



Building A Mental Toolbox

6: SELF CONFIDENCE

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SELF-CONFIDENCE

Believing in Your Abilities [even in the worst of times]

The whole thing is never to get negative about yourself. Sure, it's possible that the other guy you're playing is tough, and that he may have beaten you the last time you played, and okay, maybe you haven't been playing all that well yourself. But the minute you start thinking about these things you're dead. I go out to every match convinced that I'm going to win. That is all there is to it.

Jimmy Connors, Former Professional Tennis Player

I go into a race and I think of everything that I have done and what I've done to prepare for this race. I've worked hard for this . . . I think the people who do get to the top are the people who are really confident in what they did.

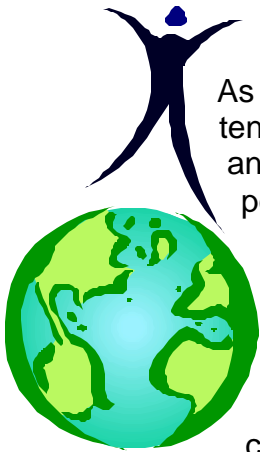
World Championship Team Swimmer

What Is Self-Confidence?

If I were to ask you to picture in your mind a confident swimmer, how would you describe this person? Descriptions that are typically used include: head up, bounce to her step, shoulders back, speaks of being able to swim well, manages her nervousness, seems unfazed by competitors, etc. While these descriptions may be accurate, a characteristic of a confident athlete that you can't see is **BELIEF** – an inner belief or conviction in one's ability to swim well regardless of the external environment.

Essentially, self-confidence is the belief in one's ability to succeed. When your coach tells you the intervals to hold in a set, confidence is the belief that you can make the intervals. When you are at Nationals for the first time and step up on the block for your race, confidence is the belief in your ability to race up to your capabilities (as you have demonstrated throughout the season). Research on elite athletes across sports suggests that a high level of self-confidence, as well as the ability to maintain that high level over time, is a factor they have in common. The challenge is in figuring out how this skill/ characteristic can be developed in athletes.

Contrary to what most people think, people who have high self-confidence sometimes doubt themselves or their abilities; elite athletes report feelings of apprehension and pressure prior to competition but still perform well. So being confident doesn't mean the absence of negative thoughts or feelings. Rather, *self-confident athletes believe in their ability to perform well despite feelings such as apprehension or doubt.* For example, when training has been going poorly or when competitive performances are below average, confident athletes still believe in their ability to perform well. Not an easy task! In this chapter, we'll discuss strategies to help you become a more confident athlete.



The Value of Being a Confident Swimmer

As has been discussed, high self-confidence is a characteristic that we tend to see in elite level athletes. To convince you that working to develop and manage your self-confidence is important, we are going to describe positive characteristics that are associated with high confidence. To increase your self confidence try thinking and behaving this way. Hopefully you'll begin to feel like you're "sitting on top of the world":

Confident swimmers consistently work hard in practice.

Confident swimmers know that much of their confidence is developed through experiencing success. They have learned to work on the controllable factors in practice that can be developed to help them enhance their abilities (and give them a feeling of success). They know that to be confident when they step up to race, they have to have put in the work.

Confident swimmers focus on controllables. Instead of spending time worrying about what they cannot do or might not be able to do, or otherwise doubting themselves, confident swimmers are more able to focus on the task at hand. While the doubt and concern they experience is real, they know that what is most beneficial is to focus on what they CAN do.

Confident swimmers try even harder when they don't reach their goals. One difference between more and less confident swimmers is how each group interprets "failure". Confident swimmers are more likely to view failure as a result of a lack of effort, preparation, concentration, skill execution, or other factors they can change. On the other hand, swimmers who are less confident view failure as a lack of ability, something less changeable. After a game, Michael Jordan was asked why he kept shooting the ball when he was 0-8 and obviously not "in the groove". His comment was that he KNOWS he is not a 0-9 shooter so the next shot was bound to sink. What confidence in the face of seeming failure!

Confident swimmers "swim to win". You've probably heard the comments "swimming to win" and "swimming not to lose." While these might sound the same, they're very different. Swimming to win means one is not afraid to take chances and take control of the race. When one swims "not to lose" the focus is on the negative and is a reactive as opposed to proactive way of behaving. Confident swimmers swim to win.

Confident swimmers manage their emotions. Confident swimmers are better able to rebound from adversity (like swimming poorly in prelims) than those athletes who are less confident. Instead of getting angry, upset, down, or pessimistic, confident swimmers manage these potentially negative emotions. Swimmers who are confident in themselves and their abilities have a "never give up" attitude--viewing situations where things go against them as challenges as opposed to immovable barriers.

Tips for Improving Self-Confidence

Recognize that Success Breeds Confidence. Because confidence is so critical to performance, a great deal of research has looked at how confidence is developed. And, we have found that the best way to develop confidence is through “performance accomplishments”; that is, through success. This success can be found in both practice and competition. To build confidence then, one can recall past successes - calling to mind the feeling of success, which can also serve as “proof” that you really can do it. And, as is discussed in the following point, one can create success. As we’ll discuss, the challenge comes when competition successes are few and far between.

