

BASEBALL'S SIXTH TOOL

PLAYING THE MENTAL GAME
TO GET THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

MARK GOLA

Foreword by Mike Hazen,
Director of Player Development
for the Boston Red Sox

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*To my collegiate baseball teammates and coaches at Rider
(1991–1994). Playing baseball with you guys was priceless.
Thanks for the friendships and memories.*

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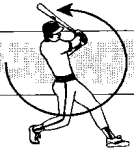
Foreword

Every professional baseball player has talent. However one calculates their tools, professional players can consistently reproduce their physical skills on the field, whether they run fast, throw hard, spin a breaking ball, or hit with power. These are skills most players are born with and strive every day to embellish in batting practice, fielding practice, or bullpen sessions. How these physical tools develop usually garners the majority of focus in evaluating prospects.

Professional baseball players have the opportunity during the season to practice their skills every day for nearly six months, and they continue to work out during the off-season. There is no shortage of game or practice repetition, and players who are committed to their careers will have an edge in maximizing their physical potential. So if all professional baseball players have talent and ample opportunities to work on their physical skills, what separates one player from the next? In order to realize the dream of getting to the major leagues, these players must develop skills beyond their physical tools.

Certainly there are players with rare abilities that separate them from the pack—Josh Beckett, Alex Rodriguez, Jose Reyes, and Vladimir Guerrero, to name a few. A large majority of players, however, don't have exceptional tools in every facet of the game. Pitchers who do not throw 95 miles per hour consistently have to develop a "feel" to pitch; throwing strikes with multiple pitches and knowing how to attack their opposition will give them an edge. Hitters who do not possess the ability to hit .330 with power have to be adept at taking the extra base or maximizing their versatility on defense by having the knowledge to play multiple positions.

Boston Red Sox second baseman Dustin Pedroia is an excellent example of a player who learned to play above his raw physical skills. Dustin possesses exceptional baseball intelligence, instincts, and defensive versatility along with a tireless work ethic and passion for the game. These skills have enabled him to become one of the best second basemen in baseball.



Much like raw physical tools, versatility, aggressiveness, intelligence, and character are tremendous assets for a baseball player. Unlike those physical tools, these sixth-tool skills are within the complete control of the player. Physical skills can be improved through hard work, but every player has his individual ceiling. Sixth-tool skills are boundless and can be acquired by any player who is passionate and attentive.

Baseball's Sixth Tool presents new and exciting information on how to attain these valuable traits. Prospective players who seek to develop these skills gain leverage on the playing field and become the type of player every coach loves to have in the dugout.

Within the pages of *Baseball's Sixth Tool*, you will learn how to become a savvy base runner, smarter pitcher, intuitive hitter, and an offensive defensive player. These tips focus on baseball intelligence inside the game that often separates one player from the next. That separation may be the difference in playing at the high school, college, or professional level.

Baseball is a great game in action and thought. What author Mark Gola enables the reader to experience is not only what players do but what they think, where they look, and how anticipation gives them an advantage over their opponents.

Best of luck in becoming a complete player.

MIKE HAZEN
DIRECTOR OF PLAYER DEVELOPMENT
BOSTON RED SOX

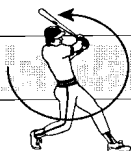
Preface

We are in an age of mechanical genius in baseball. Players articulate and execute the fundamentals of the swing, pitching delivery, and defensive technique with expertise. They learn it all at a very young age from professional instructors at baseball academies and by attending specialized camps. Ask a 10-year-old about the difference between rotational hitting and weight shift hitting, and you may be shocked at the depth of knowledge.

But as strong as these players are at learning and performing proper technique, they are equally deficient in understanding how to play the game. Imagination, daring, creativity, insights—traits that were once described as “baseball instinct”—are all too rare in our modern game of baseball. At times it seems as if baseball *instinct* is nearly *extinct*.

