

The Mackey Sasser Story

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This article reveals the untold story behind Mackey Sasser's throwing yips and the work Dr. David Grand, Dr. Alan Goldberg and myself (Rob Polishook) did with Mackey Sasser in NYC, summer of 2005.

It was a Friday night, August 3rd, Mackey's birthday; he had flown into NYC to meet the three of us (David, Alan and myself, Rob) to discuss his throwing problems as a Major League catcher and currently as a college coach. During dinner at a quaint bistro we made introductions, broke bread, laughed, and learned about each other. Mackey was very open about his career and his experiences with the throwing yips. He hoped to understand what had happened and gain some clarity towards his situation. We listened and hoped to be able to help Mackey gain insight and clarity towards his throwing yips. An inexplicable problem, which ultimately stripped Mackey of his career.

The following day we met early, David led a lengthy four-hour session and afterwards we all went to Met game sitting two rows behind the catcher. During the game Mackey was very quiet, he later expressed to me that he was exhausted but felt like he had let go of a lot of issues which led to his performance block.

During the next 6 months David had two follow up phone sessions. Then in April, David, Alan, Rob and Calder Kaufman flew to Dothan Alabama, home of the Wallace Governors. It was here we did a follow up with Mackey. By the end, Mackey reported, "I feel like a 500 pound weight has been lifted from my shoulders, I can throw again hit corners and not even think about it."

The story: In 1990, Sasser's throwing difficulties became even more pronounced and problematic. The New York fans and media responded with cruelty and abuse. "Sasser syndrome" had hit the Big Apple. "Sasser's throwing his career away" headlined the sports pages. He was the butt of innumerable jokes and at games, the hometown fans began to loudly count in unison, "One, Two, Three," with each time that Mackey pumped the ball. The fear and anxiety attached to his throwing difficulty with its accompanying embarrassment became so intense that Sasser would begin to panic the night before his games at the thought of having to play catcher and the dread that "IT" was going to happen again.

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 pressure-less throw back to the pitcher without hesitating. None of it made much sense to him. How was it possible that in a sport where he had excelled his entire life, where 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 and confusing to 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 hypnotist, but nothing helped and the problem just seemed to get progressively worse.

After Sasser left the big leagues, he took the head-coaching job at his alma mater, Wallace Community College in Alabama. But even today, some 12 years after his career ended, Mackey was still searching for answers to his mysterious throwing ailment. He claimed that not a day went by without someone asking him what had happened to him and his throwing. Mackey stated that there are times today as a coach when he still struggles to throw batting practice to his team. He continues to have trouble smoothly releasing the ball without hesitating. In fact, it's this very same 19-year-old performance problem that continues to keep him out of coaching at a professional level today, a dream that persists to this day. "I could probably be a damn good coach at the Major League level. The only reason I don't do it is because if I had to throw a batting practice, I mean..., it's embarrassing."

When we asked Mackey to tell us about his personal history and childhood, we were looking for both emotional traumas and physical injuries that might have unconsciously built up over the years, finally culminating in a visible performance problem, 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 base of these kinds of repetitive performance problems.

RSPPs do not come out of the blue. They are not something that you can "catch" from an infected teammate and they have absolutely nothing to do with being a "head case" or mentally weak. They are, instead the byproducts of the gradual accumulation within the athlete's mind/body of physical and emotional injuries over the course of the athlete's life and career. By the time the actual performance problem becomes visible to the athlete, coaches and the general public, most, if not all of these earlier traumas have either long been forgotten or completely dismissed as having any importance or relevance to the repetitive performance problem. However, the athlete's body has not forgotten and in fact, has been unknowingly keeping an exquisitely detailed scorecard of these injuries and their attached emotions.

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

Mackey Sasser's story clearly illuminates why traditionally practiced sports psychology is ultimately inadequate to fully explain, and ineffective in helping those athletes who

struggle with RSPPs. When you look more carefully at his throwing problem and underlying injury history using the lens of our paradigm, the mystery of “Sasser syndrome,” “Steve Blass disease,” and similar inexplicable performance problems across every sport begins to slowly unravel.

