

4.2: Techniques/Tools for Working on Self-Confidence

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Introduction

Throughout the module we have tried to explain how psychological variables impact athletic performance. So far, we have examined the concepts of self-confidence and resilience. Next, we will look at some techniques or resources that can be used by coaches or psychologists to work with athletes.

There are many techniques for training self-confidence and other psychological variables, such as stress, motivation, attention-concentration, self-esteem, and so on. It is important to remember that good social support cannot be replaced by these techniques. In this case, and as we have seen in the studies referred to, all of an athlete's needs are related to socio-emotional support.

Achieving positive athletic results involves training and refining innumerable physical, emotional and psychological variables. More recently, and as research progresses, psychological issues have gained significant weight in this issue: many athletes who are highly-skilled at the motor level, do not perform well in competitions due to a lack of socioaffective support, meaning that their psychological variables are out of balance.

As psychologists and coaches, the first step—before implementing intervention strategies aimed at improving athletic performance—is to analyze the athlete individually to gain an understanding of their immediate environment. For example, athletes with family problems, school performance issues or risky behaviors (violence, drugs and alcohol) are a specific type of population which will require specific types of interventions. The goal is for the subjects that we train or work with to have, firstly, a base level of harmony or socioaffective emotional balance, and secondly, that their immediate environment be supportive and they do not feel isolated in a sports career aimed at high performance. This foundation is imperative, you can not teach someone to multiply if they do

not yet recognize numbers, in other words, if they are lacking a basic foundation.

The rest of this unit is dedicated to the techniques or resources that can be used to work on an athlete's self-confidence. The objective is to improve and optimize athletic performance.

Variables that help to increase an athlete's self-confidence

Below is a set of variables that, when well managed, permit an athlete to reach optimal levels of self-confidence in order to face trainings, but above all, to face competitions. These are:

- Thought control: a positive mental attitude is essential to developing full potential. When thoughts appear that make a person feel that something is impossible, these thoughts must be replaced by positive and more realistic ones. This helps an athlete face competition with more confidence.
- Be physically prepared and have mastered, as much as possible, the motor skills that the sport requires.
- Quality physical, technical, tactical and psychological training: this provides the athlete with more resources to then deal with different situations with an increased perception of control.
- Successful sports outcomes or achievement of optimal motor performance.
- Establishing objectives: short-term objectives can help an athlete feel that she has made progress (in the short term) and to more frequently identify the fruit of her labor, which will boost confidence. Long-term objectives can be harmful for athletes with low self-confidence, as they can inhibit the visualization of results in the immediate future.
- Visualization strategies: are useful to improve skills and internalize technical motor patterns.
- Modeling techniques: the athlete observes how another person (the role model) performs the task satisfactorily and gets positive results. The aim is for the athlete to observe how a certain exercise is carried out correctly and, in this way, the athlete feels more confident when carrying out the exercise themselves.
- Affirmations of self-efficacy: using internal dialog and positive messages at identified moments of greater stress or pre-competition anxiety.
- Verbal reinforcement: use real data to reinforce that the athlete is prepared to compete at the highest level. This must be someone the athlete trusts as an expert (e.g the coach), in order for their words to be credible.

- Achievements in execution: refers to getting positive results based on correctly executing actions. For example; if a team comes from behind and wins.
- Acting with confidence: mistakes tend to weaken an athlete's confidence, triggering a loss of control and increasing an opponent's confidence as they see their rival's performance deteriorate. Athletes must always demonstrate self-confidence and self-assurance throughout competition. The right body language can be useful in this case, such as keeping one's head held high after committing an error at a pivotal moment. Such body language will confuse the opponent.
- Action plan and competition plan: both positive and negative strategies must be included in a plan. Planning possible coping strategies will make it possible to anticipate errors.
- Establishing routines: the aim is to concentrate on the task without distractions. Routines help us to focus on what is about to happen. If an athlete establishes pre-competition routines, they will be more aware that there is a competition coming up.
- Adapt the sport to the athlete: it is very important to adapt the rules of each sport to the age and progress of the athletes. This is important during formative ages.
- Train for competition: Real-life game situations during sessions. In this way, low self-confidence which only emerges in relation to competition contexts can be worked through. Thus solutions and actions can be worked on during training, and self-confidence will increase as a result. Testing out in training what you want to achieve in competition is an excellent strategy to build self-confidence. The training environment in this case should mimic the reality of competition as much as possible. It is only through real game situations, such as tournaments, that performance will improve.
- Maintain a feeling of control: the subject must direct their attention to the most important stimuli, without letting anything escape their focus.
- Do not create false expectations that are unlikely to play out in reality.
- Attend to individual aspects: objectives must be based on each athlete's actual skills, on what is actually within an athlete's control (control the controllable).
- Control the perception of success and its attributions: having self-confidence implies being able to correctly attribute success and failure, based on an objective evaluation of the situation.

