



DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING SPORT-CONFIDENCE: LEARNING FROM ELITE ATHLETES

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:



ALEXA
AGE: 14



HATHAWAY
BROWN
SCHOOL
AGES: 14–15



SUA
AGE: 15



YUQING
AGE: 15

Have you noticed how you can feel very confident in some sporting situations but in others, usually at the worst possible moment, that confidence can suddenly disappear? When athletes feel confident, they are focused on the task, feel relaxed, and commit fully to decisions—all of which help them perform well. However, when they do not feel confident, they sometimes focus on the wrong things, doubt themselves, feel nervous, and often make poor decisions, which often results in poorer performances. In this article, we talk about a study that investigated what young elite athletes feel confident about, where they get their confidence from, and what reduces their confidence. The results help to explain why the confidence of young athletes often fluctuates and, importantly, gives us clues about how to develop and maintain sport-confidence.

SPORT-CONFIDENCE

The belief, or degree of certainty, that athletes have about their ability to be successful in sport.

APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGIST

An individual who works with athletes, coaches, and/or sporting organizations to enhance performance and wellbeing.

TYPES OF SPORT-CONFIDENCE

The personal and social factors that influence what an athlete is confident about in relation to their sport.

SOURCES OF SPORT-CONFIDENCE

The personal and social factors that athletes use to gain sport-confidence.

WHAT IS SPORT-CONFIDENCE?

The link between confidence and sports performance is something coaches, athletes, and commentators often talk about. For example, when talking about how important confidence was before playing in a World Cup final, a rugby World Cup winner said:

“We knew we could play (opposing team) week-in-week-out and beat them. Having confidence like that going into a big game makes a game so much simpler. You are not worried about things, you are not worried about your opposite number, you are not worried about what they are going to throw at you. You are just completely focused on your performance and your team’s performance. As long as we got that right we were going to win. So, from that side of it, it was just confidence, and the fact we knew we were not going to lose” [1].

Sport-confidence is the belief that athletes have about their ability to be successful in sport [2]. Scientific studies have consistently shown that athletes who believe they will be successful perform better in sport [3]. As a result, interest has grown in trying to understand sport-confidence and produce models (Figure 1) that enable **applied sport psychologists** and coaches to help athletes develop it. So far, most sport-confidence research has focused on exploring what athletes are confident about (**types of sport-confidence**), where they get their confidence from (**sources of sport-confidence**), and what reduces their confidence (**sport-confidence debilitating factors**).

Figure 1

This simplified model shows that where athletes get their sport-confidence from (sources of sport-confidence) influences what they are confident about (types of sport-confidence). This in turn affects their thoughts, feelings and behaviors—things that all influence sporting performance (Adapted from [2]).

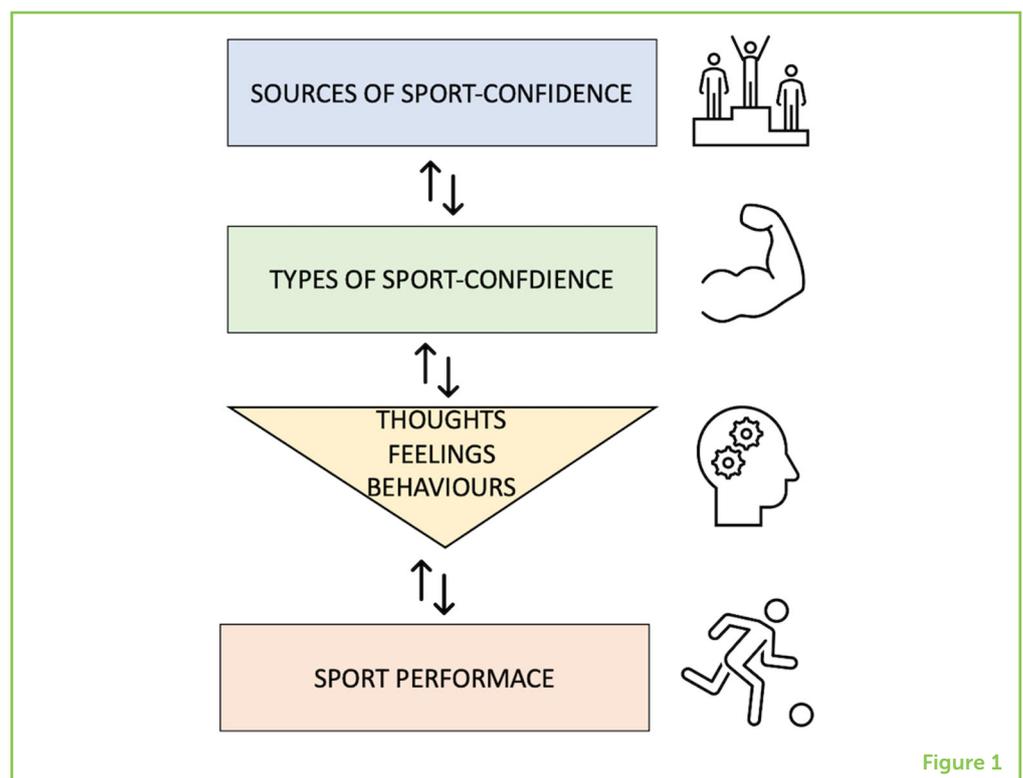


Figure 1

SPORT-CONFIDENCE DEBILITATING FACTORS

The personal and social factors that reduce or limit athletes sport-confidence.

