



KRAUSES' KORNER with Ken Krause

Be the Pig

I was at a business conference once (yes, despite appearances to the contrary ol' Coach Ken has a day job) when the presenter asked the crowd if we knew the difference between bacon and eggs. Now, having just come from the free breakfast bar at the hotel I thought I had a pretty good idea of the answer. In fact, a little of each was sitting on my shirt unfortunately. But as it turned out, it was one of those conceptual questions.

The answer he gave was "The chicken is involved, but the pig is committed." (Please, no nasty-grams from you vegans and PETA members. I don't make these things up, I just report them.)

Despite the mental images, that's actually a very important question for softball players. All too often, players are like the chicken. They show up to games or practice, they do what they're told, and participate in all the drills. (Some also kick at the dirt and cluck a lot without saying anything much of substance, but that's a chicken story for another day.) To the casual observer it looks like they're doing what they're supposed to do.

But the truth is they're not really invested in what they're doing. They're not executing everything they do to the very best of their ability. Sometimes they may try harder than others, but they're never really going all out, and perhaps they're even resistant. Yes, they may be involved, but they're not really committed.

If you really want to develop as a player, you have to be the pig. (Oh my, the looks I get from my female players and students when I tell them they need to be pigs! It generally does not go well.)

Just as in our breakfast analogy, if you're the pig you're really committed to both the team and improving yourself as a player. When the team runs sprints, you're working your butt off trying to win every heat. Even if you've been blessed with more "strength" than speed. When it's time for ground balls you're not just getting the ones that are hit at you or close to you or that are easy and waving goodbye to the rest as they pass; you're throwing your body in front of every ball you can, and diving after balls that look to be otherwise out of reach.

When you're hitting off a tee, you don't just set the ball on it and knock it off any old way while wondering if your BFF has answered that text message you sent earlier about going out for ice cream later. You don't just roll your eyes while thinking "this is boring, is practice over yet?" You actually focus on your hitting technique, working on a specific aspect such as keeping your hands tied to your back shoulder or driving the bat all the way through extension.

When you're practicing pitching you're working on developing speed or spins instead of merely counting pitches or throwing for X number of minutes just to say you put in the time.

You get the idea. There's more to being the pig than just practicing hard, though. After all, practice is for the physical skills. What really separates the great players from the merely good ones is their mental approach. Pigs work on their mental game all the time.

First of all, the pig thinks about the game away from the field. Whether it's a new technique she has learned or a particular play during a game that may not have gone the way she wanted it, the pig has it on her mind, mentally rehearsing it until she knows it inside and out.

The pig is also aware of the game in the dugout. While his teammates may be holding sunflower seed spitting contests or seeing who can hold their breath the longest (don't ask where I got that one), he is watching the opposing pitcher to see if he tips his pitches, or seeing how his opponent plays the bunt so he knows if he can maybe take an extra base should the bunt go down.

Pigs are aware of where the sun is during the game, how hard the wind is blowing (and from what direction) and whether the field is hard, soft or somewhere in between. They know if an umpire's strike zone is high, low, wide or tight, and they use that information to their advantage. For a pig, no piece of game-related information is too small or trivial to go unnoticed, because it could wind up making a difference in the outcome of a game.

Given this information, what type of player are you? Are you the chicken or the pig? Now, if you're a chicken but want to become a pig instead, the next natural question is how do you go about making the change?

The truth is it's a mindset more than anything else.

Pigs don't just happen out of thin air. (Which is a good thing in the literal sense. Imagine a world where pigs just suddenly appeared out of nowhere, oinking and rutting all over the place.)

They are created when a player decides that he/she wants to be more than he/she is right now. Maybe at some point the player was sitting on the bench and didn't like it, or was cut from a team entirely. Maybe that player felt like people looked at him/her as a second-rate player, perhaps not good enough to hang with the team's best players.

There can be a lot of motivating factors, many of which start out as negatives. But unlike chickens, which fold under the pressure like a camp chair under a fat guy, pigs rise to the challenge and decide they want to become the best players they can be. They often start out trying to solve a particular issue or overcome a particular perception. But eventually they find that their entire approach has changed, and being a pig is now a habit.

So the bottom line (nice business-speak, eh? Told you I have a day job) is anyone can become the pig. You just have to make the decision – and then put in all the extra work it takes. Believe me, though, if you do it's something you won't regret. Because no one has more fun in softball than the pigs.

The last question players often have is can't I become a top-level player without putting in all that nasty work? To which I can only reply, sure – when pigs fly.

Want to learn more about what it takes to become the pig?

Email me at kkrause342@aol.com. You can also check out my Life in the Fastpitch Lane blog at <http://fastpitch-lane.softballsucccess.com>.