Can baseball instinct be taught and learned? Yes! This new book, *Baseball's Sixth Tool*, was written to help accomplish this task. Whether you're a coach, player, or parent, *Baseball's Sixth Tool* will help you learn to complement the burgeoning physical skills with the instinct to put them to the best use. The book offers 105 tips to assist players who lack instinct, fail to anticipate, and shun risk. Players will become more instinctive by learning where to look, when to look, who to look at, what to listen for, and how to take advantage of this newfound tool.

What is the sixth tool? It's the tool made up of everything except physical ability. Sixth-tool players have exceptional baseball intelligence, a great sense for the game, original thought, and courage. They are constantly using powers of observation to exploit their opponents. The sixth tool makes a player a better base runner without becoming faster, a better pitcher without throwing harder, a better hitter without increasing bat speed, and a better fielder without improving quickness or arm strength. The predecessor to this book, *The Five-Tool Player*, addressed the development of the five essential physical tools in baseball: hitting, hitting for power, arm strength, speed, and defense. Five-tool players are rare, indeed. But sixth-tool



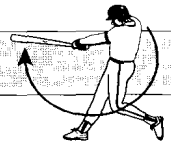
players are even scarcer. *Baseball's Sixth Tool* will help you become the complete player, one that every coach is looking for.

Baseball's Sixth Tool is divided into five chapters; the first, "Character," covers personality, or makeup, and how certain character traits are necessary to fully develop the sixth tool. It is one thing, for example, to notice that conditions are right for a delayed steal. It's another thing to do it. The character traits integral to the sixth-tool player are outlined in this chapter.

The chapters that follow discuss specific situations and the innumerable opportunities for the sixth-tool player. Base runners will learn how to advance bases, read pitchers, and capitalize on defensive positioning. Defensive players will understand the importance of being offensive in the field, sense the right time for a pickoff play, and search for "out" opportunities. Pitchers will be taught how to escape jams without throwing a pitch, recognize hitter weaknesses, and improve their bullpen sessions. Hitters will learn to recognize pitch patterns, take advantage of a struggling pitcher, and combat a pitcher who is dominant. All of these tips make the player better without getting bigger, faster, or stronger.

Why Do Today's Players Lack Instinct?

Why is this generation short on playability? Because today's playing environment doesn't include the freedom for young kids to use their minds and develop their intuitive skills. All games are adult supervised and controlled by coaches. Players are told where to stand, when to swing, which pitch to throw, and how big of a lead to take. The same coaches who bemoan a lack of instinct stifle its growth by directing and controlling the players every step of the way throughout a game. Players are trained throughout their careers to listen for an instructive voice and then react. (If Joe Torre is a manager, then many youth coaches are micromanagers.) They aren't afforded the opportunity to listen to the most important voice—the one inside their head that tells them what it sees and feels.



Those who have watched the *Bad News Bears* movies may remember a scene from the second film, *Breaking Training*. The Bears are playing their exhibition game at the Houston Astrodome when their allotted time expires and the game is ended prematurely. The coach of the Bears (Coach Leak) gets out of the dugout and starts a chant that is eventually joined by the entire crowd. He chants, "Let them play! Let them play! Let them play!" Let *them* play. We should all heed those words. It's their game to play.

Players have to be taught at an early age and need direction, but there has to be a happy medium. Adults have to let kids go during the game and *allow them to make mistakes!* Failure is one of the best teaching tools on the baseball field, and kids have to play in an atmosphere in which *it's OK to fail*. That is the only way they'll be able to test their instinct, take risk, and fully realize the power of observation. Playing the game should be challenging and fun! Being told what to do every step of the way strips players of their originality and the game of its creative offerings.

This book helps even out the playing field for those who lack instinctive skills. It concentrates on elements of the game that are rarely explored. Players who read this book will find a lot of the information new and exciting. Hopefully, they have the energy, smarts, and guts to put it to use.

Best of luck in discovering new ways to enjoy playing the game.

