



The Performance Enhancer

Bob Tewksbury advises Major League Baseball players how to keep stress at bay on and off the field

BY JON SURMACZ

In this summer of 2014, there are many familiar faces in new spots across Major League Baseball. In Boston, Grady Sizemore, a free agent veteran who hasn't played in two years because of injury, has made the Red Sox roster, replacing star center fielder Jacoby Ellsbury, who left Boston for the New York Yankees over the winter.

Also missing from the Red Sox program this year is **Bob Tewksbury (SED'04)**, who has become the new (and first) director of player development for the Major League Baseball Players Association. The role is similar to one he held for nine years with the Red Sox—mental skills coach. Tewksbury will help players deal with the psychological stresses of the game, hoping to improve their performances on the field as well as their lives off the field.

A Concord, N.H., native, Tewksbury is uniquely qualified for the position. He pitched 13 years in the major leagues, posting 110 wins and 102 losses from his debut in 1986 at age 25 to his retirement in 1998 at 37. The tall, crafty right-hander was an All-Star in 1992, when he went 16-5 with a 2.16 ERA for the St. Louis Cardinals. In short, he is familiar with the peaks and valleys of a major league career. After he retired, Tewksbury stayed close to the game, in roles as a consultant and broadcast commentator. He earned a master's in sports psychology and counseling at BU, then signed on as the Red Sox mental skills coach.

Tewksbury works mainly out of his home in Concord, but he travels to major league cities throughout the season. *Bostonia* caught up with him during spring training and again in April.

Bostonia: You've been on the job for a month now.

How's it going so far?

TEWKSBURY: Things are good. I'm getting to meet a lot of new players. I have had several players reach out to me for support in this first month, and I suspect as I continue to see more teams and players that number may increase.

What are baseball people saying about your new role?

People think it's good that there's another resource for the players specifically related to the psychological aspects of playing Major League Baseball.

How did the position come about?

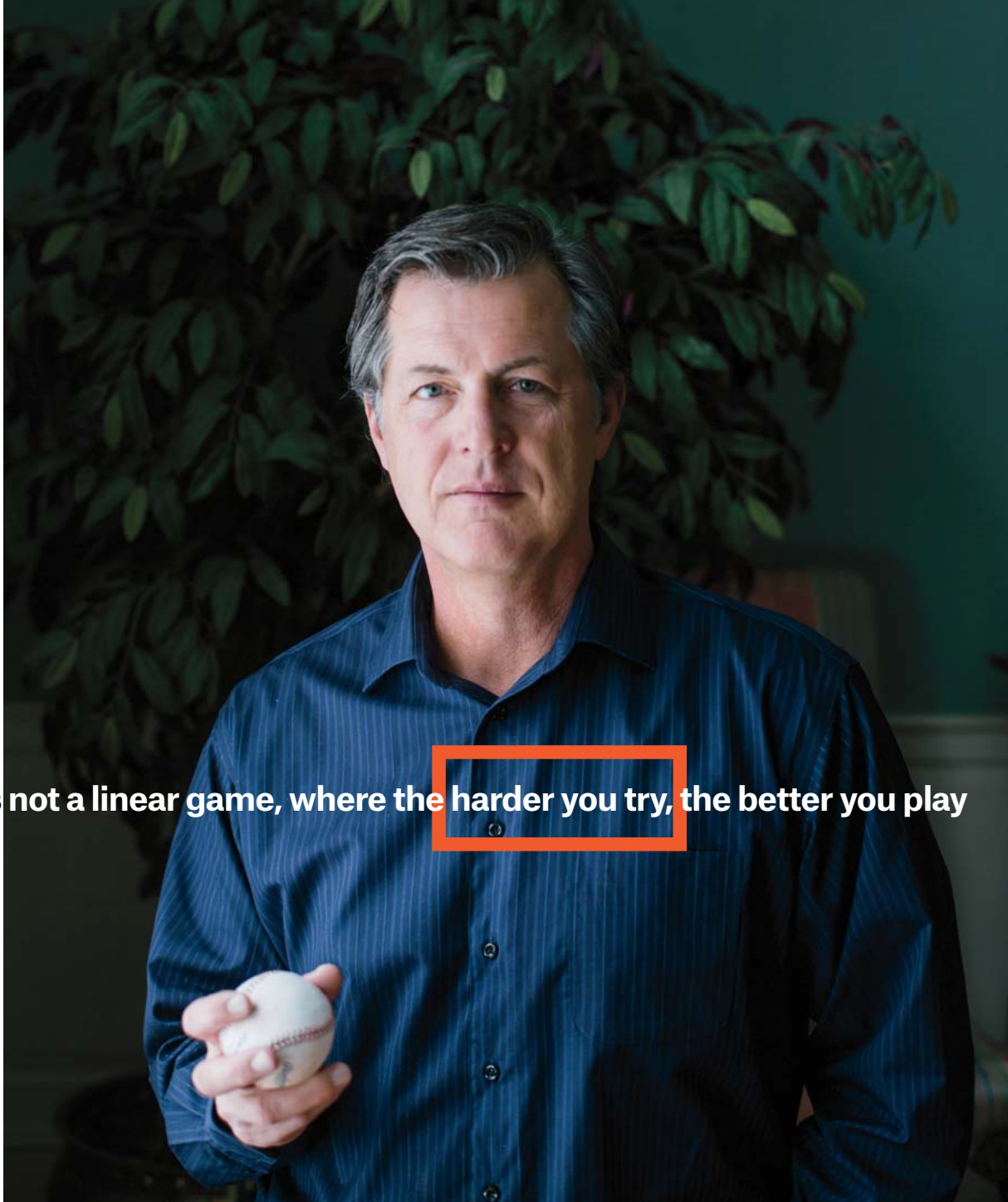
The Players Association came to me. They wanted to create a new position of support for players. Teams have existing employee assistance programs, such as drug and alcohol counseling. Some teams have sports psychologists or mental skills coaches, but not all teams do.

