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Another Wild Pitch: The Yips and Communication

**The Problem**

It happened my senior year of high school. My baseball career felt like it came to a screeching halt. I had worked incredibly hard to get to where I was, but all of a sudden, I was reduced to my former self; I couldn’t throw a baseball. I was behind the plate when a foul ball was tipped just over my glove. The ball caught my mask square in the metal bars that protected my face, bending them inward. My head snapped back and I fell on to my butt in front of the umpire. Pain radiated my skull leaving me with a nauseous feeling. The natural light on the field brightened ten-fold, I felt a weak. It may have been a mild concussion but I played through it. That was what I was taught to do, just play through it. I shook my head a few times and sat behind the plate.

About a week later, I found myself in a bad position. Instead of an easy release as usual, the ball stuck in my hand when I went to throw. I put the ball back in my mitt, wiped my hand off on my pant leg, and tried again. It didn’t work. I stood there, staring out at the pitcher desperately trying to get him the ball that was super glued to my hand. I brought my arm up into throwing position but it wouldn’t go anywhere. By this time, I started feeling a weird sensation in the pit of my stomach; a worrying sensation mixed with something else; a sense of inadequacy that I couldn’t do the easiest thing in my sport which was to make the throwback to the pitcher.

The Yips welcomed me with open arms that day. I had it for over a year. And it was the most excruciating year of my life.  But that is the narrative of a baseball player. Baseball players have their ups and downs. For a few weeks, the baseball seems like a beach ball while they’re at the plate. Then, the next few weeks they can’t seem to hit a baseball out of the infield. For me, while I was hitting in the low .400’s, I couldn’t manage to throw a baseball back to the pitcher. I was having the offensive season of my life while I was also having the worst defensive year of my life; the coherence of the baseball narrative was high with me. See, many theorists use narrative as the basis of human communication and this episode of my life was the narrative I was experiencing; struggle (Griffin, 308-313). I struggled to explain what was going in my mind and not until years later was I able to talk about it, then I began to tell stories of my struggles, of how I was once afflicted with the hush-hush disease, the yips.

Though I know the feeling, many don’t and they still find it funny watching someone struggle to the throw the ball to the right place. You will find many young, talented baseball players in college baseball right now that simply can’t throw the ball. They will pump fake it, throw it extremely off target, or “lollipop” it to their target. It is the easiest thing to do in the game of baseball - throw the ball. It is the essential action of baseball and many players including Steve Sax, Chuck Knoblauch, and Rick Ankiel have suffered from the mysterious mind block (Meisel, 2013). They simply cannot throw the ball like they used to. When the Yips rears its head, it has the potential to reduce an all-star professional athlete to a beginner.

For example, Mackey Sasser was one of the most promising young MLB catchers in the late 80’s and early 90’s. He caught well, and hit even better for the New York Mets. During a regular season game, there was a play at the plate where Mackey was blocking the plate from the runner chugging his way down the third base line. Only the runner never slid. Instead, he decided to run over Mackey who was deep in a squat. Mackey rolled with the hit and tore ligaments in both of his ankles. The Mets decided to tape him up and send him back out there because they needed his bat in the line-up. Just a few games afterward, he was not able to throw the ball back to the pitcher. He was stuck in the same cycle that I was: he would pump fake, stop, pump fake, stop, and throw a high arching ball that barely made it back to the pitcher. This went on for years and no one understood why. He had the yips so bad that he soon had to leave baseball a few years later (30 for 30: Fields of Fear).

Numerous professional athletes have suffered from it in a wide range of sports (but for the sake of this paper, I will mostly be focusing on baseball), but the mental toughness that comes with fighting off the yips and the knowledge behind why it comes on can be applied to everyday situations. The Yips are brought on by stress and anxiety (Hill; Bennett). Learning to deal with these factors not only can make a ballplayer a much more effective one, but the knowledge gained will help a non-athlete deal with high levels of stress.

