

# **Rob Polishook Interviews Mackey Sasser**

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Rob Polishook: About eight months ago when we first spoke, I had mentioned I was working with Dr. David Grand – an internationally known psychologist in the field of creativity and performance enhancement – and Dr. Alan Goldberg – a nationally known sport psychology consultant who has worked with teams and individual athletes of all levels. I spoke of Dr. Grand's unique breakthrough approach to working with athletes experiencing performance blocks. You mentioned that you continued to experience problems throwing batting practice as a head coach with your college team, reminiscent of your catching days with the NY Mets in Major League Baseball, and were still hoping to gain some answers as to what happened in your playing days. I mentioned the book we were working on regarding performance blocks that elite athletes experience and a new system that David Grand has pioneered in working with the athletes and helping them work through these performance blocks. Based on this, at the time, it seemed like a good synergy to all get together and explore your situation and hopefully help you shed some insight into your throwing problems.

Mackey Sasser: Right.

RP: Now flash forward eight months, when we visited you and your college team in Dothan, AL. You mentioned you were throwing well and easy. I hoped we could talk more about the work you did with David over the eight month period.

MS: Yeah, all right, let's do it.

RP: Last year (2006), back in August, what did you really think when I called you to discuss getting together with David, Alan, and myself to explore the throwing problems that haunted you in the Major Leagues? Mind you, we hadn't met before.

MS: To be honest, I thought, here we go again. But a good friend of mine told me y'all were great guys and it might be helpful to talk to you guys. So I said that's fine, let's do it.

RP: So looking back, what was the process like?

MS: Well, we were able to open up some things that I had thought I had put in the past, but in reality, I really hadn't put that stuff in the past.

RP: When you met with us, you had also mentioned that you had worked with about 50 other sport psychologists years ago during your playing days in the Major League Baseball system. What was like to work with David?

MS: I think most guys have the same theory, to try to solve something. David did it from the gut and worked from the inner to the outer, and he helped me get through some things

that I didn't even realize I had a problem with, where as other guys were trying to work with hypnosis, seeing and visualizing things and that kind of stuff. The other guys were trying to block it from my memory, whereas David was trying to help me see it, feel it, and then release it.

RP: You worked with David in NYC, then had a few follow up phone sessions during the next few months. And then of course we visited you in Dothan, 8 months later. What was the process like for you?

MS: It was kind of different, if you want to know the truth. Different in the aspect of just bringing up things, and how you know when David would push something in my mind, I would just run with it...he would want me to just run with what I was feeling at that moment. This helped me release it and just let it go. And working that part of my brain and body and everything together, it kind of, it was actually draining, but it released a lot of stuff that I had compacted inside myself. And I think that is where the release of it was, and it was like 500 pound weight on your shoulder being released. If that makes sense to you?

RP: Yes, it does. How was David's approach different than that of other psychologists you spoke with years ago in the MLB?

MS: Oh yeah, David believed that things that happened earlier in life (traumas) were compressed and that causes things to happen, you know like my throwing problem. And when he made me realize things and see things from that perspective I had a whole new outlook on everything that was going on around me, and so I was able to let it go. Whereas in the past, it was really hard to let it go, it was like something that stuck with me. And I'm not saying I totally let everything go, but it's helped me to release things and look at it differently.

RP: You mentioned 'he made you see that.' Do you think that was more him making you see it, or him guiding you and you actually seeing it yourself?

MS: You're right, it was more him guiding me, exactly. Let me rephrase that, it was actually me releasing that, but he was getting to the points and touching the points for me to be able to release that.

RP: Interesting, so after the NY session, we went to the Met game. What was it like to sit at the Met game, sitting directly behind the catcher?

MS: It was great to be back, Rob, to be honest with you. I was totally drained, I was just happy to be at a ball game. I saw a couple guys, didn't see all the guys I'd like to see, but it was a great experience. As far as problems I had in past, it didn't bother me 'cause I wasn't on the field, and I wasn't participating. I was totally drained from actually going through that session for four hours because you're bringing up things in your mind, when you're mentally worn out you're physically worn out.

RP: As you worked with David, it seemed you began to get some clarity and insight into things, how was that?

MS: Well, I didn't start really putting things together until we started talking about my father and his injuries and things that happened to me, and traumas (physical and emotional). Talking about those things and how it all kept feeding back to some of the problems I had when I was throwing the ball back to the pitcher. And it was crazy how that went about, and how he helped me see and feel experiences in my past, up to when I was playing ball. And then it all kind of filtered together, and what I thought it was mainly suppressing all the things I had, the injuries, the pain of my father and those kinds of things, he brought that all alive and helped me bring that out of my gut, kind of worked my brain and helped clear it for me. Helped me resolve it.

RP: Did any other sport psychologist look at Mackey as the person, and maybe think that personal issues may be contributing to the throwing problems that Mackey as an athlete was experiencing?

MS: In certain ways, but not that deep, no.

RP: When you got back to Dothan, you started throwing again. How was that, and what was the process like?

MS: I kind of felt free of all the things in the past; I didn't think about all the throwing problems or anything, I just threw the ball. It was more relaxed and more 'what the hell,' if you want to know the truth, it's nothing major, just throwing a baseball. This was different from when I did play in the major leagues...when that all started, the fear, and the setbacks, and not hitting the pitcher with it, and everything else was more of a...I don't know a fear, or whatever happened at the time...it was just, I was afraid to throw the ball.

RP: So if you had met us 20 years ago while you were still playing in the Major Leagues, and David was pioneering his work then...do you think the freedom and the looseness that your experiencing now, throwing batting practice with your kids in Dothan, would have been similar to how you felt as a starting catcher on the field at Shea Stadium with the Mets?

MS: I actually have played that in my head, if I had worked with you guys earlier in my career when this all first started to happen. I think it could have really worked for me...you know, I really think it would have worked. Yes.

RP: What's it like throwing the ball and batting practice again with your guys, on the field?

MS: I used to concentrate on throwing the ball down the middle of the plate, now I'm hitting corners, I can throw it out when I need to throw it out, I can throw it in when I need to throw it in...and what has actually happened instead of focusing so hard, it has

just become a reaction, just flipping the ball where I need to put it. It has totally taken the thinking process out of it.

RP: You mentioned when we first met in NYC that the only thing holding you back from a professional coaching job was your throwing. However, now eight months later, how do you feel?

MS: Well, I got other good stuff going on with my family, the timing's not right now. But yeah, I really thought through that process, yeah, I would be interested in it. People have asked me about it. Just not interested at this point in my life, but I think I could do it, yes.

RP: That's pretty cool...so what implications do you think the work that David does has for other ballplayers? Do you think it could be helpful?

MS: I think it would be a perfect opportunity for some guys that have problems as athletes, or problems like me, I think you guys could really help them. Like I said, if you can get to it early. However the person has to be willing to work on it, it has to be within the person that has the problem, and not worry about what other people think, because it is their careers and their lives and they have to understand that it's something that might affect them even after the game or after they are done, and they have to understand that they have to take care of that issue, whatever way they might have to do it, they have to admit they have a problem...you have to admit you have a problem...the only way you can fix it is to figure it out and be able to release it.

RP: Mackey, it's been great talking to you, and I think beneficial for all of us to meet, work, and learn together. Thanks for your time, we will talk soon.

MS: Thanks.