What they found over the years is that sometimes there are

issues where players didn't want to go through the team personnel—whether it was the employee assistance program or the sports psych program—for a variety of reasons, so they wanted to create something in-house that would make sure the players got the support that they needed in the event they needed it.

You spent nine years with the Red Sox as a mental skills coach before taking this new position. Why leave the World Series champs?

First of all, to be part of a World Series-winning team is something I had never done before in my 33 years in pro baseball and something I will never forget. The Red Sox are a great organization that values the mental aspects of performance. I was fortunate to be in that position for nine years. That said, the potential to help a greater number of players who may be looking for assistance with some personal or professional issue was a unique and special



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Bob Tewksbury pitched for 13 years and worked as a commentator before getting a master's in sports psychology.

opportunity, one that was hard to turn down.

What is your vision for the position?

I'm going to introduce myself to the players and let them know what I do, and then the first year is going to be a trial and see-how-it-goes type of year. We'll see how many players use this resource, what type of problems or issues come up,

how to provide for the program moving forward to build the support that we need for the players based on how this year goes. This is just an educational and informative type of year for the players, and we'll see how it plays out over the season.

Do you think you'll be leaning more on your

playing experience or your counseling training in this role?

I think my playing experience will open the door for me to do both. It will be a blend. I think there's a natural tie-in with playing experience and the relationship with players. But I do think that once trust is made through that experience, players can open up and talk about

other areas that might be issues for them. I think it tends to lean more toward playing stuff than other stuff, but we'll see. We'll have a better idea after this year for sure.

What are some of the top challenges facing players today?

I think players face a variety of things. Baseball is a difficult game. Stress is omnipres-



THREE STRIKES AND YOU'RE OUT

1

Players have to learn how to minimize their failures and focus on what they are doing well.

2

Players have to manage long-distance relationships and family issues. There are 81 games on the road.

3

Players have to deal with the stresses applied by social media, something that didn't exist when Tewksbury played 15 years ago.



ASK THE EXPERT

Through July, Bob Tewksbury answers questions about psychological stresses on and off the field at bu.edu/bostonia.

ent, because you are playing every day. There are few “off-days.” The cumulative effects of stress present themselves in various ways: injury, changes in sleep patterns, and poor performance. With 81 games on the road, players also have to learn how to manage long-distance relationships and family issues. Also, managing social media can be stressful for players. That’s something I didn’t have to deal with 15 years ago.

Will you use your own experiences—mistakes you made or lessons you learned—and pass those along?

My experiences are what tie me to the players. I was traded. I was released. I’ve had two surgeries. I’ve been through about every experience a player goes through, and I use my stories to give examples and to talk to them about things that I went through, and it normalizes it. Players think that whatever they’re feeling, no one else has felt this before, when in fact everyone who’s played the game has felt the same thing.

How do you plan to address such a wide variety of problems?

It’s pretty simple. The problems are usually on the field (performance) or off the field (personal). If they are

performance-based, I can tell them stories from my playing experiences and work with them to develop a mental game plan designed to improve their performance. Which is what I’ve done for years working with the Red Sox. I have a pretty good idea of how to handle that.

If the problems are clinically based, I refer them out. For example, a player calls and says, “I have anxiety and I’m having panic attacks,” then I help direct him to a clinical resource in the city he is in. But if a guy calls and says, “I had a bad game yesterday and my confidence is low,” then I can say, “OK, well, let’s talk about it.” I think discerning what to do is fairly cut-and-dried. The bigger issue is, if this becomes successful, how do you possibly juggle 200 players?

I don’t think at any one time there will be 200 players calling me. I suspect player calls will be spread out over the season and will come from both veteran and younger players, although I would suspect the majority of the calls will be from younger players for a variety of reasons. Again, I’m speculating. A year from now I may have a totally different answer and a totally different viewpoint on this.

What do you tell a player who’s slumping? We often hear the expression, he’s trying too hard—what does that mean?

I think the biggest thing with players is that baseball is not a linear game, where the harder you try, the better you play. So getting the player to understand how to control his effort level is the first thing. “Why are you trying to do so much?” Get them to talk about their goals and expectations and what’s realistic, and help them to be aware of how their self-talk affects their confidence and why. Then we work to change it. Then the confidence is self-talk—what you say to yourself. What’s the root of that? Is that something that can be adjusted?

My whole thing is: we are what we think, and getting the players more aware of their thoughts. Your thoughts usually affect your feelings, which affect your behaviors. I kind of work off that triangle, which also works in reverse, and get the players to be aware of their thoughts and corresponding feelings and behaviors and then tie in some breathing, tie in some goal-setting, tie in some concentration exercises, tie in some imagery and map out a plan that will help them hopefully get through the period

of time that’s a little rough.

What are the attributes of players who make it all the way to the big leagues?

Generally speaking, the players forget their failures and remember their successes. I should say they minimize their failures; they don’t forget them... but they focus on all the things that they’ve done well. They will understand that there are ups and downs. They’re just mentally tougher. They ride things out better. They adapt and respond to things better, for the most part, and that allows them to play more consistently. And consistent play over the course of a baseball season will keep you in the big leagues.

What happens to players who appear to be at the top of their game one year and simply lose it the next, and maybe never get it back?

Put it this way, I don’t know if anyone knows the answer why, but 50 percent of the players who play one year of Major League Baseball never play a second full year.

So this game is hard. Sometimes it’s because of injury and sometimes a player can’t sustain the talent level needed to play MLB for any length of time. ■