The Yips are more a mental block than a physical one. And many don’t realize this. When it comes to the Yips, though, there are two different types. Type I and Type II (creative, right?) are very similar but have to deal with two completely different things. Type I is also known as focal dystonia which is a neurological condition that causes involuntary muscle spasms. This type is often seen in golfers when they putt or occasionally when throwing a baseball; the fingers will curl or stiffen involuntarily and triggers bad putting or throwing mechanics. The second type of yips is driven by anxiety. In Type II, psychological symptoms associated with performing under pressure causes anxiety and inability to perform to the highest level (Clarke, Sheffield, and Akehurst, 2015).

Nevertheless, the yips come out of left field. Many don’t understand how they come about or even how they work. That is exactly the point of this paper; I want explain how the yips come about as well as how they relate to communication while explaining what they do to the body. Therefore, I hold that the yips are caused by bodily trauma and result in a breakdown of internal communication. In order to prove this, I will outline the stages of the yips and how they affect communication and bring in communication theorists to help explain the four stages of the yips a little better.

**The Three Stages of the Yips**

Though I have already explained that there are two types of yips, I did not explain how a yip works or what it does to the body and mind. According to the Mayo Clinic, the yips are involuntary muscle spasms that are a result of focal dystonia or extreme overthinking. The yips cause anxiety within the body which ultimately effects the ability to think straight and perform a simple task. When a simple task is thought about too much, the brain is clouded by noise and cannot make the muscles do exactly as they have done millions of times before. Nick Bascom, author of “Brainy Ballplayers: Elite Athletes Get Their Heads in the Game” explains exactly that, “[John] Milton believes that devoting too much conscious attention to swing mechanics could actually hurt performance… His research suggests that when professional golfers think too long about their shots, the athletes activate parts of their brains that they haven’t used during golf since the first learning the game, throwing finely tuned sensorimotor pathways out of whack” (Bascom, 23). Essentially, when the overthinking part of a yip occurs, the brain clouds and begins to use the wrong sides of the brain that haven’t been used since beginning lessons, bringing the star athlete crashing down to earth. Essentially, the yips slow down communication pathways; muscles falter and interpersonal communication minimizes.

Though the yips do cause overthinking, that is certainly not where they start. The first “stage” as I will be calling the three stages of yip progression, is Brain Disruption. There is always a trauma or major psychological life event that comes before the actual yip occurs. Many baseball players who have experienced the yips would agree; they have had some type of trauma in their baseball career that could possibly play a key role in their development of the yips. Mike Rotheram, who conducted a study in order to find a better treatment for Type I yips offers this explanation, “The occurrence of psychologically significant life events may play a role in the onset of varying forms of focal dystonia. These problems have been labeled as psycho-genic movement disorders. The disturbances have been attributed to dissociation theories and conversion disorders” (Rotheram, 553). What this essentially means is a life event that may have caused significant trauma to the brain can be blocking the body from performing its normal actions. For Mackey, it would be the play at the plate (30 for 30). For Jarrod Saltalamacchia – current Detroit Tigers catcher - it would be the shoulder surgery he had before experiencing the yips (Edes). For me, it was the blow to the head I experienced that may have resulted in an unchecked concussion.

These traumas do not have a time limit. Mine and Sasser’s trauma happened a week or so before the yips started while Saltalamacchia’s was a few months apart. But these serious life events do contain the possibility of having a direct impact on one’s performance. Dr. Tom Hanson, the leader in the field of yips understands the trauma aspect of the yips. He explains, “[putting stroke yips are] caused by psychological trauma that has likely occurred on the golf course, and when this trauma overtakes you, you might find it impossible to make the shots that you have always known how to make” (Hanson). In the Brain Disruption stage, the brain takes an emotion that it experienced from the trauma and attaches it to the action of playing that sport. For Sasser, he had a serious trauma where he was essentially tackled by an opposing player. His brain attached the negative emotion he felt to the sport and it overtook him; he could no longer throw a baseball correctly.

Once the Brain Disruption stage runs its course, the next stage of the yips begins. This stage is called System Dysfunction. This means that when a yip occurs, the system of movements is broken and the brain-body communication begins to deteriorate.

When speaking of any athletic movement in the history of sports, they are all systems of movements that give feedback to the brain in order to process and make the system better. A baseball swing is a system that must work perfectly in sync or else the ball will probably not meet the bat. The same goes for the throwing motion. The front leg strides out, the scapulae load, the shoulder turns, the scapulae unload, the ball is pulled down by the uncocking of the forearm, then the ball is released out over the front leg (Brenkus). If, at any point in time, the chain is broken, the throw will not go as far and might not go anywhere.

