

On the Firing Line (Thirty Sixth in a series)

Confidence

©2007 JP O'Connor

**“If you think you cannot, you will not.
If you think you can, you most likely will.”**

An athlete's confidence has a profound effect on the resulting performance. Similarly, the athlete's self-talk also has a very strong effect on the performance. Often these concepts are overlooked when looking for explanations of sub-par performance. Yet, they unlock many of the keys of peak performance. The difference between winning and losing is very small at the highest levels.

This article and the one to follow will explore the concepts of confidence and self-talk. Both articles are based on work by Dr. Nate Zinsser (Zinsser 2006), and provide, of necessity, only a short synopsis of each topic. Dr. Zinsser is Director of the Performance Enhancement Program, a cornerstone of the Center for Enhanced Performance at the United States Military Academy, in West Point, NY.

“The most consistent finding in peak performance literature is the direct correlation between self-confidence and success. Athletes who are truly outstanding are self-confident. Their confidence has been developed over many years and is the direct result of effective thinking and frequent experiences in which they have been successful.”

“Confident athletes think about themselves and the action at hand in a different way than those who lack confidence. They have discovered that what they think and say to themselves in practice and competition is critical to performance.”

Often, we are unaware of our inner dialogue and its profound effect on our performance. Thoughts affect feelings and feelings affect behavior. The literature of psychology is rich with examples where thought patterns directly affect outcome.

“Confidence in competitive sport is the result of particular thinking habits more so than physical talent, opportunity, or previous success. These thinking habits, when consistently practiced until they have become automatic and natural, enable athletes to both retain and benefit from the experiences in which they have been successful, and release or restructure the memories and feelings from the less successful experiences. The result of this selective perception is the priceless trait called confidence.”

It is nice to know how critically important confidence is. What is confidence, what are some common misconceptions, and how do we go about developing confidence?

To understand what confidence is, we need to look at a few key concepts.

- Confidence – is a state of assurance or belief in one’s powers. It is often marked by a level of inner arrogance or cockiness. This arrogance or cockiness is best kept as a “quiet air of confidence” inside the athlete, instead of brashly spoken to others.
- Mental Toughness – is an important component of confidence. It is the ability to cope with the demands of performance and remain focused in the face of adversity. Most of all it is an unshakeable belief in your ability to achieve your goals.
- Optimism – is the tendency always to think about the best possible or most hopeful aspects of a situation. Optimists tend to look for the opportunities that will help them achieve their goals. Optimism, regardless of the obstacles, is indispensable for success.
- Self-Efficacy – is a belief in one’s specific abilities to perform an activity or meet a challenge. Confidence can be thought of as a broader concept, while self-efficacy can be thought of as more specific, related to skills, techniques, and situations.

Taken together, these four concepts create an “I can do it!” attitude. Such an attitude is critical to athletic success. Dr. Zinsser comments, “*Without this belief, one automatically concedes an advantage to the opponent.*”

There are a number of common misconceptions that need to be dispelled before one can develop true confidence.

- Misconception 1: Either You Have It or You Don’t – Confidence is not an inherited trait or characteristic. Instead, confidence can be developed. Successful athletes develop confidence using a consistently constructive thought process or outlook to hang on to, and benefit from past successful experiences and let go of or forget their less successful experiences.
- Misconception 2: Only Positive Feedback Can Build Confidence – Positive, constructive feedback and criticism certainly is more fun than negative inputs. When negative feedback stimulates positive changes in behavior or thought, the athlete builds confidence through the positive changes. Notice how the athlete’s choice of thought pattern and response determines if the negative feedback stimulates improvement in confidence or becomes a debilitating distraction.
- Misconception 3: Success Always Builds Confidence – Just because an athlete experiences success does not automatically mean they will gain confidence. Athletes who focus on failures erode their confidence. How many shooters, upon shooting a tight group or good record target, focus on the one “bad” shot of the series of ten shots? Understand why the bad shot happened and learn from it in order to understand what needs to be done differently. Focus on the success of the other nine shots to build confidence in yourself!
- Misconception 4: Confidence Equals Outspoken Arrogance – A deeply felt inner confidence, cockiness, or arrogance, is a powerful tool to aid an athlete in achieving success. A loud, outspoken cockiness or arrogance is actually an impediment to the athlete’s success. “*It is crucial for athletes to realize that they can be confident without being considered conceited or arrogant.*”

- Misconception 5: Mistakes Inevitably Destroy Confidence – This is almost the reverse of misconception 3. All athletes make mistakes. We are, after all, human. Athletes who make improvements in their techniques, plans, strategies, and thought patterns based on what they learn from mistakes actually improve their success and build confidence.

Notice how each of these five concepts point out that it is not what happens to an athlete, but what the athlete thinks, that makes all the difference. *“Confidence is a result of how one thinks, what one focuses on, and how one reacts to the events in one’s life.”*

A solid foundation for building confidence involves these techniques.

