

BASEBALL

# Mets' Psychologist Helps Players Catch Their Breath

By TIM ROHAN SEPT. 30, 2015

As the Mets took batting practice recently, a man named Jonathan Fader walked over to the cage, chatted with a few players and found a spot behind the batter, an area typically reserved for team dignitaries — veterans, coaches, executives and owners.

The Mets had just endured an emotionally draining loss to the Yankees, and if anyone wanted to talk, Fader was there to listen. He is the Mets' team psychologist.

"He's a resource," said John Ricco, the assistant general manager. "You make that resource available to the players the same way you make a pitching coach and hitting coach available. So if they need help in a certain area, there's a guy there that can help them."

Sports psychology is hardly a new field, and teams in many sports retain psychologists to work with their athletes. But these are the Mets, in the psychotherapy capital of the world, a team whose players are not exactly experienced in the type of setting they now find themselves — division winners headed to the playoffs. They have, after all, made the postseason just eight times in their 54-year existence, they have not won the World Series since 1986, and their lineup is built on a young core that has never gone beyond the regular season.

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during particularly tense moments, like the ones they will face in their National League division series, which is set to begin next week.

“The idea is to slow down,” Manager Terry Collins said. “Slow. Down. Slow the heart rate down; slow the thinking process; slow it down. Instead of rushing, take a second, take a breath, and assess what’s going on here.”

Fader has known some of the Mets players for years. He first worked with their minor leaguers about 10 years ago as a counselor and only recently started focusing more on the major league team. Now, he runs group meetings during spring training, offers one-on-one sessions and tries to generally keep tabs on everyone.

During spring training, Fader brought in a group of Navy SEAL troops who spoke about the breathing techniques they used on dangerous missions. The players were moved by the SEALs’ message. (“They’re dodging bullets, not baseballs,” Daniel Murphy said.) Fader later spoke to some players individually about the breathing techniques as a method for lowering their heart rates.

Michael Conforto, the Mets’ rookie left fielder, who just last year was playing college baseball, uses a similar technique. When he comes to bat, he pauses, takes a deep breath and focuses on a spot on his bat. During college, he would draw a smiley face on his bats and make that his focal point. But he breaks so many bats in the major leagues that he now just looks for a good scuff mark.

“Sometimes I’ll catch myself — it’s almost like I’m holding my breath,” Conforto said. “So I just make sure I do it before every pitch.”

If Jon Niese, one of the Mets’ veteran pitchers, ever finds himself in a jam with runners on base, he stops and breathes the way Fader taught him: chest up, good posture, four seconds in, four seconds out. Then he uses another Fader trick: He visualizes making his next pitch.

With the rookie starter Noah Syndergaard, Fader took the visualization a step further. As one of the Mets’ top prospects, Syndergaard gained a reputation for lacking mental toughness. Throughout this season, too, he struggled at times on the road — an issue his coaches said was partly mental. To help Syndergaard lock in,

Fader has instructed him to imagine he is picking up Thor's hammer when he takes the mound, a nod to his nickname.

"Baseball is 90 percent mental, 10 percent physical," said Syndergaard, who considers himself close with Fader. "It doesn't matter how physically talented you are; if you're not able to conquer your own mind, you can't really do much."

As Fader goes through the clubhouse, he reminds the players of these things. He also talks with them about topics seemingly unrelated to baseball, like TV shows, their families and their lives away from the ballpark, hoping to build a relationship with them and, perhaps, get them to open up on a deeper level.

"He's an enormously curious person, in the best sense of the term," said Dr. Mary Larimer, who was Fader's mentor at the University of Washington, where he received a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. "He truly seeks to understand people, and understand the best possible approach to take, off of his observations. He is just a naturally friendly person. He forms really strong relationships. I can imagine him being extremely effective in that environment."

After Wilmer Flores famously cried on the field in July, thinking he had been traded, Fader was among those on the Mets' staff who met with him. Fader had first met Flores when he was a teenager. Just after Flores left Venezuela at 16 to sign with the Mets, he felt homesick. He was exhausted from the minor league schedule, frustrated with the language barrier and playing in Kingsport, Tenn. Fader traveled there to comfort him.

"I'll never forget that," Flores said recently, "because I was really down."

That history allows Fader to develop relationships with the players when others cannot. According to Ricco, Fader shares his observations and insight with Mets executives to give them a general sense of what the players are going through.

"We compare notes about how he can best be helpful," Ricco said.

Not every player uses Fader's services; a few veterans said they did not. Matt Harvey, for one, has used a psychologist offered to him through his high-powered agent, Scott Boras, to survive his stressful first year back from Tommy John surgery.

Harvey has had to regain his touch while dealing with innings limits, skipped starts and bickering between Boras and the Mets. Harvey said last month that he was using the psychologist “quite a bit.”

“The big thing he says is not to cloud your mind with outside things,” Harvey said. “Go with the task at hand. Go game by game, pitch by pitch. That’s the most important thing.”

In the playoffs, when each pitch is magnified, Fader could be that much more valuable. Thinking on his feet is among his strengths. One day at the University of Washington, Larimer said, she found herself in a jam: She had a major project to finish, and her two young children had scarlet fever. She brought them to the office, and Fader volunteered to entertain them for hours with puppets and magic tricks.

“He was like, ‘This is a problem, and I can solve it,’ ” Larimer said.

“My kids still talk about that,” she added, laughing.

Susan C. Beachy contributed research.

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