

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF CONFIDENCE TO ENHANCING SPORTS PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Sports Psychologists over the years are involved in exploring scientific techniques toward assisting athletes at top competitive level, have feelings that will instill the hope and drive in them to persevere even when faced with overwhelming adversity. One of such techniques that seem to have gained ground among researchers is the concept of sport, confidence. This article has examined the concept of sport confidence, the theories of its workability, common misconceptions in its utilization and also recommended some guidelines for a successful application of the construct to enhancing athlete's performance.

Keywords: Confidence, sports performance, self-awareness

INTRODUCTION

For decades, athletes of all ages at competitive levels have sought for feelings that will instill the hope and drive in them to persevere even when faced with overwhelming adversity. The modern trends in sports psychology have demonstrated that athletes with a high degree of confidence perform better in a variety of sports than those that lack confidence (Sinclair and Vealey, 1989, 2001, Mathenson & Mathes, 1991, Martin & Gill, 1991, Orlick 1990). Also one of the most consistent findings in the peak performance literature is the significant correlation between self-confidence and successful sporting performance (Feltz, 2007). Despite this claim however, there is still lack of a comprehensive understanding of this concept of confidence and what it is, and how it has such a powerful effect on sports performance.

What is Confidence?

Many sports psychologists have contributed to the understanding of the word confidence as has been described as “the inner knowledge that assures you that you can achieve your goal” (Cook, 1992, Orlick 1990). Athletes often equate confidence with a “gut” feeling that you either have or do not have. In its purest form, confidence can be described as “the acceptance of your abilities. Bandura (1997) argues that confidence is a nondescript term that refers to the strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about”. Confidence from the various scholars could be seen as possessing an optimistic attitude and the belief that one's action will have an impact on the outcome of a situation. The inter-action of optimism and belief in competence enhances one's belief that he or she can successfully fulfill the demands of a sport situation:

What is Sport Confidence?

The study of confidence within the domain of athletics and athletic situation seem to have been traditionally drawn from the concept of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an individual's judgment of his or her capabilities to organize and execute a specific course of action

required to attain a desired performance (Bandura 1997). Sport confidence is defined by Vealey, (1986) as “the belief or degree of certainty individuals possess about their ability to be successful in sport”.

The astute reader may have noticed that self-efficacy and sport confidence tend to be used interchangeably by many scholars. However although self-efficacy and sport confidence share some similarities (eg a belief that one has the capabilities to be successful), sport confidence embodies a frame of mind (i.e. a positive attitude and sense of personal control) that subsequently impacts the individual in a variety of athletic situations and tasks. It is interesting to emphasise that a good understanding of self-efficacy theory will in a long way help to determine the compelling sport confidence construct.

Theory of sport confidence:

Based on recent advances in the study of sport confidence by sports psychologist, Manzo and Silva (1993) developed a theoretical model for sports confidence. This model is based on three underlying constructs: dispositional optimism (having positive attitude), perceived control (the belief that an expectancy is under one’s control) and perceived competence (the degree to which one believes that he or she can successfully fulfill the demands of a sport situation).

Dispositional optimism

It is a system of cognitive schemas whose common dominator is positive expectation about the future (Scheier & Carver, 1985, Beck et al, 1974). Optimists are individuals who generally believe that good things will happen to them, whether or not they cause these good things to occur (Scheier & Carver, 1985).

Perception of control

It is a decisive component of sport confidence and likely the most affected by one’s perception of the world. Perceived control is how we understand why certain outcomes occur, how much we believe that our own attributes cause these outcomes, and how much we believe other individuals cause these out comes (Connell, 1985)

Perceived competence

This construct is one’s self-efficacy beliefs for a variety of sport tasks. Another conceptualization of sport confidence by researchers was a measure of sport confidence called the Carolina Sport confidence inventory (CSCI). The CSCI is a paper and pencil measure of sport confidence, and research has demonstrated very favourable psychometric properties for this measure (Manzo, Silva & Mink 2001). A closer examination of the constructs proposed in this model suggest, two broad categories: Self – efficacy itself and the cognitive appraisal mechanism used to evaluate efficacy – building information. Perceived competence in this context appears to represent self-efficacy, whereas dispositional optimism and perceived control represent the cognitive appraisal mechanism used to evaluate self-efficacy – building experiences. Thus the need for a complete understanding of sport confidence, we must know (a) the athletes self-efficacy for a specific task and (b) the perceptual filter through which the athlete evaluates the efficacy – building experiences that have resulted in his or her existing level of self-efficacy.

