

Role Recognition and Perception of Success in Baseball Batting Orders

By

Casey Willis

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Rudy Dunlap, Chair

Dr. Michael Roach, Member

Dr. Mitchell Woltring, Member

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the recognition of roles and perceptions of success linked to different positions in baseball batting orders. By including a range of statistical analyses in the literature review, the researcher was able to compare and contrast participant responses with data-driven ideal scenarios. Using a phenomenological methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather rich, detailed accounts of individual experiences. The study identifies several key themes, including the understanding and significance of batting order roles, self-perception and identity within those roles, psychological adjustments to changes in batting order position, impacts of individual performance, dynamics between teammates and coaches, and strategic situational hitting. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological and performance-related aspects of batting order placement in baseball.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Athletes are constantly striving for professional success. Most athletes, though, have different ideas of what success means individually, as well as how to achieve the highest level of their own perceived definition of success. As suggested by Collins et al. (2016), individual success is usually defined by athletes as a non-linear and highly complex experience. These definitions can even change on a minute-to-minute, play-to-play basis and are often influenced by greater team-oriented goals or coaching styles. There are countless ways and reasons these perceptions differ, and this study will attempt to gain a better understanding of those differences in the context of the psychological relationships between roles and perceived success in a collegiate baseball batting order.

Historically, the offensive roles for a baseball team differ in each position in the batting order (Tango et al., 2007). Nine batters make up the order, and each of the nine positions has a loosely associated role or general expectation regarding the anticipated offensive success of the team. The first, or “leadoff” hitter is often a player who frequently gets on base, makes the opposing pitcher throw a significant number of pitches per at-bat, maintains a limited number of strikeouts, and/or utilizes his speed to put pressure on the opposing defense. As the lineup progresses, the power hitters and high run-batted-in (RBI) producers are normally seen in lineup spots 2-6, and spots 7-9 are generally more basic contact hitters, or the weaker offensive players on the team whose playing time results primarily from an elite defensive skillset (David, 2020). Bukiet et al. (1997) used a Markov Chain process to determine a similar analysis. In mathematical approaches, however, it is often assumed that the position in the order in which a player bats does not affect his batting ability – rather, it is the analysis of a player’s ability which

dictates their position in the lineup. While this assumption is being challenged and interrogated within this study, the mathematical information still proves valuable for analysis.

Despite the extensive quantitative data from which to draw conclusions on the ideal types of players to place in a specific position in the lineup, the roles outlined above can differ, sometimes significantly, from team to team (Curran & Newhan, 2007). Some coaches prefer to work strictly by what the statistical information suggests, some coaches base their lineup creation more on personal preferences, gut feelings, or other less quantitative methods of decision-making, and others employ a mixture of methods (Kindall & Winkin, 2000). These differences in coaching style and philosophy can drastically alter the way players perceive their assigned role in the offense. The purpose of this research is to understand, through qualitative inquiry, how the players perceive success based on their position in the batting order in relation to the ideal roles set forth by the quantitative data.

Baseball, like all sports, is a combination of mental processing and physical action. In this sport specifically, the physical action is statistically researched and interpreted as the most important defining characteristic for the way the game operates at its most basic level. The other portion of the equation, however, is significantly under-researched in relation to the quantitated physical action, likely to the detriment of the baseball community. Hall of Fame catcher Yogi Berra once joked, "Baseball is 90 percent mental. The other half is physical." Obviously, this remark was made in jest. Still, as a representation of the way those personally involved at a high level feel about baseball, it illustrates the need to bridge the gap in research between the statistical measurements of the physical game and the conceptual data of the mental game. Given that a player's comfort in a specific role often provides strong positive results in performance

(Lindquist, 2023), learning how individual players interpret their roles can bring a deeper understanding of this element of athlete motivation and success.

One of the primary ways that players construct the meaning of their role in the offense is in relation to their understanding of the inherent roles that characterize each position in the batting order. Another way they interpret individual and team roles is by their personal experience throughout their playing career. Some players may have played for a coach that valued power hitting at the top of the lineup, while another coach strictly prioritized speed in the early order positions. Thus, those players will likely have had a different interaction with the symbolic value of those positions.

Individual symbolic valuations can often be best understood through the lens of phenomenology, which has been described as the study of the ways in which people relate to their environment (Vagle, 2010). It is rooted in the communication of individual experience from one's own point of view, specifically with regard to phenomena. In this case, the roles and norms that exist in a batting order are commonly understood, but they may hold a different subjective meaning to different people. In association with the phenomenological methodology, this study employs a constructionist epistemology with a symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective (Crotty, 1998.) In this approach, data is generated through individual semi-structured interviews that allow both participant and researcher the freedom and safety to examine the participants' interaction with, and interpretation of, their experiences in the context of a baseball batting order.

Essentially, this research is intended to investigate the convergences and divergences between quantitative assertions about batting order roles, coaching styles and preferences, and first-hand interviews with former collegiate athletes regarding individual understanding of success in a specific position in the batting order. In doing so, the researcher endeavors to gain a

more developed answer to the question of how the stereotypical roles in a batting order influence hitters' perception of success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Baseball has a wealth of information regarding the statistical outputs of players and teams, including optimal batting positions contingent on players' skillsets and diverse attributes. However, the psychological aspect of batting order positions is also crucial, influencing players' subjective perceptions of success. For instance, if a player perceives their abilities to align with the fifth position in the batting order, but the coach assigns them to the leadoff spot, this incongruity is likely to impact the player's confidence in their ability to thrive in that specific role.

This research seeks to answer the question, "How do baseball players' perceptions of individual success change depending on their position in the batting order?" While limited research exists on this specific topic, substantial literature explores various elements influencing changing dynamics in the discussion of success perceptions. This review of the literature aims to outline and discuss the prevailing themes of those studies in relation to the context of a baseball team, and, more specifically, the order of the batters on offense.

Historical Analysis

Historically, the game of baseball has been a fertile ground for statistical measurement. Kornspan (2014) dives into the enduring tradition of employing statistical analysis to understand and evaluate player performance. The roots of baseball's statistical analysis can be traced back to the 1860s when Henry Chadwick, often considered the "Father of Baseball" (an Englishman, ironically, the father of "America's National Pastime"), initiated the systematic recording of various player and team statistics. He laid the foundation for the quantitative assessment of

baseball performance with the introduction of essential metrics like home runs, hits, and total bases. Chadwick's efforts represented a fundamental shift in how baseball enthusiasts perceived the game, transitioning from a purely anecdotal and observational sport to one grounded in empirical data (Kornspan, 2014).

As the sport continued to develop into the following century, incorporating more professionalism and inducing a higher degree of economic impact, team owners and decision-makers saw increasing value in the expansion of Chadwick's basic statistical tracking and analysis. In the late 1930s, under the visionary ownership of Philip K. Wrigley, the Chicago Cubs became trailblazers in embracing statistical analysis as a means to gain a competitive edge. Wrigley recognized the potential of data-driven insights and recruited the first-ever baseball-specific data analysts to assist with managerial decision-making and player performance assessment. This strategic move signified a significant shift in the sport, as it marked the official entry of advanced statistical methodologies into baseball's culture (Kornspan, 2014).

Not long after Wrigley's venture into analytics, another influential character in the history of baseball started his own foray into the advanced numbers behind the game. In 1947, Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers hired Allan Roth following an exhibition of Roth's analytical talents. Roth started by analyzing things such as player spray charts¹, batter performance against left-handed pitchers versus right-handed pitchers, and day-game versus night-game performance. As stated by Roth himself, "Baseball is a game of percentages—I try to find the actual percentage, which is constantly shifting, and apply it to the situation where it will do the most good" (McCue, 2019).

¹ Spray chart: statistics showing how often a player hits the ball to left field, center field, and right field

The 1960s marked a new era in baseball's embrace of technology. The use of early computers, notably IBM machines, for statistical analysis revolutionized how teams assessed player performance. These computers allowed for the processing of vast amounts of data, enabling teams to uncover insights and patterns that were previously hidden. As a result, baseball's statistical landscape became more advanced, enhancing the precision and depth of player evaluations.

An example of an advancement that could not have occurred without the introduction of computerized statistics came from Elvin Tappe, the manager of the Chicago Cubs during the 1962 season. He put a pinch hitter into the game to replace a player that would ordinarily have come to bat due to information suggesting that the new batter had a higher batting average in the stadium in which the game was being held, despite having a worse overall batting average than other potential pinch hitters. The new batter ended up recording a hit and driving home the winning run of the game (Kornspan, 2014).

Simultaneously to the evolution of statistical analysis in baseball, the psychological aspects of the game drew the attention of writers and spectators. A 1915 article by Arthur Macdonald titled *The Psychology of Batting in Baseball* illustrated some of the early understandings of strategy and psychological approach in the game. Macdonald discussed different types of hitters, stating that some players use a "short, sharp stroke" (Macdonald, 1915, p. 440) to have a better chance of consistently hitting the ball. He adds, referencing a different style of hitter, "Sluggers'... make a long sweep of the bat backward and forward again, but usually not in time to strike the ball squarely, and so are often very uncertain as to the outcome" (Macdonald, 1915, p. 441). The difference asserted by Macdonald is similar to the difference in skillset and role understanding that exists in a modern-day batting order. Does the batter that

prioritizes contacting the ball with a shorter swing go first? Where does the “slugger” bat in the order?

Finally, Macdonald introduced the psychological strain that underperformance can have on a player, stating, “If [a batter] has a slump in his batting, it is generally due to bad physical or mental condition” (Macdonald, 1915, 442). The attention given to the mental condition of the athlete is the focal point of this study. Specifically, how does batting in a certain position in the batting order effect a player’s mental condition? Baseball has undergone significant changes over the last century and more, but the offensive objective of the game has stayed the same: score runs by hitting the ball and advancing players around the bases. A batter that lacks understanding or confidence (i.e., the player’s mental condition is suffering) in his role is more likely to fail in his part of the team’s offensive objective.

The Relationship Between Batting Order and Batting Statistics

Data-driven methodologies and statistical analyses are frequently used in the process of batting order optimization. This review encompasses a range of studies and research conducted over the years to provide a comprehensive understanding of batting order strategies and their impact on baseball performance. The researcher integrates the principles outlined in the popular baseball statistics study "The Book: Playing the Percentages in Baseball" by Tango et al. (2007), and further explores the utilization of advanced statistical models and algorithms to refine batting lineups. Additionally, it investigates the influence of player performance expectations and motivation concerning different batting positions.

It is important, first of all, to emphasize that a baseball batting order is a cycle. When a player makes the third out of an inning, the lineup does not reset to the beginning of the order. The next player in the order will act as the “leadoff hitter” for the following inning (Tango et al.,

2007). This understanding may lead one to question the importance of the roles of each position in the order. Specifically, why does having a certain type of batter in the first position, or “leadoff” role, matter significantly if that player is only guaranteed to fill that role once per game? The answer to that question is found through advanced statistical analysis.

