

Leadership Training for Softball

Using Mental Skills to Discover Your Potential

Aaron Weintraub

FOREWORD

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

CHAPTER 6

CHAMPIONS LOOK AT IT THIS WAY

It is much easier to see the picture when you are not inside the frame.

The grass isn't greener on the other side. It's greener where you water it.

There's no substitute for hard work. If you work hard and you prepare yourself as an athlete and you are in great shape, you might get beat, but you'll never lose.

—Nancy Lieberman-Cline, Basketball Player

Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.

—Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor

Don't measure yourself by what you have accomplished, but by what you should have accomplished with your ability.

—John Wooden

I am a winner. I just didn't win today.

—Greg Norman, Golfer

If you make every game a life-and-death proposition, you're going to have problems.

For one thing, you'll be dead a lot.

—Dean Smith, Basketball Coach

For any athlete to perform up to her potential, it is vital for her to focus effectively. It is difficult, for example, to hit a target that she does not see. Therefore, the way she focuses—her perspective—is critical. The dictionary defines perspective as the “ability to see things in a true relationship” to one another or a “specific point of view in understanding things or events.” Another definition says “the appearance of objects as determined by their relative distance and positions.” Synonyms are outlook, attitude, and aspect. Athletes find all sorts of ways to hold themselves back from performing at their best; most of these are related to a flawed perspective, or flawed patterns of self-talk.

Two separate ideas about perspective exist. First is the athlete's *Weltanschauung*, which is her overall world view or her set of priorities, which is discussed in this

chapter. The second is specifics of the view she has when she looks at something, or her focus, which is the topic of Part 4 of this book. Healthy priorities and views about life's events affect each other. To consistently perform near her best, an athlete must learn to look at life in a way that is both true and useful. True, because she will not be able to lie to herself. Useful, because there are two sides to every coin. Both sides are true, but only one is most useful. For example, it is more useful to view the glass as half full than half empty.

An attitude of gratitude is a key skill for success in softball, as in life. Being thankful improves the heart's rhythmic functioning, which reduces stress, promotes clarity of thought, and aids the healing process. It is physiologically impossible to feel stressful and grateful at the same time. Grateful athletes are more relaxed, more coachable, more forgiving, more present to the task at hand, and generally more positive than their counterparts. They are less likely to complain. Author Jon Gordon says, "Remember that complaining is like vomiting. Afterwards you feel better but everyone around you feels sick." Leaders live out the words of John Wooden, "Don't whine. Don't complain. Don't make excuses."

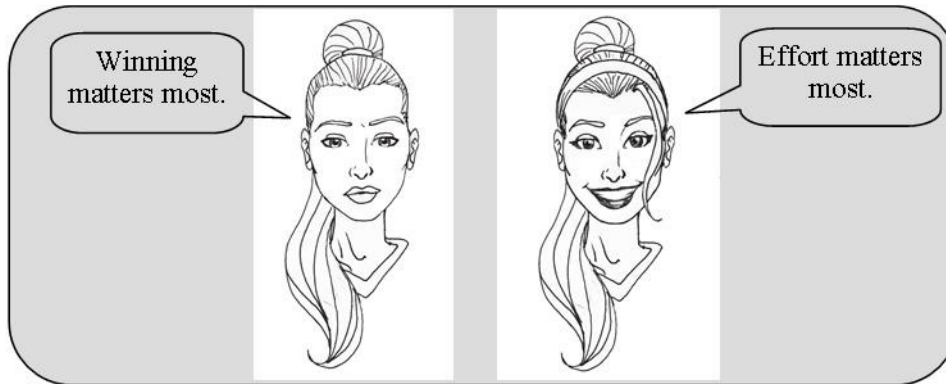
Athletes love to be "in rhythm" and this is much more likely to happen when they are "in gratitude." They might consider the belief that they "won the lottery" when they were born. Winning the lottery means gaining immense wealth at odds of approximately 10,000,000 to 1. Americans today have some real problems, without a doubt, but when compared to all the present and past times and places that people could have been born into, they are extremely lucky to have been born when and where they were. The odds of being born with this many opportunities for health, freedom, happiness, contribution, and satisfaction are many, many times longer than the odds of winning the lottery!

