'Yips' Can Be Nail In Coffin For Career In Baseball If Not Corrected The onset of these RSPPs never

Started In 1958 At The Request Of Our Nation's Baseball Coaches

Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2008

By DR. ALAN GOLDBERG & DR. DAVID GRAND Special To Collegiate Baseball

AMHERST, Mass. - What do the names Mackey Sasser, Steve Blass, Mark Wohlers, Steve Sax, Chuck Knoblauch and Rick Ankiel

have in common? Besides being highly visible, talented Major Leaguers, they all struggled with mysterious repetitive performance problems which gradually undermined their considerable skills and all but one

were driven out of the game. Sasser was a catcher for the Mets who had trouble making the routine throw back to the mound. Blass was

a World Series MVP pitcher in 1971 who suddenly and inexplicably lost his signature control the following year. Knoblauch and Sax were both

second basemen who, out of the blue, couldn't make the easiest of throws to first base and Wohlers and Ankiel, like Blass were pitchers who abruptly couldn't do what they used to do since Little League: Perform at the highest level.

Only Ankiel was able to stage a successful return to baseball with his bat, but not as a pitcher.

What causes these baffling repetitive sports performance problems, (RSPPs) and what, if anything, can be done to

successfully turn them around? People in and out of baseball are unaware that the career-ending conditions suffered by Blass,



Sasser, Wohlers and others is part of a silent epidemic crippling athletes at every level within every sport. It seems that coaches, parents and athletes are afraid to talk about these problems as if somehow they might be "contagious," (i.e. in the Majors, a pitcher who suddenly loses his control is said to have "Steve Blass Disease.")

For many of these athletes, the "yips" as they're called emerge out of the blue; a control pitcher gets wild, a catcher can't throw back to the pitcher, a golfer's wrists badly break or freeze every time he goes to chip or putt, a gymnast balks on a skill she's been nailing for years or a diver loses her ability to throw a reverse one and a half, her best dive.

makes sense to the athlete, his/her coaches, parents or fans. Trying to explain the inexplicable, everyone weighs in on what they think is really wrong. "He's mentally weak," "she's just not motivated," "he's cursed," "she doesn't want it bad enough," "he's a choker" or "she's a quitter." Unfortunately these explanations only add to the existing misunderstanding surrounding these repetitive

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performance problems.

Coaches also try everything they know in a futile attempt to get their player back on track. When they fail, coaches feel helpless and some end up labeling their athlete a "head case." Others worsen the emotional turmoil by humiliating him/her in front of teammates. RSPPs are tenacious, defying

the best efforts of even the most experienced professionals. The athlete, unable to perform like his "old self," often quits the sport. Traditional sports psychologists

have typically confined their work with RSPPs to the surface of the problem, focusing on the athlete's conscious mental strategies. That is, they apply behavioral

techniques in an attempt to help the athlete relax, change his/

her negative self-talk, improve concentration, let go of mistakes and quiet an overactive mind.

Falling Short

While all these surface strategies can be useful for mental toughness training, and a necessary part of an athlete's skill set, they consistently fall short when it comes to resolving RSPPs.

These "conscious" techniques bring temporary relief to the athlete because they only address the symptoms of the problem, (i.e. preperformance nervousness, negative thinking, tight muscles and/or poor concentration).

Because this surface approach leaves the roots of the problem untouched, even if there is any improvement, the performance difficulties eventually reemerge or worsen.

But RSPPs do not materialize out of thin air. You cannot "catch" them from an "infected" teammate. And having one of these repetitive problems does NOT make you a "head case." Instead, RSPPs are the byproducts

of the gradual accumulation within the athlete's brain and body of physical and emotional injuries over the course of the athlete's life and career. By the time the actual performance problem emerges, most of these earlier upsets have long been forgotten and are not understood as related to the repetitive performance problem. However, the athlete's body has not forgotten. In fact, it

has been unconsciously keeping an exquisitely detailed scorecard of these injuries and their attached anxiety.

It's the physical and emotional effects of this detailed body scorecard that are ultimately responsible for interfering with his/her natural talent, countless hours of training and extensive performance experience. How is it possible for an athlete who was an MVP at every level to be unable to execute the most basic of skills? The athlete's mind and body always hold the answer. Stuck athletes suffer from a

version of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, (PTSD) that we have labeled "Sports PTSD," Every injury is experienced as a trauma to the athlete's brain and body. An athlete's crippling fears and blocks can be traced back to his injury history both in and outside of his sport. Participating in competitive athletics continually exposes us to both physical and emotional injuries. Physical injuries can be as basic as a mild sprain, slight muscle pull or a getting the wind knocked out of you.