It is essential to know the causal attributions athletes make during success and failure experiences. The impact these attributions have on how individuals view their athletic abilities and accomplishments play an influential role in the formulation of an athlete’s sport confidence. These attributions also inform individuals about whether their actions have an

impact on future outcomes. To understand this attribution process, an examination of the construct of explanatory style is necessary. It is through understanding this explanation process that psychologists can account for the vast amount of individual differences in human behavior. Explanatory style grew out of the learned helplessness research conducted during the mid-1960s (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman 1993)

Learned helplessness

The construct of learned helplessness occurs when an individual perceives a no contingency between his or her actions and subsequent outcomes. This leads to the expectation that future outcomes will not be contingent on his or her actions, and ultimately leads to passive behavior (Peterson, Maier & Seligman, 1993). Learned helplessness is sometimes exhibited in sport competition. Athletes often perceive that they are performing to the best of their capabilities, yet they do not observe the desired result. Athletes who have this perception are likely to attribute failure to reasons outside of their control, such as officiating, injury or even luck or fate. They concede that the outcome is out of their control, which is a form of decreased confidence.

Explanatory style

A reformation of learned helplessness.

This construct proposes that when people encounter an uncontrollable event, they ask themselves why it happened. The causal attributions embedded in an individual's response to such events set the parameters for the feeling of helplessness or competence that follow (Peterson, Buchanan & Seligman, 1995). The reformation construct left the original model of helplessness intact by maintaining that uncontrollable events produce motivational and behavioural deficits when events produce an expectation that one's future responses are independent of future outcomes.

It is proposed that an athlete's explanatory style may influence how he or she processes their experiences and therefore, the degree to which efficacy beliefs benefit from these experiences. Thus, an individual with an optimistic explanatory style will display greater judgments of perceived self-efficacy than an individual with a pessimistic explanatory style. The individual with an optimistic explanatory style will likely attend to the positive aspects of the experience, attributing successful experiences to superior personal skills and abilities. The individual with a pessimistic explanatory style probably will focus on the negative aspects of his or her performance, attributing success to external forces. Simply stated, explanatory style is viewed as the lens through which an individual makes sense of his or her world.

Common misconceptions about confidence:

Misconception 1: Either you have it or you don't. Some people believe that confidence is an inherited disposition or trait that cannot be changed by training, practice or experience. This belief implies that nothing can be done to enhance confidence, so why bother trying? The truth is that the high self-confidence seen in outstanding athletes is not an accident or a random occurrence over which athletes have no control. Instead confidence is the result of a consistently constructive thinking process that allows athletes to do two things: a) Hang on to and thus benefit from their successful experience, and b) let go of or deemphasize their less successful experience.

Thus athletes gain confidence in the same way that they gain other skills or attributes through practice and repetition of the proper habits making the commitment to systematically gain confidence must become one of an athlete's top priorities

Misconception 2: only positive feedbacks can build confidence although positive feedback from teammates, parents and coaches certainly helps to build confidence. It is possible to selectively perceive and reinterpret criticism, sarcasm and negative comments as stimulating challenges and use them to build confidence instead of being mentally destroyed by what appears to be negative feedback, athletes who choose to respond by reinterpreting the comments or using active strategies to combat them may actually gain confidence. Thus with the right attitude and thinking skills, athletes can gain confidence even when they are overlooked, underestimated and disrespected provided they selectively screen and reinterpret these experiences.

Misconception 3: success always builds confidence. It is generally true that “nothing succeeds like success” but this is not the whole story. Successful secondary school athletes do not always make an easy transition to university competition despite their years of previous success. Other successful athletes may lose their confidence because past success becomes a form of pressure from which they cannot escape. Still other athletes who experience great success use their perceptual abilities to focus only on their weakness and to remember only their failures thus successful athletes may limit their failure / success because they do not have the level of confidence that their accomplishments would suggest

Misconception 4: Confidence equals outspoken arrogance: Certain confident individuals in the world of sports are outspoken and brash, but there are just as many who carry with them an equally powerful quiet confidence. It is crucial for athletes to realize that they can be confident without being considered conceited or arrogant.