Athletes who are trying to find their ideal performance state certainly should consider an attitude of gratitude as one of their significant "green" light indicators. Instead of focusing on the pressure and the consequences of mistakes, gratitude promotes a focus on playing the game the right way for the right reasons. Instead of pressure and disappointing people, leaders focus on opportunities, including the opportunity to make themselves proud.

An unhealthy perspective in softball says "win at all costs; the score is the only concern." The first step to a healthy perspective on the game is to recognize that it is just a game. Softball is not a life-or-death proposition. Parents and other loved ones will not stop loving because of what happens on the field today. Athletes in "big" moments on television may have literally millions of eyes on them and they are sometimes "tough" enough to perform as though they have not a care in the

world. Attend a little league softball game and you are likely to see a few nine-year-olds carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. The source of these polar opposites is not the situation, but the way the athlete perceives the situation. Her perspective is the one that will empower her with the freedom to be totally engrossed in the moment, making her the kind of athlete that others want to follow.

Figure 6-1



This is not to say that a leader is not competitive. On the contrary, she is extremely competitive. Winning is always more fun than losing and if she is going to play the game, she is going to play to win, including at practice each day. It is a silly question to ask which team “wants it more” in the finals of a tournament. That question has already been clearly answered in the way the two teams prepared themselves at practice. Both teams “want it” badly when the prize is right in front of them. Leaders “want it” just as badly when the prize is off in the distance and their current job is painful.

Winning is far better than the alternative, but the “winning is absolutely critical” perspective is a problem because it does not encourage effort if the victory can be obtained easily. It also does not encourage effort if maximal effort is not perceived to be likely to lead to winning. In fact, it (often subconsciously) discourages it because the person who loses without maximal effort can still defend her win-driven ego (unhealthy perspective) by believing that if she had tried harder, she *might* have won. However, if she took the chance of giving maximal effort and did not get the desired outcome, she would have no solace. She would feel like a “failure.” Not giving her best effort is, she believes, her safest course of action. ~~Many athletes...~~ Most athletes need and keep this safety net for their psyche. Leaders do not know what will happen, but because of their perspective on

success, they do not need a safety net. They know that their best effort is always good enough.

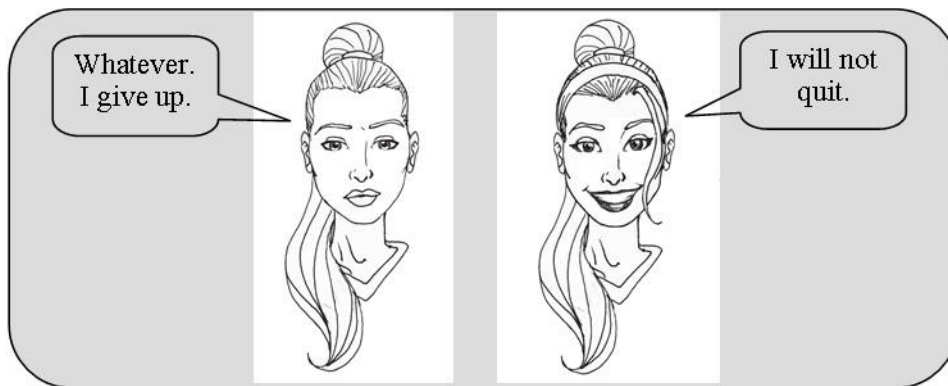
Mistakes are Good

Make learning most important today.

It's important to know that at the end of the day it's not the medals you remember. What you remember is the process—what you learn about yourself by challenging yourself, the experiences you share with other people, the honesty the training demands—those are things nobody can take away from you whether you finish twelfth or you're an Olympic champion.
—Silken Laumann, Olympic Bronze Medalist

A healthy perspective on sports reflects the definitions of success and “failure” promoted throughout this book. Success is “the peace of mind that comes from knowing you did your best.” “Failure” is a term others use to describe undesirable outcomes, but those are not really bad. “Failure” is simply part of the process of achieving success. Real failure (without quotation marks) is bad and can only happen with the athlete's permission. It includes various forms of quitting and excuses.

