

All the Little Things

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In a recent meeting with a college coach, our discussion turned to confidence and how confidence is critical to athletic performance. You know that having a belief in your ability will impact your performance on the field and in the weight room. Any doubts about the influence of confidence can be eased by looking at the flip side. That is, think about how a lack of confidence impacts performance. How likely is a golfer to make his putt when he does not really think he can make it? Do you think a softball player who is struggling with her hitting will get a hit when she believes “you’re in such a slump –there is no way you’re going to connect”? As you would likely guess, these athletes are probably going to perform poorly, in part, because they do not have confidence in their abilities.

At the end of the meeting, the coach made a comment that nicely summarized our discussion on confidence. She said “I need to get my athletes to realize it comes from all the little things, don’t I?” At times, athletes get so caught up in searching for confidence that they miss all the little things they are doing on a daily basis that serve as the foundation for confidence. Renowned sport psychologist Jim Loehr likes to refer to Tiger Woods and how strong his mental game is. Dr. Loehr says to pay particular attention to what Tiger says in the

press conference after a round of golf. He may have missed every fairway and has reporters asking him questions like, “Have you ever played so poorly?” Yet he responds with comments like, “My short game was really on today” or “I was able to get out of some difficult situations. I have an opportunity to go hit some drives today and come out with my A-game tomorrow.” Drawing confidence from the little things, even though the “big picture” result (what most people focus on) was not what he may have hoped for.

There is a tendency to believe confidence is built solely on that “breakthrough” performance in practice or competition. However, it is important to realize that confidence can come through the successes athletes are experiencing on a regular basis. The quote at the beginning of the article also nicely captures this concept. Confidence can be a by-product of the day in and day out, week in and week out work you are doing.

In your efforts to build or maintain your athletic confidence, it is important to focus on the little things that you are doing well. So, what are the little things that athletes do that can serve as the foundation of confidence? Table 1 presents examples of the little things that you may be doing (or can start doing) that can contribute in a big way to confidence. Read through the ques-

“Confidence comes from hours and days and weeks and years of constant work and dedication. When I’m in the last two minutes of a December playoff game, I’m drawing confidence from wind sprints I did the previous March. It’s just a circle: work and confidence, then more work and more confidence.”

Roger Staubach,
NFL Quarterback

tions then use it as a starting point to develop your own individualized list of confidence boosters. Identify the little, yet critical, things you do that you can draw on when preparing for your next competition.

The list could go on. However, each of these questions focuses on a mini-success that should build confidence that you are putting in the work and taking steps toward achieving your athletic goals.

Now, it is time for you to get started. Here is your homework. Identify a list of little things you do already that can fuel your confidence, and identify the little things you can start doing to further enhance confidence and performance. Acknowledge when you meet these goals.

Table 1. Training and Performance Questions

- Do you train with consistency? Do you make every practice session? There may be days you do not want to get out of bed, but doing so is important to physical development and confidence.
- Do you get proper sleep? Not just prior to a competition but in preparation for training as well.
- Do you maintain a diet that is conducive to athletic success? You know that the “fuel” you put in your body effects how well the “engine runs”. This includes staying hydrated as well.
- Have you made a commitment to stretching and flexibility? Some athletes do not put forth full effort on these as they are not perceived as being the main components of a workout. But, doing all the little things to take care of your body can boost confidence and it is critical to long term health and performance.
- Do you strive to maintain a positive attitude? Accept that it is not always easy to do then commit to working on your attitude.
- Do you keep your attention on the task at hand? When at practice, are you there physically and mentally? Doing so will impact performance which will impact confidence.
- Do you train with quality? There is a qualitative difference between “just doing it” and doing it with purpose and intensity.
- Do you address the mental aspect of performance in training and competition? Using mental skills on a consistent basis to manage and enhance performance can bolster your confidence that you have optimized preparation.
- Do you maintain a high effort? Do you commit your energies whether it is the first sprint in pre-season or the last sprint? As noted by Roger Staubach in the introductory quote, effort in the little things months ago can play a role in confidence and performance today.
- Have you made a commitment to strength training? Recognize how the work you do in the weight room translates to performance on the field to build your confidence.
- Do you work to perfect technique? Do you strive for technical excellence in everything you do? As an athlete, you can study video of yourself or others, breakdown training sessions, and get feedback as part of a commitment to perfect the process of performance.

I bet, if you put your mind to it, you will be able to find something positive in every practice or training session, no matter how bad you think it is. I encourage you to write something down after each practice that you did well. Soon you will see how many little things you are doing right, giving you the confidence to take your athletic performance to new levels.

About the Author

*Suzie Tuffey Riewald, PhD, NSCA-CPT,*D, received her degrees in Sport Psychology/Exercise Science from the University of North Carolina – Greensboro. She has worked for USA Swimming as the Sport Psychology and Sport Science Director, and most recently as the Associate Director of Coaching with the USOC where she worked with various sport national governing bodies (NGBs) to develop and enhance coaching education and training. Suzie currently works as a sport psychology consultant to several NGBs. ▲*