

Building Self-Confidence

By Marvin Zauderer

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If Yogi Berra were a cyclist, here's what he'd say: cycling is 90% mental, and the other half is physical. Yet with enough self-confidence, our minds tend to stay out of the way, and we have the freedom to perform to our potential. The mentally fit cyclist knows how to assess, maintain, and build self-confidence to improve fun and performance on the bike.

In last month's Sport Psychology column, I continued our series on **Integral Elements**, the building blocks of the mentally fit cyclist's five core skills, by describing how [managing your will to succeed](#) can play an important role in your mental fitness and cycling performance. This month, I explore Self-Confidence, perhaps the most important element of every athlete's mental fitness.

For the article [The Mind of a Mentally Fit Pro](#), I asked pro cyclist [Steven Cozza of Slipstream-Chipotle H3O](#) about mental skills that have been challenging for him. He didn't miss a beat:

"Confidence. It's a huge thing in cycling. I was even told by some people, 'consider a career change.' You can improve so much by believing in yourself. You can say, 'I should be at the front of the race, I should be top 5.' You don't have to be cocky, but if you're not confident, you don't stand a chance. You've got to believe in yourself."

Confidence. Some of us seem born with it. Some of us are lucky enough to grow up among family, friends, and mentors who help develop it in us. But for many of us, at least in certain aspects of our lives, it's an ongoing challenge.

As I noted in [the article on Goal-Setting](#), much of what we've learned about self-confidence in sport builds on the work of psychologist [Albert Bandura](#) of Stanford University (home of the current national champion road cycling team -- defending their title this week!). Bandura defined *self-efficacy* as your belief in your "capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." Roughly translated: Your belief that you can achieve your goals.

Bandura identified four sources for self-efficacy:

1. Mastery experience: When you succeed, you'll (tend to) believe you'll succeed in the future.
2. Vicarious experience: You see someone doing something, and you think, "I can do that, too."
3. Social persuasions: The encouragement (and discouragement) you receive.
4. Physiological factors: How you interpret the feelings and sensations you experience when attempting to achieve your goals.

According to Weinberg and Gould, researchers built on Bandura's work (among others') to identify nine sources of self-confidence specific to sport.

1. Mastery: Developing and improving skills in training and competition.
2. Demonstrating ability: Having success in competition.
3. Getting the breaks: Seeing things going your way.
4. Seeing others perform successfully.
5. Physical and mental preparation.
6. Social support: Encouragement from family and friends.
7. Belief/trust in your coach(es).
8. Body image: Feelings about body, strength, appearance, weight.
9. Environmental comfort: Feeling comfortable where you're performing.

Let's examine how you might get more from some or all of these sources by seeing how self-confidence fuels – and is fueled by – the 5 Core Skills.

Self-Confidence and The 5 Core Skills

First, let's look at [Goal-Setting](#). Supported by self-confidence, you'll set appropriately challenging goals for yourself. If your goals are too easy, or worse, maniacal, you may erode your self-confidence.

You'll certainly set *outcome goals* – winning this, completing that – over which you have some, but limited, control. You'll also set *process goals* – preparing well for competition, overcoming your anxiety on descents, holding your form on steep climbs – over which you have much more control, and which help you add to your experiences of mastery and success. And in managing yourself to your goals, your experiences of *follow-through* will add to your self-confidence as well.

Next, the core skill of **Concentration**. If you're self-confident, your mind will more likely be at ease. Then, you can more naturally draw on everything within you – physical, psychological, spiritual – when you're riding, rather than having to fight your mind to do so. And that experience of tapping into your full potential, of being "in the zone" on a ride or in a race: that builds self-confidence. In contrast, if you're distracted, you may be missing opportunities to build skills, have success, or just plain feel good on the bike. Check out [the article on Concentration](#) for tips on how to improve it. Yogi said, "I can't think when I'm concentrating." Ah, the pleasures of an uncluttered mind.

How about the core skill of **Communication**? When you're self-confident, you'll tend to speak up. You won't be thrown off-center by conflict, or another person's opinion, or their unskillful behavior. But still, relationships affect performance in sport at times. If you're struggling at all with self-confidence, be sure you look within, but also assess whether the key people in your life – in or out of sport – are supporting or eroding your self-confidence. In particular, if you have a coach, ask yourself these four questions:

1. Does your coach really "get" you? Does s/he truly see your abilities, skills, strengths, weaknesses? If not, your coach's expectations of you – and behavior toward you – may be misaligned with who you actually are.