When the system is interrupted by a communication error, the system fails and so does the throwing system and no feedback is sent to the brain (Griffin, 39). During a throw, plenty of feedback is sent to the brain; how the arm felt and where the ball went. This visual and physical feedback gives the baseball player’s brain feedback in order to make a change if needed. When a yip occurs, the brain doesn’t receive any feedback because there is nothing to see or feel, the ball is still in the hand or it barely went anywhere (Hill; Bascom; Bennett). Somewhere along the line, the chain was severed severely, it did not work and feedback was not given. Therefore, when a yip occurs there is a break in the chain; there is no internal communication happening because the system has failed.

There are also numerous reasons why the system would fail. Yes, the chain breaks, but the deeper question here is why does it break? The underlying assumption is overthinking, or also known as “noise.” This is what keeps a player from being “automatic” or performing to their highest potential when they tell themselves to. When automaticity is not achieved, it is attributed to when the brain is too clouded to think and the muscles do not fire properly. Bascom explains, “Transmission errors along the [nervous system] serve as a sort of sensory static, or “noise,” that prevents the muscles from hearing the message the brain is sending” (Bascom, 23). The noise that happens along the way gums up the muscles and does not allow them to fire properly. This can also be seen when an athlete begins to think too much about what has to happen during a certain action. According to Jenn Bennett, author of “The Yips and the Lost Move Syndrome” a yip occurs when there is little or “ineffective focus” as well as too much cognitive anxiety to physically release the ball (Bennett, 3). When there is too much “noise” going on in the brain, the system fails to send feedback and system function slows, not allowing athletes to produce the full action. Therefore, when a yip occurs, it results in a breakdown of communication within the body; the system is severed and the action is stopped.

The second stage is essentially the system of movements failing, causing a disruption in the communication between the brain and the muscles. But, the third stage deals with actual internal and interpersonal communication. This third stage has been aptly named Communication Deterioration. This stage deals with the communication happening within the ballplayer and between ballplayers when someone is affected by the yips.

Many who have studied the yips realize the effects they have on the brain, yet they don’t notice the effects it has on interpersonal communication. The yips can destroy a system of movements, but they also deteriorate interpersonal communication, “Once, Saltalamacchia was too proud to acknowledge that he needed help from someone else… ‘When I was first coming up, just being young, your ego plays into it’" (Edes). Saltalamacchia was too embarrassed to actually seek help. He thought he was too good to have the yips; he didn’t want to admit his problem because he thought he was a stronger, more durable person than those that have the yips. A yip is not a sign for mental weakness. It is not a sign that someone is not good enough. It is simply a sign that means communication between the brain and the muscles is bad; the system is broken and needs to be recalibrated.

While the interpersonal communication begins to fail, so the does the internal rhetoric of the athlete that is afflicted. As it is currently, many athletes call their inner monologue their “demon.” The demon they experience is the negative voice in the back of their head saying they can’t do it, they are too weak and they should give up right now. Alla Tovares explains that this is to be expected of many ballplayers, “athletes often use nouns or verbs with negative connotations to index the voices that are either too pushy or too weak” (Tovares, 270). This essentially means that during times of adversity – Tovares uses a first time marathon runner as her example – athletes will begin to talk negatively toward themselves, making themselves believe that they truly can’t do it. Therefore, as adversity grows, the internal rhetoric turns slightly more negative.

With the yips though, the inner dialogue does not turn bad during the yip, it turns bad afterward. The system fails, the body chokes and the ball goes flying over the head of its target, then the athlete begins to mentally kick and degrade themselves for the botched throw. In Bennet’s research study, she mentions a study done by Philippen and Lobinger where they explored the thoughts and feelings of an athlete affected by the yips. Their results, she says, shows that “the yips lead to a combination of emotional and cognitive factors, particularly frustration, disappointment, anger… and perceived loss of control” (Bennett, 4). Their study found that once a yip happens and the system of movements fails, their brain turns negative. While the brain turns negative, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis suggests that the negative words, thoughts, feelings being used in the feelings of anger and disappointment begin to shape our reality (Griffin, 43). The yips make the affected feel angered, which then turns language and self-talk negative, which then makes the yips come out once again. It is a vicious cycle because our words shape the reality we are in. Our negative thoughts turn into negative actions.

