

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS OF BUILDING AND MAINTAINING ATHLETES' SELF-CONFIDENCE THROUGHOUT THEIR CAREERS

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Abstract: Athletes' self-confidence is one of the key psychological factors that directly affect sports performance, consistency of achievement, and resilience to stress. This review paper aims to analyze the mechanisms involved in the development and maintenance of self-confidence in sports across different stages of an athletic career—from early youth development, through peak competitive performance, to the transitional or retirement phase. Special attention is given to both interpersonal and intrapersonal factors, including self-perception, coaching style, feedback, team dynamics, and psychological interventions. By presenting relevant theoretical models and contemporary empirical research, this paper provides clear insights into effective strategies for building, stabilizing, and enhancing self-confidence. Understanding these processes is essential for the psychological preparation of athletes and for the long-term preservation of their mental well-being and motivation.

Keywords: self-confidence, sport psychology, athletes, career stages, psychological factors, motivation, resilience, performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the world of modern sports, where performance is constantly scrutinized by the public, media, coaches, and organizations, athletes face multiple pressures that go beyond the physical demands of their discipline. In this context, psychological resources have gained a central place in understanding the factors that distinguish successful athletes from less successful ones. Among these resources, self-confidence stands out as one of the key predictors of athletic efficiency, consistently associated with better competitive outcomes, emotional stability, and long-term career sustainability [1], [2].

Sport-specific self-confidence can be defined as the degree of an athlete's belief in their ability to successfully perform tasks specific to their sport. Unlike general self-confidence, which refers to a global self-image, sport confidence is specific, situational, and largely dependent on previous experience, perceived competence, and external factors such as coach support, feedback, and team climate [3], [4]. Its role becomes particularly pronounced in high-pressure situations—such as decisive matches, recovery from injury, or transition to a higher level of competition—where mental strength and belief in one's capabilities often determine the difference between success and failure.

However, self-confidence is not a stable or immutable trait. On the contrary, numerous factors can influence its growth or decline over the course of an athletic career—including changes in physical abilities, fluctuations in athletic status, social responses, and internal emotional processes [5], [6]. Young athletes most often develop self-confidence through successful experiences and adult support, while professional athletes tend to build and maintain it through performance outcomes, routine, and self-regulation strategies. In the later stages of a career, self-confidence can be undermined by identity changes, physical limitations, and reduced competitive engagement, raising important questions about maintaining mental resilience and adapting to career transition.

In addition to individual differences, social and organizational factors also play a critical role in the development and maintenance of sport-specific self-confidence. Coaches, sport psychologists, and family members serve as key sources of verbal encouragement, success evaluation, and emotional support. Theoretical models such as the Self-Efficacy Theory [3] and the Sport Confidence Model [1] provide a conceptual framework for understanding how athletes acquire and sustain self-confidence, emphasizing the importance of past success, modeling, emotional states, and social support.

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This review paper explores contemporary theoretical and empirical insights into the mechanisms of building and maintaining self-confidence in sports, with a particular focus on differences across various stages of an athletic career—from the development of young talent, through peak performance phases, to periods of professional decline and athletic retirement. Understanding these processes is crucial not only for optimizing athletic outcomes but also for the long-term mental health and psychological well-being of athletes.

2. THEORETICAL MODELS OF SPORT CONFIDENCE

Understanding self-confidence in the context of sports requires reliance on theoretical models that explain how this belief is formed, developed, and maintained. The two most influential conceptual frameworks in this domain are Albert Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory and Robin Vealey's Sport Confidence Model.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory [3] emphasizes that the perception of personal efficacy stems from four primary sources: previous successful experiences, observational learning (modeling), verbal persuasion, and emotional states. This theory has been widely applied in sport psychology as it explains how athletes develop the belief in their own ability to successfully cope with challenges.

Vealey [1] developed a specific Sport Confidence Model, which differentiates between trait confidence, state confidence, and sport-specific confidence. This model highlights the importance of context and the interaction between an athlete's personal characteristics and situational demands. Key roles are played by coach feedback, prior performances, and the athlete's interpretation of their own abilities.

Empirical analyses confirm that both models are valuable for clarifying the complex mechanisms behind the formation and fluctuation of sport confidence [7], [4]. The combined application of these theoretical frameworks allows for a deeper understanding of individual differences among athletes, as well as the development of targeted interventions to enhance confidence at various stages of their careers.