To begin, the cyclical nature of a batting order is actually a point of strength rather than weakness in the argument for the study and understanding of a lineup’s optimal roles. According to analysis by Tango et al. (2007), each position in the batting order will have between .11 and .13 more plate appearances per game than the subsequent position. To expand, this difference from position-to-position leads to almost one whole plate appearance more per game for the first batter in the order compared to the ninth (final) batter. It would stand to reason, then, that the best batter should bat first in the order so that he receives the most plate appearances.

Additionally, the offensive goal of the game is to score runs, and in order to do so, it helps significantly to have players on base that can advance on a hit. The batter in the first position in the order bats with runners on base just 36% of the time, the least out of any spot in the lineup, because there are no runners on base to begin the game and the batters that hit before him at the end of the order before the cycle restarts are normally less capable batters due to the aforementioned plate appearance statistics. The batting order position that takes its plate appearances with runners on base the most is the fourth position at 51%. So, then, the best hitter should bat fourth to maximize the number of times the best hitter bats with runners on base.

While there is merit in that claim, there is another angle to analyze. Since the first batter in the lineup bats with no runners on base the most often, the implication is that he needs to be the one to get on base. With a player that frequently gets on base batting first, a team would likely want a capable and consistent player to bat next, increasing the likelihood of advancing the

first batter around the bases. Even the best batters fail approximately seven out of every ten attempts, and even though the fourth position has the most opportunities with runners on base, that position also bats with 2 outs 35% of the time (the second-most on the team behind the third position with 37%). The second batter bats with 2 outs just 26% of the time. Thus, a capable and consistent presence in the second spot in the batting order increases the likelihood for the players that bat before him to advance around the bases, and for the players after him in the order to have their plate appearances occur with more runners on base and less outs. In finality, Tango et al. (2007) suggested the following arrangement for the batting order: the best three hitters bat second, fourth, and first; the fourth and fifth best hitters bat third and fifth; the final four hitters are placed in positions 6-9 in descending order of capability.

The assertions made by Tango et al. (2007) have significant reinforcement in many other statistical studies about batting order optimization. David (2020) examined the realm of college baseball lineup optimization by employing the Seqn² model to explore various strategies and their impact on team performance. He ran three simulations for all 14 teams in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) with each simulation using a different batting order. The SEC is one of the preeminent college baseball conferences in the country, producing five consecutive national champions and six out of the last seven.

The first of the three simulations served as the baseline and was based on each team's "best" lineup, which was drawn from a lineup used in a crucial game during the 2019 season.

The second simulation was based on a lineup created by putting the batter with the highest OPS³

² Seqn²: a Python-based modeling tool created by Brian and Frank McAfee in 2020 with the specific purpose of assisting coaches in lineup creation.

³ OPS (On-base percentage plus slugging percentage): On-base percentage is calculated by dividing the number of times a player reaches base by his total number of plate appearances; Slugging percentage is calculated by dividing the number of total bases a player collects from his hits (1 base for a single, 2 bases for a double, etc.) divided by his total number of at-bats.

statistic in the leadoff position and going in descending order of OPS through the lineup. The third simulation was based on the lineup orientation recommended by Tango et al. (2007) in *The Book*.

David's (2020) results showed that only 2 of the 14 SEC teams actually fielded their optimal batting order orientation as their baseline. The OPS-based lineup produced higher output than the baseline in 64.29% of comparisons, and the order based on *The Book* did so in 78.57% of comparisons. The comparison from *The Book* even had eventual national champion Vanderbilt scoring almost 9 more runs over their 71-game season than their baseline lineup. Finally, the two teams that missed the SEC postseason tournament, Alabama and Kentucky, had some of the largest differentials between their baseline and optimal batting orders. Consequently, during the studied season Alabama lost five 1-run games and Kentucky lost three 1-run games (David, 2020).

Further research suggests that an optimized lineup likely would have made a significant difference in the year-end outcomes for Alabama and Kentucky. In Major League Baseball, it has been shown that batting order optimization can increase a team's win total by up to three games per season (Sokol, 2003). Since 2000, excluding the shortened COVID-19 season in 2020, 17 of the 23 seasons have had multiple teams miss the postseason by three games or less. Four teams missed the postseason by this same margin in 2023 alone (mlb.com).

Another metric that has been studied in accordance with lineup optimization is wOBA.⁴ Nakahara et al. (2023) studied the idea of altering team batting strategies based on the batter at the plate using the wOBA statistic. Their results showed that adjusting for lower wOBA is either the same or less effective when creating a lineup and executing in-game situations, highlighting

⁴ wOBA (Weighted On-Base Average): wOBA is calculated by attaching a weight to each different offensive event (single, double, triple, home run, walk) and dividing the total by plate appearances.

the importance of having the right player in the right spot in the batting order so that alternative strategies do not need to be implemented.

Clearly, statistical optimization is an important aspect of lineup creation, but what remains to be discovered is how a player's personal relationship with the roles and expectations of batting order positions contributes to their success, and thus contributes to the team's ability to optimize. In order to determine the impact that the mentality of each player has on their ability to succeed, both perceived and actual, the remaining review of the literature will focus primarily on the psychological aspects of success.

Player Perception of Success

Research on success perception is plentiful as it is such an important determinant of real-world success in sports (Araujo et al., 2020; Frey et al., 2003; McCauley et al., 1985). Like in any sport, success in baseball is measured by winning games, making it to the postseason, and ultimately winning championships. However, to attain these overarching objectives, it is essential for players to have an individual definition of success. Ohlert & Kleinert (2014) discussed the significance of navigating performance pressure, emotional regulation, and balancing stress as a means for success in competition. This study asserted the importance of role recognition and differentiation for managing the conditions of the performance setting. Green & Gallwey (1986) offered an even more succinct idea of success in performance, noting the necessity to "reduce mental interferences that inhibit the full expression of human potential" (Green & Gallwey, 1986, p. 7).

Cognitive psychologists, when evaluating young baseball prospects through personality assessments, identified four key attributes that strongly correlate with predicting a player's success: self-confidence, emotional control, mental toughness, and drive/aggression (Dalmass,

2018). Players who not only comprehend their roles but also feel at ease in them are more likely to foster and preserve these crucial characteristics within themselves. Furthermore, while the initial understanding of, and comfort in, a given role is paramount, the four key attributes listed above are dynamic, changing from game-to-game, or even play-to-play. A batter who is confident in his role in the batting order and driven to succeed in that role at the beginning of the season may not record a hit in the first five games of the season. This extended failure could diminish his level of confidence and cause him to question his ability to succeed in his given role in the offense.

Baseball exhibits characteristics of both team and individual sports, between the push toward a collective goal and the emphasis placed on each individual at different times. Batting illustrates this duality well in that the act of standing at the plate trying to hit the ball is an individual experience, but the outcome, whether successful or unsuccessful, impacts the team as a collective. The dualism of the sport asserts some similarities in the mental processing and potential struggles between baseball players and other athletes from many different sports.

Collegiate tennis and golf are interesting to discuss in conjunction with baseball because each player's actions affect only themselves from play to play, but the overall outcome of the activity affects the whole team. In this way, both tennis and golf are more individualized than baseball, but the similarities stand. In his 1997 publication titled *The Inner Game of Tennis: The Ultimate Guide to the Mental Side of Peak Performance*, Timothy W. Gallwey discusses his theory of each elite athlete having a "Self 1" and a "Self 2." Self 1 is referred to as the "ego-self" and is responsible for overthinking and forced performance, which in turn causes mental and physical tightness. Self 2 is the "physical self," possessing inherent natural talent that, when left to perform, can be exceptional. Instead, Self 1 blames mistakes and poor performance on Self 2,

causing lost confidence in one's natural ability (Gallwey, 1997). When left unattended, small lapses in confidence can spiral into issues that cost athletes full seasons, or even careers. In this context, a batter's ability to control Self 1, or, in essence, his mentality in relation to failure, has a significant impact on his ability to be successful. Furthermore, understanding of individual and positional roles can undoubtedly have a significant impact on a batter's ability to promote Self 2 without entertaining the ego-self. For example, imagine a player that consistently bats with runners on second and/or third base (scoring position). Success in his role likely rests primarily on hitting the ball so that those players can score runs. That player gets out more than he would like, but still has the highest RBI (run batted in) total on the team. His ability to promote Self 2 and ignore the ego-self rests on his knowledge that he is fulfilling his role on the team by driving in runs, despite his underwhelming personal performance in other statistical categories.

Other determining factors in the psychology of baseball players, and athletes in general, is their internalization of emotions such as anxiety (Weinberg & Gould, 2019), fear, anger, frustration, fatigue, and negativity/doubt (Hanson, 2006). Anxiety is "a negative emotional state characterized by nervousness, worry, and apprehension" (Weinberg & Gould, 2019, p. 78). Fear can stem from worry about physical injury or emotional damage, such as embarrassment or disappointment following a failure. Fear of failure is a strong deterrent for young athletes of all levels, but many elite level athletes have been shown to use their fear of failure as a motivating characteristic (Lowe, 2018). Mental toughness, or a psychological advantage that allows an athlete to better respond to the aforementioned psychological factors of sport performance, in relation to fear of failure and Self 1 vs. Self 2 study can also be a key determinant of athlete success (Connaughton et al., 2008). In baseball specifically, the ability to internalize the fear of

failure as a positive motivator can be crucial to batting success because the act of hitting is one in which failure happens far more frequently than success, simply by nature.

External factors can also be impactful in the way that players perceive and attain success. Previous success, such as an unsustainable streak of hits, can alter a player's personal expectations, worsening the occurrence of a failure. Other external influences are coaching or an overemphasis on statistical performance (Hanson, 2006), like a batter focusing on his sub-standard batting average rather the fact that he has hit the ball hard each time at the plate and simply been unfortunate with the placement of his hits in relation to defenders. Coaches can employ several different styles of leadership to which individual players will likely respond differently due to basic differences in personality. One coaching style is authoritative, in which the coach makes all decisions and players follow. Opposingly, a coach may take a submissive, laissez faire, approach, in which he makes the least decisions possible, requiring the players to take ownership of the team. A third style is collaborative coaching, in which the coach makes decisions with the consideration of the players. Regardless of style, successful coaches consider individual differences, abilities, skillsets, and personalities when constructing a team, or in this context, a batting order (Jenny & Hushman, 2014).

These varying coaching styles can significantly influence how players perceive success. As a contextual example, a coach who values statistics, data, and probabilities is likely to instill a similar appreciation in their players. This may result in players having a better understanding of intricacies such as pitch probability, improving their ability to recognize and leverage pregame and in-game information. However, if a player doesn't share the same enthusiasm for statistics, it could create discord and undermine trust, potentially reducing motivation within the player and creating a hole in the lineup, leaving one of the crucial roles unfilled.

While the exploits on the field are carried out physically, there are highly influential psychological aspects of baseball that originate both internally and externally. Personal insecurities about success and failure, misplaced importance on some elements of the game over others, and differing styles of leadership and coaching are all shown to have a significant effect on the ability of players to understand and fulfill their role within the team. In turn, a player's understanding of their role, or lack thereof, can be the difference between success and failure.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks that are appropriate and significant in the context of role understanding and success perception are Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT). Both theories speak to the individual influence held in the dichotomy between internal and external motivation, as well as the different conditions in which each motivational style exists.