Build success into your training. It was mentioned that success breeds confidence, which leads us to suggest that you need to find “success” on a consistent basis. You are doing good things all the time in training; now, you need to be purposeful about making note of all these successes because it is these daily successes that you can carry with you to competition to enhance your belief that you really are ready to swim fast. One way to do this is by keeping a “success log” where you record the 2-3 successes of each day. Another strategy is to establish a goal setting system (See the Goal setting chapter for more information). By setting goals and achieving them you are in essence structuring success into your training. The late tennis great, Arthur Ashe, talked about how he used goal setting to help his self-confidence:

One important key to success is self-confidence. An important key to self-confidence is preparation. Complete mental and physical preparation has to do with sacrifice and self-discipline. Start by setting modest goals that are meaningful, but attainable. For example, every Sunday night, write down four things that you want to accomplish for the following week, and then make sure that seven days later when you make up your next list, all four items have been crossed off. These small but meaningful completed tasks should generate much self-confidence as time goes by.

Watch and Model the Successes of Others. While not as powerful as successfully performing the skill or behavior yourself, watching others who are similar to you experience success has been found to be another strategy to enhance confidence. For example, watching a teammate, who you train with all the time, swim a great prelim swim can enhance your confidence in your ability to also have a great prelim swim (“If she can do it, so can I”). Or, watching an underwater videotape of a well executed flip turn then using imagery to see yourself executing a great turn as well can build your confidence in your ability to actually execute the flip turn.

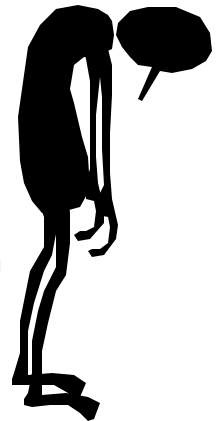
Talk confidently to yourself. Confidence means thinking that you can and will achieve your goals. Persuade yourself, through your self-talk, that you are capable, you can perform well, you will execute your race strategy, and you can make all the intervals in the set. Monitor what you say to yourself and make sure your internal

talk is instructional and motivational rather than doubting and negative. See the chapter in the Toolbox on self-talk (Chapter 4) for more ideas on how to use this important mental skill to build your confidence.

Act confidently. Your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all related--if you **act** confidently, this should enhance your **feelings** of confidence. This is really important when you begin to lose confidence. Put on a confident front during competition by keeping your head high--even after a poor swim—and “fake it ‘til you make it”. Behave with confidence (remember, head up, bounce to your step, focused on controllables) to trigger your mindset of confidence.

Salvaging confidence when things are going poorly

When things are going well, times are dropping, your coach tells you how good your look in the water (and you feel it, too) . . . confidence almost seems to flow from you. You're performing well in practice and have reason to be confident that you'll perform well in competition. During rough times, performance slumps, when you don't feel right in the water . . . these are the times when it is most challenging to remain confident. What can you do to still believe in your abilities when your “abilities” seem to have left you?



Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. It is difficult to truly believe in your ability to perform well (to be successful) when you aren't performing well. However, we can offer a few strategies and suggestions to help you salvage your confidence when things are going poorly.

Focus on achievable goals: Instead of setting a goal to swim an in-season best time which may not be realistic right now, focus on a goal that is challenging yet realistic. For instance, to swim a best time by the end of the season, you need to work on the back half of your race. So, set a goal of negative splitting your race. It is do-able and will set you up for fast racing later.

Recreate past successes: Go back, in your mind, to last season when you were swimming well. Recall how you felt, what you said to yourself and how you focused when standing on the blocks getting ready to race. Try to recreate that now. Set the stage for your success. While a multitude of factors affect performance, your attitude and thoughts certainly have an influence. Strive to recreate the “mental environment” that has proven beneficial.

Carry “P’s with you: P stands for Positives. When not swimming well, there is a tendency to be attuned to negatives; to focus on all the negative things that confirm you are not swimming well. For example, a swimmer who is struggling will get out of practice and remember the two missed intervals and how heavy his legs felt on the kick set. You need to force yourself to acknowledge the P’s – the positive, good things that occurred such as improvements in technique or feeling better than the day before. These P's should go with you to competitions to give you confidence that things are turning around.

Develop and stick to a competition plan: Prior to the competition, figure out how you are going to execute the race and how you need to be, physically and mentally, to race well. “Plant” the things you want to say to yourself, decide how you are going to focus before and during the race and commit to doing it. Too often, athletes get distracted by the environment and allow extraneous thoughts and feelings to enter into their preparation (thoughts that can be detrimental to confidence). Develop a plan in advance; one that is conducive to confident feelings.

Be patient: Accept that your confidence will not rebound “in the blink of an eye”. It is undoubtedly going to take perseverance, persistence, and patience on your part to work through this challenging time. But, believe that with effort and patience you can enhance your confidence.