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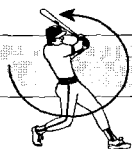
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1 Character

Why is character a chapter in a book titled *Baseball's Sixth Tool*? Because the sixth tool is entirely about character. It is about being competitive, energetic, aggressive, fearless, observant, and imaginative. These character traits (and many others) embody a player who possesses not only baseball intelligence but also the psychological makeup to put that knowledge to use.

Knowledge is power, and if you know what to look for, the baseball field provides loads of information you can use to your advantage. Once you get that information, what you do with it defines who you are—your character. As an example, let's say you're on second base and your team is rallying.



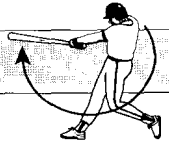
Baseball's Sixth Tool

The pitcher is dealing with assorted emotions and becomes distracted. An individual who plays with only physical tools simply hopes the hitter at bat will drive him in with a base hit. If you're using your sixth tool, you notice that the pitcher isn't changing his looks to second base. He has fallen into a pattern. You capitalize and get a great jump that allows you to steal third base. That stolen base requires intuition, observation, and the courage to act on it. It makes you a special player.

Using your sixth tool means you must play with will. And playing with will includes a willingness to fail, a willingness to be wrong, a willingness to encounter humility, and a willingness to accept responsibility when a bold attempt ends poorly. You are willing to take educated risks because you sense opportunity to capitalize, to take advantage of a situation or player that leads to success. You cannot sit on the sidelines and talk about what you observe and how it might be used to your advantage. You need to get out there and do it.

College Hall of Fame coach Sonny Pittaro had a saying that hung on the wall of his baseball office. It read, "Courage to risk failure is what leads to success." Many players struggle to act on sixth-tool opportunities because their personality doesn't match that type of player. Most sixth-tool players are aggressive, physical, upbeat, risky, competitive, and quick-witted. If these adjectives don't describe you, then you need to undertake an alternate personality on the baseball field. Search and explore that small flame that burns inside you and use the baseball field as your outlet to cut loose. Conservative minds are not intriguing in sports nor do they cause worry. Step outside yourself and play the game for the sake of playing. Do that and the results will begin to fall into place.

This chapter sets the tone for the book. In it, we address ideas and fundamental traits essential to constructing the type of character you will need to execute the tips that fill the following chapters. These traits come more easily to some than to others. You will read about terms such as *resolve*, *awareness*, *imagination*, *body language*, and *gamesmanship* and learn how they are put to use. The tips that are presented in this chapter are not specific to game situations. Several are in the form of a question that will force you to examine yourself and your character.



What Kind of Player Do You Want to Be?

Take out a piece of paper and a pen and write down how you would characterize yourself as a player. This is not an assignment to describe your baseball skills. It is about describing the type of person you are as a baseball player, both good and bad. Are you timid or aggressive? Do you show negative emotion on the field or are you seamless in your composure? Start to formulate a list of words that encapsulate you. Next, write down the type of player you would like to be. You may already possess some of these traits and on some you may fall short.

The point of this exercise is for you to be aware that *there are a lot of things about you as a baseball player that you control, probably more than you think*. You control whether you hustle out onto the field. You control what you're watching and thinking between pitches. You control your work ethic or how much you communicate with teammates. In short, you control *how* you play. By addressing some shortcomings that are within your control, you've outlined a plan to become a better player.

So what kind of player do you want to be? What would you like people to say about you when discussing your character? Think about what an onlooker might say, both positive and negative. If you're a base runner who avoids taking risks, look for opportunities to take extra bases. If you have trouble dealing with failure, make efforts to control your emotions and rebound after an error in the field. If you're trying to develop a changeup but are afraid of how batters will treat it, throw your changeup in the game. Physical tools cannot make you throw that changeup, play with poise, or run the bases with courage. It is the decision to step outside yourself and do it!