Figure 6-2

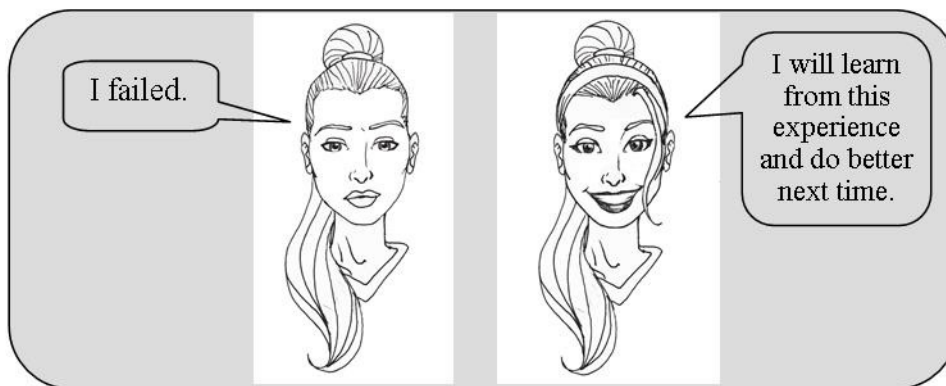


This set of priorities encourages effort towards best-possible behaviors. It emphasizes the process of athletes practicing and performing and doing their best. It acknowledges the importance of destinations, but emphasizes enjoyment for the journeys to these destinations. The leader's journey is most important because personal growth and the welfare of the team are the primary concerns. Improvements come from effort. Full attention to the task at hand is valued

because an ideal focus leads to growth. Most importantly for enhancing performance, freedom from anxiety about outcomes makes it possible for an athlete to consistently enjoy the process of performing during games. Through both tough times and smooth sailing, athletes with a healthy perspective will play with a freedom of spirit that allows them to perform up to their potential.

An ideal perspective recognizes that more important things in life exist than today's performance. This does not mean that performance outcomes do not matter. In addition to their effects on little things like status, money, and reputation (wink, wink), outcomes provide a competitor with feedback about her process. They are important because they reveal the truth about what works and what does not. But no single outcome should ever be given too much importance. No loss should ever be seen as a catastrophe. No "failure" should be allowed to carry an emotional scar of inadequacy. No fear of "failure" will interfere with performance because a competitor with a healthy perspective on the game knows that by putting forth great effort, she cannot fail. She will be a success in her own eyes and the eyes of those who watch her with a healthy perspective. In fact, she already is successful if she designs, practices, and executes her plan (routines) to the best of her ability. The stress and pressure to perform well that others feel is replaced only by the pressure she puts on herself to perform up to her potential as quickly as possible.

Figure 6-3

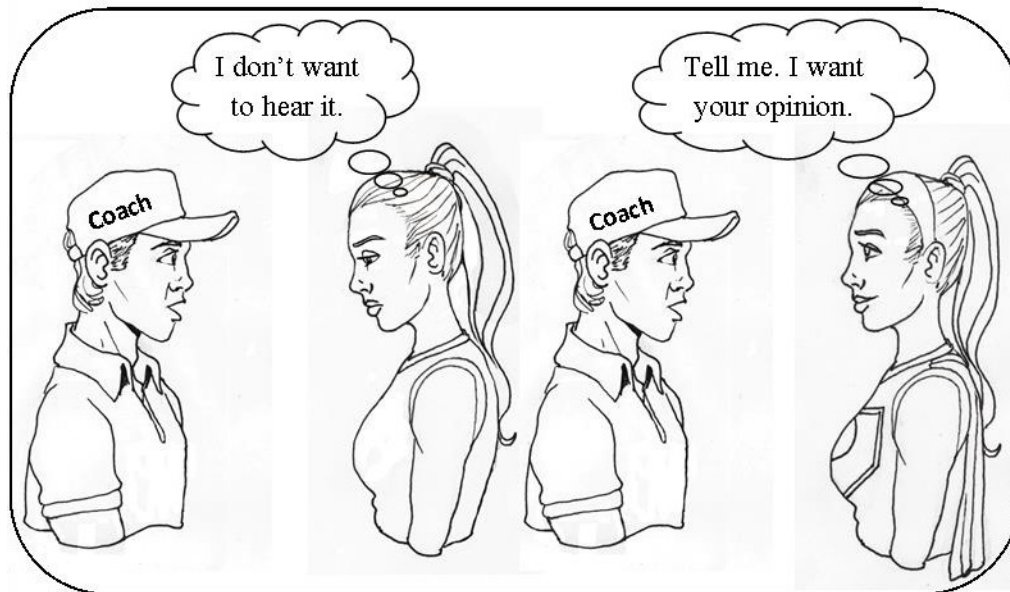


Every athlete will experience many challenges and setbacks along her journey to find out how good she can be. With a healthy perspective, she will view each obstacle as a stepping-stone to success. Challenges and pitfalls provide motivation for her to do better next time; they are not viewed as a disappointment or "failure." She is finding out which things work so she can repeat them and which things

