

## Train Your Brain:

### Peak Performance through Mental Training

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Excelling in sport – especially at the high school level – isn't always the easiest thing to accomplish. With the amount of pressures adolescents face on a daily basis, who can blame them if they lose focus every now and then? The purpose of this five-part series is to help you maintain that focus and drive through the use of some simple psychological tools. And no, you're not crazy just because you decide to slip a little mind power into your game. Although, you are probably crazy if you don't see this stuff being able to help you get to that next level whether that be playing in college, winning districts, or even just making the team.

You don't need to read these chapters in any type of sequential order. Feel free to read what interests you and go from there. Please note that the information presented in these lessons is by no means meant to undermine anything said or taught by your coach. The information presented is simply a summary of some of the more popular trends and research in sport and exercise psychology. Anyone interested in these topics could hop on-line or visit the media center to get this information.



## Chapter 3: Self-Confidence

*"The greatest mistake you can make is to continually fear you'll make one."*

– Elbert Hubbard, American Author

There is a sport cliché from the world of golf that makes reference to something you need by saying you should "have that club in your bag." Well, let's say that self-confidence is one of those clubs you really do need in your bag. By definition, self-confidence reflects the opinion you have of your own ability and self-worth. Besides determining how far you go in sport, self-confidence will play a part in determining how far you go in life.

Sport can be both enormously effective in improving your feelings of self-worth and highly destructive in ruining them. When sport is used creatively, with an emphasis on enjoyment and the use effective goal setting, it can build self-confidence when targets are reached and improvement is observed. Conversely, when children are forced to participate in a sport for which they have no aptitude, it can be disparaging to self-confidence and a lack of self-worth is reinforced. Parents and coaches should ask themselves if they are prepared to take responsibility for inflicting this damage, even if they view their own reasoning to be legitimate.

## Benefits of Self-Confidence

As we mentioned earlier, self-confidence breeds a number of positive benefits. Weinberg and Gould (2003) explain how self-confidence:

- ◆ **Arouses positive emotions.**

When under pressure, a confident athlete is more likely to remain calm and relaxed. Confident athletes also interpret their anxiety levels much more positively, thus allowing them to reframe their emotions to facilitate performance.

- ◆ **Facilitates concentration.**

Confidence allows an athlete to focus on more important things, such as the task at hand. Athletes who suffer from a lack of confidence will not only worry about how they are performing, but how others think they are performing. Confident athletes are more successful applying cognitive skills to their game. They are also more adept at applying attentional skills and coping strategies.

- ◆ **Affects goals.**

As we will discuss in Chapter 5, it is important to set challenging goals. Confident athletes will set challenging goals and push themselves to achieve them. Athletes lacking in confidence will set easy goals and most likely never realize their potential.

- ◆ **Increases effort.**

Confidence will allow athletes to continually exhibit constant effort in the pursuit of their goals. Some athletic competitions may turn into a war of attrition, with the winner being the athlete or team that doesn't give up or pushes harder.

- ◆ **Affects game strategies.**

Confident athletes play to win. They are not afraid to take risks and take control, therefore forcing their competition to play their game. Confident athletes let the game come to them and they respond accordingly and without hesitation. For example, a player coming into the game off the bench will immediately try to make something go his team's way, like making a steal then hitting a big 3-pointer to win the game.

- ◆ **Affects psychological momentum.**

Getting a shift in momentum at a crucial time may be the difference between success and failure. Because a confident athlete is less likely to give up, they are more likely to have the ability to control or influence momentum. In fact, when things aren't going their way, they react with increased determination and interpret the situation as simply another challenge.

- ◆ **Performance.**

The positive relationship that confidence has with performance is nothing new. Research consistently shows a linear relationship between the two.

## Levels of Confidence

How confident you are is important. If you are underconfident, you will not be able to take the risks that need to be taken. If you are over-confident, then you may find yourself not trying hard enough and failing to succeed. Confidence should be based on reality. It should be based on the achievement of performance goals. Good self-confidence comes from a realistic expectation of success based on physical skills that have been practiced, knowledge of the sport, and respect for your own competence, preparation, and good physical condition.

**Underconfidence** can lead to a fear of failure, which might prevent you from taking risks that need to be taken and when you do take them, you do so tentatively. Underconfidence can also lead to self-doubt, lack of concentration, and negative thinking. You may find yourself blaming yourself for faults that

are not yours. You may also find yourself being passive when you need to be aggressive. In sport, we unfortunately seem to encounter a concept known as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” far too often. Essentially, this is when you expect something to go wrong and it does – because expecting it to happen actually helped it happen. Not surprisingly, this can create a vicious cycle that does nothing but perpetuate the negative thinking.

**Overconfidence** is dangerous – it can lead you into a situation where you lose control of what is happening. It can set you up for serious failure that can devastate the self-confidence you have worked at establishing. Overconfidence is not rooted in reality. In fact, it may not even be your fault. It may be the result of pressure or misleading information from parents, coaches, or peers trying to motivate you without understanding your abilities. Overconfidence may be caused by vanity or ego, or may be caused by positive thinking or imagery which is not backed up by ability.

### Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in an individual’s “capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainment” (Bandura, 1997; p. 3). In plain words, self-efficacy can be described a situation-specific form of self-confidence. Self-efficacy is a critical element in developing an athlete’s sense of control in what happens during practice and competition. If an athlete believes that he is in control and has the power to produce specific, desirable results, he will be more self-confident and more motivated to try and make things occur. If an athlete believes that he can influence the outcome of a game in a positive manner, he will eagerly enter the game. An efficacious athlete is a motivated athlete; one who is motivated to work hard to ensure success because he believes he can succeed.

Albert Bandura (1997), a pioneer in the field of psychology, proposed four basic elements effective in developing self-efficacy:

1. **Successful Performance.** Very similar to the development of self-confidence, an athlete must experience success in order to increase self-efficacy. Coaches and team leaders must find a way for beginners to experience success or they will believe they cannot succeed, or possibly quit trying. After an athlete experiences success with the simple task, the difficulty of the task can be increased.
2. **Vicarious Experience.** The use of modeling to help younger or inexperienced athletes can be helpful in teaching new skills. Such modeling can be provided by the person teaching the skill, a skilled teammate, or a video of a skilled performer.
3. **Verbal Persuasion.** Verbal persuasion traditionally comes in the form of encouragement from others. Positive verbal statements that give the athlete the sense that they can succeed are more desirable than statements that are negative. In fact, negative statements should be avoided altogether. When giving tips, it is best to state them in a positive manner, such as telling a hitter to “keep his eye on the ball,” rather than to “not look away.” Self-talk, a form of self-encouragement is also useful in the development of self-efficacy. We will be discussing self-talk later.
4. **Emotional Arousal.** An athlete must be emotionally ready and optimally aroused in order to master a particular skill and develop a feeling of efficacy. We will go into further discussion of arousal later.

### Enhancing Self-Confident & Self-Efficacy

As we have hopefully made you aware, in order to enhance your performance, you must make an attempt to enhance your self-confidence. While it’s true that your family, coaches, and teammates will all play a part in constructing your self-confidence,

you should not leave it in their hands. In order to enhance your self-confidence, take some time to understand the following guidelines and implement them into your training routine.

- ♦ **Emphasize strengths.**  
Focus on what you can do, not what you can’t. Make sure you focus on the process, rather than the result. Starting from a point where you feel comfortable with your ability or skill level will help you to set your goals within the bounds of reality. Making goals realistic makes them reachable. Finally, make sure you give yourself credit for everything you try.
- ♦ **Take risks.**  
Approach new experiences as opportunities to learn and improve rather than occasions to win or lose. If you can be successful at tasks that may be challenging, you will give yourself a boost and open yourself to a world of opportunity. While it might keep you in your comfort zone, not challenging yourself will most definitely inhibit personal growth. Self-confidence allows you to take risks, as you have enough confidence in your own abilities to be sure that if things do go wrong, you can put things right.
- ♦ **Use positive self-talk.**  
Use self-talk as an opportunity to counter harmful thoughts you may be having. If you find yourself thinking negatively, tell yourself to “stop,” then substitute more positive or constructive thoughts. For example, when you make a mistake, stay away from thoughts such as “don’t do that again,” or “don’t let up.” Remind yourself what you need to do, not what you don’t need to do. So, stick with thoughts like “you can do better,” or “keep pushing had.” You should also focus on what you can do, not what you can’t. When you catch yourself expecting perfection, remind yourself that it’s only possible to try to do things and to try to do them well.
- ♦ **Self-evaluate.**  
Learn to evaluate yourself on your own. Doing so allows you to make sure what you’re “hearing” is being offered in a constructive manner. When you self-evaluate, you will also avoid the tension that comes from waiting and wondering about what the opinions of others might be. Focusing internally on how you feel about your own performance will allow you to become more self-reliant and prevents others from having any power or control over you.
- ♦ **Set goals.**  
Goal setting is one of the most effective ways of building self-confidence. By setting measurable goals, achieving them; setting more, achieving them; and so on, you prove your ability to yourself. You can recognize and enjoy your achievement and feel real good about your accomplishment. The success attained should be measured in terms of personal performance, not achievement goals such as winning. It’s also important to know what you are able to achieve, so you are not setting yourself up for failure – you always have to have an accurate assessment of what your abilities really are, which is unclouded by ego or vanity.
- ♦ **Imagery.**  
Imagery is useful in building self-confidence, but only if properly applied. Imagery should be used to envision your achievement of your goal to help you to believe that your goal is attainable. It should only be used, however, where you are sure that you have the ability to achieve that goal.

### References

- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. San Francisco, CA: Freeman.
- Weinberg, R. S., & Gould, D. G. (2003). *Foundations of sport and exercise psychology* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL.