

Confidence serves as protective shield for young athletes

Youngsters that possess confidence are more likely to have lower levels of anxiety and move on more quickly from mistakes – and coaches play an instrumental role in building confidence in all their players.

Picture two little league players up at bat. By looking at them, you can tell that one is confident and the other is not.

The confident athlete is in a ready stance, has his head held high and is staring down the pitcher. The other athlete, by comparison, looks uncomfortable, is glancing all around and appears to be back on his heels as if trying to get away from the situation.

Which athlete has a better chance of success? The answer is easy: the confident one.

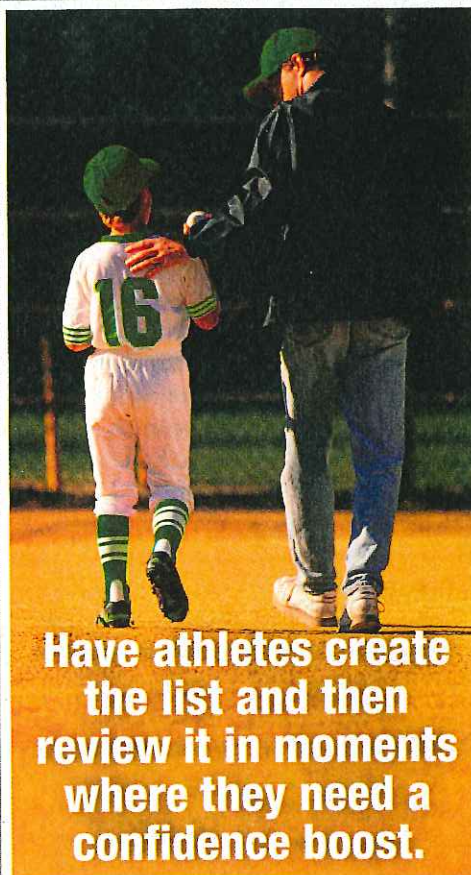
Confidence is the positive beliefs that we have about ourselves. In sports, this may be having the belief that we can take on challenges, execute skills or perform the way we want.

TEACHING CONFIDENCE

As a coach, helping a young athlete learn how to build confidence is one of the greatest skills you can teach. Athletes who are confident are more likely to experience lowered levels of anxiety, move on more quickly from mistakes, have more perseverance in the face of challenges and view pressure situations as facilitative (helpful) versus debilitating (hurtful). In other words, confidence acts as a shield against the impact of some of the tough situations that sports present.

Confidence, or belief in yourself, allows you to look at situations as challenges that can be overcome rather than impossibilities.

While many think that either you have confidence or you don't, this is not true. Confidence can be learned, and as coaches, you can teach it.



Have athletes create the list and then review it in moments where they need a confidence boost.

What follows are a number of ideas to use with your athletes to help build confidence. These can be implemented with the whole team, or with athletes individually.

- **Reinforce performance accomplishments:** Performing well is one of the most powerful things that impacts confidence. Confidence can drop substantially when athletes are not performing as they want to. Help athletes remember past successes in practice and competition, and help them feel accomplished again. For example, a goalie who continues to let teams score can have her confidence restored by allowing her to practice saving goals, progressing from less challenging to more challenging. This way, she has very recent confidence-building accomplishments to recall. When competing, a

higher confidence level may translate into playing more effectively.

- **Highlight list:** This is a list of moments that an individual is proud of. Highlights can be big (*took 1st place in the Falling Leaf Tournament*) or small (*improved my speed by .2 of a second*). The idea is to have athletes create the list and then review it in moments where they need a confidence boost. For example, the morning of a game, before penalty kicks or before tip-off.
- **Affirmations:** These are powerful, short and simple, present-tense "I" statements



give them confidence (*scoring a goal on a tough goalie*), and do imagery of that moment when they want a boost in confidence. By reliving accomplishments, confidence can climb.

- **Communicate to build confidence:** As coaches, what you say can have a big impact on confidence, especially for young athletes. Try your best to help your athletes notice their highlights by acknowledging not only the wins, hits or scores, but also their effort, their improvement in technique and their ability to handle a tough situation. Give positive feedback whenever

When an athlete is having trouble believing in him or herself, oftentimes seeing a teammate have success can help boost confidence for both.

that help build confidence, remind you of why you are a strong player and can help create strong positive beliefs. Affirmations can be things you want to be, not just what you already are. Examples: "I see the pitches I want to make," "I am fast" or "I am a strong player." Just like the highlight list, once you help athletes create affirmations they can be used to help build confidence.

- **Body language:** Confident athletes have a certain look. By taking on the posture and attitude of a confident person, such as head up, smile and shoulders back, this helps confidence move from the outside (body language) to the inside (the way the athlete feels). Help your athletes learn to look confident to observers, even if they are nervous on the inside.
- **Imagery:** This is creating or recreating an experience in your mind, using all of your senses. Essentially, athletes pick moments they are proud of and that

possible and encourage your athletes to see the positives in their own performance.

- **Encourage teammates to build confidence in one another:** When an athlete is having trouble believing in him or herself, oftentimes seeing a teammate have success can help boost confidence for both. Success doesn't necessarily mean winning in this case, but rather executing a skill, or learning a tough maneuver. The athlete who is struggling can see "If he can do it, then I can do it" and the other realizes "Wow, coach notices what I'm doing well."

Given that confidence is so important to athletes on and off the field, it is imperative to understand how it can be built. Use the above ideas to help your athletes learn how to take control over confidence so that they have a strong shield against whatever comes their way in sport or in life. **sk**

Sara Robinson, MA, is a Mental Skills Coach with a Master's Degree in Sport Psychology. She works with parents, coaches and athletes ages 8-18 to teach the mental skills necessary for sport and life. To receive her quarterly newsletter or for more information visit her website at: www.trainingthemind.com or email Sara_SportPsych@hotmail.com.