could be done better so she can change them. Most people view outcomes as bad or good, but leaders view them as bad and good. Yes, mistakes are good.

To promote growth, a strong-minded athlete is extremely coachable. She welcomes coaches' feedback and even seeks out constructive criticisms. Most athletes avoid or ignore criticisms because the identification of the mistake within the criticism makes them *feel* like a "failure." They do not like any negative feedback, even if it is constructive, appropriate, and polite. This response is emotional, not rational. All that is needed to adjust it is a decision to use the brain.

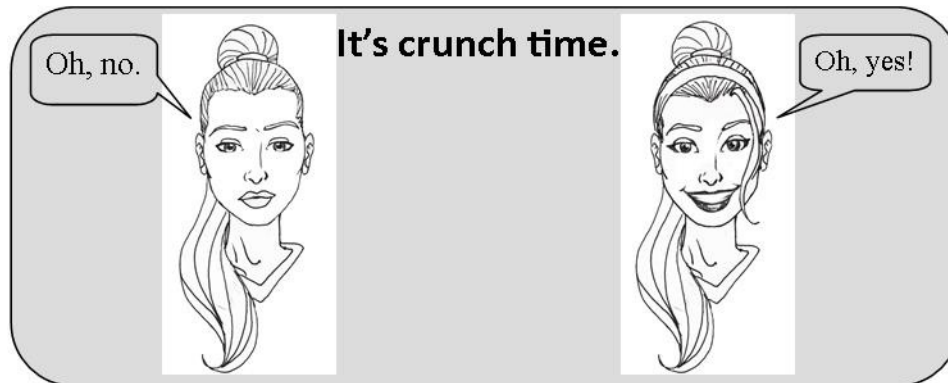
Figure 6-4



An athlete with a healthy perspective is a great teammate. She works hard and has a consistently positive attitude, plus she looks to help others. She admires those who excel, rather than criticizing them. In fact, she has a personal rule against ever criticizing a teammate in public. She has no interest in competing with her own teammates. Rather, she encourages and complements them. She is patient with those who struggle, knowing that she, too, has weaknesses. Everyone's strengths and weaknesses are different. She is encouraging and optimistic when times are tough and comfortable expressing her joy and appreciation when times are good. Her teammates enjoy her presence.

A leader's attitude towards a "clutch" moment in competition is another impressive part of her mental game. She views every performance as an opportunity to evaluate and display all the work she has done to prepare. Others may focus on the pressure, but she knows that increased pressure is the shadow of increased opportunity. This opportunity is her chance to "show off" to herself (especially), her family, and others the combination of her talents and her efforts. The bigger stage is the better stage, as far as she is concerned, because she is proud of her preparation and her ability. In fact, she lives for that big moment that follows the thought, "Bring it on! I'm ready and I know I will succeed because I know I will give my best effort."

Figure 6-5



Who are you playing this weekend? The best answer is "ourselves." In a big game, a mentally tough athlete's confidence is doubled by her superb mental skills and that of her teammates. She is doubtful that her opponents have such a healthy perspective on the game or that they are as thoroughly prepared as she and her team, both physically and mentally. The ironic truth is that the person who wants to produce positive outcomes because she defines her success by her achievement is much less likely than the person with a healthy perspective to get that good outcome. So it is: trying to win by outscoring the other team decreases the chance of that happening; trying to win versus oneself increases the chance of scoring more than the other team. This is because at the performance level, the unhealthy competitor does not know how to focus effectively. She has too much to worry about, especially as the pressure rises. She does not know if she will be comfortable looking at herself in the mirror after the game. The healthy athlete knows.

No Achievement Necessary?!?