Self-Determination Theory

The first theoretical framework being discussed in relation to role differentiation and perception of success is Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT, as outlined by Ryan and Deci (2000), introduces a framework emphasizing the critical factors of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in shaping intrinsic motivation, social development, and overall well-being. These fundamental components, when satisfied, contribute to enhanced self-motivation and mental health. Conversely, when these needs are unmet, they lead to diminished motivation and general discomfort. Notably, the theory underscores that the social conditions in which an individual operates, such as coaching decisions and batting order position, significantly influence their motivation and performance. Motivation, according to SDT, encompasses various aspects of activation and intention, constituting a vital force that mobilizes individuals to act.

Of particular importance is authentic (intrinsic) motivation, which tends to result in heightened confidence, interest, and excitement. This intrinsic motivation, regardless of the individual's perceived competence level in a given activity, correlates with improved performance, greater persistence, and enhanced creativity. Conversely, external factors such as threats, deadlines, and imposed goals tend to diminish intrinsic motivation, while autonomy fosters motivation by affording individuals feelings of choice and opportunities for self-direction. A key insight is that intrinsic motivation thrives when individuals engage in activities that inherently interest them, demonstrating the importance of alignment between personal interests and the pursued activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In regard to athletes specifically, the findings from Gillet et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation, which is associated with the greatest positive outcomes for athletes. A study by Shannon et al. (2020) reinforced the stance that athletes who view their coaches as supportive of facilitating their needs for SDT's three main components are more likely to develop and maintain intrinsic motivational characteristics to practice and excel in their sport than athletes who feel that their coaches are repressive of these ideals. Autonomy suppression often results in decreased motivation and performance. These findings highlight the critical role of autonomy support in fostering self-determined motivation among athletes.

Expectancy-Value Theory

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), as introduced by Atkinson in 1957, delves into the motivational determinants of risk-taking behavior by examining the intricate interplay of motives, expectancies, and incentives. EVT has been developed in conjunction with Need Achievement Theory (NAT), which was originally coined by McClelland in 1961 and expanded via EVT by Atkinson in 1974. Need Achievement Theory consists of several components, but

primarily concerns itself with whether people seek achievement-based situations and enhance their performance within those situations, or if people avoid those situations so as to avoid the shame of failure. EVT is a stepping-stone idea from NAT in that it discusses not only the need to achieve or avoid, but the expectancy to do so and the value that the activity holds.

Within the EVT framework, expectancy and incentive are identified as closely related concepts. Expectancy pertains to the anticipation that an action will result in a particular consequence. The strength of an expectancy is represented by the subjective probability associated with that expected consequence. In contrast, incentive concerns the relative attractiveness of a specific goal, or the relative unattractiveness of a specific consequence. Central to EVT is the concept of motive, which refers to an individual's disposition to strive for a specific kind of satisfaction. Motives can be categorized into classes such as achievement, affiliation, and power, which produce the same kind of satisfactory experience. For example, the achievement motive is associated with pride in accomplishment, while the affiliation motive is linked to a sense of belonging and being warmly received by others. The power motive is tied to the feeling of being in control and having influence over one's environment (Atkinson, 1957). In a sport context, all three of these motive classes can be met simultaneously, and teams are often more successful when at least two of the three are met.

When athletes have a genuine interest in a sport and a belief that it is beneficial, they are more likely to invest effort and persist in their athletic pursuits (Cox & Whaley, 2004). Further research highlights the reciprocity between expectancy and value within the EVT framework. Specifically, higher perceived value in an activity leads to higher expectancy of achievement, and vice versa. This relationship is particularly relevant in the context of sports, where athletes who excel naturally place a higher personal value on their athletic abilities. As athletes grow and

develop, both their value and expectancy in the sport tend to increase (Gao et al., 2008). This insight is especially pertinent for NCAA players who must invest significant time and energy into their athletic pursuits, demonstrating an exceptionally high value for the sport and a strong expectancy of success. Understanding the interplay between expectancy and value is essential for comprehending athletes' motivations and behaviors in sports.

Relating EVT specifically to batting order, players who have batted in the same position with success for a long time will hold a high value for that position and their ability to positively impact the team in that role. They will also hold a high expectancy of themselves to do so. Contrastingly, players who frequently change batting order positions may not hold a personal value for one position over another outside of their interpretation of the assigned roles in each spot. Their own perception of their skillset and self-confidence may be the deciding factor on the level of expectancy they have in each different position. Finally, players who are accustomed to one specific position and role in the batting order but have recently been switched to a new position and role will likely be undergoing an internal transformation depending on the extent to which they interpret the change in role based on new batting order position. This internal understanding and dialogue will undoubtedly affect the value they place on their new role, as well as their expectancy of success.

Team Dynamics and Strategy

The role of team dynamics and strategy plays a crucial part in shaping athletes' perceptions of success, drawing insights from both Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT). Earlier in this review, the duality of baseball as both an individual and team sport was alluded to, but only the more individualized aspects were discussed in-depth. There are, however, significant team-oriented factors and dynamics that

occur within a baseball team, particularly at the collegiate level, that must be identified and discussed as well.

Voight and Callaghan (2001) asserted that intangible factors, though more difficult to measure and quantify than tangible factors, are often critical in determining team success. Team dynamics and strategies are some of the foremost intangible components to which Voight and Callaghan (2001) were referring. As stated by Hardy et al. (1996), “Elite athletes do not live in a vacuum; they function within a highly complex social and organizational environment, which exerts major influences on them and their performances” (Hardy et al., 1996, p. 239-240). Cohesive teams are characterized by multiple people who all desire to work within a group and are integrated into the group. They work in conjunction with each other as a separate entity rather than simply as individuals together (Carron et al., 1985). A more recent study by Poulus et al. (2022) on the emerging esports industry indicated that these assertions about team dynamics span the boundaries of sport and recreation, further solidifying their influence. In order to create and maintain cohesion, each member of the group falls into a certain role. In a batting order, these roles are often defined by the statistical measurements asserted in the earlier section of this review, and these roles build upon each other in attempt to formulate a cohesive unit in which the scoring of runs is maximized. This assertion emphasizes the importance of role clarity within a team, as role ambiguity can lead to poorer relationships among teammates, both at the task and social levels, ultimately diminishing motivation. As games and seasons progress, expectations may fluctuate depending on circumstances. Players’ overarching role on a team does not normally change play-to-play (barring something drastic like an injury), but what is expected of a player, and what a player expects of himself, can change rapidly in an in-game scenario. To

retain team functionality and cohesion, it is paramount that players understand and fulfill their individual roles (Lindquist, 2023).

Warner et al. (2012) used Social Network Analysis to illustrate that, though networks and dynamics between teammates and coaches evolve over the course of a season, positive relationships in that capacity have a strong correlation with team success. In their two-team examination, the researchers found that the team which possessed higher efficacy and trust levels interpersonally among players and coaches from the beginning through the end of the season also found more success in the form of wins over losses. In the context of a baseball batting order, consistency in structure and role understanding, along with trust in coaches and teammates, puts the team in the best position to win. They also found that the role of the coach became more decentralized as the season progressed, insinuating that players are less focused on skill development and more focused on execution during the season. This assertion further reinforces the necessity for coaches to encourage autonomy in their players, as discussed in Self-Determination Theory.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study intends to shed light on the subjective perceptions of former NCAA baseball players. Specifically, the research investigates how individual players perceive success based on their understanding of roles in the batting order. Qualitative inquiry is an effective framework through which to conduct this study because of the emphasis on the subjective meaning-making process for the purpose of comprehensively understanding each participant's individual experience. This approach is an important facet of this particular study because it allows the researcher to gain a well-rounded awareness of how different people perceive similar situations. In turn, the similarities and differences that come to light through this process can be used to

further the body of knowledge in the context of role recognition and perceptions of success. As a basis for understanding through this structure, each participant's personal accounts and understandings were examined through the constructionist lens of phenomenology.

Phenomenology's pillar of intentionality is paramount in the study of individual interaction with a role-based environment. Intentionality "does not refer to our intent, purpose, reason or motivation for doing something. Rather, it means the ways in which we find ourselves being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living" (Vagle, 2010, p. 394). In the case of this specific study, phenomenology and its focus on intentionality is particularly adept at uncovering the essence of the firsthand interactions between players and their designated roles. Through detailed interviews and reflective analysis, the study facilitates a nuanced understanding of how players view their abilities and roles, which in turn influences their performance and psychological engagement with the game.

For example, the first batter in the order may only hit first in an inning once in a given game, but that does not change the role that he fulfills for the team as the proverbial "table setter" for the powerful hitters that follow in the order. This study aims to shed an important light on the more convoluted non-statistical elements that affect player performance by identifying the relationship that the player feels to his role, or various roles, in this structured, yet ever-evolving landscape. These individual role-based relationships are made even more intricate by the factors of team dynamics and coaching style, both of which inevitably have an effect on the way a player interprets their specific position in the batting order (Voight and Callaghan, 2001; Hardy et al., 1996; Carron et al., 1985).

Participants

Ten former NCAA baseball players from multiple institutions in both Division I and Division III participated in this study. The purpose of this strategy was to achieve a wide range of individual experiences so that experiential similarities and differences can be seen more clearly.

Recruitment Procedures

A recruitment email was sent to all potential participants. Once responses for volunteer participation were received, the researcher briefed each participant individually and sent consent forms to be signed and returned to the researcher. Once consent forms were received with signatures from each participant, 30-60-minute interviews were scheduled. Interviews were automatically transcribed by the video conferencing software used to conduct the interviews, but proofreading was necessary to ensure accuracy in the transcription.

Data Generation

Each participant engaged in a single 30-60-minute semi-structured interview to gain insight into individual experiences and interpretations. Employing semi-structured interviews allowed for a cooperative space for both interviewer and interviewee to delve deeper into certain questions and topics when either or both felt it would benefit the study. For example, the researcher may have received a response to a certain question that sparked an unforeseen, but relevant, curiosity. Under the pretense of a semi-structured interview, the researcher crafted a new question in that moment that urged the participant to explain further. Or the researcher may simply have said, "Tell me more about XYZ."

Interview questions specifically addressed individual understanding of batting order roles, positional batting order experience, and perception and understanding of success as an

offensive baseball player. In many cases, this type of qualitative inquiry can invoke participants into “impression management,” in which they determine how they want to be perceived by others, the researcher specifically, and adjust their responses accordingly (Miles et al. 2020). Discussing these topics with former players as opposed to current collegiate athletes helped to dispel some of these feelings because of the ability to reflect without the perceived potential of social or team-related consequences.

The medium through which interviews were conducted and recorded is Zoom videoconference software. Zoom provides an auto-generated written transcription of the interview, which was proofread to correct mistakes in the transcription.

