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Psychologist aims to release potential within the Royals

By BILL REITER
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The Royals were stumbling through another loss when the newest member of the organization walked into an empty room overlooking the field at Kauffman Stadium. A 53-year-old psychologist sat in a cushioned chair, glanced down at the diamond and began to explain.

"My job here," Andrew Jacobs said over the sound of fans, "is to be of assistance to the players and coaches to help them mentally deal with whatever it is they have to deal with, whether it's a personal issue or a professional issue."

Jacobs' role with the team was only two weeks old, but his path to the job stretched a long way back, down two different roads.

One went back to Royals general manager Dayton Moore's first face-to-face conversation with manager Trey Hillman, when the two men talked about what would be necessary to turn perennial losers into consistent winners.

"Dayton and I have been discussing that since the beginning — even a little during the interview process," Hillman said. "It's about focus and balance, understanding their individual personalities better, and what they have to do day in and day out to be successful, whether it's as a starting pitcher, bullpen pitcher, bench player. A sports psychologist helps the players get to know themselves better."

The other path to this place began in a college classroom 30 years earlier, when Jacobs, then a student, picked up a book about sports psychology, a subject most people considered a kind of snake oil.

Now here he was, after 27 years in the business, including time spent with the U.S Olympic team, the Chicago White Sox and the Kansas City Comets — as well as a 1990 stint with the Royals — settling in as another piece of the puzzle that Moore has been assembling as he tries to reverse the Royals' fortunes.

"This is a game of failure and how you deal with it," Jacobs said. "It's a game of negativity. George Brett is in the Hall of Fame, his career batting average is just over .300, he failed nearly twice as many times as he succeeded. So failure is inevitable.

"How they deal with that, how they cope with that dictates the success you'll have in your career."

Indeed. As Jacobs talked Wednesday afternoon, the Royals were foundering against the Tigers. They had yet to put a base runner aboard, much less rack up a hit. After a while, Jacobs paused, looked at the scoreboard and frowned.

"It's a perfect game through five innings."

Jacobs kept talking, but like team officials, he declined to say specifically what he does to help the Royals play better, citing confidentiality. But he was quick to point out he's a trained, licensed professional, not some kind of magic man or palm reader.

He paused again. He studied the field. By now it was the seventh inning, and the Royals were still without a hit or a walk.

"I have a feeling they're going to get a hit this inning."

Thirty seconds later, David DeJesus lined the ball to right field for a single.

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It was 1978 and Jacobs, who had left Kansas City to attend Vanderbilt University, was at the California School of Professional Psychology in San Diego studying for his doctorate.

"I took a class called sports psychology, and five minutes in I knew this is what I wanted to do," he said. "My professor wrote a book called *The Inner Athlete: Mind Plus Muscle for Winning*."

The book and the professor, Robert Nideffer, led Jacobs to an internship at San Diego State. Shifting his career calling to sports psychology would send eyes rolling.

"After I graduated, I moved back here," he said. "I stopped by the Olympic training center on the way here in 1981."

Jacobs had scheduled a meeting with an Olympic official. He wanted to pitch his services. Given a chance, he believed he could help coax athletes to a better place mentally.

"He just blew me off," Jacobs said. "It ticked me off enough that, on the way here, I got a speeding ticket and set three goals. I wanted to work with a professional team, an Olympic team and a collegiate team within five years."

It wouldn't be an easy road. Psychologists — who, unlike psychiatrists, are not required to attend medical school — were often viewed with suspicion by athletes taught to keep their emotions to themselves. It was the same for Jacobs.

In Kansas City, Jacobs received a lukewarm reception as he made the rounds of local colleges and teams. He got a break in November.

"I went up to KU, and I met a professor who found out I'd worked under Nideffer," Jacobs said. "He said, 'How'd you like to work up here?' He sent a memo to all the coaches."

A time and place to meet the new sports psychologist was set. Only two coaches bothered to show up.

"They were the men's and women's track coaches," Jacobs said.

For \$5 a week, Jacobs worked with any athletes who wanted the help. After some positive reviews, the university brought him back the following year and gave him a \$5-a-week raise.

"I had a clinical psychology practice, but sports psychology was my passion."

This was how it started all over the country, for men and women trying to convince athletes that the mind needed to be nurtured as much as the body.

"Fifteen years ago, people would give you a quizzical look if they heard you were in the field," said Cory Bank, a professor and licensed psychologist of the Abington Center for Therapy and Sports Psychology in Glenside, Pa.

Robert Troutwine is a sports psychologist in Liberty who has helped more than 20 NFL teams prepare for the draft.