- Understand the interaction of thought and performance – Earlier it was mentioned that thoughts affect feelings and feelings affect behavior. This is because the feelings, generated by thoughts, cause physiological changes in the athlete such as altered breathing patterns, restricted blood flow, muscle tensions, and other changes. Muscle tension alters the familiar patterns and destroys timing. Tension in the wrong muscles causes the gun to move around more than usual. Even tension in the right muscles, but at the wrong time, can be devastating. Such as in the trigger finger!
- Cultivate honest self-awareness – How honest are you with yourself? How aware are you of your thought patterns and their effect on you? Many athletes delude themselves due to deep-seated defense mechanisms. Many athletes have developed habits of self-doubt, self-criticism, and hesitation.
- Develop an optimistic explanatory style – How do you think about the events that happen to you? Optimistically or pessimistically? This style, developed in childhood and adolescence stems from your view of your place in the world. Do you think you are valuable and deserving or worthless and hopeless? Sport often results in setbacks. An optimistic pattern of thought is critical in analyzing and improving performance. Sometimes athletes are over-optimistic and make decisions that hold back their performance. This is much less common, but awareness of it is just as important. The hallmarks of explanatory style are:
 - Permanence – The optimistic athlete believes that good results are the result of their learning and execution and are a “permanent” part of their game. They believe that mistakes are isolated and rare and will diminish with more experience.
 - Pervasiveness – The optimistic athlete believes that success in a particular experience or activity will generalize to other contexts. They also believe that mistakes are isolated and are confined.
 - Personalization – The optimistic athlete believes that successes are the result of their own hard work and are repeatable. They also believe that mistakes are anomalies either that are beyond their control or that are the result of specific circumstances or errors that can be rectified.
- Embrace a psychology of excellence – Our culture conditions us to focus on mistakes and constantly reminds us of them. This instills a self-critical “failure focus” that ignores the many successes one has and erodes confidence. Successful athletes buck this trend and develop a positive thought pattern to build confidence

through successes and positive thoughts, while learning from and then forgetting mistakes. Here are important components of a psychology of excellence:

- Go for your dreams – Believe that great things can be done – by you – even if never done before. Get excited about doing, feeling, and experiencing things that few people have ever done.
- Focus on your successes – Use your free will and decide to dwell on the successes and the opportunities for learning that you are presented with and that you make happen for yourself. After every session, regardless of how well or poorly it went, find and write down at least one success, one improvement, and one instance of great effort.
- Be your own best friend, biggest fan, and greatest coach – Talk to yourself the way you want your best friend or favorite coach to talk with you. Think about the most positive, helpful person you have ever known or wish to meet, and imagine what they would say to you... and then talk to yourself that way.
- Create your own reality – If a session starts out with difficulty, tell yourself you are still working out some kinks and expect to do better on the next shot. You likely will. Interpret events in ways that open you to the possibilities of what you can create. Believe in yourself.

At the highest levels of sport, the difference between the winner and the others is so tiny that the slightest “edge” is often the difference. Understanding and believing that thoughts have a profound effect on performance is a critical skill that is required to be successful at the highest levels. In the rookie leagues talent may carry the day from time to time. It will not in the majors!

For deeper study on this topic, refer to the reference provided. Because self-talk is such an important component of developing and maintaining confidence, it is the topic of the next article in this series. In the mean time, enjoy this illustration of the power of confidence and one’s belief system.

Roger Bannister is best known for being the first person to run a mile in under 4 minutes. He did this in 1954 at a major competition in Oxford, England. Modern readers may wonder why this was such an important event. Up until then, almost everyone believed that the human organism could not possibly bear up under the physiological and psychological stress and therefore could never run a mile in less than 4 minutes. Numerous papers were written purporting to “prove” that it could not be done. Numerous athletes had tried and failed over the course of many years. As Roger’s awareness of his improving capabilities grew, he realized two important things: 1) it was possible for a human to run a mile in under 4 minutes, and 2) he could be the one to do it. He trained both his body and his mind for the goal with a strong belief that it was possible. Then, in 1954, he reached his goal. As remarkable as that is, the most remarkable thing is that in the following 6 months, no less than 37 other runners also ran the mile in under 4 minutes. The only thing that had changed was their belief. Their own beliefs had held them back until Roger proved to them it could be done.

Reference

Zinsser, Nate, L. Bunker, and J. M. Williams. 2006, Cognitive Techniques for Building Confidence and Enhancing Performance. Chap. 17 *Applied Sport Psychology*, ed. J. M. Williams, 349-355. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Dr. Nate Zinsser for assisting my use of applied sports psychology in coaching through his generous encouragement and suggestions.

The “On The Firing Line” series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as “On the Shooting Line” published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at www.pilkguns.com.

Permission is granted to distribute FREE copies for non-profit educational purposes provided the article is kept unedited in its entirety with all notices, copyright, and other information contained in the document. Any other use requires advance, specific, written permission from the author. The author may be contacted at jpoc@acm.org.

Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O’Connor (jpoc@acm.org and <http://www.america.net/~jpoc/>) is involved in rifle and pistol target shooting as a competitor, is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team, is a Level 3 coach, serves on the National Coach Development Staff, and coaches the rifle and pistol teams at North Georgia College & State University. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and rifle athletes from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in clinics and one-on-one private coaching, all on a volunteer basis. He also works with musicians and athletes in a variety of sports.

(Biographical information as of October 2009)