Data Analysis

The first step in analyzing the data gained from interviews consisted of editing the automatically curated transcriptions supplied by the Zoom software. Once transcription was completed, the researcher began data condensation by coding each individual interview to highlight important statements and common themes among participant responses. In condensing and coding on an interview-by-interview basis, the tendencies for recency bias and other such analytical inhibitors was quelled, ensuring that each participant’s personal reflections were given equal credence in the final analysis of the information. Specific relationships to the statistical data on lineup optimization were also prioritized in analysis.

Coding is a sort of note-taking process that allows the researcher to categorize the findings from the interview process. In this study, the researcher employed the emotion coding strategy. As the overarching purpose of this research was to better grasp the feelings and perceptions of baseball players in relation to their offensive role, making a clear and conscious effort to illuminate their emotional responses was a highly important factor of this process (Miles

et al., 2014). Following coding, the researcher began theming the data: “Analysts, if they wish, can code their data first, cluster the codes according to commonality, and construct an extended thematic statement rather than a short category label from the assemblage” (Miles et al., 2014). In other words, after the coding was completed, the researcher created clusters of similar information, followed by an analytical statement reporting what each cluster actually signifies. This approach was used in lieu of assigning a simple label or title to each cluster of coded data. Conducting the analysis in this fashion led to more clarity and concision in the final results.

The structure of the analysis process remained an important factor so that themes and ideas did not become jumbled and, therefore, meaning and interpretation lost. One way to work toward this goal was to conduct Second Cycle Coding following the conclusion of the First Cycle Coding approaches outlined above. Second Cycle Coding is primarily concerned with pattern recognition and more specific categorization of participant concepts and themes. These steps and procedures helped to ensure that none of the meaning being relayed by the participants was lost in translation when conducting the final analysis and eventual results.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this research was to explore how individual baseball players perceive and interpret their roles within the batting order and their definitions of success related to these roles. Employing phenomenology as the methodological approach, the study provided an in-depth examination of players’ subjective experiences and perspectives. This methodology is particularly adept at uncovering the essence of firsthand experiences, revealing the complex ways players internalize and enact their designated roles. Through detailed interviews and reflective analysis, the study aimed to unearth the meanings players attach to their batting order positions and their associated individual measurements of success. Phenomenology's emphasis

on individual consciousness and intentionality facilitated a nuanced understanding of how players view their abilities and roles, which in turn influences their performance and psychological engagement with the game.

The primary concern of the research prior to conducting the interviews was to focus strictly on the experiences that occurred during participants' time playing at the collegiate level. While the temporal differentiation between college and pre-college participation was shown to be important in the participant's willingness to accept their role, it was not an important determinant of how the batting order roles were understood by the participants. It quickly became clear that the ways in which participants structured their understanding of the batting order roles traced back to their early playing days as children, but their ability and willingness to accept and fit into their optimal role became more prevalent at higher levels of competition. Thus, while the reason for choosing players that played at the college level remains valid – namely maturity, developmental success in an athletic landscape, and depth of sport-related understanding – it was obvious that, in order to discuss the critical ideas of this study in a way that lent itself to the understanding of roles and phenomena by both participant and researcher, the experiences of participants prior to their college days needed to be included as an additional focal point of the interview sessions. This distinction is rarely, if ever, observed in this chapter, as it did not play a major role in the thematic analysis of participants' responses. It is, however, important to note the differentiation between the recognition of roles and the acceptance of them.

Understanding of Roles within the Batting Order

Many participants articulated a traditional perspective on the roles within the batting order, saying things like, "... typically, you can kind of section it off in 3 sections... you got your top 3 hitters, got your middle 3 hitters, and you got your bottom 3 hitters." One participant, Tony, said:

First 3 in the order, the most important thing is to see as many pitches as you can⁵, and to get on base is the goal there. 4, 5, 6. Those are your big boys. Those are your power hitters. The goal for those guys should be shooting alleys⁶ and getting the ball over the fence. They're your power, so their goal should always be to hit it, you know, double, triple, homer. 7, 8, 9, bottom of the order. Those are the guys that are willing to be unselfish, I guess. Similar to the top of the order, go out and see as many pitches as you can, try to get your walks. Those are your contact guys, you know. They'll grind out at bats, and at the end of the day, if coach needs you to bunt over a guy depending on the situation, they're willing to do that as well.

Other participants differed slightly from this interpretation, but largely held the same values for each role. Jack said:

... your 1, 2 guys are trying to get on base. The second guy could also be trying to get the guy over for the middle of the order. So, your 3-5 guys are trying to drive runs in, hit the ball in the gaps, typically your power hitters. Towards the bottom of the lineup, it gets a little bit fishy, depending on what kind of team you're on. The 6-hole guy typically would be another on-base guy, 7-9 try to get on base. Your 9 hitter is usually also quicker. And then 8 hitter is typically the worst hitter in the lineup.

A couple of the participants broke down the order by each individual position. Andy said:

The lead off position is probably somebody that's quick, somebody that's gonna have a good at bat, somebody that's a good hitter overall and is good at making contact with the ball... Second hitter, I think, is going to be one of the best hitters on the team. I think it's going to be somebody that might come with maybe a little bit more pop⁷ than somebody in the one slot, but I think also we've seen a lot of that when we look in the major leagues. We see a lot of really good hitters with a lot of pop that have actually moved up from what is next, the 3-hole, to the 2-hole... 3-hitter is probably gonna be the best hitter on your team most of the time. 4 hitter is gonna be probably a big guy that's gonna be able to clear the bases, should the bases be full for him once he comes up. His goal is to go gap-to-gap, typically somebody that's got a little bit extra pop there as well. 5 is the guy that's gonna be similar to 4. Maybe not quite as good, but still a really solid hitter. 6, I think you're rounding out the top of your hitters there. Once you get to 7, I think it's gonna be somebody that is probably gonna be solid, but also might be there more for their defense as opposed to maybe what they're gonna bring offensively. 8 and 9... one of those 2 guys is probably gonna be the least good hitter in that starting lineup. A lot of times, coaches want to have somebody that's fast in the 9-hole so you have somebody that's basically secondary lead off and can turn that order around. And so maybe in those cases your 8-hitter would be maybe a little bit less confident, less good than the 9-hitter, but I think that those two spots are kind of interchangeable.

⁵ Make the pitcher throw more pitches so that he is forced to show the hitter each kind of pitch he throws.

⁶ Hitting in the gaps between outfielders

⁷ Power

In this example, Andy discusses one of the principles asserted by “The Book,” and currently being more consistently implemented at the professional level, which is the prioritization of the second position in the batting order. Another participant, Larry, also broke down his discussion of the order into a description of each individual position. His response regarding the second position differed from Andy’s though:

I think the second spot is a great spot great to hit... in the 2-hole, you're still trying to get a feel, still trying to see some pitches... You know the second guy's job isn't trying to put one over the fence. Get an extra base hit? That's great. But ultimately, how do we get the guy on first base into scoring position? So, you got the boppers out back [referring to the hitters in the third and fourth positions] operating behind you who are trying to drive them in.

Larry discussed the second position as a hitter who would set up the better hitters to follow, while Andy referenced the second position as being one of the better hitters himself.

As participants progressed through the batting order, their responses regarding positions in the order became more synchronized, echoing Jack’s interpretation of the 3-5 spots: “Those are the guys you know, driving in runs. These are your best hitters. These are the guys who got gap-to-gap power.” The phrase “gap-to-gap” was consistently used in discussion of hitters with power to both sides of the field, describing the gaps between the center fielder and the right and left fielders. This phrase was most commonly associated with position 3-5.

Though the majority of participants described positions 6-9 of the batting order as maintaining the lineup's momentum and setting up the top of the order, John offered a unique interpretation of the seventh position: “I always thought putting a power hitter in at 7 was a good spot for a guy who's got some pop, a guy who's, you know, not necessarily gonna get on base all the time. But those guys in the middle of the order are getting on, so an extra base hit here and there could really help the team.”

Many participants, like Andy, characterized the role of the ninth position as “a second leadoff hitter,” possessing similar attributes as the first position in the order, but at a lesser quality. John, for example, stated, “The 9-hitter is your second lead off guy. I think that's a guy where if he had to hit lead off one day he should be more than able to. And then you're trying to flip the line up over so you get the top of the order to come and hit you in.”

In summary, responses were most consistent throughout all interviews regarding the roles for the first, third, and fourth positions, though the other spots in the batting order had consistent echoes among participants as well. Each participant described the first position as requiring patience, the ability to make consistent contact, and speed when running the bases. The third and fourth positions received a general consensus among participants, with the fifth position included on several accounts. Specifically, these players should fulfill the power hitting and run production responsibilities for the team. As participants progressed their responses toward the bottom of the order in positions six through nine, the focus shifted to maintaining the lineup's momentum and setting up the top of the order.

Participant Perception of Self in the Batting Order

The most referenced positions in the batting order with regard to feelings of individual fit and comfort were the third and fourth positions in the order. On most occasions, however, both of those two spots were referenced in a negative light. John said:

I think games where I did hit 4, there's added pressure there, for sure. I think that personally I struggled with that a little bit. I was always an aggressive hitter⁸, and so I struggled with that because I knew I had to be more patient in that slot... I wasn't comfortable at 3. I wasn't comfortable at 4 and I didn't really wanna hit there.

Jerry echoed John's sentiment about the fourth position, but described an affinity for the third and fifth positions:

⁸ Swings at pitches early and/or often in the at-bat

I think the 3-hole and 5-hole were my 2 favorites. I hate the 4-hole. Not because I can't hit in the 4-hole, but because I know that in the 4-hole of the lineup you get pitched a lot differently than you do in the 3-hole... Everybody knows a 4-hole, they're supposed to essentially hit a home run every at bat. If you don't hit a home run, you're essentially failing. And like, is that actually true? No, obviously I know that. But, in my head, I have to do damage. I have to hit it up.

Jerry went on to describe the reasoning for his comfort in the third position:

A pitcher, a lot of times in his first inning, he's just trying to establish himself. So, in the first inning I knew my plan was like, 'Okay, first time through a lineup he's not gonna go out there and throw all 4 pitches. He's gonna throw typically one or two to get through that. And I knew that as the 3-hole hitter in the first inning, I could go up there and I could ambush⁹ a little bit more than I would if I was hitting 5-hole and I'm not hitting until the second inning where pitchers are like, 'alright I'm established, I had the first inning. Let's mix it up a little bit.' So, I felt especially confident being a pretty good fastball hitter and knowing a 3-hole hitter was gonna see majority fastballs and maybe a changeup in that first inning.

In this instance, Jerry discussed his desire to hit in the third position stemming from wanting to face the pitcher in the first inning when he is still trying to get a feel for his pitches, as opposed to batting in a subsequent inning when the pitcher likely has already figured out how he wants to pitch for that game. This idea of preference in relation to self-perception was referenced by several participants. In discussion about his time batting fourth, Larry said:

... at that point I feel you got a pretty good idea of how the pitchers gonna come in and attack you¹⁰... you're probably gonna get first pitch off-speed¹¹. You sit that, and he hangs it in your zone¹², go ahead and hammer it. But other than that, you gotta realize that you're gonna get pitched around¹³.

