

KRAUSES' KORNER

with Ken Krause



Eating an Elephant

There is an old African proverb that asks “How do you eat an elephant?” While some of you may opt for an answer such as “with a knife and fork” or “with buffalo sauce” or “why in the world would you want to eat an elephant when there’s a Wendy’s just down the street?” The correct answer is “one bite at a time.”

In other words, if you have a giant task in front of you, such as learning to hit or pitch better, learning to call pitches as a catcher, learning to play the outfield after spending your entire career in the infield, or even making the transition from player to coach (as Claire talks about in her column), it can be overwhelming to think about mastering the whole thing at once. (That may be a record for my longest sentence ever.) In fact, it can be downright paralyzing. Much like writing a regular article for a famous softball publication when you have a blank screen staring at you, and a cursor blinking “let’s go, let’s go, let’s go” constantly.

The key thing to remember is you don’t have to get it all at once. No one is expecting you too. At least no one in their right mind, which can sometimes be difficult to find at a softball diamond. The important thing is to get started somewhere, and take it a little bit at a time. Lots of little bits will add up to the whole thing over time.

Of course, in the business world they don’t like you to only bring up problems. They want you to bring solutions with it. So since I’ve brought up the problem of eating a figurative elephant, here are some suggestions on things you can do to actually take one bite at a time.

Break the big job down into smaller tasks. Let’s say you want to learn how to pitch. Nothing fancy, just be able to throw strikes faster and more reliably. That can be a distant and frustrating goal, especially if you don’t have the benefit of an instructor to help you. You work on throwing strikes, but strikes don’t happen, and pretty soon (like after a half hour) it just seems like too much.

The problem is you’re too focused on the end result. You’re trying to swallow the entire elephant. Unless you have a hinged jaw like one of those creepy angels in that new movie that’s coming out, that’s not going to work.

Instead, start by finding what your arm should do in the last half of the circle, then work on getting it to do that. After all, if you do everything else right up until that point and then go wrong when it’s time to throw the ball, all the rest of what you did doesn’t matter anyway.

Don’t even worry about where the ball goes at first. Just focus on making sure your arm is doing the right thing and let the results take care of themselves. Once you have the hang of that piece, move on to the next one, and the next one, and the next one. If you stay focused on gaining little victories, over time you will achieve large ones. Which brings me to my next point.

Be patient. On the old Seinfeld show, when Frank Costanza (George’s father) would find himself getting agitated, he would scream “SERENITY NOW!” It was supposed to calm him down, I guess, but if anything it made him even more irritable.

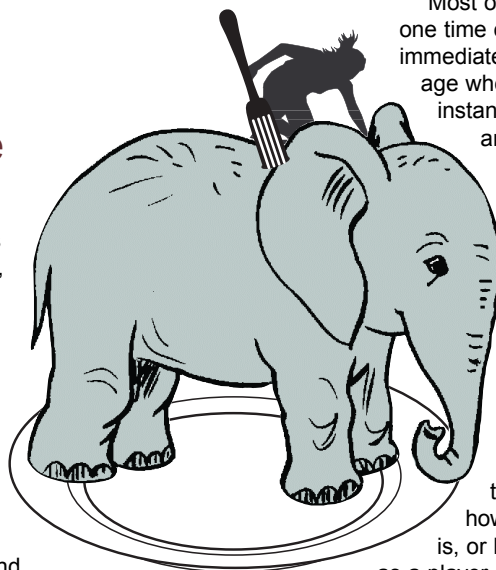
Most of us have been there at one time or another. We want immediate results. We live in an age where messaging is instant, popcorn takes three and a half (instead of 20) minutes to make, and parents give their kids \$300 bats instead of making them go out and earn the money for it.

But big tasks can’t be accomplished in one sitting. You can’t learn to hit for power in one session, no matter how good your instructor is supposed to be, how cool his/her Web site is, or how great he/she was

as a player. You can’t learn all the nuances of fastpitch softball strategy by reading a book or watching a video. It takes time to gain the knowledge and/or experience to really grasp something new and be able to put it into action without hesitation or having to think through the steps first. Give yourself the gift of taking small bites and learning to enjoy each of them, rather than trying to rush to get to the end. It’ll save you a lot of indigestion.

Set goals and milestones. Your ultimate goal is to eat the elephant. (Not literally, of course. Your vegetarian friends, not to mention the local zoo, frown upon that sort of thing, and it won’t help your game much as elephant tends to be high in cholesterol.) But eating an entire figurative elephant is a big job, and it can seem like it’s taking too long or not producing enough results to move you toward your end game.

Setting smaller goals and milestones will give you the sense of accomplishment it takes to keep going when things look their bleakest. For example, if you’re trying to make the transition to the outfield it can take a while to master all the skills. So why not focus first on being able to judge balls that are hit in front of you? Or learning how to tell if a ball is hit in front of or behind



KRAUSES' KORNER

you for those who still can't resist taking that first step in! Set a goal that is measurable and achievable with some work, such as "I will field six out of 10 balls in front of me successfully," then keep increasing the number until you've mastered the skill.

When you can do that, work on side-to-side, then on going back. Having little successes along the way will feel a lot better than focusing on a litany of failures, and all your little successes will add up to the big one toward which you're shooting. (I was going to say "shooting for," but the voice of my third grade English teacher Mrs. White wouldn't let me end that sentence with a preposition. Thanks Mrs. White!)

Start somewhere. Anywhere. Switching continents momentarily (see? Softball Magazine is not only good, it's good for you) there is an old Chinese proverb that says "A journey of 1,000 miles (or kilometers if you're on the metric system) begins with a single step. While that sounds very wise, what does it really mean?"

It means often times we put off doing certain tasks because we're so focused on how much time and effort it will take to complete. We hesitate to take that first step and in so doing just put ourselves further and further behind.

I was that way about finishing my basement. I'd fret over how much work it was going to be, how many building materials I had to get down there, where I was going to start, what would I do if something went wrong since it's not my area of expertise, and all kinds of other stuff.

Ultimately, though, nothing happened until one day I just decided to go down there, grab a hammer, and start working. It took a long time – I pretty much repeated that pattern with every phase – but today I can go downstairs and enjoy the Women's College World Series and all those movies I quote here in a lovely finished basement.

The job you're facing may seem just as big. There can be a thousand reasons to put it off. But your best bet is to get going doing something, even if it may not be exactly the right thing. Just as ol' Isaac Newton said about bodies in the universe, once you overcome your own inner inertia it's a lot easier to keep yourself going. And now you can add physics to the philosophy and geography lessons you received today. You're welcome.

Eating the elephant may seem like too big a task to take on. But if you remember to go one bite at a time, you'll find you've actually reached your goal sooner than you thought you would. And you may even acquire a taste for future elephants.

Have a question or comment? You can reach me at kkrause342@aol.com. And for more like this (as our friends at Google say), check out my blog at <http://fastpitchlane.softballsucces.com>.