**The Communication Relation**

As I have said before, many researchers have focused on the physical and mental aspects of the yips. None of them, unfortunately, have focused on the communication that is ultimately effected by the yips. I have explained my three stages of the yips; the Brain Disruption, the System Dysfunction, and the Communication Deterioration. But I have only mentioned the Narrative Paradigm and the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Though those are incredibly important to this theory, there are a few others that I based this theory on. I used Cybernetics, Semiotics, Cognitive Dissonance as a foundation of this theory. These three theories were picked because they had the most to do with systems and that is essentially what the yips are; a system of actions that deteriorates, causing communication to falter.

First, Cybernetics was used to talk about systems of movements as well as general communication. Norbert Weiner, father of the Cybernetic tradition of communication believes that communication is essentially inputs, outputs, and feedback that is all processed in our head. The belief here is that communication is a system of information processing; communication is the link that connecting separate parts of any system. If the chain or system fails at any point, then the communication fails (Griffin, 39-40). This theory was used to help explain the system that the body has. There is a relationship between the brain and the body that forms a system. If the system fails, then the action fails. A yip comes from this broken system; the noise coming from within the body blocks the muscles from firing properly and cannot obtain automaticity

Second, the Semiotics tradition was used to help develop the stages of the yips. It doesn’t offer enough room to explain how experiencing a yip can affect the rest of an athlete’s play. That is when the Semiotics tradition comes in. The Semiotics tradition was founded by Roland Barthes and aims to help humans lessen misunderstandings by showing that communication is symbolic. Its main purpose is to show that verbal and nonverbal signs can stand for something else; they analyze something to see if it has the possibility of meaning something else. Barthes holds that a sign is a combination of two things: a signifier and signified. The signifier is a physical form of a sign like a build board. The signified is the meaning we associate with said signifier (Griffin, 41 & 332). For example, in this paper, a yip would be the signifier while the signified would mean the pain and psychological trauma if the person understands what it’s like to have the yips. On the other hand, if a person does not completely understand the yips, the signified would change to associate a yip with mental and physical weakness.

Lastly, the theory of Cognitive Dissonance was used in order to further explain the third stage. The negative emotional experience an athlete feels after a yip is much like the mental distress someone feels while experiencing Cognitive Dissonance. This theory essentially says that there is a mental state that is caused by an inconsistency between a person’s beliefs and actions. This means that the athlete knows they can throw or putt a ball, but the action does not allow them to. This feeling that an athlete would experience, as explained by Leon Festinger, the creator of Cognitive Dissonance, would be something of mental anguish (Griffin, 217-228. This goes hand in hand with what is stated above. Jenn Bennett explained that research was done which found that athletes experience anger, frustration, and loss of control. This is much like the mental anguish side of cognitive dissonance, as the belief and action do not line up causing a mental state much like anger and frustration.

**The End**

It wasn’t until years later when I did this research that I found the root of my problem. I had associated that trauma I experienced of taking a 90 mile an hour fastball to the face with throwing a baseball. My yips narrative ended my sophomore year of college when I began to visualize before games. I would visualize myself driving in runs and throwing out base stealers. I felt more relaxed and confident when I played baseball, allowing my muscles to not “gum” up and freely act like they were intended to be used.

To sum up, the yips are caused by a traumatic life events which results in a deterioration of communication. Psychological trauma is a root cause in Type I and Type II yips which, in turn, break down the communication pathways and do not allow actions to be completed. Type I and Type II may be different but they both can wreak major havoc on the body while proving that the systems of communication that the body has are fallible; they will break when extreme stress and anxiety is factored in. Though it is obvious that communication can always change, it is important to always reevaluate yourself and see how you can get better. The yips changed my life and almost ruined my baseball career. Fortunately, staying confident and bettering my communication helped to get rid of them.

Play on.

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