In this statement, Larry outlines how, for the fourth hitter in the batting order, it's important to have the self-awareness to recognize which pitches one hits the best. By the time the fourth hitter comes to bat, the pitcher likely will have established the strategy with which he wants to pitch, in

⁹ Anticipate a specific pitch that the pitcher is likely to throw

¹⁰ The types and sequences of pitches that the pitcher throws to try to get the hitter out

¹¹ Breaking ball or change-up; non-fastball

¹² Anticipating a breaking ball in a specific area of the strike zone, and the pitcher throws it there.

¹³ The pitcher will not throw many strikes. Instead, he will try to make the batter swing at pitches out of the strike zone, knowing that if he does not swing, it is ok to walking the batter and try to get the next batter out.

a general sense. Knowing that the fourth hitter is usually one of the best hitters on the team, the pitcher is less likely to throw fastballs because they are straighter and flatter and, usually, easier to hit. Thus, the recognition of whether one is a better breaking ball or fastball hitter can help to determine the batter's approach and aggressiveness toward each pitch, and the at-bat as a whole. One participant discussed how his skillset was best utilized in the third position, but only on certain teams because of the skillsets of others around him. Tony and Jerry were the only other participants that mentioned either the third or fourth position as one of comfort. Tony stated:

There's almost like a baseball allure to hitting in the 3-hole that gives you some added confidence, and you kind of feel like you're swinging the bat well, and everything kind of feels connected. There's a weird kind of psychological effect hitting in the 3-hole... that confidence that you're kind of the guy in the order, one of the better hitters or the best hitter. So, 3 was probably my favorite place, or where I thought I fit the best. And then 5 was where I've probably felt most comfortable.

So, even though Tony felt that the third spot was his favorite and the best fit for his skillset, he still felt most comfortable in the fifth spot.

Of the participants that identified the majority of their experience batting in the 3-5 positions, all but one stated the fifth position as their spot of highest comfort, consistently citing the added psychological pressure of the third and fourth positions in the order because of the long-standing roles associated with those spots. When discussing the differences between the third, fourth, and fifth positions, Tony said:

I'd say I felt the most comfortable, probably, in the 5 hole, because I felt like I was still hitting good enough to be in the kind of meat of the order and I wasn't further down the order and basically, I knew that these teams would often pitch around 3 and 4 hitters hoping that the 5-hitter would just be an easy out, and they might kind of relax and give me a pitch to hit.

He mentioned that the fifth position felt the most comfortable because it was still in the "heart" of the lineup but wasn't inherently seen as being required to be the best hitter on the team. This

difference often led to more direct pitching tactics by opponents, increasing the success of the participants.

Even players who stated their preference as hitting in the second position or the bottom of the lineup (6-9) mentioned an aversion to the high-pressure roles that exist at the first, third, and fourth positions in the lineup. In reference to hitting at the end of the batting order, Rick stated:

...being more down in the order I felt like the mental aspect of the defense was, because I did it too when I was on defense, you're like 'oh, we're getting down to 6, 7, 8, these guys can't really swing it.' And I feel like, as a six hitter, I felt more confidence in myself. I don't know if that was because I thought the defense was more on their heels, more kind of laid back, but I always felt like 6-9 I had an upper hand.

As the interviews progressed, it became clear that many participants felt negatively toward their experiences in the first, third, and fourth positions in the batting order because of the added attention from the opponent, as well as the added pressure to fulfill a role of such vital need for team success.

Psychological Adaptation to Batting Order Changes

Building on the theme of self-perception, participants discussed how moving within the batting order, as well as being added and subtracted from the lineup, prompted significant psychological adjustments. These changes in batting position were frequently associated with shifts in self-confidence and perceived importance to the team. It became apparent that players' self-esteem and mental approach to the game were influenced by their batting order status. Jerry shared:

... sometimes they'd have me hitting in the 3-hole. There would be games where I would hit in the 5-hole because, you know, I was just driving in runs and you need somebody to drive in runs... if I just wasn't hitting well, I would hit in the 8-hole, 9-hole... my confidence would be up and down based on where I was hitting in the lineup. If I was hitting ninth, my confidence was low. If I was hitting third, my confidence was pretty high, and so on and so forth. It was really hard to kind of get going a lot of times if I wasn't swinging it good because I was riding that wave so much.

In addition to the movement from one spot to another within the batting order, the psychological toll of whether or not one is in the lineup at all became an important theme. Larry mentioned:

You always just felt like you could never be comfortable, and you felt like, when you were in, you had to have the best game you were ever going to play... I don't really think you're able to get the best out of guys if you're giving them 3 at-bats, 4 at-bats in a double-header and then they don't see any live pitches for 2 weeks, 3 weeks.

Later in the interview with this participant, he mentioned how, when a player is not receiving the amount of playing time necessary to maintain confidence and consistency, the idea of one's role fades to the background when an opportunity is finally provided. He also alluded to this stance in the above quote with the statement, "you had to have the best game you were ever going to play." In essence, the role that one fills to work toward the success of the offense as a whole would come after individual accomplishment because of the fear that failing to get hits and drive in runs would result in another extended stint on the bench. Additionally, the lack of consistent opportunities makes it more difficult to be successful, creating a cycle of failure and diminishing confidence.

Another participant, Dan, also discussed this concept. He said:

Every time there is an opportunity given, due to the inconsistency, we felt like we needed to press¹⁴, right? We needed to perform. That in that spot you really don't know when the next time's gonna come around again. You find yourself a lot of times trying to do too much, and not sticking within your strengths because you're just pressing at that point because of the lack of consistency, and not knowing when that opportunity may come around again.

When asked about their perception of success, both Larry and Dan discussed feeling frustrated by the lack of consistency based on the outcome of their at-bats not necessarily being representative of the way they felt they were playing. Larry said:

¹⁴ Try too hard, or try to do more than one's skillset allows

If I have a day where, let's say, I go 0 for 3, but 2 at-bats I hit the screws off the baseball¹⁵, and another one I worked a deep count and struck out. At the end of the day, it still reads 0 for 3. And you're not happy with yourself because then you're probably still like 'Oh, shoot! I thought I did alright. But, you know, did my coaches think that? Am I gonna be in after I went 0 for 3?' and then I haven't played in 2 weeks, 3 weeks. So, I think my definition of success vastly changes based on the inconsistency playing.

Dan said:

Maybe I strike out. I go 0-for-2, 1-for-3, but I feel like I was seeing the ball really well that day, and I was picking it up, and I feel like I could have taken that into the next game but I don't get put in the lineup. I play game one on a Saturday and game 2 I'm sitting, but in game one I felt like I was seeing the ball well, but just due to the nature of coaching you weren't able to take it into the next day.

The distinction between where a player bats in the lineup and whether they bat in the lineup, particularly in these two interviews, was of great importance. Both participants also referenced the role that coaching plays in these scenarios. Additionally, in many instances, players who were often positioned toward the bottom of the lineup were concerned more with simply being in the lineup, while participants who mentioned that their roles were in the more high-pressure batting order positions primarily discussed movement up and down within the lineup.

Impact of Coaching on Role Interpretation

The influence of coaching styles emerged as a critical factor in how players perceived their roles, particularly regarding the idea of misuse or misinterpretation of individual strengths on the part of a coach. All participants except for one were able to describe a specific situation in which they felt that their skillset was misused or misinterpreted by a coach or coaching staff, showing the dissonance between how players perceive themselves and how coaches implement lineups. A specific example came from Jerry, who discussed an early-college experience following a series of breakout games against a high-level opponent:

I was playing great, swinging it good. And my hitting coach said, 'we'll really need you to hit more home runs'... And then the rest of the year was kind of trending downward

¹⁵ Very hard, solid contact

because I was trying to swing to hit 3 home runs in one at-bat, essentially. All because I wanted to stick in the lineup and impress... my entire high school career, I only hit 2 home runs, so I didn't know how to hit for power... so I started swinging harder. I started swinging at more pitches, got myself out a lot, and then I ended up sitting. And [the coaches] are like, 'you're not swinging it good anymore.'

Jerry went on to talk about how those particular coaches often employed a cookie-cutter approach, saying, "They wanted everybody to do the same thing... certain things that you are telling me are good. But the rest doesn't work for me." This statement shows the need for adaptability in coaching strategies in accordance with individual roles to maximize player performance.

A commonality among participants was the idea of bunting. Many participants recalled playing for coaches who highly valued the bunt as a tactical play, and it came up in conversation during the interviews in both a positive and negative light. While participants recognized the importance of executing a bunt play when called upon to do so, they often suggested that they differed in opinion from the coaches that routinely utilized the bunt. Frustration toward, or acceptance of, the call to bunt had a direct correlation with the participant's perceived role in the batting order. Tony said:

I played with a coach that really liked to bunt and I still remember him getting furious at me because I didn't get down a bunt. And then I think I proceed to hit a double off the wall in the next at-bat, which shows like this doesn't make a lot of sense why you're having me bunt... Making a power hitter bunt, or a guy with pop and gap-to-gap power, is not necessarily the best idea, but you do see it in kind of every level of baseball.

Contrarily, Andy said:

Hitting mostly in that 1-hole, sometimes the 9-hole, I really thought of myself as, 'Oh, [Andy] is just a contact hitter, I've got no business really going gap-to-gap. You know, I'll lay down a bunt and beat it, and then steal the next bag, or do something like that. That's my good skill set. I'll put some pressure on the defense, make some little things happen, stir some things up. That's my job.'

The duality between these two responses illustrates the importance of the individual's perception of their role in the batting order, as well as the relationship between player self-perception and coaching philosophy.

Individual Performance and Team Dynamics

The interviews showed that the interplay between individual performance and team dynamics is a complex and vital aspect of baseball, particularly evident when participants discussed their experiences within the batting order. Participant responses indicated that personal success on the field, as evaluated by oneself, coaches, and teammates, is not always measured in the traditional statistics of hits and home runs but also in how effectively a player fulfills the tactical requirements of their assigned lineup position and contributes to the overarching strategy of the team.

When discussing how individual performance impacts the team from different batting order positions, Larry said:

There is a sense of responsibility in the 5-hole that you gotta be able to drive the ball to the gaps and then move guys in. Because there's 2 things with the 5-hole, you're either hitting with guys on in front of you, most likely with a couple on, or an out or 2. Your job is to drive them in and move base runners, as well. Or, a lot of times you're leading off to start an inning, too. And so I felt like in the 5-hole as well, if I'm able to work the pitcher, able to see pitches - you know, I strike out, have weak contact or whatever. But if I'm able to get deep in the count and make that guy work at the start of an inning, that's huge... I think if I was slotted anywhere else, you want to be able to see pitches, take the pitcher deep into the count. But if I was hitting 7 all I would really care about was how the heck do I get on base here. That's the thing like how the heck do I get on base, hoping next guy can get on base and move me over. How do I keep the line moving? So, I think a successful at-bat towards the bottom of the order is, again, seeing pitches, getting on base. If you're in the 5-hole, I'm making hard contact. I'm trying to push runners across.