Sometimes they are more serious like a concussion, torn cartilage, broken bones, deep lacerations, or any injury requiring surgery.

Emotional injuries, or traumas, can entail being humiliated by a coach in front of teammates, failing in a clutch situation or experiencing

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sports and personal histories of athletes struggling with repetitive performance problems, you always find an accumulation of these sports "traumas." With Sports PTSD, both the

physical and emotional injuries are frozen in the athlete's brain and body. This includes all the images, sounds, emotions, body sensations

and negative thoughts accompanying the traumas. Later, when the athlete is in a reminiscent situation, these same images, emotions, physical sensations and negative thoughts are activated and interfere with his

present performance. Sometimes this relationship is clear as in the example of a 9 year

ball broke his nose and shattered two bones in his face. Months later, after physically recovering and ready to play, he was unable to get himself to stay in the batter's box during an at-bat. Two years later he was still struggling with the same repetitive

problem. No matter what he tried, he couldn't consciously get himself to stay in the batter's box. When he stepped to the plate, the scene of the accident, he became panicky, convinced that "IT" would

happen again. His brain and body held the memories of the injury and reflexively bailed out to keep him safe. The relationship between injuries and performance problems is usually less obvious. For example, a minor league pitcher was struggling with

serious control problems which threatened to derail his career. These problems began after his sophomore year in high school, when working with a pitching coach to increase his speed and improve his control.

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able to integrate the changes naturally and automatically. He was unable to overcome the overthinking phase necessary to make the mechanical changes. The next season he continued to consciously "coach" himself on the mound during games. But the more he over-focused on

his mechanics, the wilder he got. After several humiliating outings, he found himself out of the starting rotation. When we examined this athlete's injury history, it became clear that

there was another, long-forgotten

incident unconsciously fueling his control problems. Pitching as a 14 years old, he took a come-backer in the face. The ball knocked several teeth out and briefly left him unconscious. He appeared to have bounced back from this injury at the time,

but his body had not forgotten the trauma. Under the increased pressure of

high school, college and then minor league ball, physical and emotional

For that assistant coach who has been

loyal to your program for many years.

For your kid's high school or youth

For your favorite player who needs

✓ For that parent who helps you out.

extra encouragement or pat on the back.

injury were unconsciously triggered, revealed. fueling his lack of control. Let's examine how this works: Your brain/body processes and

stores "normal" experiences much differently than it does physically and emotionally upsetting ones. Most ordinary events are processed through and stored in your brain in image form. If you ever do recall them, these memories elicit little to no physical or emotional

reaction. Because traumatic experiences remain unprocessed and remain in the body outside of conscious awareness, the athlete is vulnerable to getting "triggered" by certain familiar situations which unconsciously remind him of the scary experience. Physically and emotionally he will then respond as if he is

back there. Suddenly he may feel physically tight, overwhelmed with anxiety and flooded with self-doubt. When this happens, his body's fight/flight response, the natural self-protective mechanism has been instinctively triggered by the misperceived danger. Disrupting Mechanics

This instinctive threat response

as he's about to perform sets into motion a physical and emotional conflict disruptive to proper mechanics, resulting in the repetitive performance problem. The conflict emerges because the performance needs of the situation, i.e. a pitcher must accelerate his arm and body towards the plate, This directly counters the need to protect oneself by moving

away from the batter and potential injury. This internal, unconscious pitcher's struggle leads to numerous mechanical mistakes resulting in excessive muscle tension, lack of control and proneness to injury. For example, our now 11-year-

old Little Leaguer may be aware he is unlikely to be hit in the face again. Yet his exaggerated panic about the "what if's" blocks his memory of how relaxed he used to be at the plate. His unconscious physical and emotional memory of the accident, is retriggered every time he steps into the batter's box. While a hitter needs to move

towards the ball, the boy's triggered fight/flight response automatically hitches him sideways and out of "harm's" way. Any attempts to interrupt his

reflexive, self-protective response by using positive self-talk, ("just relax," "stay in the box, you have nothing to be afraid of."), visualization, (seeing himself remaining in the box and getting a hit), rituals or concentration techniques are all doomed to fail. Faced with such a traumafueled performance problem, these

trying to stop a charging elephant with a butterfly net. As an athlete sustains additional injuries throughout his/her career, these frozen negative experiences unconsciously accumulate. And it's the unconscious remnants of

conscious mental strategies are like

these past negative experiences that continually generate the danger, tension and self-doubt interfering with present performance. Mackey Sasser's story clearly illuminates how this process works.

