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Confidence

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Confidence

Robin S. Vealey and Dan Vernau

Athletes know two things about confidence. One, confidence makes them feel bulletproof. When they believe in themselves – that they have the resources and abilities to perform successfully – their performances flow automatically and easily. Two, athletes also know that confidence is fragile. Certain circumstances, such as failure in a critical competitive moment, can lead to chinks in athletes’ bulletproof armors, or even a total collapse of confidence and an inability to successfully perform a skill in competition. Elite athletes have stated that the most important ingredient in mental toughness is a deeply rooted self-confidence that is strong and resilient in the face of setbacks and obstacles (Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005).

Because confidence is foundational, but sometimes fragile, athletes and coaches often identify it as an important mental skill to be nurtured and maintained. Research suggests that confidence may be enhanced through various types of mental training (e.g., Vealey & Chase, 2008). So what strategies can be used to help athletes gain and maintain confidence? How can we individually use and collectively package the tools in the mental training “toolbox” described in this section of the book to build confidence? And how can we, or even can we, help athletes develop the deep, resilient confidence identified as a key to mental toughness or feelings of “bulletproofness?”

How confidence is built

To organize our thinking about how to build confidence in athletes, we’ve boiled down what research and best practices in sport psychology have taught us to create the illustration shown in Figure 54.1. Here are the key points to be extracted from the illustration:

1. There are four broad categories to draw from in building confidence. The boxes on the left side identify the four main sources of confidence in sport (Bandura, 1997; Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007; Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, & Giacobbi, 1998). How do athletes build confidence? They (a) physically train and prepare exhaustively, (b) engage in self-regulatory strategies (e.g., self-talk, imagery,
energy management, behavior monitoring) to habituate productive responses in competition, (c) gain inspiration and support from others (e.g., teammates, family, coaches), and (d) progressively achieve success and gain experience in succeeding in diverse situations. Or, a more colorful way to describe it is to say that athletes gain confidence through: perspiration (hard work), regulation (mental training), inspiration (socially from others), and validation (seeing their hard work and preparation pay off in successful performance).

2. Athletes’ self-confidence is nested within a complex range of social contexts, so it is important to account for all these types of confidences. This point is illustrated by the “stair steps” on the right side of Figure 54.1. Athletes’ self-confidence is embedded within increasingly broader social layers, such as confidence in their abilities to succeed in their roles and within their specific cohorts (e.g., line in hockey, doubles partner in tennis) as well as confidence in their coaches, teams, and organizations. An abusive coach, team conflict that negatively affects performance, and/or a dysfunctional athletic department or organization can all serve to undermine an athlete’s confidence or sabotage attempts to build self-confidence.

3. The direct pathway to building confidence is using the four sources of confidence to create and enhance strong, resilient beliefs about one’s abilities (lower long arrow). These strong and resilient beliefs about abilities create feelings of confidence, which enable athletes to engage in successful performance execution. This pathway is best thought of as building confidence for performance success.
4. The indirect pathway to increasing confidence is to build one’s physical and mental skills (upper long arrow) that lead to effective energy management, productive thinking, and optimal focus. These qualities are controllable mental skills that guide optimal performance execution, which then enhances confidence. The premise is that even if athletes’ belief systems (feelings/thoughts about abilities and probability for success) are less than optimal (as when one lacks confidence), they can use their physical and mental training to focus on relevant cues, manage energy, and think productively to successfully perform. Successful performance execution then builds confidence, which then enhances performance, and so on. This pathway is best thought of as building performance success for confidence.

This indirect pathway is important because confidence is a difficult skill to mend once it has been shaken by failure or poor performance, because one main source of confidence is performance success. Through systematic physical and mental training, athletes can develop an automatic performance response that will allow them to succeed, even when their confidence is shaky. This application of mental skills to enhance performance at a time of shaky confidence is aptly described by Peter Vidmar, U.S. Olympic gold medalist in gymnastics:

I was petrified because I missed my first two routines. I was starting to panic thinking I might not make the Olympic team, even though I was still in third place. All of a sudden, I just calmed down and started thinking straight. Just as I started thinking, things started to click for me. It turned out to be the best routine of my life up to that point. I don’t have that type of panic anymore. As the years went on, I got rid of that element of panic because I triggered myself somehow into saying, “Okay, something is wrong now. What can I do about it?” as opposed to saying, “Something’s wrong. I can’t believe it’s happening!”

(Ravizza, 1993, p. 96)

Building confidence through “perspiration”

Confidence is earned through persistent, deliberate practice and training (or “perspiration”). There are no shortcuts or quick fixes when it comes to confidence. Systematic physical preparation allows athletes to trust themselves in executing their skills during the pressure of competition. Here are some specific ways to build confidence through perspiration:

1. Incorporate training strategies that simulate pressure situations and create unexpected scenarios to train adaptability. Practise against a six-player defense in basketball; use multiple balls and rapid-fire sequencing in volleyball defensive drills; turn the heat up (literally!); systematically practise last-minute plays and strategies, and use the scoreboard to create specific situations for athletes (e.g., down by six points with a minute left, up by two points with a minute left). Some coaches are masters at these tactics, with the intent being that competition will rarely be more intense than the training.

2. Set up a team or programmatic mantra or attitude that defines the work ethic of the team and how they can “live” this work ethic. Work with team leaders to create the “how we do it here” norm for training intensity and practice expectations. One example mantra is “I see me.” A team with whom we worked bought into the idea that “details make champions,” and then they committed to that by emphasizing the
importance of everyone taking personal responsibility for the details of becoming champions. “I see me” meant that no one had to be watching or evaluating for each player to take care of the smallest details in training and preparation. The phrase was extended as players would say “I see you, Robin” to acknowledge and show appreciation for a teammate’s hard work or extra effort.

3. Teach athletes to focus on performing at their best level “that day.” Perspiration is particularly needed by athletes on those days when things don’t come easy for them. Confidence affects our effort and persistence, without us even realizing it. Athletes must understand how important it is for them to focus and “grind” out their best performances when they aren’t “in the zone” or when they are not feeling naturally confident. Challenge them to focus on performing at their best for that day. If they feel like they’re not at 100%, focus on the 80% that they have. This situation is an important mental test for athletes. Great athletes don’t wait until they feel like performing great; they attempt to perform great even when they don’t feel like it. An important part of athletes’ confidence is their beliefs in their abilities to perform well on “off” days.

4. Ask athletes to assess their preparation and commitment to training. In a team meeting, ask athletes to grade (from 0 to 100%) their team’s commitment to physical conditioning, physical skill execution, and mental skill development. Then post all the team members’ scores on a chalkboard for all to see. Lead a discussion about the various grades assigned to each category. Then, in small groups followed by a collective team discussion, have athletes generate ideas about how to raise the team’s grade in each category.

Another exercise to assess athletes’ effort in training is asking them to consider their training efforts compared to key competitors (Selk, 2009):

1. Who is your toughest competitor, the person you most enjoy outperforming?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, rate how much effort you think this person puts into training. (1 = very little effort, 10 = as much effort as possible)
3. On the same scale, rate how much effort you put into training.
4. If your number is less than 10, what changes would need to be made for you to put a 10-level effort into your training? Be specific, and describe what a 10 would look like for you in your training.

Building confidence through regulation

Perspiration is the first step in building confidence, so that athletes have foundations to be confident. Just like the endless physical training repetitions that athletes undergo to hone their physical skill execution, they must also undergo deliberate mental repetitions to systematically train productive responses to competitive demands. This psychological training could include many of the mental strategies presented in this book, including self-talk training, imagery, energy management, and the development and use of focus plans. Below are a few specific tips about how to “package” various self-regulatory skills to enhance confidence.

1. Fake it ‘til you make it. Athletes should attempt to exude a physical or behavioral level of confidence as much as they can. Athletes will benefit from controlling their
body language, facial expressions, and posture so that they convey a sense of confidence and personal control. This faking it until you make it should be explained, practised, and monitored in training sessions, because physical poise and behavioral confidence are an essential part of a team culture or program “code.” Responding with outer poise or confidence makes it easier to respond with inner confidence, or to believe in self. Although faking it ‘til you make it refers to an outward appearance of confidence, it also can apply to internal beliefs. Athletes should adopt a key affirmation that describes their idealized self-image, or what they want to be. Affirmation statements should always be stated in the present tense to project to themselves that they are what they intend to be. Affirmations should also be simple, active, emotive, and positive. Examples are: “I’m a relentless scorer,” “I love the pressure because it draws out my best,” and “I’m prepared, strong, and focused.” Affirmations work if athletes believe in themselves enough to program thoughts toward their desired goals and achievements.

2. Learn to “respond” with confidence. We believe that athletes should focus on responding with confidence and control, as opposed to reacting with emotion or unproductive behaviors. Practice is needed because competitive sport involves failures, mistakes, inequity, criticism, embarrassment, aggression, and opponents whose goal is to block athletes from achieving their goals. Athletes should develop thoughtful, planned responses to situations that jolt their confidence or distract their focus. These situations include such things as receiving criticism from coaches, making performance errors, suffering a heartbreaking defeat, dealing with rough play, and taking bad luck in stride (such as a poor call from an official or a freak, lucky play from an opponent). Effective self-regulation means that athletes are mentally efficient and emotionally adaptive, no matter what occurs in competition.

How can athletes learn to respond with confidence? By practising it – in training and through imagery. We suggest using “I respond with confidence” as a go-to phrase that athletes learn to repeat when training their response-ability. Everyone has the ability to respond more effectively: it just takes a commitment to change and practice in making the new response automatic. Below is an example of a response plan that athletes could develop and practise for those moments when they lose focus, make a critical error, or feel as if they are “choking.”

The acronym ACT gives athletes three steps to follow in responding with confidence: Accept, Center, Think. Accept the dreadful feelings, and tell yourself that it’s okay; you understand what’s happening and expected that you could feel this way. Don’t try to suppress or hide the bad feelings – acknowledge them. Own them, or they will own you. Center yourself physically. Create a confident posture; inhale deeply, thinking about infusing your body with feelings that you need (e.g., strength, readiness, relaxation), and then exhale the tension, negative thoughts, and bad feelings. Think intentionally by directing your thoughts to your “go-to” self-talk strategy, such as the, “I respond with confidence” statement to center yourself, followed by a performance-oriented go-to thought that focuses on controllable things and the process of performance. Continuously occupy your mind by thinking on purpose, instead of letting your thoughts wander in unproductive ways.

Athletes should ACT, not just fall victim to random thoughts and feelings that enter their minds. Athletes can successfully ACT if they have planned productive mental responses to specific situations that undermine their confidence and focus, and then mentally practise these responses over time to make them habitual.
3. When responding effectively to adversity, athletes self-regulate their performances to “stay within themselves.” An ineffective response to mistakes, poor team performance, or other obstacles is to try too hard or to attempt to make up a mistake with an exceptional play. But by trying to take it up a notch or do something spectacular, athletes forego the disciplined, trained performance responses that lead to success. Tell athletes: what happens to you is not nearly as important as how you respond to what happens to you. After a triple-bogey, golfers should program their focus to respond with a solid tee shot on the next hole (as opposed to ripping a career shot). A struggling volleyball hitter should attack aggressively to attempt to put the ball down, but not spectacularly in attempting an unbelievable shot. Attempting to do something great, in responding to mistakes, often leads to more mistakes. Help athletes understand how to make the solid play as a confident response.

4. Create and re-create personal images of successful experiences. Athletes should “see” what they want to happen (successful performance) and replay past successes. Many athletes today have personal highlight videos of themselves to view, a motivational and confidence-building technique. In addition to using technology in this way, athletes should create their own mental personal highlight videos using creative imagery. Athletes can create whatever highlight video they want, but a good formula to follow is to make about a minute or two highlight of a previous peak performance or combination of highlights from the past (see Selk, 2009). Then immediately follow that up by creating images of how they will feel, think, and perform in an upcoming competition. Athletes should outline on paper the key images that will make up both parts of their imagery highlight videos. This method makes their mental approach systematic as they experiment with images to find the ones that work best for them.

