it is at least 80% of the equation. Whatever the number, athletes all recognize that the ability to deal with “failure,” be in the moment, and trust their stuff is a difference maker. An important question follows: how much time do most athletes spend... how much of their attention in training is dedicated to improving their mental skills?

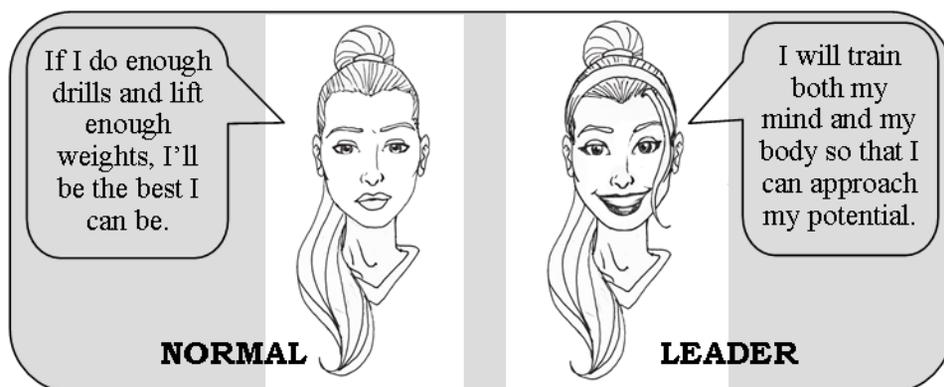
Normal athletes spend most of their time thinking about mechanics and training physically. They miss out on many opportunities to train their mental game. Perhaps this is because they have not been exposed to the details about how to do it. Leaders recognize that mental skills are important and often under-addressed by coaches, so

they take the bull by the horns to find out how to get what they want. After all, they invest lots into softball and it is superb mental skills that will enable them to maximize their return on that investment. They know that by persistently looking for the answers, they will find them. Quite a few are included in the pages that follow, but potential leaders be forewarned: knowing what to do is much easier than doing it.

Athletes improve their mental skills when they work smart. Many girls practice their drills, run their sprints, and lift weights. Very few people are willing to pay attention to the details so they can figure out more about themselves and more about the game. Even fewer will do what it takes to apply everything they learn. Doing so is tough, but this is great news for leaders, because this allows them to get an edge by being willing to do what others will not do! This book will simply illuminate the path that leaders are already on, perhaps also putting the wind at their backs. The primary goal herein is to approach potential by getting better, faster.

Even though it is obvious, an important principle to remember is that, “All you can do is all you can do” or “All you can control is all you can control.” Athletes cannot control other people, the weather, or the past. Getting upset about a mistake by self, teammate, or umpire is normal, but it is not useful. Athletes can control themselves, including how they respond to challenges, what attitude they practice and perform with, and how fast they learn. Are they learning to be relaxed, confident, ready to go, committed to the plan, and focused one play at a time? They can be if they will think like a scientist and making learning more important than today’s results. They can leave normal far in the distance behind by making it a habit to give their best effort one step at a time.

Figure I-1



THANK YOU FOR READING THIS PREVIEW!

**COACH TRAUB**  
MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POTENTIAL AND PERFORMANCE  
Excellence Enthusiasm Forgiveness

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SICK TO GET BETTER  
**NO EXCUSES** Best Effort Now

STRIVE FOR PERFECTION BUT NEVER EXPECT IT  
Control the Controllables **W.I.N.**

**CONFIDENCE** **FOCUS**  
**COURAGE** **EFFORT**

**Trust** Be a **Scientist** Let it happen  
ENJOY YOUR JOB KNOW YOUR JOB DO YOUR JOB

The graphic features a dark grey background with white and light grey text. At the top, 'COACH TRAUB' is written in a large, bold, outlined font, with 'MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING' below it in a smaller, solid font. The central focus is four interlocking puzzle pieces arranged in a 2x2 square. The top-left piece is solid grey and contains the word 'CONFIDENCE'. The top-right piece is white with a grey outline and contains 'FOCUS'. The bottom-left piece is white with a grey outline and contains 'COURAGE'. The bottom-right piece is solid grey and contains 'EFFORT'. To the left of the puzzle pieces, the text 'BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POTENTIAL AND PERFORMANCE' is written vertically, with 'Excellence Enthusiasm Forgiveness' below it. To the right, 'STRIVE FOR PERFECTION BUT NEVER EXPECT IT' is written vertically, with 'Control the Controllables W.I.N.' below it. At the top of the puzzle pieces, the phrase 'YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SICK TO GET BETTER' is written, followed by 'NO EXCUSES' in large bold letters and 'Best Effort Now' in a smaller font. At the bottom, the words 'Trust', 'Be a Scientist', and 'Let it happen' are written in a large font, with 'ENJOY YOUR JOB', 'KNOW YOUR JOB', and 'DO YOUR JOB' written below them in a smaller font.