Thank you for teaching me that my best is good enough.
—Andre Agassi, Tennis Player

You must sacrifice, train, do everything possible to put yourself in a position to win. But if you consider second or third a failure, I feel sorry for you.
—Joe Falcon, Runner (mile in 3:49:31)

You cannot live a perfect day without doing something for someone who will never be able to repay you.
—John Wooden

So many people get their identity through sports, and we have to remember that's what they do, not who they are.
—Pat Summitt, Basketball Coach

It is very, very dangerous to have your self-worth riding on your results as an athlete.
—Jim Courier, Tennis Player

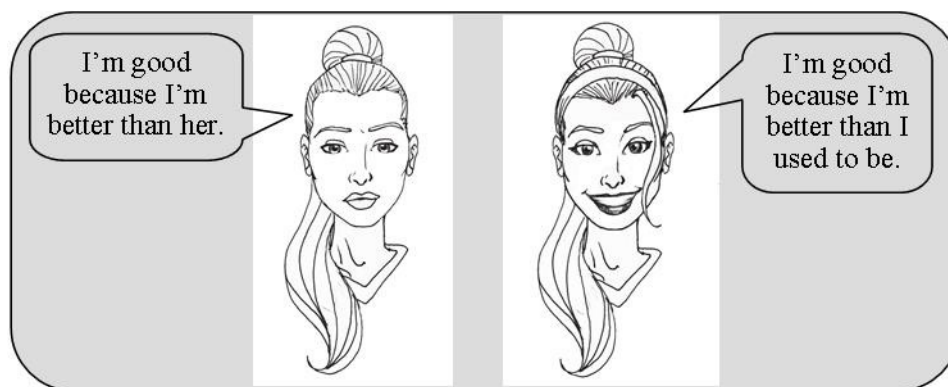
For when that One Great Scorer comes
To mark against your name,
He writes – not that you won or lost
But how you played the game.
—Grantland Rice, Football Coach

Why is a less-than-ideal perspective normal? Why is it so common that today's athletes hold the distorted belief that success depends on achievement? Why would athletes wrap their self-worth around their daily sport performances? Because unless they are careful, socialization into the American competitive, capitalist culture will teach them that the outcomes are what matters most.

Many people, organizations, and critics knowingly or unwittingly promote the idea that it is appropriate to “win at all costs.” The media rewards achievement and makes “larger-than-life superstars” out of those athletes who put up superior numbers. “Just win, baby” says the advertisement or commentator. Rewards such as money and adulation are given out for positive outcomes in competition, without regard for the sources of those outcomes (steroids, academic shortcuts, illegal recruiting). Because they are similarly socialized, parents, peers, “role models,” and coaches sometimes reinforce the terrible concept that athletes are good people when they produce good outcomes but are of little or no value when they do not.

Unless an athlete succeeds in ignoring this bad influence, socialization will create a performance/self-concept link in her mind that now needs to be broken. Children are captive to their environment. Adults are captive to their habits, but human adults are uniquely gifted with the ability to create new habits. The softball player who acts like an adult has somehow learned that her value as a person does not depend on winning a game. In fact, it does not depend on anything other than being born. It is an immeasurably immense birthright.

Figure 6-6



Self-esteem (discussed more in Chapter 8) is not a given; it is the reputation a person acquires of herself. Self-esteem is not based on achievements in softball. On the contrary, it depends on many factors, including the care an athlete demonstrates for family, herself, and others. Her work-ethic, including her ability to find the truth, accept responsibility, and take appropriate actions is critical. Self-esteem also depends on her integrity and the effort she puts forth to reach her goals. Her integrity is completely intact when her words, thoughts, and actions all line up with each other in accordance with her values¹. Self-esteem can be thought of as global confidence; it is a direct factor in an athlete's confidence (and therefore performance) in any situation.

The "American way" highly regards achievement for good reasons. First, positive outcomes typically reflect a superior effort. Second, winning feels great, so people naturally want to win or be associated with those who do. Last, it is easier to measure an objective score than someone's subjective effort. Speed is objective; "intangibles" are subjective. Batting average and runs scored are clear; the team concept demonstrated by a leader is unclear.