Andy said:

I think in a spot where I was batting sixth or ninth, my measured success was more so on the aspect of 'okay, did I make really strong contact with the ball? Did I hit it with authority?' I think that statistics prove that the harder you hit the ball the more likely you are to get on base. And so that was kind of my measure of success, especially in the 9-

hole. I also understood that in that role success also might be just being a little bit pesky and getting on base. So, I found success in that as well.

He continued, discussing his experience in an earlier batting order position:

In that 2-hole spot I think it changed slightly in the sense that if I was to also make really strong contact, that was success to me, but I also felt like my job was to most definitely get on base because of the hitters that are coming up behind me. So, it was making sure that I could do whatever I could to also get on base for the upcoming hitters, too. It's not that it isn't important, towards the end that line up to [get on base], especially in the 9-hole because you have the top of the order coming up. But [in the second position] we've got the 3-hitter coming up versus the one hitter coming up, and I've got the ability to score from first base on a double. I was seeing that as more of like, 'okay, if I can get on base, we can unleash a little bit of havoc here.' Or, even better, if I can go gap one, now I'm on second base. A single from the guy right behind me would be enough to make me score. So, I think that naturally I put a little bit more pressure on myself to get on base more frequently, find hits more frequently, as opposed to just making really solid contact.

The breakdown of these intricate roles within the batting order show that success is multifaceted, including not only individual accolades but also the less quantifiable aspects of being a reliable and adaptable contributor to the team's strategy. This team-oriented approach to evaluating performance underscores the psychological depth and complexity inherent in the comprehension and self-perception associated with the batting order.

Strategic Approach and Situational Hitting

Situational hitting and tactical adjustments are critical skills in baseball, deeply valued by coaches and essential for a team's success. As the participants of the study reflected, their approach to each at-bat was not static but fluid, heavily influenced by the specific needs of the game at any given moment. Jerry echoed this assertion:

There are a lot of aspects to a game that can change the way you hit. If we're down one in the bottom of the seventh inning, and we have runners on first and second with one out, I can't go up there thinking that I need to hit a three-run homer right here. My objective needs to be, 'okay, I need to tie the game. I need to drive this run in.' And a byproduct of that might be a home run - cool, great. But that's my job in that situation. If it's the first inning, runner on third, 2 outs, and I'm the 4-hole hitter, it's okay for me to try and hit a homer because there's 2 outs, first inning, and we're trying to score. The likelihood of

him scoring whether he's on second or third doesn't change, and we clearly have momentum on our side. But if I can hit a homer that's okay.

John continued that train of thought:

I think in the second inning, let's say it's a tie game. It's the top of the second, might be a runner on, you might be thinking to bunt right there. If you do, you've given away an out, but you got somebody in scoring position now. A base hit might be able to score them, especially if they're fast. If there's a little bit slower guy on first base, maybe that's not something you really want to do. So, depending on how well you're hitting at that moment, too, might determine what exactly you're gonna be doing. If you've been really struggling, maybe it does make sense to put a bunt down. A lot of good things can happen from bunting. I've seen many people gain hot streaks after just being able to lay down a really quality bunt, somehow able to beat it out. Now you have runners on first and second.

John discussed a different set of circumstances:

At the same time, if you're feeling confident and you've been seeing nothing but beach balls up there for a while, maybe that's an instance where you're like, 'Hey, I'm gonna put this one in a gap and hopefully score him. Now we got another runner on second base, and we didn't have to give away an out so early in the game. I think that you're a little bit more willing to take those types of risks as opposed to late game. If it's bottom of the eighth and you're down 2 runs with a runner on first base with nobody out, maybe you do lay down a bunt to get that runner over to second base. Then you have at least another 2 opportunities most likely to have one of your teammates be that guy to get a base hit and knock that guy in. Or a sacrifice fly and then a base hit. There could be a myriad of different ways for that guy to score, and you're putting the defense in a more pressure-filled environment.

From these examples, it is clear that participants recognized that their individual at-bats were often less about compiling personal statistics and more about executing plays that would benefit the team as a whole. For instance, in the scenario described by John in which the team is trailing by two runs in the eighth inning with a player on first base and zero outs, the batter's ability to bunt and move the runner to second base can be incredibly valuable. The emphasis on "productive outs," such as sacrifice flies, bunts, or even groundouts that advance base runners, illustrates a depth of understanding regarding the tactical nuances of the game. The tactical approach, however, is likely different from batter to batter. In the situation described above,

while bunting may be the optimal approach for one batter, another may be in position to make a larger impact by taking a normal at-bat. For example, if this situation arises with the eighth batter in the order, bunting may be the optimal strategy. If the second or third batter is up, however, it is likely not in the team's best interest to sacrifice that player's offensive ability by bunting. Instead, that player will often use their full offensive skillset to move the runner around the bases.

Jerry discussed a situation that concerned more than just the game currently in play:

If we're down 10-0, and I'm hitting in the 7-hole in the seventh inning, my success for that might be, 'okay, clearly we're gonna lose this game. How can I make this pitcher throw as many pitches as possible so that we won't have to see this guy when we play again on Sunday. Or if we're up 10, and they're throwing all their young guys, I'm thinking, 'How can I run up their pitch count now and make sure that we see as many of those guys as we can, so that they have to start throwing their better arms early and we can see those young guys again on Sunday. There are so many little intricate situations where it's like, 'Okay, how I can help us Sunday versus how I can help us now.'

As shown in this context, players constantly evaluate the game state and adjust their strategy accordingly. It's an example of the mental acuity needed alongside physical skills, where a player must balance personal prowess with situational necessity. Understanding of one's role in the batting order can help to determine how one should approach a certain situation in the game, or even with regard to the season as a whole. The communication of specific coaching strategies and philosophies is an important factor in players' situational awareness and understanding. The example given by Jerry is a product of both personal in-game experience at the collegiate level and coaching tactics at various points throughout his career.

Conclusion

In summary, this research is intended to discuss the intricate dynamics of how collegiate baseball players understand and embody their roles within the batting order, providing a nuanced portrait of the psychological and strategic dimensions of baseball. Utilizing phenomenology to capture

the players' individual experience, the study underscores the significant impact of early experiences, coaching philosophies, and situational pressures on players' self-perception and performance. By conducting interviews to examine the traditional structure of the batting order and the distinct responsibilities assigned to each position, the findings highlight how individual roles contribute to the collective strategy and success of the team by emphasizing the critical interplay between individual agency and team dynamics in baseball.

Specifically, the analysis of the data illuminated several key findings. First, participants frequently discussed the pressure to perform as a determinant of self-perceived ability to be successful, specifically regarding the middle of the order (3-5) batting positions. Secondly, experiences with moving both up and down in the batting order, as well as in and out of the batting order, were shown to have significant effects on participants' self-perception and perceived ability to be successful. A third main element that emerged from the data analysis was the idea of success not necessarily stemming only from personal accomplishments and statistics, but from accomplishing a task with one's at-bat that increases the team's likelihood of winning, such as hitting a sacrifice fly, where the batter gets out, but a runner scores.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study delves into the nuanced perceptions and interpretations of individual roles within the batting order among collegiate baseball players, using a phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of their experiences within the motivational frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy Value Theory (EVT). The results highlight the traditional and non-traditional segmentation of batting order roles into top, middle, and bottom sections, emphasizing the distinct responsibilities and attributes associated with each position. Through detailed interviews, the research reveals how early playing experiences, coaching

philosophies, and situational pressures shape players' understanding of their roles and their definitions of success. This discussion explores the interplay between individual self-perception, coaching impact, and strategic adaptability, specifically regarding the juxtaposition between the consistent underlying roles within the batting order and the constant evolution of in-game scenarios, providing a thorough understanding of how these factors influence performance and psychological engagement in the game.

Understanding of Roles within the Batting Order

The results from the interviews emphasized both deep-rooted traditional perspectives and nuanced individual interpretations that shape participants' understanding. The majority of participants illustrated a conventional view of the batting order, segmenting it into three primary sections: top, middle, and bottom. This segmentation reflects long-standing baseball norms, where the top of the order is tasked with setting the stage, the middle of the order focuses on power hitting and run production, and the bottom of the order aims to maintain momentum and set up the top again. The detailed breakdowns by participants showcase a shared knowledge base, likely stemming from early baseball education and reinforced through years of play and observation.

The segmented view of the nine-person batting order, referenced above, implies that each section consists of three batters (i.e. the “top” section is 1-3, “middle” is 4-6, “bottom” is 7-9). While a few participants stuck to this conventional understanding, many offered a more nuanced approach, stating that the “top” of the order consists of just 1-2, the “middle” is 3-5, and 6-9 makes up the “bottom.” Jack’s statement that “your 1, 2 guys are trying to get on base” illustrates this concept well, as he excluded the third spot in the order from this specific grouping. He then mentioned that the “3-5 guys are trying to drive in runs,” insinuating this group as the middle of

the order in charge of the majority of offensive scoring output. In Andy's position-by-position breakdown of the lineup, he mentioned the second hitter as "one of the best hitters on the team," clearly differing from the simple "table-setter" approach described by other participants for that specific batting order position. This divergence underscores the flexibility within traditional roles, shaped by individual experiences and team strategies.

Moreover, participants' discussions reveal a hierarchy within the batting order roles, where certain positions are universally understood to necessitate specific attributes. The leadoff hitter, or the first position, is consistently described as requiring patience, speed, and the ability to make contact. This role sets the tone for the rest of the lineup, emphasizing the importance of getting on base and providing opportunities for subsequent hitters. The second position, while seen differently by participants, generally involves a combination of contact hitting and strategic play, such as advancing runners, reflecting its pivotal role in transitioning from the leadoff to the power hitters. This understanding, as well as that of the successive positions, differs from the statistical batting order model in *The Book* (Tango et al., 2007), which asserted the second position as the best hitter on the team.

The middle of the order, particularly the third, fourth, and fifth positions, is highlighted as the core of the lineup's offensive power. Participants frequently mentioned these spots as occupied by the team's best hitters, with discussions regarding these batting order positions littered with terms such as "gap-to-gap power" and "driving in runs." Across the board, this section of the order implies significant pressure, as indicated by the players' stated comfort levels and psychological responses. The descriptions of these roles also reveal an intrinsic understanding of situational hitting and the need for adaptability, where players must balance the expectation of hitting for power with the necessity of contributing to the team's overall strategy.

The lower part of the order, comprising the sixth through ninth positions, is characterized by its support role in maintaining the lineup's momentum and setting up the top of the order. Participants often mentioned these positions as requiring versatility and a willingness to adopt less glamorous tasks, such as bunting or working deep counts to tire out pitchers. The only difference in opinion when discussing these spots was John's assertion that "7 [is] a good spot for a guy who's got some pop" because "those guys in the middle of the order are getting on, so an extra base hit here and there could really help the team." In essence, John's ideal scenario is to have a player in the seventh position that may not be good enough to hit in the middle of the order, but still is capable of hitting the ball hard and driving in runs from time to time. This idea is similar to the participants' commonly discussed idea of the ninth hitter being a "second leadoff," possessing many of the skills needed for the first position, bridging the gap back to the top of the order to continue the offensive threat.

