

Mind May Be MVP on the Diamond

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“Hope springs eternal” in the heart of every baseball fan and nothing trumps the feeling of emerging from the turnstile to absorb the comforting vision of fresh grass, manicured infield dirt and crisp white foul lines. The starting lineup, read with pent-up energy over the public address system and the greasy, tempting aroma of ballpark fare are traditions of the game captured in two momentous words: “Play ball!”

What makes it possible to play baseball, however, may look more like psychology than the national pastime. According to one University of Missouri researcher, psychology is the mediator between the physics of the sport and the human limitations of the player.

Mike Stadler, associate professor of psychology and associate director of the honors college at MU, has found an important relationship between the mental and physical aspects of baseball. The results of his study have been published in his book, *The Psychology of Baseball: Inside the Mental Game of the Major League Player*.

“Yogi Berra said baseball is 90 percent mental; the other half is physical. While his math is questionable, he’s right,” Stadler said. “Baseball is an incredibly mental game. The physics of baseball imposes physical limitations on the game, and the players’ biology imposes physiological limitations; psychology mediates between the two.”

According to Stadler, when considering only the physics of the game of baseball, it should be impossible, for example, to consistently hit a major league pitch. The hitter has to know, before the ball is roughly halfway to home plate (in about two-tenths of a second), whether to swing or not and where to place the swing. Acts of physical skill, which fans take for granted and separate the pros from the amateurs, would not happen without psychology. These fundamental skills include hitting, throwing and catching.

Some of the subjects Stadler examined in his psychological study were skills essential to playing the game, performance variability (what makes one player or group of players better than another), players’ performance changes over time, mental strategies, conditioning, streaks and slumps, ‘clutch’ hitting, and fan perceptions.

As for the psychology of morale, Stadler said it’s winning that produces chemistry, not chemistry that produces winning.

“The usual public perception of psychology can be extreme: Sigmund Freud or the psychologist in the movie *Silence of the Lambs*. There’s no reason for psychology to be dry—we’re talking about baseball, after all. Psychology helps coaches, managers, owners and fans understand the game a little better. I think the more insight you have into the way things work, the more you can enjoy certain parts of it.” Stadler said.

Source: University of Missouri

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