Sasser had a number of significant injuries over the course of his high 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 further contributed to the later emergence of his throwing “yips.” As we outline these negative experiences, it’s interesting to note that not one of the more than fifty professionals that Mackey saw over the course of his career ever inquired about any of these injuries/events or their possible relationship to his then current throwing troubles

As Mackey recalled his early childhood, he shared pieces of his history right off the bat. The first was that his father had always suffered from a very severe rheumatoid condition that significantly limited his activities and left him crippled with pain. This made it virtually impossible for his dad to throw the ball overhand when they started playing catch when Mackey was just a very young boy. Instead, his father would have to flip the ball underhanded to his son. Mackey’s father coped with his persistent pain by self-medicating himself with alcohol. He was described as a “quiet alcoholic” and, as a consequence, Mackey soon took on a caretaker role in the family starting at a very young age.

The second piece of personal history that Mackey shared was as a 7 year old, witnessing his 5 year old brother run past him and his sister at a crosswalk and get hit by a car. The vehicle struck the boy in the chest and threw him some 100 feet in the air. His brother was “dead at the scene” but the EMTs managed to revive him. According to Mackey, his brother was never the same physically or emotionally after this accident and that it seemed to ruin his life. Even though he was just a seven year old at the time, Mackey was wracked by guilt that he had somehow failed in his responsibility to watch over and protect his brother.

When he was ten years old Mackey fell from 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 shin. As he recalled the incident, some thirty-four years later he winced in pain. The fall left him badly shaken because he couldn’t get himself to stop thinking about how much more seriously he could’ve been hurt.

When Mackey was 12 years old 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 knee surgery. Knees are absolutely critical equipment to a catcher. They are central to squatting, throwing and effectively playing that position. Knee injuries requiring surgery further expose the athlete to additional trauma. This is because the body is always traumatized by surgery, even if the procedure is necessary and helpful.

Along with athletic injuries and emotional traumas, surgeries get 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 team and acknowledged that in this position he got hit numerous times as he was releasing the ball. 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 sore for days. While your conscious mind may forget an incident like this within a week or two after the 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 a baseball and a football are essentially the same. The right-handed thrower turns sideways and lines up his left arm and left side in 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 follows through with his throwing arm. 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 has resulted in some significant trauma as it did 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 were hurt. 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 body/mind will get activated and intrude into your consciousness. 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 and physical tension that can then interfere with quick, accurate and smooth execution.

In 1984, the year he was drafted by the San Francisco Giants, Sasser again hurt his left knee sliding into a base and required more surgery to repair torn cartilage. Over the course of his career Mackey would have to have this same knee operated on several more times to clean out bone chips.

In 1985, when he was playing Double-A ball in the Texas League, Mackey was run over at the plate by Kevin Keene who kneed him in the head in the collision. Mackey was left dazed and momentarily helpless, suffering from a case of whiplash. The entire right side of his body and neck were so sore that he was too stiff to play the next day.

While all of these injuries and traumas predated the actual emergence of his unique throwing problem, each of them in their own way unconsciously contributed to it. This is because the body exquisitely remembers what it was doing and how it was moving whenever it gets injured or experiences anything traumatic. In a similar way that muscle

memory gets developed for an athlete through many repetitions of the same movement over time, the body also remembers the one-trial learning that's always involved with upsetting or traumatic experiences. Any movements that even approximate the movements that were involved in the original injury or trauma can potentially call up anxiety, muscle tension and disruptive memory details from that old injury. It's in this way that a problem in one area, can mysteriously emerge in another, seemingly unrelated area.