The aim is to assemble frameworks with situations in which the athlete can distinguish each moment when interferences occur. The more clarity there

is and the more predictions are considered prior to the event, the more security and confidence athletes will have.

Working specifically on self-confidence

To continue developing possible actions and strategies for optimal levels of self-confidence, we can say that self-instruction, visualization and coping strategies for stress can help the athlete to increase their self-confidence. It is recommended that in the days prior to competition, the psychologists, together with the coaches, focus on having the athletes perform only those actions that they execute correctly. In this strategy, positive actions are emphasized to create a positive mood. In relation to the skills that are not yet mastered, it is recommended that these are not worked on in the days leading up to competition, as it will not create a favorable mood. If these skills are worked on, care should be taken to ensure the athlete is not invaded by negative thoughts, thus reaching competition day with a negative self-image.

Another resource is to watch videos which feature the subject-athlete achieving positive outcomes or showing moments that display their skills. These kinds of compilations can help subjects to recognize that their contribution to the team is beneficial.

It is also important to analyze opponent players in advance to lower anxiety levels. Watching opponent videos and going over analyses of their game characteristics helps players to prepare emotionally and this in turn increases confidence to face the competition. In formation stages, this kind of work is recommended to get the subject-athlete used to studying the rival team and to reduce stress and anxiety.

Strategies

1- Control over thoughts:

- Identify and recognize disruptive thoughts, the situations that trigger them and how long they last.
- Eliminate disruptive thoughts using previously practiced stimuli, for example, keywords and actions.
- Prevent disruptive thoughts from coming back. For example: after keywords, focus on positive thoughts and/or focus attention on a task (next action) or an individual routine.

Substituting disruptive or negative thoughts for positive thoughts is as simple as making a list of the negative thoughts and, next to them,

assigning a word or thought to replace them. This must be practiced before being used in competition, because it needs to be mastered.

2- Trick your body and/or your opponent (act with confidence):

The athlete must act with confidence (as if they feel confident) in difficult moments. She must reflect confidence towards her opponent and towards herself, otherwise the opponent will take advantage of the moment and feel more confident about winning. Body language that displays fear is not recommended.

It is important to adjust previous expectations by setting realistic execution goals and not goals related to results.

3. Developing action plans:

In an effort to anticipate and deal with stressful and difficult situations with confidence, the use of a table outlining scenarios that the athlete has identified as complicated or threatening can be helpful. For each scenario, disruptive thoughts are identified that get in the way of focusing attention on what is actually important. Try to find examples of previous successful situations and look at the differences. Finally, we identify elements that are actually beneficial for performance and those that we need to pay attention to and aim to execute well. This allows the athlete to focus on concrete actions that, when executed correctly, help to increase the chances of performing well.

Table 1: Tools and activities

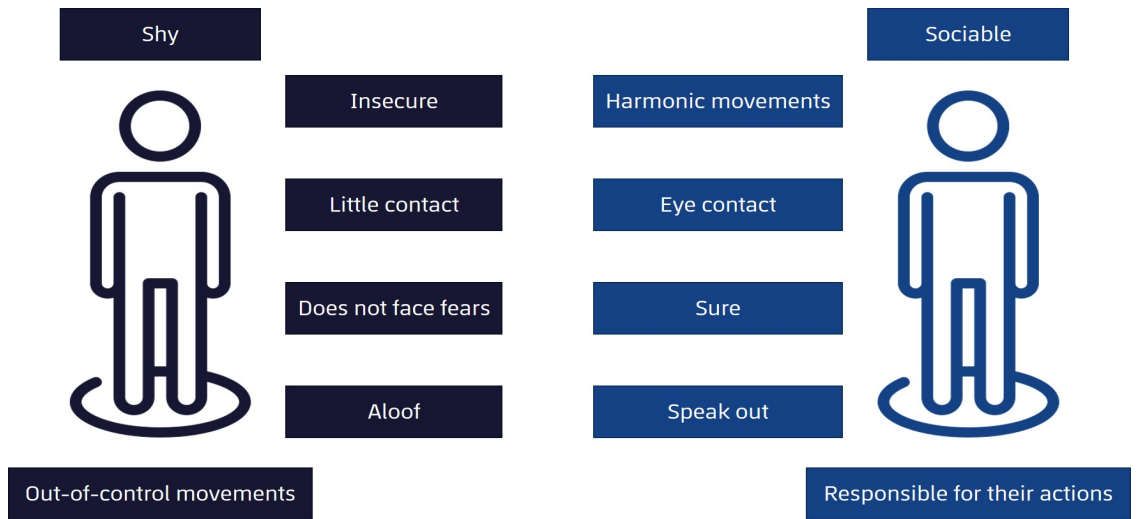
NAME	THE HERO
DESCRIPTION	<p>Ask the athlete to imagine a hero and to identify what characteristics they have in common with this hero. Identifying similarities and being able to recognize heroic qualities in oneself reinforces the athlete's self-concept and therefore, their self-confidence.</p>