These detailed interpretations underscore the players' deep-seated understanding of their roles within the batting order, shaped by years of experience and reinforced by traditional baseball norms. This shared knowledge base not only guides individual performance but also contributes to the cohesive functioning of the team, where each player understands their specific responsibilities and how they fit into the broader strategy. The convergence of participants' role interpretations also lends itself to discussion about EVT, as the players' expectations and values for each batting order position seem to mostly align, with some small divergence from the common understanding. This parallel thought impacts the motivation and understanding of success for themselves, as well as for their teammates, as it ties into Atkinson's (1957) assertion of both the affiliation and achievement motives in that the players connect with their teammates in a way that allows each to strive for accomplishment individually and as a collective.

Traditional Perspectives and Evolution

The study's findings also illustrate the tension between traditional perspectives on batting order roles and evolving strategies in modern baseball. While participants largely adhered to conventional views, some discussions hinted at the influence of contemporary baseball analytics and strategic shifts. For instance, Andy's mention of the trend in professional baseball to prioritize the second position for teams' best hitters reflects a departure from traditional roles. This adjustment, informed by mathematical analyses such as those written by Tango et al. (2007), Sokol (2003), and Nakahara et al. (2022), suggests that even deeply ingrained baseball norms are subject to change as new data and strategies emerge. In these articles, it is consistently found through the implementation of various statistical analyses like the calculation of wOBA (Nakahara et al., 2022) and Markov Chains (Sokol, 2003) that placing the best all-around statistical contributor in the second position is optimal for the creation of a day-to-day batting order because of the elevated opportunities to bat, as well as batting more often with runners on base and/or with less than two outs.

These evolving perspectives highlight the dynamic nature of baseball and the need for players to adapt to changing expectations. Players with specific skillsets that have interpreted their offensive role in a certain light for the majority of their playing careers may have to adjust their individual understanding of how they are best able to contribute to the success of the team. In reference to SDT and EVT, these adjustments, while often necessary, could have a significant impact on motivation. If a player's expectation of themselves changes, the value that they place on their role is also likely to change. Furthermore, if the adjustment is followed by a period of difficulty or increased failure, they may feel added pressure to perform, or may even feel their autonomy over the decision-making process while batting begin to recede (Shannon et al. 2020).

One instance of lost autonomy could be if a player is experiencing a slump, rather than allow that player to swing the bat to try to drive in a baserunner, the coach may call for the player to bunt. This decrease in autonomy can significantly affect the player's confidence and intrinsic motivation.

Based on the interview responses, it seems that players who have experience batting in the bottom on the lineup (6-9) would have an easier adjustment to a new-school analytical approach than those who are accustomed to hitting in the "heart" of the order due to the variation discussed above. In other words, a player who batted seventh on one team, who switches to a different team that employs more advanced mathematics in their lineup creation, may still bat seventh. A player who goes from batting fourth on one team to third on another based on wOBA (Nakahara et al., 2022), Markov Chain (Sokol, 2003), and/or sabermetric (Tango et al. 2007) analyses, however, will have to deal with the changes in number of at-bats and the situations in which those at-bats take place.

In addition to the physical and role-related changes in batting order position, there may be a significant motivational byproduct in switching spots. A player moving from fourth to third, assuming he understands the statistical analyses influencing the decision, may have several thoughts as it relates to his new role. Knowing that the analytics suggest the third position is less valuable to the offense than the fourth may result in diminished confidence and questioning his importance to the team in the eyes of the coaching staff. Contrastingly, the lingering historical pressures associated with the third position may still hold weight in his perception of himself and his role. In combination, the influence of the statistical measurements with the historical pressure of the third position could exacerbate, potentially resulting in decreased feelings of competence,

autonomy, expectancy, and value for the player's new role, all resulting in diminished confidence and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Atkinson, 1957).

In these interviews, the blend of traditional and modern views within the participants' responses suggests that while foundational principles remain influential, players and coaches are increasingly open to adopting these innovative approaches that can enhance team performance. This adaptability is crucial for players at the collegiate level who must navigate a complex landscape of established norms and emerging trends as they develop their skills and understanding of the game, and of themselves.

Interestingly, college baseball teams can be prone to differing coaching strategies more frequently than those at the professional level simply because it takes longer for lower levels to receive and recognize the information available to professional organizations. For example, professionals seldom utilize bunting as a tactical play, but it is still quite popular in high school and college because the idea of a bunt is that the team is sacrificing an out in order to advance a runner. Professionals are often expected to be able to advance runners without sacrificing themselves at a more consistent rate than players at lower levels. This disparity, particularly once the evolution does begin to manifest, can be destabilizing to college players because they have been accustomed to a particular strategy throughout their career. While each coach will have their own unique aspects, the switch in general principle from old school to new analytics can take a significant toll on player understanding and, thus, motivation.

Participant Perception of Self in the Batting Order

The interview process also revealed a complex interplay between self-perception and batting order position, with significant psychological implications for the players. Certain positions in the batting order were mentioned by participants more often than others, and with

more implications as to the psychological toll taken by hitting in those positions. The “middle of the order” spots were most commonly associated with high-pressure roles, often leading participants to discuss feelings of discomfort and negative impact on performance. These specific feelings highlight a critical aspect of sports psychology: the mental burden of expectations can significantly influence an athlete's comfort and effectiveness in a given role. As Gallwey (1997), discussed, the ability to separate the expectations, particularly those placed upon oneself, from the performance of the skills is crucial to success in any given role. Ohlert and Kleinert (2014) referenced the ability to deal with performance pressure as a key step in the evolution of athletes. As players' roles change through physical and mental growth, changing of teams and teammates, and the consistent influx of statistical analyses, the ability to understand and adapt to performance pressures is key to success. As a result, having a dynamic understanding of roles and their expectations can have a significant positive influence on player success.

Psychological Pressure in Key Positions

For many participants, the third and fourth batting positions were associated with the most significant psychological pressure. These positions are traditionally viewed as the “heart” of the batting order, with the expectation of driving in runs and hitting for power. John mentioned that hitting in the fourth spot added considerable pressure, affecting his comfort and performance. Similarly, Jerry expressed a dislike for the fourth position due to the heightened expectations. Even Tony, who stated, “There's almost like a baseball allure to hitting in the 3-hole that gives you some added confidence... 3 was probably my favorite place, or where I thought I fit the best,” still referenced the fifth position as the one in which he felt the most comfortable.

These statements, particularly Tony's, reflect the weight of expectations placed on players in these key positions. Even a role that meets the motivational tenants of SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and EVT (Atkinson, 1957), or a role that one enjoys and feels matches their skills, can weigh on players' mindsets. The anticipation that they must deliver exceptional results in every at-bat can lead to increased anxiety, reduced confidence upon failure, and diminished intrinsic value for the role itself. This phenomenon is consistent with psychological theories on performance pressure, such as those that discuss anxiety (Weinberg & Gould, 2019) and the fear of failure (Lowe, 2018), where high expectations can negatively impact performance, especially if the individual feels that the expectations from the coaches do not match their own.

Comfort and Confidence in Preferred Positions

Conversely, the fifth position emerged as a favored spot for many participants. In addition to his aforementioned feelings of comfort, Tony felt it provided a balance between being a key contributor without the extreme pressure of the third and fourth positions. Tony described the fifth spot as his most comfortable position, which he supplemented by saying, "I knew that these teams would often pitch around 3 and 4-hitters hoping that the 5-hitter would just be an easy out, and they might kind of relax and give me a pitch to hit." Essentially, because the third and fourth positions require so much psychological strain by both the hitter and pitcher, the fifth position allowed him to take a more relaxed approach while still being in a position to contribute to the team's success. In addition to fulfilling the needs asserted by SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and EVT (Atkinson, 1957), this realization could play on Hanson's (2006) mention of fatigue as a critical factor often present in the failure of athletes. Opposing teams, specifically pitchers, may become fatigued by the high-intensity performance necessary to combat the

second, third, and fourth positions, making it easier to succeed in a position immediately following.

Rick made a similar statement to Tony about the opposing team underestimating a hitter with his reference to hitting near the bottom of the order: “‘we're getting down to 6, 7, 8, these guys can't really swing it.’ And I feel like, as a six hitter, I felt more confidence in myself.” From these two responses, there seems to be an added comfort and confidence in one’s ability to succeed based on how they are perceiving the opposing team’s reaction to their own position in the order.

The preference for the fifth position, or even lower in Rick’s case, suggests that players value a role where they can contribute significantly to the team's success without the added psychological burden of being at the forefront. This balance allows players to maintain high performance levels while managing their mental well-being and maintaining their intrinsic motivation. The findings indicate that player comfort and confidence are crucial for optimal performance, and positions that align with their self-perceived strengths and abilities can enhance both individual and team success. These findings are consistent with all of the literature found in this study (Gallwey, 1997; Dalmass, 2018; Hanson, 2006).

Negative Experiences and Adaptation

The study also highlights the negative experiences of players when they are moved to positions that they find uncomfortable or when they face inconsistent playing time. Jerry discussed how being moved around in the batting order affected his confidence and performance, saying, "If I was hitting ninth, my confidence was low. If I was hitting third, my confidence was pretty high." In this scenario, Jerry’s confidence was impacted heavily by his position in the

order based on how he perceived the roles and interpreted the necessity of the player in each position.

Larry discussed at length the idea of bouncing between being in and out of the lineup. He said, “You always just felt like you could never be comfortable, and you felt like, when you were in, you had to have the best game you were ever going to play.” The inconsistency of playing time set against time on the bench weighed on Larry’s perceived ability to be successful, especially when he felt like he performed well offensively but the numbers at the end of the game did not provide the evidence: “I thought I did alright. But, you know, did my coaches think that? Am I gonna be in after I went 0 for 3? And then I haven't played in 2 weeks, 3 weeks.”

The interview with Larry consistently turned toward the inability to maintain one’s success with a lack of repetition and opportunity, as well as trying to gauge whether he was performing up to the necessary standards when the opportunity finally arose. Dan echoed this sentiment during his interview when he said that he did not feel that his skillset was misused as much as he felt that it was not used consistently enough to showcase his ability to contribute to team success. Gallwey’s (1997) discussions about the “Self 1 vs. Self 2” conundrum experienced by athletes is especially important in this situation, as the lack of repetition can lead to increased failure despite one’s knowledge of their own ability. This situation can often snowball, culminating in the long stints on the bench that players are afraid of in the first place.

This variability underscores the importance of stable roles and consistent opportunities for baseball players to build and maintain confidence and rhythm. The inconsistency in playing time and batting order positions often led to fluctuating confidence and motivation levels, impacting overall performance. This finding suggests that coaches should consider more consistent and communicative strategies to help players adapt to their roles and manage the

psychological challenges associated with fluctuating batting order positions. The individual attention may also assist with motivational maintenance, as coaches who are supportive of building understanding and autonomy within their teams often see greater success.