Misconception 5: Mistakes inevitably destroy confidence. The greatest difficulty in gaining confidence is the fact that sports are played by imperfect human beings who periodically make mistakes. Too many athletes respond to their mistakes with weakened or diminished confidence as they gain experiences playing their sports because they selectively attend more to the mistakes and errors that are inevitable in sports. As a result of this shortcoming, many athletes become more cautious, more tentative and more fearful as they advance from the beginning to the end of their years in competitive sport. Other athletes build confidence despite repeated failures because they use their perceptual abilities to selectively attend to whatever small improvements and positive experience occur. In fact such positive self-monitoring and focus provide the foundation for intervention programme that have successfully enhanced performance (Krischenbaum, Owens and O’Connor, 1999). Thus, athletes can learn to gain confidence even while making mistakes and this is what the greatest athletes have always done

Taken collectively the preceding points all indicate that confidence has relatively little to do with what happens to an individual. Instead confidence is a result of how one thinks what one focuses on and how one reacts to the events in one’s life.

Prerequisites for gaining confidence:

Psychologist and researchers have shown that confidence can be grasped. The following four prerequisites could be useful in providing a solid foundation for building confidence.

Understand the interaction of thought and performance:

Philosophers, scientists and poets have known for thousands of years that the thoughts we have of our ability, of the demands we face and the environment we happen to be in determine to a large extent the way we feel inside at any given moment. Think, I have done this many times before, and you feel confident. Think’ I am being taken advantage of, and you feel angry. Think “this practice is worthless” and you feel impatient. These immediate

feelings, in turn, directly affect performance, because they produce objectively verifiable changes in muscle tensions, blood flow hormone production and attention focus. For example, thoughts that anticipate failure lead to feelings of anxiety and among other things overall muscle tension when the wrong muscles are tense or the right muscles are tense at the wrong times coordination and timing are disrupted. The confident athlete deliberately directs his or her thoughts onto those aspects of self that produce powerful confident feelings so as to produce better and better performance.

Cultivate honest self-awareness:

Striving for control over ones thoughts and feelings is a process of demanding honest self-awareness. One must be willing to honestly pursue the question. "Am I really thinking in a way that will give me the best chances of success" For most people who play sport the real opponent is within themselves in the form of self-criticism self-doubt and hesitation, all in which are caused by in effective cognitive habits. This means athletes with great confidence have simply learned to win the battle with themselves. This is the most difficult battle that anyone will never try to win and it is also the challenge that makes sport such a great experience with so much potential for self-development and satisfaction.

Develop an optimistic explanatory style:

The term explanatory style refers to the way an athlete internally responds to and explains both the good and bad events that occur in his or her life. According to Seligman (1991) explanatory style is the hallmark of whether an individual is an optimist or a pessimist. This habitual style of interpreting events is developed in childhood and adolescence and "stems directly from your view of your place in the world whether you think you are valuable and deserving or worthless and hopeless". The concept of explanatory style is especially applicable to the competitive sports environment, in that sports participation invariably involves setbacks, obstacles and disappointments to which an athlete must respond optimistically if he or she is to retain confidence and continue investing time and energy. In the often hostile world of sport, explanatory style is useful tools for helping athletes maintain optimism and confidence.

GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING SELF-CONFIDENCE IN SPORT

Manzo and Silva (1993, 1994) theory on sport confidence contends that self-efficacy and explanatory style interact to form an athlete's sport confidence self-efficacy and alter explanatory style should cultivate feelings of sport confidence within the athlete. Some of the guidelines include

Developing Self-efficacy

Bandura (1997) suggests that judgments of self-efficacy are generated via four sources of efficacy information (past-performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal, thus athletes should be aware of how to utilize these sources of self-efficacy.

Nothing breeds success like success

If an athlete wants to develop sport confidence, it is imperative that the athlete be in the position to have successful efficacy – building experience (Miller 1991). For example, a coach can reward effort and good performance even if it does not always result in the desired outcome. The coach must be realistic, however, and should be careful not to reinforce mediocrity.