Building confidence through inspiration

Systematic physical and mental training helps athletes gain confidence through perspiration and regulation, and is the most direct method to build confidence. We also know that athletes thrive when they perform within a “culture” of confidence. Such a culture involves supportive and trusted interpersonal relationships between athletes, teammates, and coaches. Team building and communication activities may enhance not only team cohesion, but also team and athlete confidence. Consultants and coaches should choose team-building activities that focus on trust and personal self-disclosure, understanding and embracing diversity, and creating a collective sense of team identity. The leadership and decision-making of coaches has also been shown to be an important source of confidence for athletes (Vealey et al., 1998), and coaches should be sensitive to the needs of the team and individual athletes in terms of confidence. Frequent, yet short and concise team meetings to consistently reinforce productive interpersonal patterns might be helpful. For example, 5 minutes at the end of training sessions could be scheduled for team members to give feedback and evaluate the quality of the workout as well as the team's progress. Questions might include: What went well? What needs work? How can coaches help you? How can teammates help you? Confidence in teams is also enhanced by having strong athlete leaders. Coaches and sport psychology consultants should initiate team discussions around leadership to specifically identify what it means to be a leader for this group and what the team needs in terms of leadership.
Building confidence through validation

The strongest source of confidence is success. The biggest reason that athletes lose and lack confidence is that they allow others to define success for them. Each athlete can develop a personalized goal map that identifies specific and individualized mastery and performance goals (process goals are embedded in both; see Chapter 51), as well as time-bound goal achievement strategies (e.g., Vealey, 2005). Athletes who buy into their personal goal maps gain control over their own success, which is central to building confidence. Coaches should reinforce progress and achievement for each individual athlete based on their personal goal maps. Particularly in relation to self-confidence, athletes need help in identifying and pursuing challenging yet achievable goals. Athletes should be encouraged to push their limits and extend their performance and skills, but not at ridiculously unrealistic levels and definitely not as defined by others. Stable, resilient confidence is based on the pursuit and achievement of goals within personalized goal maps.

A case example: the line is mine

Here we present a case example of a basketball player in a crisis of confidence. Multiple strategies were used to rebuild this athlete’s confidence, including physical and mental training to integrate perspiration and regulation within an inspirational climate to achieve personal validation and performance success.

Description

Kyra was the starting point guard for her college team. In a key game in early December against a highly ranked opponent, she missed two free throws in the closing seconds, which could have won the game for her team. Immediately after that game, Kyra’s confidence at the free-throw line plummeted and her shooting percentage dropped from a heady 87% to a dismal 50%. Kyra’s coach told her to, “Relax and don’t worry about it,” but Kyra continued to struggle at the line. In a holiday tournament, the coach had to substitute another player for Kyra late in the game to ensure that she had a ball handler on the floor who could make critical free throws down the stretch. Kyra understood the decision, continued to practise more and more free throws, but she still could not regain her confidence and free-throw shooting percentage.

Assessment

Kyra had fixated on the key free throws she had missed at a critical time. Her images and self-talk had become negative and less controllable than before, and her attentional focus at the line turned inward as she was paralyzed into controlled processing (thinking about how to shoot) as opposed to allowing her shot to flow freely through automatic processing. She lost her belief in herself to make free throws, particularly in critical situations.

Intervention

When the team had a week off for final exams, with a 2-week break between games, Kyra met with a sport psychology consultant. She stated that she wanted to “regain
her confidence” in her free throw shooting, that she “knew she was still a good shooter,” but that “she didn’t believe she could transfer being a good shooter into putting the ball in the basket at this point.” The consultant clarified that Kyra meant that she knew her solid shooting was still in there, but she had too much mental interference to “let it happen” naturally as it had in the past.