2.1. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF SPORT CONFIDENCE

Athletes' self-confidence is not merely a result of their internal capabilities, but is also shaped by external factors, the most significant of which include previous success, feedback, social support, and physical condition [4]. While the foundational framework of confidence is individual and relies on internal mechanisms such as self-efficacy, many environmental factors can either foster or undermine this belief.

Previous success plays a central role in the development of confidence. Bandura [3] emphasizes that successful experience is the most powerful means of strengthening a sense of personal efficacy. When athletes successfully overcome challenges and achieve their goals, their confidence increases. Furthermore, feedback—whether from coaches or teammates—significantly influences how athletes assess their own abilities [1]. Constructive feedback that emphasizes strengths rather than solely pointing out errors can help maintain high levels of confidence.

Social support, including motivational and emotional support from coaches, family members, and other important figures in the athlete's life, also plays a major role in sustaining confidence, especially during periods of poor performance or injury recovery [7]. This social framework allows athletes to face uncertainties and challenges with the assurance that they have a support system to rely on in moments of crisis.

The physical condition and health status of athletes are also directly linked to their self-confidence. Injuries or diminished physical fitness can reduce sport confidence, while optimal physical condition often contributes to greater assurance in one's ability to perform at a high level [5].

Although confidence may be challenged at various stages of an athletic career, the implementation of effective self-regulation and mental training strategies—such as visualization, goal setting, and the development of emotional resilience—can enable athletes to rebuild and preserve confidence during difficult phases [4].

2.2. CONFIDENCE ACROSS THE STAGES OF A SPORTS CAREER

The psychological needs and sources of confidence change significantly throughout the various stages of an athletic career—from early development and amateur beginnings, through the peak of competitive achievement, to the phase of declining performance and eventual retirement from professional sport. Each of these stages carries specific challenges that require adaptive strategies for maintaining and rebuilding confidence.

- *Early Development and Young Athletes:* In the early stages of a sports career, athletes' confidence largely depends on external sources—encouragement from parents, coaches, and peers, as well as experiences of success and failure in training and competition [8]. During this developmental period, the foundational perception of competence is formed, with supportive coaching communication and affirming feedback playing key roles in maintaining motivation and confidence [9].
- *Elite Level and Professional Career:* At the peak of their careers, athletes rely on previous experience, established routines, mental techniques, and competitive results as the basis of their confidence. This stage is marked by a strong internal sense of control and stability, but also by increased exposure to external pressures from the public, media, and sponsors, which may threaten mental balance [10]. Some athletes develop specific rituals and emotional regulation strategies to preserve their focus and belief in their abilities [11].
- *Late Career Phase and Transition:* In the final stages of a professional career, athletes face changes in physical capabilities, a diminished role on the team, and the redefinition of personal identity. This transition often brings a decline in confidence, particularly if it is not accompanied by adequate preparation for life after sport [12]. Athletes who engage in long-term career planning, education, and psychological support show greater resilience and better adaptation to post-sport life [13].

Understanding how confidence evolves throughout the athletic life cycle enables professionals to intervene in a timely manner and provide support that helps athletes maintain psychological well-being and effectiveness at all stages of their careers.

2.3. PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING AND ENHANCING CONFIDENCE

Effective management of athletes' confidence involves the application of various psychological interventions aimed at developing a stable sense of competence, resilience, and control. These interventions may be individual, group-based, or implemented as part of the training process and are often included in broader mental training programs.

- *Visualization and Mental Preparation:* The technique of mental imagery, or visualization, has proven to be an extremely effective tool for strengthening confidence. When athletes imagine themselves successfully performing movements or entire competitive scenarios, they activate the same neural structures used during actual performance, thereby increasing their sense of control and predictability [14]. Regular visualization practice contributes to positive self-talk and the development of a strong sense of capability.

