

Getting a Firm Grasp on Confidence

"Skiing is a demanding sport mentally because of the risk factor involved. Fear comes from not having confidence in yourself and your abilities."—AJ Kitt

You are standing at the top of the moguls run trying, to no avail, to convince yourself that you can ski a clean run. You keep telling yourself "Be confident" and "Just do it" but it doesn't seem to help your performance. Instead, the overriding thought is that you haven't had a clean run all day so why

should this run be any different. Typically, you get about halfway through the moguls when you start to tighten up because you just know you are going to miss a turn and either take a spill or have to stop. You want to be confident, since you know this is critical to your performance, but don't know what to do to build your confidence.



As a skier (or athlete in any sport for that matter), this scenario probably rings true for you. Each time you are on your skis or snowboard, you are challenging yourself—to successfully complete a more demanding run, to try a new trick, or to let go of your “brakes”. To do so successfully requires that you believe you can do it. But, how can you be confident when it is a skill or run you haven’t tried before or haven’t successfully accomplished? In this article, I’ll address the challenging topic of confidence and give you some ideas as to how you can begin to build and control your confidence.

Understanding Confidence

To better understand confidence, let me recount a quote from a newspaper article from several years ago. Michael Jordan had started the basketball game going 0–for–9 and the reporter asked him why he kept asking for the ball instead of dishing it to a player who had a hotter hand since he was obviously having an off night. His comment was simple. MJ said he is not and never has been an 0–for–10 shooter so the next shot was bound to drop! What confidence in the face of seeming failure. Whereas most athletes would be hesitant taking more shots, MJ didn’t allow his failure to affect his next shot — he maintained his belief in his ability to make a basket on his next shot.

Simply put, confidence is your belief in your ability to succeed. While you probably already know that confidence is critical to performance, further support for this belief is found through research on elite level athletes — high confidence is a skill that consistently characterizes elite level athletes. However, being confident does **not** mean that you never doubt yourself. In fact, highly confident elite athletes report negative thoughts and concerns about performance. Being confident relates to performing well despite such concerns or negative thoughts. Keep this in mind the next time you are apprehensive about skiing a mogul run, or on more advanced terrain — this apprehension doesn’t mean you can’t be successful.

Unfortunately, confidence can be a difficult concept to “get one’s arms around”; it is a state that oftentimes seems elusive and fragile. One incorrect turn on your skis or a near fall and confidence levels can plummet. Because of this, athletes and coaches often perceive that confidence is something you either have or you don’t have. The reality is that confidence, just like other physical or mental skills, can be learned, built upon and controlled (although it is not an easy task to do so).

So, we know confidence relates to success and we know it is a skill you can learn. Being the high achiever that you are, the question that is probably on the tip of your tongue is “What can I do to develop and build my confidence and have some control over it?”

Strategies to Build Your Confidence

We owe much credit to Albert Bandura for our understanding of how to build and maintain confidence. He conducted research

on self-efficacy (or self-competence), a concept that is closely related to confidence, and identified primary sources of self-efficacy. That is, he looked at the primary means by which individuals develop a belief in their abilities in given situations. It is from this research, as well as extensive interaction with athletes and coaches, that many of the following suggestions were derived. Keep in mind that these strategies will be relatively easy to implement when you are skiing (performing) well as you have reason to be confident. It is when you are not skiing (performing) well that it is quite a challenge to effectively implement confidence building or confidence salvaging strategies. However, during these difficult times is precisely when you need confidence in yourself. So be vigilant and persistent in the implementation of these strategies.

- **Create / Find Success.** Through years of research we have found that the best way to build confidence is through performance accomplishment. More simply put, success breeds confidence. Not really a big surprise, is it? For most athletes and coaches, the surprise comes in knowing that success doesn’t relate to just competition success, which is often what is assumed. Athletes seem to think they need to “win” to build confidence. In reality, success can be found in all the little things you do on a daily basis. Success can come from achieving a training goal you set for yourself or going for your morning run when you really wanted to stay in bed. Success can be the two additional repetitions you crank out in the weight room or maintaining a positive attitude throughout training. Success can be executing correct technique through a difficult part of the ski run. Your challenge is to find and/ or create these daily successes that will help you build confidence.

- **Watch and model the success of others.** Another effective means of developing confidence is through modeling the successes of others. You can experience success vicariously by watching another successfully execute a skill or accomplish a task. Watching your teammate successfully execute a specific trick on her snowboard will alleviate your apprehensions and provide you with a sense of confidence that you, too, can do the trick. Using this strategy, you might videotape another athlete skiing a challenging run (or as a track and field hurdler, you could videotape her racing the 110 hurdles), and then use imagery to see yourself skiing the same run with correct technique just as your competitor did. What a boost to your confidence having seen someone else do it then seeing yourself experience success.

- **Act confident.** You may know the saying, “Fake it until you make it”. There is a lot of truth behind this adage. Your thoughts, feelings and behaviors are intricately linked. If you behave as if you have no confidence, this will undoubtedly influence your thoughts and feelings related to your confidence. Conversely, if you act confident, this will help trigger a confident mindset. So, how does a confident person behave and act? Some typical responses include — head held high, shoulders back, a slight bounce or strut to one’s step, control of pre-competition anxiety, wanting to be challenged and even seeking out challenges, and a focus in on oneself. Begin acting the part of a confident athlete.

- **Carry P's with you.** P's? Yes, P's as in Positives. Confidence can be built and enhanced by keeping positives (successes) at the forefront. When confidence is shaky, there is a tendency to attend to the negatives, to mistakes and deficiencies ("I missed again", "Why can't I do this?"). Thoughts and focus need to be purposefully directed to positives. Before starting down the ski run, instead of focusing on the landing you missed, remind yourself of all the things you did right, that you could do again.

- **Focus on achievable goals.** Setting realistic daily goals is an especially valuable strategy when things are going poorly, when you are struggling with your performance and your confidence. You need to experience success, so identify daily goals that are challenging but do-able to set yourself up for the possibility of success. Unfortunately, when struggling, athletes often compare themselves to their best performances – "I used to do this run under 1 minute and now I'm not even close" or "Last month I lifted 10 kilos more". Avoid focusing on what used to be and attend to what you want to and can accomplish today.

- **Monitor your self-talk.** I'm sure you know of the importance of talking positively to yourself to help build your confidence. But, saying to yourself "be confident" is not enough and most likely will not be really effective. A better approach is to convince yourself, through your self-talk, to be confident. That is, you can tell yourself what specifically you need to do (i.e., hold your line, stay tucked) and you can tell yourself why you can and will be successful (i.e., you've trained hard; you've done it in practice dozens of times). Remember, this is no easy task. It is one thing to say it and quite another to say it with conviction.

Implementing these confidence-building strategies should set you on your way to learning to control and manage your confidence. Be patient, as this won't happen overnight. But, with commitment and discipline you can learn the skill of confidence.

"One of the most important qualities for young athlete is the ability to believe in oneself. If you have confidence in yourself, in your teammates and in your coach, you will succeed." Chuck Knox, NFL Coach

About the Author

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