TYPES, SOURCES, AND DEBILITATING FACTORS OF SPORT-CONFIDENCE

In 2007, an important research study was conducted with world-class sport performers (Olympic medallists and/or World Champions) that identified their types and sources of sport-confidence [1]. Findings suggested that world-class athletes were confident about achievement (winning or performing well), skill execution (physical and technical skills), physical factors (strength, fitness), psychological factors (controlling nerves, competing under pressure), feeling superior to their opposition (being quicker or more skilful), and tactical awareness (knowing when to attack in a race, reading the game). The world-class athletes sourced their sport-confidence from nine different areas (preparation, performance accomplishments, coaching, social support, innate factors, experience, competitive advantage, trust, self-awareness, and athlete specific factors), but indicated their confidence was mostly gained from high-quality mental and physical preparation, performance accomplishments (improving their sport skills or previous success), and the social support they received from the people around them (coaches, teammates, parents). Importantly, the findings supported the idea that the sources of an athlete's confidence influence what they are confident about. For example, when the world-class athletes physically and mentally prepared well (a source of sport-confidence) they were more confident about their skill execution (a type of sport-confidence).

In addition to types and sources of sport-confidence, more recent studies have looked at how sport-confidence influences world-class athletes' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as what reduces their levels of sport-confidence [4]. When the world-class athletes felt confident, they were focused on the task, relaxed, and fully committed to decisions. However, when they did not feel confident, they sometimes focused on the wrong things, doubted themselves, felt nervous, and often made poor decisions. The factors that debilitated sport-confidence included poor performance (like playing badly in a competition), poor preparation/training, injury or illness, poor coaching, pressure and expectations from others, and psychological factors (such as focusing on uncontrollable things, like the performance of an opponent).

EXPLORING YOUNG ATHLETES' SPORT-CONFIDENCE: NEW DISCOVERIES

Although we know a reasonable amount about world-class athletes' sport-confidence, until very recently we knew very little about younger athletes' sport-confidence. It seemed that young people might base their sport-confidence on a small number of sources, such as performance accomplishments and positive feedback from coaches.

CONFIDENCE PROFILING

A method of measuring and understanding an individual athlete's types, sources, and debilitating factors of sport-confidence.

However, as psychologists, we must be more confident (excuse the pun!) that our hypotheses are supported by research. Therefore, in 2019, we used a technique called **confidence profiling** with a sample of elite academy soccer players in the UK and made some new discoveries about their types, sources, and debilitating factors [5].

MEASURING SPORT-CONFIDENCE: CONFIDENCE PROFILING

Measuring sport-confidence can be challenging. In the past, researchers have used questionnaires that include confidence-related statements (like, "I usually gain confidence in my sport when I improve my skills") which athletes rate on a numbered scale—for example from 1 (not at all important) to 7 (high importance). One problem with this method is that it assumes everyone gains confidence from the same source. To overcome this, researchers developed **confidence profiling**, a technique in which athletes complete a diary and a follow-up interview to capture their specific types and sources of sport-confidence and any confidence-debilitating factors they may experience [6]. This approach allows sport psychologists to obtain key information about athletes' sport-confidence.

STUDY RESULTS: FEWER SOURCES AND TYPES OF SPORT-CONFIDENCE

The results from our study (Figure 2) suggest that the confidence of elite young athletes shows some similarities to that of world-class athletes. For example, consistent with world-class athletes, young elite athletes were confident about their ability to perform specific skills (passing, positioning, shooting), physical factors (speed, work rate, strength), and some psychological factors (ability to handle pressure, ability to communicate, ability to lead). However, the young elite soccer players were not confident about achievement or being better than the opposition. In terms of sources of sport-confidence, young athletes gained confidence from their accomplishments and the support (positive feedback, encouragement, advice) they received from their parents, friends, and coaches. The quote below highlights how important accomplishments are during competition:

"Once I am passing well, I normally play well. When I have put 3, 4, 5 in a row together, that is when I start to grow in confidence. That is like the heartbeat of my confidence passing" [5].

Preparation was also a widely used source of sport-confidence. However, young players mostly relied on physical rather than psychological preparation. Some young athletes in our study also gained confidence from innate factors (natural ability) and vicarious

Figure 2

Types, sources, and debilitating factors of sport-confidence in elite young athletes. The sources of sport-confidence influence their types of sport-confidence—and confidence debilitating factors can influence both these things.