Kyra and the consultant agreed to combine a progressive physical training strategy with a mental training strategy designed to “clear” her mental interference. Basically, the intervention was to “rearrange” Kyra’s focus, self-talk, and personal images. Because Kyra lost confidence in her free-throw shot, she agreed to change her pre-shot routine (somewhat radical for a college basketball player in the middle of a season) to wipe away the negative memory and triggers that reminded her of the missed free throws. She described it as wanting to leave the old free-throw “problem” behind by changing her routine, and liked the concept of a fresh start.

To create this new routine, Kyra engaged in a centering exercise where she carefully considered how she wanted to feel physically as well as what she wanted to think about when she got to the free-throw line. She decided to engage the feeling of being strong in her legs and balanced at the line. She would take her stance carefully and flex her knees a few times to cue the strong and balanced feeling. Her attentional focus was a smooth uncoiling of her body and the ball floating softly over the front of the rim. Her self-talk mantra was “strong, smooth, soft,” which verbally and visually led her through the steps of her routine.

She noticed that her new routine at the line was working, but she still felt out of control at the initial moment when she was fouled and realized she was going to the line. She said she would have a quick “Oh, no!” moment where she felt fear about going to the line. Through discussion, the first thing Kyra came to realize and accept was that fear is okay and normal in that situation. She learned a response plan for the moment she was fouled, in which she could acknowledge her fear but also her confidence that she “had the shot.” She chose to focus her attention immediately on how prepared she was to shoot the free throw by repeating to herself, “The line is mine; the line is mine – strong, smooth, soft.” “The line is mine” created a strong overall feeling of confidence, and the words “strong, smooth, soft” locked her mind on her specific pre-shot routine and the needed focus for the shot. She worked on physically portraying confidence in her posture, walking to the line, and visually rehearsing the thoughts, feelings, and posture in which she would engage prior to shooting.

Once her routine was created, she began practising it in sets of 10 repetitions at 5 feet, 10 feet, and then 15 feet (the free-throw line) in front of the basket. This tactic gave her a progression to follow, with the intent of practising the routine enough to make it automatic and useful. And prior to physically practising at each station, she mentally practised her new routine and shooting the 10 reps at each spot. As time progressed in training sessions with the team, the coaches eased Kyra back into pressure situations by having her shoot free throws with consequences (e.g., taking a “time out” and going through mental rehearsal again) if she missed. This tactic allowed her to practise her new routine in simulated competitive situations.

**Outcome**

Kyra really liked creating a new routine and leaving her problem behind her, and the fresh start and mental plan coupled with systematic physical practice allowed her to
overcome her “choking” response at the line. In time, Kyra learned to trust her preparation and follow her mental plan, and was able to do so because she spent extra time physically practising her free throws within the new routine. She described the experience as “breaking through the barrier” that kept her true shot from coming out at the line. Her confidence was mended through mental training to manage her thinking in such a way as to perform better, which then built back her confidence.

Conclusions

The overall goal for athletes is not a quick fix of confidence here and there to keep them going. Strong and resilient confidence is based on a challenging physical training foundation, practiced self-regulatory skills, strong leadership and a supportive team/organizational culture, and success that is personally validating of one’s abilities and achievements. But athletes must accept that confidence is not a shatterproof shield or magical state. What is important is that athletes believe that they have multiple ways to gain or restore confidence and their performance abilities. See Box 54.1 for a summary of key points from this chapter.

Box 54.1

Key points about confidence

- Athletes gain confidence through (a) physical training and preparation, (b) self-regulatory strategies to habituate productive responses in competition, (c) inspiration and social support from significant others, and (d) progressive achievement and success.
- Athletes’ self-confidence is nested within broader social layers, including confidence in their roles, cohorts, teams, coaches, and organizations.
- Confidence is built directly by creating and enhancing strong resilient beliefs about one’s abilities, and is also built indirectly by applying physical and mental training to achieve performance success, which then leads to greater confidence.
- Specific activities and techniques may be used based on the four confidence-building strategies of perspiration, regulation, inspiration, and validation.

References