The Use of Psychology in Professional Baseball

The Pioneering Work of David F. Tracy

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Recently the psychological aspects of baseball have begun to receive much attention from those involved in preparing professional baseball players. One reason for the increased interest in psychology is that the game's mental aspects are often considered an important element in determining whether professional ballplayers perform to their potential.\(^1\) According to George Gmelch one way most baseball organizations assess a player’s mental abilities is through psychological testing.\(^2\)

One of the first examples in which a baseball player’s mental abilities were assessed occurred at Columbia University in 1920. Babe Ruth was brought to a Columbia University psychology laboratory so that researchers could try to determine what physical and psychological abilities made him one of the greatest home run hitters in baseball. The researchers assessed various measures, including Ruth’s reaction time, attention span, memory, learning and coordination. The results of Ruth’s psychological tests gained media attention and were printed on the front page of the *New York Times*.\(^3\)

A second example of psychology applied to baseball is Coleman Griffith’s work with the Chicago Cubs in 1938, when he was hired as a consultant to conduct a psychological analysis of the Cubs team. Griffith was given filming and laboratory equipment to observe the players. During his research he analyzed each player psychologically and produced a report. After completing his work he was offered a full-time consulting position with the Cubs but did not accept the position.\(^4\)

Although these historical examples of psychology applied to baseball are documented in the literature, they did not seem to make the psychologist or the mental skills specialist an integral part of baseball culture. Thus little is known about when and how psychologists began to educate professional baseball players, coaches, and management about the mental aspects of baseball. To aid this understanding, this article will describe David F. Tracy’s work dur-
ing the 1950 baseball season. Specifically it will provide a description of how Tracy was hired and the impact his hiring had on local and national media as well as a discussion of his work with the St. Louis Browns. We will consider the impact of Tracy’s work on the medical and athletic community and will discuss the role of sport psychology in the culture of professional baseball today.

TRACY HIRED BY ST. LOUIS BROWNS

According to Tracy he began to receive attention from the media about his use of psychology with professional athletes while speaking at a New York City psychology meeting during the summer of 1949. At this meeting Tracy presented information on his psychological work with semipro baseball players. He explained the performance improvement made by these athletes as they implemented psychological skills into training and competition. Tracy also suggested that he could help other professional baseball players and teams enhance their performance through the use of psychological skills. Subsequently a media report was released stating that Tracy offered his services to the St. Louis Browns.

Tracy met with Browns president Bill Dewitt at the December 1949 winter baseball meetings. Subsequently the club owner hired Tracy to be the Browns psychologist. According to Borst Dewitt hired Tracy because the team’s athletic trainer convinced them that the psychological elements of athletics were important. The St. Louis Browns management believed that if psychologists were used by other industries they might also be of help to professional baseball teams.

After the Browns hired Tracy, the media began to publish stories on the work that Tracy would be doing with the team. Although Tracy used various psychological interventions, hypnosis was the one most often discussed by the local and national media. Most articles viewed his hiring as the first time a psychologist had been hired to work with a Major League baseball team. As Tracy began his work with the Browns athletes, he suggested that there was a definite place for a psychologist working in the sports world. He stated:

I think there’s a great field in sports for the work I’m going to do with the Browns, and I’m confident that in a few years psychology will be used to a great extent. After all, if a successful business man frets and worries and then freezes up when called upon to make a speech, or an actor suffers stage fright on opening night, consider the tension on a young ball player. A stage play doesn’t change, but every ball game is different. I’m sure I can help the Browns.
Tracy’s Work with the St. Louis Browns

Tracy’s major role before spring training began was to conduct promotional work. For example, during January and February 1950, he lectured and made various media appearances. Tracy’s first lecture was at Carnegie Recital Hall on January 11, 1950.14 He arrived in St. Louis on January 20, 1950, to begin lecturing on radio and television. On February 17, 1950, Tracy even appeared on a national TV show called We the People.15 A meeting on February 26, 1950, with the Brown’s Boosters followed this interview and was attended by 1,600 fans.16 Subsequently he traveled to Burbank, California, to begin his spring training work with the Browns athletes.