It also tells why traditional sports psychology doesn't adequately explain, or help those athletes who struggle with RSPPs. By carefully examining his throwing problem and underlying

injury history through the lens of our model, the mystery of "Sasser syndrome," "Steve Blass disease," and other inexplicable performance

At 6' 1", 210 lbs Mackey Sasser was the catcher of the future for the

1988 New York Mets. An aggressive hitter, Sasser was surprisingly agile for a catcher. The Mets hadacquired him to replace the aging Gary Carter.

In his rookie season, Sasser batted .285 with an on-base percentage of .313. His numbers steadily improved over the next two years. In 1990 Sasser hit .307 and was a lock as a starter and a potential all-star prospect. **Problems Throwing**

Despite his strength both behind

the plate and at-bat, all was not right with Sasser. In his rookie season, Mackey occasionally struggled with the simple task of throwing the ball back to the pitcher. Sasser began to double, triple and even quadruple pump the ball before releasing it. When he finally let it go, his toss back was a soft flip rather than

a hard throw. Opposing runners took advantage of this pre-throw idiosyncrasy and timed their delayed steals to Sasser's pumping motions. Mackey's problem was especially confusing as he had no trouble throwing back to the pitcher in the

bullpen or nailing a runner stealing second base in a game. In 1990, his best year in the majors, Sasser's throwing difficulties worsened. The New York fans and media responded with cruelty; "Sasser

syndrome" had hit the Big Apple. "Sasser's throwing his career away" headlined the sports pages. He was the butt of relentless jokes and during games the home town fans would loudly count in unison, "ONE! TWO! THREE!" each time that Mackey pumped the ball.

His fear and humiliation became so intense that Sasser would panic the night before every game, In 1990, Sasser was bowled over

by the Braves' Jim Presley while blocking home plate. Sasser landed on the disabled list for six weeks and was never the same. His hitting dropped off and he couldn't release the ball at all, He saw less and less action

behind the plate and ultimately was released in November 1992. Mackey was quickly signed by the Mariners but soon his throwing problem was back full force so he opted out of the defensive line-up. In 1995, after brief stints with the

Padres and Pirates, Sasser retired. He returned home to Alabama as head coach of his alma mater, Wallace Community College.

Throughout his entire ordeal, Mackey desperately wanted to solve his problem but felt completely helpless to do so. He was at a total loss to explain

why he couldn't make this pressureless throw back to the pitcher without hesitating. How was it possible that in a sport where he had excelled his entire life, he was the MVP in every league he played in, that he was suddenly unable to execute the most simplest of skills? What made Sasser's dilemma

that much more frustrating for him was that while he was still with the Mets he had absolutely no problem throwing the ball back to the pitcher in the bullpen. It was only when he got behind the plate in a game that everything changed. In a desperate attempt to find a solution, Mackey saw so many

psychologists and experts that he lost count. He even worked with a See 'YIPS ORDEAL, Page 31

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As your body remembers, you

may suddenly begin to feel scared

and/or physically tight as you

rear back to throw. It's this fear

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Mackey fell some 15 feet out of a

tree house and landed on the rusty

edges of a 55 gallon drum that

had been cut in half and used as a

planter. He needed multiple stitches

to close two deep wounds on both

his chin and leg. As he recalled the

incident, some 34 years later, he

The fall left him badly shaken

When Mackey was 12 years old,

because he couldn't get himself to

stop thinking about how much more

he had a Baker's cyst surgically

removed from the inside of his

left knee. When he was 17, he tore

ligaments in that same knee sliding

into a base and had to undergo

surgery. Knees are absolutely

critical equipment to a catcher.

They are central to squatting,

throwing and effectively playing

further expose the athlete to

Knee injuries requiring surgery

This is because the body is

always traumatized by surgery,

even if the procedure is necessary

seriously he could've been hurt.

Fall Leaves Mental Scars

winced in pain.

that position.

additional trauma.

Collegiate Baseball

'Yips' Ordeal Has Destroyed Players Through Years a baseball and a football are relationship to his then current and helpful. essentially the same. The right throwing troubles. Along with athletic injuries and handed thrower turns sideways and When he was 10 years old, emotional traumas, surgeries get hypnotist, but nothing helped and

Continued From Page 30

the problem worsened.