NAME	THE STICK FIGURE
DESCRIPTION	<p>Draw two stick figures on a sheet a paper and give each one an opposite value. In this case we will give figure 1 an elevated profile with optimal confidence and figure 2 will have a low confidence profile.</p> <p>Next, the person is asked to attribute each stick figure with characteristics (attitudinal, postural, communicative, visual or emotional) depending on the previously assigned profile (low or high confidence).</p> <p>Finally, the person is asked to say whether the characteristics named for each stick figure reflect a high or low level of self-confidence.</p> <p>Each concept is discussed in order to define it, considering what tools are needed to practice it and with the ultimate aim of carrying out a brief role play to represent both roles and, thus, for the participant to put themselves in the shoes of someone with low or high confidence. In summary, the athlete is asked to experience the two alternatives: a person with low self-confidence and a person with high self-confidence.</p> <p>In order for the athlete to progressively acquire the skills and behaviors associated with high self-confidence, she is asked to choose one or two characteristics from the positive stick figure. The objective is for the athlete to play the selected role over the course of a week and act like they have the chosen qualities. This role-play activity is ideal when working with subjects with low self-esteem.</p>

Source: Prepared by the author.



Figure 3: Real example of the exercise



Source: Prepared by the author.

3- The best friend

Table 2: Tools.

NAME	THE BEST FRIEND
DESCRIPTION	The athlete has to describe themselves how a friend of theirs would, listing all the characteristics that made their friend choose them as a friend and identifying why other people love them.
VARIATIONS	You can change the scope of this activity and rather than "as a friend" it could be as a team player, son/daughter, or another role that the person performs well.

Source: Prepared by the author.

4- The count

Table 3: Tools.

NAME	THE COUNT
DESCRIPTION	<p>In this activity, after a competition or match is over, the athlete must count all their positive and negative, technical-tactical and attitudinal actions. Depending on how the coach thinks that the athlete feels, this could be done to highlight that they demonstrated more positive than negative actions.</p> <p>Very short-term (e.g a training session) and achievable objectives are recommended. The objectives must be easy to measure and record, so that somebody else can also record them.</p>

NAME	SWOT
DESCRIPTION	<p>Using a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities) the athlete must identify the resources available, both internal (strengths) and external (opportunities), as well as identify internal barriers (weaknesses) and external barriers (threats) that play an important role in dealing with problematic situations. This tool can be implemented on paper to help visualize if there was decompensation between the barriers and the identified resources.</p>

Source: Prepared by the author.

- Weaknesses: internal weaknesses that get in the way of achieving stated objectives.
- Threats: external factors that make it difficult to reach goals.
- Strengths: internal areas of strength that help to achieve objectives.
- Opportunities: external factors that can facilitate the achievement of goals.

Table 4: Group activities

NAME	THE BALL OF YARN
DESCRIPTION	The first person takes one end of the ball of yarn and then passes it to a teammate. As they do this, the person needs to share a positive quality as well as an aspect to improve on for their teammate, who then, holding onto a length of the yarn, passes it on to the next person, until everyone has participated. The last person will pass it back to the first person, sharing the positive quality and area to improve for this person.
VARIATIONS	Variation 1: depending on how well the participants know each other, you can just ask for positive qualities. Variation 2: you can ask for team qualities to be shared instead of individual qualities, if the aim is to create cohesion as well as confidence. Variation 3: the critiques can be limited to a specific domain, for example, they could be athletic, academic or emotional.

NAME	BEING REPRESENTED
DESCRIPTION	In groups of three, two participants will act as representatives of the third participant. In this role-play the two representatives will present to the team management committee (represented by the rest of the team or the coaching staff) the reasons why they should sign their player, emphasizing their non-sporting qualities, that is, highlighting their qualities as a teammate.

Source: Prepared by the author.

The strategies and tools that we have described throughout this unit help us to understand a player's confidence levels, and, most importantly, how to work on increasing or adjusting those levels to an optimal level, thus, facilitating improved performance. These are tools that not only help players, but also coaches to connect with players and build relationships within their teams.



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