¹ See Appendix E – Values Exercise

The importance of winning can be a great thing because it motivates. Winning, particularly against high-level competition, is enabled by a strong mental game. Therefore, those athletes who want to win badly enough will figure out what works and do it. Problems arise when shortcomings in perspective and self-esteem put up a roadblock to growth. All roadblocks can be passed, but this process can be painful and it requires awareness. This awareness might only be found with the assistance of a friend, parent, coach, or even a therapist or counselor. To avoid this pain, many roadblocks are not passed. Every athlete is a product of her genetics and her environment, but with discipline, she can assume adult responsibilities, keeping the positives and breaking the chains of any negative environmental effects. Clearly, it is not just experiences that matter, but what is done with these experiences.

If people all had equal genetic abilities and environmental support (including luck), the score would accurately reflect effort. This is not the world we live in. Every person has different abilities, different strengths, and different weaknesses. A person strong in some skills (physical or mental) will be weak in other areas. The person who can run the fastest may be weakest in maintaining a positive, confident attitude. In fact, that great “athlete” from high school may be the most disadvantaged one: her physical gifts are so easy to see that the expectations of others are set high. Meanwhile, her mental shortcomings tend not to be understood or coached very well. She will get away with many mental mistakes because of her physical talent until the level of competition becomes high enough to expose these shortcomings. She is bound for an emotional roller coaster that may have some serious rough spots. On the other hand, it is comical that some people call Peyton Manning, Whitney Canion, or Craig Counsell poor athletes. They not only have above-average physical skills but also have world-class mental skills.

Hopefully, the position each athlete loves takes advantage of her strengths and minimizes her weaknesses. This tends to happen more than chance might suggest because athletes pursue roles where they have “success.” However, there are also many times when an environmental factor caused the athlete to pursue something that she was not “made” for. Some people want to be part of a team and do not like to be the center of attention or primarily responsible for how well things are going. This personality type is a problem for a pitcher, even if her loving father started teaching her to pitch at age five. Honesty about what is fun and what goals are realistic will lead the athlete to wonderful pursuits.

EXERCISES

Exposing the Core of Your Relationship with Softball

1. List several things you do that contribute to building your self-esteem. Pick one additional thing that may be a good idea to do more consistently in the future.
2. Why do you invest time, money, sweat, and tears into softball? Why do you compete? Record your answer, and then write down why you want that. Continue repeating why you want that, persistently forcing honesty until you get to the core components of softball that hold the greatest value for you.

About the Author

Aaron Weintraub is a coach, speaker, and consultant dedicated to helping athletes and coaches “win” the mental side of the game. After 13 years as a college baseball coach, Weintraub became a full-time mental skills coach in 2006. Since then, his clients have included Baylor University, University of Houston, Dallas Baptist University, University of Texas at Arlington, Blinn College, Georgia Tech, Michael Johnson Performance and many other teams and individuals. He speaks regularly at coaching conventions and workshops. In 2012, Weintraub began releasing Coach Traub’s Elite Athlete Audios, a library of crisp, convenient, and inspirational mental training lessons. They are available on iTunes, Amazon, Facebook, and other .mp3 outlets.



Weintraub received a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Emory University and a master’s degree from the University of Virginia. At Virginia, he studied sport psychology and motor learning under Dr. Linda Bunker.

Weintraub coached college baseball from 1994 to 2006. In 2001, he helped lead the Emory University Eagles to their first ever #1 national ranking on the way to a final record of 36-9. From 2002 to 2006, Weintraub coached at Cedar Valley Junior College in Dallas. He helped the Suns grow from a 13-38 team to a well-respected, consistent winner. The team was nationally ranked in the top 10 in 2004, 2005, and 2006. Weintraub also coached baseball at Presbyterian College, Brevard College, and the University of Virginia. Each of these programs was nationally ranked or set a school record for wins while Weintraub was there. Brevard College did both when they went 46-10 in 1996. Additionally, Weintraub coached several select high school and collegiate summer teams.

Weintraub lives in the Dallas, TX area with his wife, Nicole, and their four children. If you have feedback on this book or would like more information about Weintraub’s coaching services, public events, or speaking availability, contact him at aaron@CoachTraub.com or visit his website: www.CoachTraub.com. You can also connect with him on Facebook at Coach Traub’s Mental Skills Training or *Leadership Training for Softball* and Twitter @coachtraub.