When we first met Mackey in the summer of 2006, he was still saddled with this inexplicable

throwing disorder. When throwing batting practice to his players, he couldn't release or control the ball. The 19-year-old problem was now blocking him from coaching in the majors, a dream Sasser had carried since he retired. Tremendous Humiliation Mackey claimed, "I could be a damn good bullpen coach in the

bigs, but I'd have to throw batting practice. I'm afraid I couldn't cut it and face that humiliation again."

Our goal in meeting with Mackey was simple. We aimed to help him resolve his much publicized throwing "yips" and demonstrate the Grand System's

groundbreaking power in resolving Repetitive Sports Performance Problems (RSPPs). I. (Alan Goldberg) have been working exclusively in the field of applied sports psychology for over 22 years, specializing in helping athletes like Sasser overcome performance fears and blocks.

successful model for healing athletes struggling with RSPPs. Despite my success over the years, there were certain athletes I couldn't help. I sensed I was missing something that could elevate my work to another level. My search for answers led

In 1997 I wrote Sports Slump Busting, which featured my

me to the work of David Grand, an internationally known expert on creativity and performance enhancement and New York trauma therapist. The author of Emotional Healing at Warp Speed - The Power of EMDR, David had applied trauma healing techniques to performance blocks and pioneered an approach that transcended every approach currently utilized in applied sports psychology. His theory

was groundbreaking: all repetitive sports performance problems like the "yips" and severe slumps had a trauma basis that operated outside of the athlete's conscious awareness. Unless the underlying physical and emotional injuries When we asked Mackey to tell

were directly addressed, the block might reduce but would never fully release. us about his history and childhood, we were looking for both emotional and physical injuries that might have unconsciously built up over the years, finally culminating in the visible performance problem of his

arm locking up behind the plate. Mackey's personal and injury history clearly reveal what most people have completely missed in relation to his seemingly unusual throwing difficulty, the trauma basis of these kinds of repetitive performance problems. Sasser had a number of significant

school, college and professional career which unknowingly formed the foundation of his performance difficulties. In addition, he experienced several earlier, profound non-sports related traumas, and all of these

injuries over the course of his high

further contributed to the later emergence of his throwing "yips." As we outline some of these negative experiences, it's interesting to note that not one of the more than 50 professionals that Mackey saw over the course of his career

ever inquired about any of these iniuries/events or their possible

Continue -

lines up his left arm and left side in etched into the body's exquisitely detailed scorecard. They become part of the body's cumulative storehouse that later unconsciously fuels the performance problem. Throughout high school, Mackey played quarterback for the football follows through with his throwing team and acknowledged that in this

When he was 18, he was playing quarterback in a semi-professional league game against guys who were much bigger and older than him. As he went back to throw a pass, he was blind-sided in his ribs. The extremely hard hit on his left side went underneath his protective padding leaving him

While your conscious mind

sore for days.

position he got hit numerous times

as he was releasing the ball.

soreness has disappeared, your body never forgets. In fact, your body remembers exactly how you were moving and every detail of what you were doing when you were injured. It's interesting to note that the body mechanics of throwing

the direction of the target. He then rocks back shifting his weight onto his right foot and leg as he brings his throwing arm back and up. He then shifts his weight forward as he releases the ball and

When you set up to pass as a right-handed quarterback, you completely expose your left side to potential hits from the on-rushing defense. If being in this position in the past resulted in some significant

trauma as it had in Mackey's case,

(i.e. being blindsided), then your

body and mind will exquisitely remember all the details of this trauma, including the memory of your body movements when you may forget an incident like this were hurt. within a week or two after the Whenever you find yourself back in this same position, whether it's to throw another pass or to toss a baseball back to the pitcher, the

unconsciously stored details of this

trauma in your brain/body will get

activated and intrude into your

consciousness.

and physical tension that can then interfere with accurate execution. Asking The Right Question Why is it that not one of the almost 50 professionals who worked with Sasser ever asked him about his life history or the