Tracy’s work before spring training received a great deal of media attention. His work was chronicled in the sports pages of the St. Louis Dispatch as well as The Sporting News. The sportswriter who covered Tracy’s work for both publications was Bob Broeg. Broeg discussed Tracy’s work in his published memoirs, Memories of a Hall of Fame Sportswriter.17

One interesting cultural aspect of Tracy’s work was how baseball fans responded. They wrote letters to the editor in national magazines about Tracy’s work with the St. Louis Browns. In The Sporting News, the editorials appeared in a section titled “The Fan’s Voice”; responses were varied. One fan wrote that using psychology may give an unfair advantage.18 The media also published cartoons that addressed Tracy’s work with the Browns.19

One of the first components of Tracy’s work with the Browns athletes was to convince them of the benefits of psychology as well as what his role would be in working with them.20 Some players were apprehensive about working with him because they thought he would want to treat them for mental problems, but Tracy assured the players that he was not a psychiatrist.21

Tracy began teaching psychology classes with the St. Louis Browns on March 2, 1950.22 Classes were held twice a day since the Browns practices were split between two squads. When members of a squad were not practicing on the field, they had the option of attending his classes. Tracy held class every day for the first week and then every other day during the second week.23

To help the athletes improve performance, Tracy’s classes consisted of teaching hypnosis, autosuggestion, relaxation, and confidence-building techniques.24 The intended outcome was to help the Browns overcome their fear of crowds and thus play relaxed.25 To this end, Tracy based much of his work changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts. For example, he taught the Browns pitchers to step off the mound and take three deep breaths when they were feeling nervous. Tracy stated, “My primary work was to get pitchers to
reject all negative thoughts from their minds and force themselves to think confidently.”

The reaction to Tracy’s work was positive overall. Tracy believed that he had helped baseball realize the importance of psychology and that he had succeeded in helping athletes learn to relieve nervous tension, to relax, and to use hypnosis and autosuggestion. Dewitt, the Browns president, commended Tracy’s work at the end of spring training. Specifically, Dewitt stated, “We’re satisfied Dr. Tracy has been received favorably by most of our players and that he already has helped some of them . . . and we’re fully aware of the publicity value that has resulted.” Also, based on Tracy’s work with the St. Louis Browns, Dewitt believed that a psychologist could play an important role in working with athletes and sports teams.

USE OF HYPNOSIS DURING THE 1950S AND 1960S

After Tracy worked with the St. Louis Browns, other individuals began providing interventions to professional baseball players. For example Arthur Allen, a professional hypnotist, recounted that he received a request from the New York Giants to provide a hypnosis intervention. Allen suggested that he was called because of the media attention given to Tracy’s work.

Much of the media focus and attention that Tracy received was for his use of hypnosis with baseball players. Interestingly hypnosis as an intervention with athletes began to be used more often throughout the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1950s and 1960s journal articles and published conference proceedings began to be published on the use of hypnosis with athletes. For example, Warren Johnson published articles that described his use of hypnosis with athletes and also presented case studies on hypnosis with athletes at the first World Congress of Sport Psychology in 1965. Hypnosis as an intervention for enhanced performance was used internationally as well during this time period.

As the use of hypnosis became more popular as a performance enhancement technique with athletes, it did not escape controversy. In 1961 the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Sport in conjunction with the Council on Mental Health of the American Medical Association published a report on the use of hypnosis with athletes, which read in part: “In substance, this report states that for reasons of sportsmanship as well as possible health hazards, hypnosis for the purpose of improving athletic performance is undesirable. For purely health reasons, however, there may be instances when hypnosis of an athlete may be medically indicated without reference to athletic achieve-
ment.” In response to this report Johnson suggested that hypnosis could help improve an athlete’s performance and in most cases was not hazardous to an athlete’s health.