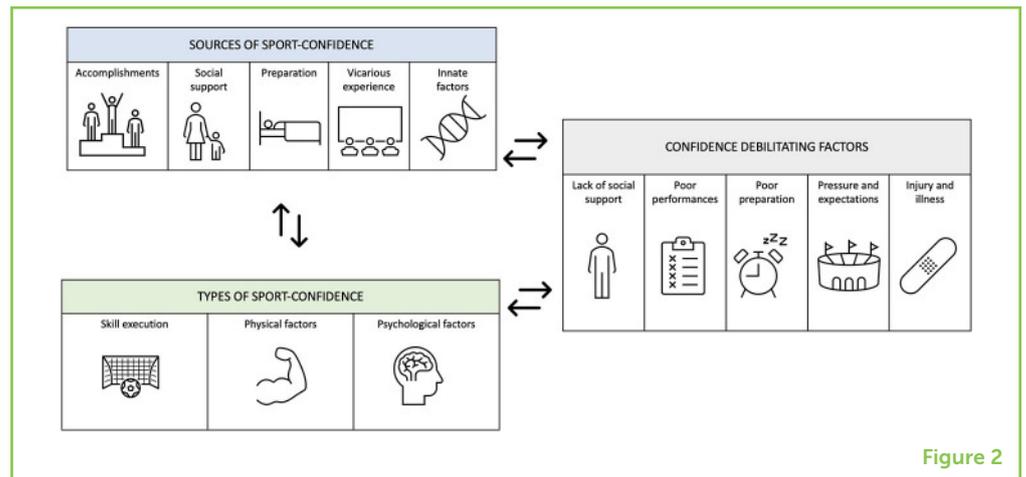


Figure 2

experience (watching other people successfully perform a task). As one player suggested:

“Observing better players and learning from what they do gives you confidence when you go away and do what they do, maybe not to the same level, but you can take parts of their game and put it into yours” [5].

Finally, the confidence-debilitating factors identified by young elite academy soccer players included a lack of social support, poor performance, poor preparation, pressure and expectations, and injury/illness [5]. As you might have noticed, some of these confidence-debilitating factors (like poor preparation) are the opposites of the sources (good preparation) from which they gained their confidence.

DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING SPORT-CONFIDENCE

Our study suggested that, compared to world-class athletes, young elite athletes are confident about fewer things and gain their sport-confidence from a relatively small number of sources. This may help explain why young athletes' confidence levels often go up and down. For example, if a young footballer's confidence is solely based on scoring goals and that player has not scored for a few matches, their confidence will drop and they may start to doubt their ability, feel pressured, and make bad decisions. The problem here is that the player's confidence is based solely on one relatively uncontrollable confidence source—scoring goals.

A simple way to develop and maintain sport-confidence is to broaden the base of sport-confidence sources used. As mentioned above, even though scoring a goal or receiving positive feedback from a coach will increase confidence in the short term, those things do not always happen, so players should not rely on them. We have

learnt that world-class athletes use lots of other controllable sources (meaning sources they can do something about) to develop and maintain their confidence. These include working on areas that need improvement during training, watching and learning from others who perform skills well (teammates or other elite athletes), and mentally and physically preparing for competitions by sleeping well, recovering, eating healthily, imagining previous or future successes, and using positive self-talk [1]. These things also help world-class athletes to develop effective coping strategies, so they can perform under pressure and ensure their confidence remains stable and steady when they need it most! In conclusion, these insights show how both personal and social factors (e.g., age, level, coaching behaviors) play a role in influencing sport-confidence and in doing so can help to develop interventions aimed at developing and maintaining sport-confidence in young athletes.

ORIGINAL SOURCE ARTICLE

Thomas, O., Thrower, S. N., Lane, A., and Thomas, J. 2019. Types, sources, and debilitating factors of sport confidence in elite early adolescent academy soccer players. *J. Appl. Sport Psychol.* 33:192–217. doi: 10.1080/10413200.2019.1630863

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YOUNG REVIEWERS



ALEXA, AGE: 14

Alexa is a secondary 3 student attending a highschool in Montreal, Canada. Alexa uses she/her pronouns. She is looking into studying biology and is interested in fungi and foraging. She has a pet cat named Carlos and a couple fish. Alexa used to play the flute and the piano but now enjoys expressing herself by listening to her favorite artists. She also recently discovered her passion for drawing.



HATHAWAY BROWN SCHOOL, AGES: 14–15

We are students from the Science Research & Engineering Program at Hathaway Brown School. We enjoy learning about the peer review process, learning how to communicate science to different audiences, and offering our suggestions. We are helped by our Science Mentor, Crystal Miller.



SUA, AGE: 15

I am a secondary 3 student who very much takes interest in all things science such as astronomy. I also enjoy drawing or listening to music in my free time.



YUQING, AGE: 15

Yuqing is a secondary 3 student in Montreal, Canada. She is interested in biology and astronomy and enjoys writing. She hopes to pursue a career in the medical field or become an astronaut. In her spare time, she plays the piano, skates, and chats with her friends.

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