innumerable physical traumas that

defined his career as an athlete? Our

contention is that you can never

separate the athlete's performance

problem from who the athlete is as

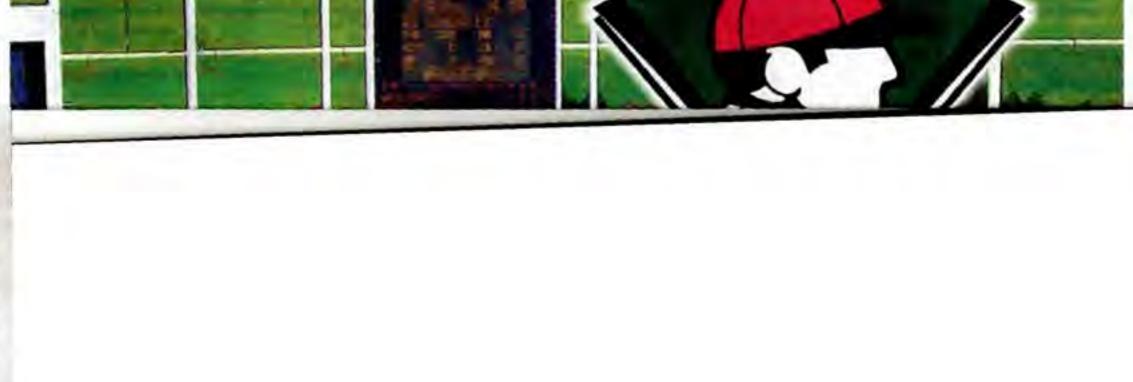
ultimately end up losing valuable

When you attempt to do so, you

a unique human being.

information that is necessary for both understanding and effectively solving the RSPP. Unlike the symptom-focused approach of traditional sports psychology, the Grand System identifies and targets performance problems stuck in the athlete's

brain and body down to the roots of the RSPP. This is accomplished by the holistic, brain/body centered approach which is the foundation of our new book, Limitless Achievement - From Performance Blocks to Breakthroughs.



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bullpen or nailing a runner stealing second base in a game. In 1990, his best year in the majors, Sasser's throwing difficulties worsened. The New York fans and media responded with cruelty; "Sasser

syndrome" had hit the Big Apple. "Sasser's throwing his career away" headlined the sports pages. He was the butt of relentless jokes and during games the home town fans would loudly count in unison, "ONE! TWO! THREE!" each time that Mackey pumped the ball.

His fear and humiliation became so intense that Sasser would panic the night before every game, In 1990, Sasser was bowled over

by the Braves' Jim Presley while blocking home plate. Sasser landed on the disabled list for six weeks and was never the same. His hitting dropped off and he couldn't release the ball at all, He saw less and less action

behind the plate and ultimately was released in November 1992. Mackey was quickly signed by the Mariners but soon his throwing problem was back full force so he opted out of the defensive line-up. In 1995, after brief stints with the

Padres and Pirates, Sasser retired. He returned home to Alabama as head coach of his alma mater, Wallace Community College.

Throughout his entire ordeal, Mackey desperately wanted to solve his problem but felt completely helpless to do so. He was at a total loss to explain

why he couldn't make this pressureless throw back to the pitcher without hesitating. How was it possible that in a sport where he had excelled his entire life, he was the MVP in every league he played in, that he was suddenly unable to execute the most simplest of skills? What made Sasser's dilemma

that much more frustrating for him was that while he was still with the Mets he had absolutely no problem throwing the ball back to the pitcher in the bullpen. It was only when he got behind the plate in a game that everything changed. In a desperate attempt to find a solution, Mackey saw so many

psychologists and experts that he lost count. He even worked with a See 'YIPS ORDEAL, Page 31

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As your body remembers, you

may suddenly begin to feel scared

and/or physically tight as you

rear back to throw. It's this fear

Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2008

Mackey fell some 15 feet out of a

tree house and landed on the rusty

edges of a 55 gallon drum that

had been cut in half and used as a

planter. He needed multiple stitches

to close two deep wounds on both

his chin and leg. As he recalled the

incident, some 34 years later, he

The fall left him badly shaken

When Mackey was 12 years old,

because he couldn't get himself to

stop thinking about how much more

he had a Baker's cyst surgically

removed from the inside of his

left knee. When he was 17, he tore

ligaments in that same knee sliding

into a base and had to undergo

surgery. Knees are absolutely

critical equipment to a catcher.

They are central to squatting,

throwing and effectively playing

further expose the athlete to

Knee injuries requiring surgery

This is because the body is

always traumatized by surgery,

even if the procedure is necessary

seriously he could've been hurt.

Fall Leaves Mental Scars

winced in pain.

that position.

additional trauma.

Collegiate Baseball

'Yips' Ordeal Has Destroyed Players Through Years a baseball and a football are relationship to his then current and helpful. essentially the same. The right throwing troubles. Along with athletic injuries and handed thrower turns sideways and When he was 10 years old, emotional traumas, surgeries get hypnotist, but nothing helped and

Continued From Page 30

the problem worsened.