SPORT PSYCHOLOGY IN BASEBALL TODAY

Tracy’s work set the groundwork for sport psychology to become the important part of baseball culture it is today. Many books have been written on the psychological aspects of baseball, including The Mental Game of Baseball, The Mental Keys to Hitting, and The Mental ABC’s of Pitching, and Heads Up Baseball. Charles Maher, a sport psychologist for the Cleveland Indians, has described how sport psychology is an important component of Major League baseball culture today:

Four years ago maybe only 20% of Major League baseball clubs worked with a sports psychologist, but today that number is at least 70%. I think the first reason for this is that many clubs have come to realize just how beneficial and important this is. Some of our best work is done with the coaching staff. Coaches have the most direct impact on a player’s mental health, maybe more than their wives in some cases. It makes my job so much easier when we handle things in a proactive way than a reactive way. I think in the next few years, you’ll see every team—in every league—using a sports psychologist.

Sport psychologists are a part of baseball culture today partly because of the beliefs of a team’s front office staff. For example, Mark Shapiro, Cleveland Indians assistant general manager, states: “Generally, about eight percent of an organization’s Minor League players make it to the bigs. We’re a little better than that. For us, the most important thing for a minor league player is that he be a great player not only physically, but also mentally.”

This article has summarized David F. Tracy’s work with the St. Louis Browns between January through May 1950, pointing out the similarities between Tracy’s work and the work of present-day sport psychologists. One similarity is explaining the role of the sport psychology consultant to athletes. In 1950 Tracy had to explain that he was there not to treat mental problems but to help enhance performance. Still today, this is one of the most important components of the initial meetings between sport psychologists and athletes. Also similar are the interventions Tracy used, including self-talk, relaxation, and visualization. These are all interventions that most sport psychologists use today with athletes.

This article has shown how hypnosis as an intervention for athletes received
attention from researchers and practitioners during the 1950s and 1960s. The media attention that Tracy’s work received may have influenced others to begin using this intervention with athletes. A committee report was even generated suggesting that hypnosis with athletes not be used as a performance enhancement intervention. The committee report cited a lack of sportsmanship as one reason hypnosis for athletes should not be used. Clearly a change of thought has occurred during the past forty years about the fair use of hypnosis as well as other psychological interventions used to enhance the performance of amateur and professional baseball players.

Tracy’s work is an important part of the history of baseball because it may represent the first time the application of psychology to professional baseball received a great deal of attention from management, media, and fans. Tracy brought national attention to the psychologist’s role—and, specifically, his own use of hypnosis—in professional baseball.

NOTES

7. Tracy, The Psychologist at Bat, p. 16.
9. Tracy, The Psychologist at Bat, p. 21. Originally Tracy was hired to work with the baseball team only during spring training.
12. An article by John P. Carmichael (“Psychologist to Bat for Missing Stars on the Browns: Emotional Stability as a Substitute for Base Hits,” The Sporting News, January 4, 1950, p. 8), a Chicago sportswriter, was the only article found that suggested that this was not the first time a psychologist had been hired by a professional baseball team.
Carmichael wrote that a psychologist had worked with the Chicago Cubs during the 1941 baseball season. Coleman Griffith was known to have been a consultant to the Chicago Cubs during the 1938 baseball season. It is unclear whether Carmichael was referring to Griffith’s work with the team or to another psychologist who was hired after Griffith.


20. This is an interesting parallel to what sport psychology consultants face today. Tracy had to explain to the athletes that he was not a psychiatrist but a psychologist and was interested in helping them reach higher levels of performance. Sport psychologists face a similar situation today. However, now psychologists make a distinction between educational sport psychologists and clinical sport psychologists. Also, many sport psychologists do not use the term “psychologist” to clarify to the athlete that they are working with them to help improve performance.


26. Tracy, The Psychologist at Bat, p. 64.


40. *CBS Healthwatch*. 