The very first visible signs of Sasser's throwing yips came in 1987 during an early season game played in Calgary. The temperature at game time was uncomfortably cold and sometime during the game Sasser caught a hard foul tip on the upper chest muscles just to the left of his right shoulder. The ball managed to get in between the catcher's protective padding and sent an electric jolt of pain through his shoulder and down into his throwing arm. Despite his better judgment, he kept himself in the game and as he did so, his shoulder progressively stiffened up from both the injury and the cold. Soon it became impossible for Mackey to pull his right arm back and away from his body in order to cock the ball before the throw. To compensate for this limited range of motion, and to protect himself from the intense pain that he experienced whenever he did try to cock his arm back, Mackey began to keep his right arm tucked in close to his body and to flip the ball off of his fingers in order to get it back to the pitcher. He continued to do this for two or three days after the injury and soon discovered that for some inexplicable reason, he was unable to get his normal throwing motion back when his shoulder and throwing arm started feeling better.

When he returned to San Francisco, Mackey continued to struggle with his throwing and one day he was angrily confronted by a coach for hesitating before throwing the ball back to the pitcher. The coach made a public spectacle of Sasser's throwing difficulties yelling at him in a demeaning manner. The coach told him and whoever else was in earshot that he was going to fine him \$20.00 every time that Mackey hesitated in his throwing motion. While this particular coach may have just been trying to do his job, his calling attention to Mackey's problem in this way only made things that much worse for the catcher. Mackey felt embarrassed in front of the whole team and as a result, experienced even more anxiety around his throwing. For the very first time that he could remember, he suddenly began to feel pressure to throw the ball correctly. The result of his increased self-consciousness about his throwing could have been predicted: Sasser's throwing problem worsened.

Mackey's experience with his coach highlights a very common dynamic for many athletes struggling with RSPPs. The cyclic performance problem, which is first caused by trauma, ultimately ends up causing even more trauma for the athlete. Embarrassment and humiliation at the hands of coaches, parents and/or fans because of the performance problem almost always has an additional and quite powerful traumatic effect on the athlete. The cruelty, insensitivity and humiliation that the athlete has to endure makes the performance difficulty that much more severe and intractable. It creates additional anxiety for the athlete which, in turn, further tightens muscles, distracts the athlete's focus from the task at hand and insures that the performance difficulty will continue to

intensify.

Later in 1987, after Sasser was traded to the Pittsburgh Pirates he again experienced problems with his left knee, the one where he had already had several surgeries. Team trainers thought that a bulge on the outside of Mackey's left knee was just simply another Baker's cyst and for treatment they stuck a needle in it several times in an attempt to "drain it." As it turns out, the bulge was actually a torn muscle that later required yet another surgical intervention to correct.

In 1990, Mackey's best year in baseball he severely sprained his ankle and partially tore his Achilles tendon in a hard collision at home plate with Atlanta's Jim Pressley. As a result of this injury Mackey was out for six weeks. The collision caused a lot of damage on Mackey's left side and prevented him from being able to rock back whenever he threw. When he finally returned to action his throwing problem seemed that much more pronounced. He talked about a "fog of anxiety" rolling over him whenever he thought about having to throw and many times he couldn't even get the ball to leave his hands. It was in this same year that Mackey's father died from cancer.

In 1994, after Sasser was traded to Seattle and in just the second game of Spring training Kevin Ryan collided hard with him at home plate and broke Mackey's left scapula. At first, his trainer mistakenly thought that Sasser's shoulder had simply been dislocated and he attempted to forcefully jam his player's shoulder back into place. Of course, this misdiagnosis and ill-directed treatment caused Mackey even further trauma. According to Sasser, this shoulder injury was the "nail in the coffin" to his career and within a year he was out of Major League Baseball for good.

Mackey Sasser's seemingly bizarre throwing problem and its close connection to his personal and injury history points out another critically important concept when trying to understand the mystery of RSPPs. Repetitive sports performance problems are almost always intricately connected to the athlete's personal history. All too often traditionally practiced sports psychology adopts too myopic a perspective when working with athletes. In its over-focus on solving the athlete's performance problem, the field tends to either overlook or completely ignore the athlete as a unique individual. That is, those early experiences that may have significantly affected the athlete's life and personality are rarely considered to be relevant to the performance problem in the present. Why is it that not one of the almost fifty professionals who worked with Sasser ever asked him about the early experiences that shaped his childhood 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 a unique human being. When you attempt to do so, you ultimately end up losing valuable information that is necessary for both understanding and solving the RSPP.