Visualize success

By practicing positive imagery, athletes can develop images of themselves performing successfully and create a template in their mind's eye of positive past performances and expectations of good performances (success in the future).

Choose positive models

Modeling can serve as a rich source of self-efficacy information and should be used when appropriate. When selecting a model, it is important to choose one with which the athlete can easily identify (e.g, a football amateur using a professional as a model)

implement positive self-talk

Some of the most powerful and influential messages are those that come from within our "inner voice". Thus, covert conditioning can be valuable source of verbal persuasion. However, such self-talk should maintain a positive perspective. This entails structuring statements to emphasize the execution of a desired performance as opposed to an undesired.

Understand Arousal

Depending on how an athlete interprets the physiological arousal sign in his body. Those that perceive such arousal sign say butter flies in his / her stomach as weakness and indicators of self-doubt are setting themselves up for failure. However , the athlete who interprets such physiological arousal as a sign that his body is getting ready for the physical demand required by their sport is priming himself for success. Thus, athletes need to be encouraged to become more aware of how their body feels when they are relaxed and when they are anxious.

Becoming an optimist

Optimists believe they can have an impact on the outcome of events. Additionally, optimists possess an attribution framework that is internal, stable, and global for positive events and external, unstable, and specific for negative events.

Own your success

Individuals who lack confidence often "explain away" their success. If an athlete is to develop an optimistic explanatory style, he or she need to begin to internalize their success. This can be accomplished with the help of a "sport confidence" log in which the athlete keeps a diary of his or her training and competition (Millier, 1991). The log can identify specific training and competition behaviours the athlete exhibited that contributed to a successful performance. Taking responsibility for your success and understanding what you need to correct when you fail are both important aspects of the process of internal attributions.

Views failure as changeable

Athletes should take responsibility for their actions (internal attribution) to the extent that they are able to recognize the mistakes that head to poor performance or failure. It is important that the athlete views these mistakes as changeable. However where the athlete is unaware of the aspects of his or her performance that caused the unsuccessful outcome, the athlete would benefit best from an external attribution. The key is being able to recognize the actions that are under one's control, which if changed would result in improved performance

and an increased probability of success. If an athlete is unaware of what he or she did, incorrectly that led to failure and is oblivious as to how to correct his or her behaviours, the athlete's sport confidence would best be served, by an external attribution that would insulate their sport confidence. However, once the athlete becomes aware of the steps he or she needs to take to improve performance, an external attribution would no longer serve this function.

Take Control of your situation

Instrumental to developing an optimistic explanatory style is believing that one's actions will have an impact on subsequent results. Thus, athletes need to develop ways to take control over their situations. Developing performance goal windows and having precompetitive plans are examples of how athletes can monitor and make subsequent adjustments to their behaviour and performance in competition.

Finally embrace the psychology of excellence

Confidence in competitive performance is the result of many constructive thinking process and experience in that sport to produce energy, optimism and enthusiasm. Embracing the psychology of excellence may include some of the following.

Go for your dream

Get excited about doing things that few people have ever done. Believe that great things are possible even if they have never been accomplished before.

Focus on your success

After every practice session or competition, (not just after successful ones) file away in a training journal at least one instance of success or one instance of great effort.

Be your own best friend, big fan and great coach

Give yourself the same helpful advice and total support you routinely give to your very best friends. At the end of each day create the image of the most positive and helpful person you have ever known and talk to yourself the way that person would.

Create your own reality

Interpret the events in your sport in a way that opens you up to greater and greater chances for success. If your performance early in a contest does not go well, take it as a signal that you are getting all the kicks out of your motion now and expect to do better as the game goes on.

CONCLUSION

The role of confidence to enhancing sport performance is indeed a veritable tool that could bring the cutting edge to athletic performance if properly understood and implemented. Explaining events according to these guidelines and deliberately perceiving them selectively does not mean that one ignores mistakes entirely or adopts a totally unrealistic view of one's ability and circumstances; it means that one views mistakes and failures rationally using them as aids to improvement rather than dwelling on them unproductively.

An athlete's tendency to interpret events along these dimensions is learned and reinforced through experience by learning techniques of self-talk and selective perception and then employing these techniques in practice and competition will go a long way to helping the athletes systematically build optimism and gain confidence.

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