

Going for the Gold – Using Sport Psychology to Improve Self-Esteem

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Self-esteem falls under the umbrella of self-confidence and can be defined as “the extent to which an individual holds favorable attitudes towards oneself.” The higher one’s self-esteem, the greater they feel about oneself and can have positive outcomes when it comes to athletics (Ahmed et al., 2021). On the flipside, athletes could have negative outcomes in their performances if they allow thoughts of self-doubt to cloud their mind (Trine University Center for Sports Studies, 2023). With this aspect of self playing such an important role in athlete performance, working on tactics to improve self-esteem is essential. An Olympics-themed guide of educational tactics has been laid out with this goal in mind.

Bronze: Back to Basics

The idea of self-talk is a simple one, but it is easy to master and can be employed at any time. It is the idea that things people say to themselves affect their behavior. There are different types of self-talk, instructional and motivational. Instructional is used to give directions and motivational is used to increase motivation. It is motivational self-talk that is thought to improve self-esteem and self-confidence (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2009).

There are six dimensions of self-talk to work on with athletes. The first dimension is valence can be positive or negative, but self-talk should be positive. For example, a baseball player should be thinking something like, “I’m going to hit this ball out of the park,” rather than “I’m probably going to strikeout.” The second dimension is verbalization, meaning the athlete can perform their self-talk in their head or out loud, either is fine, depending on what makes the athlete comfortable. The third dimension is self-determination. Are they participating in self-talk because they want to or just because they were assigned to do it? Self-talk is something that they should want to do and not something that they are just checking off a list of chores (Munroe-Chandler & Guerrero, 2019).

The fourth dimension of self-talk is directional interpretation. Is the athlete psyching themselves up? This is perhaps one of the most important dimensions because motivational self-talk is what is going to improve self-esteem and self-confidence. The fifth dimension is directional intensity, meaning how intense they are with their self-talk. The sixth dimension is frequency, which just means how often they are participating in self-talk (Munroe-Chandler & Guerrero, 2019).

This can be taught to athletes as a first step to working on self-esteem and self-confidence. Each dimension can be tweaked as needed. For example, if it's found that an athlete's self-talk isn't happening often enough or it isn't intense enough, a coach can suggest using self-talk more often and with a little more intensity.

Silver: More Advanced Techniques

The next technique to teach an athlete to help improve their self-esteem is a little more involved. The hierarchical structure of the physical self is an idea that overall self-esteem can be broken down into categories such as appearance self-perceptions, body shape self-perceptions, conditioning self-perceptions, and strength self-perceptions. A “Bottom-Up Approach” can be taken to this structure, in which the athlete focuses on lower levels of the hierarchy to improve the overall global self-esteem (Sabiston et al., 2019). For example, under body shape self-perceptions, if the athlete was overweight, a physical activity intervention could be designed with a goal to help the athlete lose weight. This could lead to an overall improvement of self-esteem.

Going for the Gold: Challenging and Risky Maneuvers

The last step of the Olympics-themed plan is to teach the athlete about self-discrepancies. The idea is that everyone has two different perspectives, their self and their other, and three types of beliefs – who they actually are, who they would like to be, who they should be. These are the

actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self, respectively. Discrepancies occur when the actual self is not in line with the ideal self or the ought self (Sabiston et al., 2019).

An actual-ideal discrepancy is when a person's actual self and who they would like to be do not match up. For example, an athlete may think, "I am not in shape, but I ideally would like to be in shape." An actual-ought discrepancy occurs when a person's actual self and who they should be do not match up. Tweaking the previous example, "I am not in shape, but I should be in shape" (Sabiston et al., 2019). An athlete learning this technique would need to take a deeper dive into themselves than they would with the hierarchical structure or self-talk.

Results

If an athlete has learned one or all these techniques, they will be well on the way to improving their self-esteem and self-confidence. This will lead to improved performance and all-around better attitude.

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