

Being a Confident Performer - Neal Bowes, Certified Sport Psychologist (AASP, CC)

I always tell young performers that if they want to become rich they should sell confidence; everyone wants it. For many performers, confidence is an elusive commodity that never seems to be in sufficient quantity or sticks around when they need it. Few performers realize that confidence is something they have far more control over than they might initially think. This article will give some simple ideas for performers in how to develop their confidence.

What is confidence?

A good starting point in developing confidence is to know what it is. Simply put, confidence is a belief that you are able to do something. The opposite of confidence therefore is anxiety i.e. you worry about being able to complete something.

Knowing your strengths and weaknesses as a performer

Many players can endlessly list the weaknesses or problems with their game. However, few take the time to regularly evaluate what they are actually good at. Taking the time to systematically review your strengths and identify improvements are key tools in developing confidence. Reviewing performance in this way not only makes performers feel good, but also allows them to turn this knowledge into everyday positive self talk. It also gives vital knowledge about what has to be changed to improve.

Foundations of robust confidence

Building confidence is, in some ways, similar to building a house. To have a solid structure you must have a strong foundation. Many performers confidence is like thin ice. At the first sign of pressure it cracks and gives way. This is often because the performer has a narrow base on which their confidence is based. For example, in golf, if a players confidence is based upon their ability to hit the tee ball a long way, if for any reason they aren't hitting the tee ball well their whole confidence as a player falls apart. To have robust confidence, players need to develop a broad base. This is related to knowing your strengths as a performer. If performers spread their confidence across many skills, then if for any reason one aspect of performance isn't going well, they still have confidence in the other aspects. A second aspect of robust confidence is the ability to base confidence on controllable aspects of performance. Performers who base their confidence on uncontrollable aspects such as winning or losing are extremely vulnerable to rollercoaster up and downs in confidence. One minute they are confident, but the next they have no confidence at all. All performers should primarily base their confidence upon controllable aspects such as; their improvements in performance, their ability to prepare well, their ability to control self-talk, their ability to plan and execute recovery from mistakes, and their ability to remain focused under pressure.

Setting realistic expectations and goals

One of the most efficient ways to block opportunities to develop confidence, or to lose any confidence you may have, is to set unrealistic expectations. One of the mistakes performers often make, which leads to confidence being extremely fragile, is not expecting to, or allowing

themselves, to make mistakes. It's an interesting paradox that professional athletes expect to make mistakes, yet most amateurs either don't expect to make mistakes or react emotionally when they do. All players have to expect and allow themselves to make mistakes. As one famous sporting quote always reminds us *"It's not the mistake which counts, but what you do next"*. If making a mistake knocks your confidence it is likely that you'll make the same of similar mistakes in the future.

Taking opportunities to fill your confidence balloon

One of the things I notice most working with athletes is their reluctance to think or talk positively about themselves. I'm sure it's a product of our parents, many of which develop our habits of; always looking for what's wrong over what's right, and things being good, but not as good as they could be. In terms of performance, athletes use the same evaluative patterns. I always tell performers that it's okay to be your biggest critic if you are also going to be your biggest fan. So next time you play a good shot, tell yourself "good shot" and avoid adding the "but I still didn't get that...right". Other effective self-talk phrases which help fill up confidence balloons include; "I've really improved my ability to...", "That...was so much better than last time", and "I really am making progress with ..."

'What if' strategies

One of the most effective ways to protect confidence is for performers to develop their awareness of when their confidence is likely to be challenged. For each situation they then draw up a strategy to deal with the challenge. These strategies are planned from the notion of 'what if'. In tennis these could include; What if...I double fault...I lose my service game...I'm making many unforced errors. In golf, 'what if's' could include; I bogey the first hole; I three putt from a short distance; I'm struggling to hit the ball straight. Having strategies prepared in advance increases performer's feelings of being able to cope and prevents them having to work out solutions during performance.

If you would like further help with any of the aspects identified in this article, or indeed any other psychological aspect of your performance, please contact us at 1 703 533 3615

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