Strategic Considerations and Role Fulfillment

Participants' self-perception also influenced their strategic approach to batting. For instance, Jerry discussed his preference for the third position due to the strategic advantage it provided in facing pitchers who were still establishing their rhythm early in the game. He felt more confident in this spot because he believed it offered better opportunities to display his personal strengths as well as exploit the pitcher's weaknesses:

A pitcher, a lot of times in his first inning, he's just trying to establish himself... first time through a lineup he's not gonna go out there and throw all 4 pitches. He's gonna throw typically one or two to get through that. So, I felt especially confident being a pretty good fastball hitter and knowing a 3-hole hitter was gonna see majority fastballs and maybe a changeup in that first inning.

This realization of personal strengths and abilities in combination with the awareness of situational and time-oriented tendencies of the opposing team creates the optimal mindset for offensive success. With Jerry's level of expectancy and value for this specific role, the importance of his autonomy in understanding and approaching the at-bat cannot be overlooked with regard to his continued motivation to perform in that role.

According to Dalmass (2018), the four most important components of success for baseball players are self-confidence, emotional control, mental toughness, and drive/aggression. In Jerry's role, as he describes it, his ability to correlate his batting order position with the approach he expects from the opposing pitcher increases all four of these components. He is confident in his ability to handle the pressure imposed by both the situation and opposing team, allowing him to regulate his emotions, use his mental toughness to adjust to a potential change in

strategy from the pitcher, and maintain the necessary level of aggression to keep the upper hand during the at-bat.

Other participants also discussed their strategic approach based on the situation in the game at the time, often mentioning that certain situations required that their personal accolades and statistics take a back seat to team success. One commonly referenced strategy was bunting, though it was talked about with mixed feelings among the participants, showing the need for understanding the game situation and skillset of the batter when determining the best strategy. Choosing to bunt or to not bunt can both help the team, but they are not equal in their contribution based on the dynamics of a game at a given time.

This strategic consideration highlights how players' understanding of their own abilities and the tactical context of the game can shape their comfort and performance in different batting order positions. Players who perceive themselves as well-suited to a particular role are more likely to approach their at-bats with confidence and a clear strategy, enhancing their effectiveness and contribution to the team. This assertion aligns with Atkinson's (1957) Expectancy-Value Theory, as when a player expects that their skills will pertain to their role, and they value those skills and the role highly, they are more likely to give full effort and succeed.

Impact of Coaching on Role Interpretation

The influence of coaching styles emerged as a critical factor in how players perceived their roles, particularly regarding the idea of misuse or misinterpretation of individual strengths on the part of a coach. All participants except for one were able to describe a specific situation in which they felt that their skill set was misused or misinterpreted by a coach or coaching staff, showing the dissonance between how players perceive themselves and how coaches implement lineups. The study by Warner et al. (2012) examining team dynamics showed greater success in

teams with higher levels of efficacy and trust. Players that are unable to trust their coaches to implement them in a way that aligns with their skillset are more likely to fail in the role they are forced into.

Additionally, while Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy Value Theory are important factors to each facet of this study, they pertain particularly strongly to the impact of coaches. The most easily observable example of this connection is autonomy support (Shannon et al., 2020), in which a coach empowers a player to make a judgement about a particular situation or to conduct skill-based practice in a way that the player deems appropriate, to name a few examples. There are other ways, though, that SDT and EVT are intertwined with coach-athlete relationships. One such situation could be a coach's impact on a player's perceived competence in a given skill based on the time spent developing the skill in practice. Another related instance is the expectancy that a player holds for a certain role from strategic conversations with coaches. Based on these examples, clear and intentional communication is key between coaches and players, though, based on many participant recollections, is not often carried out to the necessary degree.

Coaching Styles and Misalignment

A specific case of divergence between player and coach came from Jerry, who discussed an early-college experience following a series of breakout games against a high-level opponent. He described how his hitting coach pressured him to hit more home runs despite his natural playing style not aligning with this directive: "I was playing great, swinging it good. And my hitting coach said, 'we'll really need you to hit more home runs'... And then the rest of the year was kind of trending downward." Jerry's experience displays the potential negative impact of a rigid, one-size-fits-all coaching approach. By forcing a player to adopt a style of play that does

not suit their strengths, coaches can inadvertently diminish the player's performance and confidence, highlighting the importance of coaches understanding and respecting each player's unique skill set and finding ways to effectively integrate those strengths into the team's overall strategy.

Positive Coaching Influences

Conversely, the study also highlighted positive examples of coaching that aligned well with players' attributes and self-perceptions. For instance, participants like Andy appreciated coaches who recognized their role-specific skills and made tactical decisions that played to their strengths. Andy, who frequently batted in the leadoff or ninth position, valued a coach who understood his capabilities as a contact hitter and a base-stealer: "coach told me that basically my job was get on base, have a good at-bat, hit the ball as hard as I can, but they're not expecting me to clear the bases at any point in time." Andy's positive experience highlights the importance of role-specific coaching that recognizes and leverages a player's strengths. When coaches align their strategies with the natural abilities and preferred styles of their players, it can lead to increased confidence, better performance, and a more harmonious team dynamic.

Conclusion

Through analysis of the subjective experiences discussed by the participants, several things have become clearer. First, there is a distaste for the third (and sometimes fourth) position in the batting order. Despite the 'baseball allure' to hitting in the third position, almost all of the participants mentioned a clear opposition to filling that role, often specifically referencing the pressure of being known as the 'best hitter.' The dissonance toward the third position is interesting, particularly with the understanding of the reason for it, because of the contrast with the new-age analytics and lineup optimization techniques. Seemingly, few players want to hit

third because they have to be the best hitter, but the numbers say that the third position should actually be the third or fourth best hitter in the lineup. This inconsistency shows the stranglehold that the history of baseball and the longstanding roles within the lineup still have on the current generation of players. Despite the scientifically-backed evolution of understanding, the interpretation of roles remains largely unchanged.

The second clarification that has been made through the interviews and analysis is that players often feel that their skills are misused, or not used enough, by their coaches. Almost every participant mentioned a specific situation, or even a full season or career, in which they were underutilized or placed in a position that did not fit their self-perception. While the coaches are ultimately the ones that make the lineup for each game and are said to know their team the best, these interviews have shown a stark lack of communication when it comes to players' understanding of how the coach views their skillset and value to the team offensively. In instances like Larry discussed, in which he plays well but does not end up with the stats to show it, he was unsure as to whether the coaches saw his performance for what it was, or simply for the 0-for-3 batting line. These scenarios came up all too often during the interviews, illustrating a clear need for more intentional communication of expectations and roles from coaches to players. If the players are unclear about what is expected of them, they are unable to build intrinsic value in that role, leading to a lack of competence and relation to their role (Gao et al. 2008). Eventually, these factors result in team-wide failure, all due to a lack of transparency from the coaches.

A third theme, in a similar vein to the second, is that players are far more likely to flourish when they understand, and feel comfortable in, their role. Regardless of how the coach wants to organize the lineup, it seems that the players simply want to be understood and

communicated with about what is expected of them. If a player is placed lower in the lineup or benched, they want to know why, as well as what they need to do to regain their previous position. If they are placed in a certain position in the order, they want to understand how the coach is interpreting their skills as pertinent to that role. Most importantly, however, in every interview, was the idea of consistency. Players that lack a consistent position or consistent playing time feel that failure is imminent. When someone is moved up and down in the lineup, or in and out of the lineup, they suffer from an inability to understand and settle into the role that best allows them to have success individually and as part of the team. The resulting lack of motivation and confidence is consistent with the aforementioned communication example. Players who know what to expect from their coach can build their relatedness, create personal value, and learn the skills to become autonomous in that role (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gillet et al., 2010; Shannon et al., 2020; Atkinson, 1957; Gao et al., 2008).

These findings strongly suggest that coaches, even if they are unwilling to forgo their own interpretation of a certain player within their lineup, need to emphasize communication and consistency with their players. In other words, if a player feels more comfortable hitting fifth than third, but the coach wants or needs that player to hit third because of how he views the optimal lineup for that specific team, the coach needs to be transparent with the player about what in the player's skillset the coach views as an opportunity to be successful in that role. In turn, this open communication is more likely to show the player his value to the team and increase his own motivation and expectancy of success in his role.

Chapter 6: Implications

The existing research on baseball includes historical advancements, psychological insights, batting order optimization techniques, and team dynamics. This study highlights the

complex ways in which players understand their roles and perceive success within the batting order. Some of the important elements found in this research include player confidence – or lack thereof – based on specific coaching techniques and tactics, dynamics among teammates, understanding of the statistical elements of baseball, and the history of the role-based focus of the sport as a whole. While these elements are all certainly important, even more important still may be the players' own interpretation of their specific skillset in relation to those roles. This interpretation undoubtedly holds power over both their perceived and actual levels of success, as well as their levels of intrinsic motivation and relationships with coaches and teammates.

Regarding this particular study, the fact that the existing body of knowledge does not contain a study of this sort illustrates the potential significance of this research. One of the main themes discussed by participants was the idea of strategic situational hitting and the pressure to perform in certain in-game situations. The potential to study what makes certain players perform better in high-pressure, or “clutch,” scenarios is just one of a plethora of offshoot opportunities based on the results of this research. Another important distinction that became apparent during the study was the idea that batting order positions 1-4 and 7-9 all carried fairly common role definitions among participants, but the fifth and sixth positions were often more ambiguous. Expanded research on those two positions specifically could help to round out the basic understanding of how each position is interpreted.

A third, and perhaps most important, area of expanded research may be the difference in types of pressure felt by players in different batting order positions. It became clear in this study that players who were accustomed to batting in the early spots (1-5) often felt more pressure to perform in order to help the team, while those who batted in the latter portion of the order (6-9) felt pressure to perform in order to keep their spot in the team's starting lineup. Clearly, these are

different types of pressure, potentially with a different basis and outcome, and more specific defining of this difference would be helpful for a more complete understanding of role-based pressures in baseball. Elements like defensive errors or baserunning mistakes may come into play in that research, as well, further illustrating the added pressure at the bottom of the lineup.

The above research ideas could be carried out similarly to this study, but there are also other forms of research that could lend alternative perspectives. For instance, using narrative inquiry as opposed to phenomenology to focus on how players' perspectives change throughout the course of a game or season could shed light on this topic in a more direct and immediate manner by connecting with players before and after games and/or practices. Finally, a greater focus on the team dynamics aspect of the study could help to illuminate the underlying factors of role-specific success because a player's definition of success may vary greatly depending on how they perceive the abilities of those hitting around them in the lineup.

Not only can this information assist coaches in their understanding of the players on their teams, but also shed further light on individual performance and team dynamics under specific role-oriented constraints. The quantitative elements of baseball have been studied for almost 200 years, and the qualitative aspects for more than a century. This study hopes to add significant and impactful information to that extensive history of literature.

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