"The beginning started around 1980, that's when some groups were formed, publications became a little more mainstream within the discipline of psychology," he said. "The (public) acceptance level was very low.

"That's about the time Andy and I both got out of graduate school," he said. "My main focus was player evaluation for the NFL draft, and I got started in 1985. At that time, it was pretty revolutionary."

During that period, Jacobs worked for KU, the U.S. Cycling Team, the Chicago White Sox minor-league system, the Kansas City Comets and others. Acceptance came — and still comes — slowly.

"People started seeing the results, and more and more people came around to what we do," Troutwine said.

Lynette Woodard, a former KU basketball All-American and the first woman to play for the Harlem Globetrotters, was one of those people.

"I'm sure Andy had those challenges, but I took that seriously," she said. "As a women's basketball player, there was no acceptance. I can relate to that uphill battle."

Woodard declined to say what, exactly, Jacobs did to help her performance.

"It's something that's private, which is what makes Andy Andy," she said. "It's not mass produced. He works to get to know you, and he observes and is very conscientious and he's trained to pick up certain things."

Jacobs, Royals officials and many former athletes who have worked with him declined to speak in specifics about how Jacobs works, citing the private nature of what takes place between a patient and psychologist.

But Craig Glicker isn't as reticent, and his story offers insight into the kinds of techniques that Jacobs — and professionals like him — use to help manage the tide of stress that comes with athletic careers.

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It was 1985, and Glicker, a KU shot putter and discus thrower, had a problem.

"We were in Nebraska the night before the conference meet," he said. "I was thinking about my finger, and it's going to rip open the (stitches), and there'll be blood everywhere."

Glicker couldn't help it. Every time he closed his eyes, every time he thought about the meet, he saw his finger ripping open, he saw blood, he saw failure.

So he called Jacobs.

They met at a Holidome and went into an empty room. Jacobs put on a tape. He had Glicker lie on the floor.

"Andy walked me through this story," Glicker said. "I'm on this deserted island and there's a warm breeze going through the islands, and it's one of the most beautiful, calm places on the planet — this elaborate story — and I'm believing it and getting into it."

His eyes closed, the vision growing in his mind, the thoughts of failure and blood and his injured finger slipped away.

"He talked further about the coconut lying next to me on the sand, the calm waves coming on to the beach," Glicker said. "He would say, 'Craig, now, for a brief moment we're going to talk about your technique.' He knew that, what I had to do, because he'd talked to the coaches."

There was no stress.

"He said, 'You're imagining yourself in these positions, and you're going to be able to do it, because you're very calm and relaxed and there's nothing stopping you from being the best shot putter in the world,'" Glicker said.

"I loved it," he said. "I was young, I was very excited. It really made sense for me.

"He took me out of my body in a sense."

The next day, on his first throw, Glicker threw far enough for third or fourth place. His finger ripped open. The rest of his attempts were poor, but it didn't matter.

"It had worked," he said. "I'd gotten what I needed on the first throw."

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By the time the Royals brought Jacobs back for a second stint with the team a few weeks ago, sports psychologists had become a part of the professional-sports landscape. Moore was familiar with them from his time in the Braves' front office.

"We used our sports psychologist to help us analyze players for the draft, deal with certain players at the major-league level, be a resource available to them," Moore said.

For now, Jacobs will focus on getting used to the daily routine of major-league baseball. He has and will attend every home game. He'll also go on some road trips, as he did on the latest trip to Chicago. It's so players know he's there if they want to talk.

"This game is every day, it's a very intense grind, and it's all about being able to manage failure," Moore said. "Some of a sports psychologist's programs — relaxation, focus, those types of things — are very important for athletes to be successful day in and day out.

"It's not uncommon — it's pretty common — with most of the clubs for them to have a sports psychologist. We're transitioning and building this thing in a way where we have a competitive program with everything I do. I look at Andy's role no different than I do our massage therapist. It's just a different aspect of our medical team."

In the booth overlooking the field, Jacobs was still talking about being a sports psychologist: "It's about stress management, your personal relationships, staying in the moment. ... If you focus too much on the short-term stuff, you're in trouble."

In short, he said, it's about positive energy — something he thinks he can help bring out.

As if to prove him right, the Royals responded by turning DeJesus' single — the one Jacobs had predicted, the one that broke up the perfect game — into the team's only run of the game.

What is sports psychology?

- Psychology is the science of mind and behavior, not to be confused with psychiatry, which is a medical field.
- Sports psychologists seek to enhance athletes' performance by analyzing the connection between mind and body.
- Some techniques that sports psychologists teach athletes are goal setting, relaxation, visualization and rituals to help performance.

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