Six Character Traits of the Sixth-Tool Player

Players vary in personality just as they differ in their batting stances and pitching deliveries. Some character traits, however, are staples in



Baseball's Sixth Tool

a sixth-tool player. Six traits in particular spearhead the list of qualities that set a foundation. Sixth-tool players are *competitive*, *energetic*, *aggressive*, *fearless*, *imaginative*, and *observant*. Each trait is essential but can't stand alone. Each is dependent on the other five. You can't be aggressive without also being observant. Your play will be reckless. An imaginative player needs to be fearless to put that creativity to use. Following are the six significant traits along with a brief description.

Competitive

Inclined, desiring, or suited to compete; to strive consciously or unconsciously for an objective (as position, profit, or a prize)

A competitive player wants to succeed. He will search for a way to conquer through his ability, intellect, and experience, and/or by exploiting weakness. Each small personal gain brings his team closer to triumph. Competitive fire is what drives the bus.

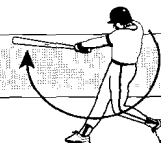
A competitive player takes pride in every at-bat regardless of score, inning, or how he has performed that day. He views each plate appearance as a personal battle between himself and the pitcher. A player who is not competitive gives way if the chips are down or if he has already registered a successful day.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to win. Absolutely nothing. It's symbolic of pride, belief, and a desire to achieve. The primary reason you play sports, hopefully, is because you enjoy it. And there is joy in winning. It would be difficult to find anyone in any facet of life who wouldn't choose winning over losing. In baseball, it's a bonus prize awarded for practice, execution, attentiveness, and effort. Football coaching legend Vince Lombardi has been credited by many for saying, "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing." Whether Lombardi actually said as much and, if he did, what he meant by it, is the subject of much debate, but one thing we can take from the quote is that there is nothing that replaces the satisfaction of a group of individuals accomplishing a common goal.

Energetic

Operating with marked vigor or effect

Playing baseball with energy is visible proof that the individual is passionate about the game. Those who truly enjoy the game can't hide it, and it's obvious there is nowhere else they would rather be than the baseball field.



An energetic player runs out to his position. A player who lacks energy has to be told to run out to his position.

Hustle and constant activity are telltale signs, but the clearest indication of a player with energy is the look in his eyes. His eyes dance, observe, absorb, and enjoy. Much the way manager Leo Durocher described his legendary player Willie Mays, “He could do the five things you have to do to be a superstar: hit, hit for power, run, throw, and field. And he had that other magic ingredient that runs a superstar into a super, superstar. He lit up the room when he came in. He was a joy to be around.”

Ballplayers have two choices. They can play the game in first gear, or they can put it in overdrive. Play the game with mental and physical energy. It will pay dividends, and you’ll have fun while you’re at it.

Aggressive

Making attacks or encroachments; marked by combative readiness; marked by driving forceful energy or initiative: enterprising

The word *enterprising* is a great word in that definition. It taps into another sixth-tool trait—imagination—but a player who is enterprising is one who is restless in his intent to succeed.

An aggressive player looks for opportunities to slide or dive for a ball. A player who lacks aggression slides or dives only when absolutely necessary.

It’s almost without fail that the more aggressive party wins. It’s rare that a participant who is passive, lethargic, or apathetic defeats the aggressor. The aggressor knows what he wants and will seek all measures to attain it.

You hear it all the time in baseball. Good hitters “attack the ball.” Successful pitchers “go at the hitter.” Great base runners are opportunists. Coaches are often heard calling out to fielders, “Come to the ball. Don’t let the ball play you.” An aggressive baseball player takes the action to the ball, to the pitcher, to the base paths, to the opponent. He does not allow the contending party to take the action to him.

There is a simple quote by Henry David Thoreau, “Kill or be killed.” It doesn’t get more black and white than that. Do you want to be the one on the offensive, or would you rather sit back and defend or survive? Some show it more than others, but the best players on the diamond are on the hunt.