- *Self-Talk and Cognitive Restructuring*: Using positive self-talk is a simple yet powerful technique for regulating inner dialogue and transforming negative thoughts into constructive ones. Athletes who become aware of their automatic thoughts and train in reframing negative statements into affirmations demonstrate higher levels of confidence and reduced emotional reactivity under pressure [15].
- *Goal Setting*: Structured goal setting enhances the sense of control over one's development and competitive performance. An effective goal should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART), enabling athletes to monitor progress and feel competent even during periods of stagnation [16]. Achieving smaller goals further reinforces a sense of competence.
- *Social Support and Interpersonal Relationships*: Confidence does not develop in isolation—it is often a reflection of the social context in which an athlete operates. Coaches, teammates, and family members play a crucial role in maintaining athletic confidence by providing affirmation, security, and constructive feedback [17]. Coach education programs often include training on the importance of emotional support and communication.
- *Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation*: The application of mindfulness techniques in sport is gaining increasing attention as a means of enhancing presence, reducing anxiety, and strengthening focus. Mindfulness training can help athletes remain psychologically stable even in unpredictable competitive conditions [18], thereby indirectly boosting their confidence.

2.4. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN BUILDING AND MAINTAINING SPORTS CONFIDENCE

Confidence in sports does not develop identically among all athletes; rather, it is deeply rooted in the psychological, developmental, and social specifics of each individual. From the earliest stages of sports involvement, differences in temperament, early success experiences, feedback processing, and personal attribution contribute to variations in the perception of one's own efficacy. Athletes with high emotional stability and a stronger internal locus of control tend to show greater resilience to failure and stronger belief in their abilities [19]. In contrast, athletes prone to neuroticism or anxiety often interpret negative outcomes as personal failures, which can lead to the destabilization of confidence at critical moments.

In addition to personal traits, a significant factor in individual differences lies in the type of sport the athlete participates in. Research suggests that confidence is formed and maintained differently among athletes from individual and team sports. In individual sports, where the outcome is directly tied to personal performance, confidence relies more on intrinsic factors such as perceived control, routine, and focus. In team sports, social interactions, the athlete's role within the team, and relationships with the coach have a greater influence [20]. Moreover, gender and age also play a role: adolescent girls in sports often show lower levels of confidence compared to their peers, partially due to cultural expectations, self-assessment of body image, and the greater significance of social comparison [8].

Furthermore, past experiences—both successes and failures—shape the cognitive frameworks that athletes use to interpret new challenges. Athletes who have previously experienced comebacks from tough situations typically develop more robust confidence patterns based on proven stress and failure coping strategies [10]. Their ability to transform negative experiences into motivational resources often makes them more resilient to the emotional fluctuations that characterize elite sports. Individual differences are also reflected in the degree to which athletes use psychological interventions—while some naturally internalize positive strategies like visualization or self-talk, others adopt them through training and experience with professional guidance.

Ultimately, understanding individual differences in the experience and maintenance of confidence is essential for accurate and tailored psychological support in sports. Effective psychological intervention cannot be universal—it must consider personal characteristics, sports context, developmental phase, and previous behavioral patterns. Only through such a differentiated perspective can lasting changes be created that contribute not only to results but also to the overall well-being of the athlete.

3. CONCLUSION

Self-confidence in the sports context cannot be viewed in isolation from the overall psychological functioning of the individual. It represents a complex and multi-layered construct that mediates between an athlete's internal capacities and the external demands of the competitive environment. Its development requires the integration of cognitive, emotional, and social processes, and its maintenance is the result of long-term investment in the athlete's psychological development, both by the individual themselves and by the coaching and professional team. Due to its complexity, building stable sports confidence requires an approach that goes beyond classical motivational models and encompasses holistic strategies focusing on identity, resilience, self-reflection, and adaptation. Self-confidence is increasingly recognized not only as a prerequisite for optimal athletic performance but also as an important indicator of mental health and psychological sustainability throughout an athlete's career.

The significance of this area extends beyond the boundaries of sport. In the context of modern challenges and the increasing psychological demands of sports professions, understanding and nurturing self-confidence becomes crucial for the prevention of burnout, retirement from sports, and negative effects on the personal development of athletes. This opens up space for a multidisciplinary dialogue between sports psychology, pedagogy, coaching practices, and clinical psychology. Future research directions should include factors specific to contemporary professional sports, such as the influence of social media, digital evaluations of success, and identity crises caused by changing career roles. Only through a comprehensive approach can support for athletes be provided that is both scientifically grounded and practically applicable in the everyday life of elite sports.

4. REFERENCES

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