2. How does your coach talk to you about your successes? Does your coach say they're the result of things within your control or outside of your control, and what effect does that have on you? As the [U.S. Olympic Committee points out](#), the self-confident athlete sees successes as having a significant "permanent, personal, and controllable" component, eg. "My training paid off" vs. "I was just lucky." Which side is your coach on?

3. How does your coach talk to you about your setbacks? In a way that's just plain wrong for you (eg. making harsh comments about your personality) or are you just taking it too hard? Does your coach see your setback as permanent (look for words like "never" or "always"), personal, and *uncontrollable*? Or does your coach see the setback as temporary, due at least in part to things beyond your control?

4. Does your coach truly believe in you? And is your behavior and performance confirming their expectations?

If you don't like your answers to these questions, it may be time for a heart-to-heart with your coach. If you *do* like your answers, it may be time to tell your coach. (Or, at least deliver some chocolate!)

Now, on to the core skill of **Effective Self-Talk**. What kind of coach are you for yourself? Ask *yourself* the four questions above. (Alert readers may notice a Passover theme here.) Sufficient self-confidence tends to fuel self-talk that supports and adds to, rather than detracts from, your performance. A lack of self-confidence can fuel a view of yourself (not to mention others) that is negative, judgmental, and pessimistic. And that tends to erode self-confidence. The degree to which you encourage yourself, support yourself, visualize yourself succeeding, acknowledge your progress and successes, and just plain stop any negative self-talk: all of these – and more – are reflections of your relationship with yourself.

There may be people in your life who you would like to relate to you more skillfully. Sometimes the best way to influence that is to do the same for yourself. To paraphrase Gandhi: Be the coach you want to see in the world.

Next, the fifth core skill: **Managing Emotions**, particularly the athlete's #1 nemesis: anxiety (and its siblings: stress, nerves, fear, tension, worry, and pressure). Self-confidence evokes positive emotions, which are often wonderfully effective counterweights to anxiety, and tend to make it easier to manage anxiety when it arises. And when you feel the sadness, frustration, or disappointment of setbacks? Self-confidence helps you handle and metabolize those feelings. On the other hand, lower self-confidence can open the door for more anxiety, and a sufficient amount of ongoing, debilitating anxiety can wear away self-confidence. Plus, if the afflictive emotions from setbacks are getting "stuck" in your system, that may erode self-confidence as well. Go back to [the article on Managing Emotions](#), and perhaps the articles on [Self-Awareness](#) and [Handling Pressure](#), for some ideas on how to improve your skills here.

Going Deeper, For Intrepid Self-Explorers

There's one other source of self-confidence I'd like to mention, and it's not for the faint of heart: self-worth.

I recently read Bill Strickland's harrowing and ultimately redemptive new book, *Ten Points*. With deeply moving, edge-of-the-saddle writing, Bill explains how he used his cycling to help him overcome the shame created by an abusive childhood. An excerpt:

"I fought the thing inside me and rode when I could, as much as I could, as much as a responsible husband with a new daughter and what felt like an important job could manage. And when I couldn't ride, I was terrified. I could feel something stirring in my chest, awakening from the sleep that cycling fatigued it into."

He later names it:

"Simple shame, that was all. That was the unbearable thing that had destroyed who knows how many generations of my family, an emotion that for some reason the first abused ancestor of mine must have found unendurable unless it was transformed into a grand curse, something that could be boasted about, that could be a source of twisted pride, that could be passed along like a sick heirloom. My childhood was not a curse, nor a destiny, just something shameful that happened to me a long time ago."

Whether in sport or in other aspects of our lives, many of us have had experiences of embarrassment, guilt, and shame. From being picked last for the schoolyard team over and over again, to the most heinous acts of abuse, these feelings have a way of creating a stranglehold around self-worth, and as a result, self-confidence. For any of you who know this to be true, cycling offers a way through, and perhaps a way out, to freedom.

In all of your efforts to build self-confidence, I wish you success.



Marvin Zauderer leads the Mental Training program at [Whole Athlete](#), a performance center in Marin County, California that provides a comprehensive set of coaching, testing, fitting, and consulting services to amateur and professional athletes. He is a [licensed psychotherapist](#), [USA Cycling Level 2 Coach](#), and Masters road racer for [Synergy Racing](#). You can email comments and questions to him at marvinz@pobox.com.