When we first met Mackey in the summer of 2006, he was still saddled with this inexplicable

throwing disorder. When throwing batting practice to his players, he couldn't release or control the ball. The 19-year-old problem was now blocking him from coaching in the majors, a dream Sasser had carried since he retired. Tremendous Humiliation Mackey claimed, "I could be a damn good bullpen coach in the

bigs, but I'd have to throw batting practice. I'm afraid I couldn't cut it and face that humiliation again."

Our goal in meeting with Mackey was simple. We aimed to help him resolve his much publicized throwing "yips" and demonstrate the Grand System's

groundbreaking power in resolving Repetitive Sports Performance Problems (RSPPs). I. (Alan Goldberg) have been working exclusively in the field of applied sports psychology for over 22 years, specializing in helping athletes like Sasser overcome performance fears and blocks.

successful model for healing athletes struggling with RSPPs. Despite my success over the years, there were certain athletes I couldn't help. I sensed I was missing something that could elevate my work to another level. My search for answers led

In 1997 I wrote Sports Slump Busting, which featured my

me to the work of David Grand, an internationally known expert on creativity and performance enhancement and New York trauma therapist. The author of Emotional Healing at Warp Speed - The Power of EMDR, David had applied trauma healing techniques to performance blocks and pioneered an approach that transcended every approach currently utilized in applied sports psychology. His theory

was groundbreaking: all repetitive sports performance problems like the "yips" and severe slumps had a trauma basis that operated outside of the athlete's conscious awareness. Unless the underlying physical and emotional injuries When we asked Mackey to tell

were directly addressed, the block might reduce but would never fully release. us about his history and childhood, we were looking for both emotional and physical injuries that might have unconsciously built up over the years, finally culminating in the visible performance problem of his

arm locking up behind the plate. Mackey's personal and injury history clearly reveal what most people have completely missed in relation to his seemingly unusual throwing difficulty, the trauma basis of these kinds of repetitive performance problems. Sasser had a number of significant

school, college and professional career which unknowingly formed the foundation of his performance difficulties. In addition, he experienced several earlier, profound non-sports related traumas, and all of these

injuries over the course of his high

further contributed to the later emergence of his throwing "yips." As we outline some of these negative experiences, it's interesting to note that not one of the more than 50 professionals that Mackey saw over the course of his career

ever inquired about any of these iniuries/events or their possible

Continue -

lines up his left arm and left side in etched into the body's exquisitely detailed scorecard. They become part of the body's cumulative storehouse that later unconsciously fuels the performance problem. Throughout high school, Mackey played quarterback for the football follows through with his throwing team and acknowledged that in this

When he was 18, he was playing quarterback in a semi-professional league game against guys who were much bigger and older than him. As he went back to throw a pass, he was blind-sided in his ribs. The extremely hard hit on his left side went underneath his protective padding leaving him

While your conscious mind

sore for days.

position he got hit numerous times

as he was releasing the ball.

soreness has disappeared, your body never forgets. In fact, your body remembers exactly how you were moving and every detail of what you were doing when you were injured. It's interesting to note that the body mechanics of throwing

the direction of the target. He then rocks back shifting his weight onto his right foot and leg as he brings his throwing arm back and up. He then shifts his weight forward as he releases the ball and

When you set up to pass as a right-handed quarterback, you completely expose your left side to potential hits from the on-rushing defense. If being in this position in the past resulted in some significant

trauma as it had in Mackey's case,

(i.e. being blindsided), then your

body and mind will exquisitely remember all the details of this trauma, including the memory of your body movements when you may forget an incident like this were hurt. within a week or two after the Whenever you find yourself back in this same position, whether it's to throw another pass or to toss a baseball back to the pitcher, the

unconsciously stored details of this

trauma in your brain/body will get

activated and intrude into your

consciousness.

and physical tension that can then interfere with accurate execution. Asking The Right Question Why is it that not one of the almost 50 professionals who worked with Sasser ever asked him about his life history or the

innumerable physical traumas that

defined his career as an athlete? Our

contention is that you can never

separate the athlete's performance

problem from who the athlete is as

ultimately end up losing valuable

When you attempt to do so, you

a unique human being.

information that is necessary for both understanding and effectively solving the RSPP. Unlike the symptom-focused approach of traditional sports psychology, the Grand System identifies and targets performance problems stuck in the athlete's

brain and body down to the roots of the RSPP. This is accomplished by the holistic, brain/body centered approach which is the foundation of our new book, Limitless Achievement - From Performance Blocks to Breakthroughs.

