

Confidence boost

In the first of two articles, Dr Brian Hemmings explains how to build a player's self-assurance.

It will come as no surprise to PGA teaching professionals that building confidence is one of the most common mental issues players face.

Over the years, however, I have found many misconceptions among both players and coaches as to how confidence can be developed. In this first article I will explain some simple ways how sport psychologists might set about this and suggest how PGA pros could adopt the same methods.

Self-confidence is defined as a belief that you can successfully perform a desired behaviour. Confident beliefs determine how a player will feel, think and behave. For example, confident players approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided. This outlook fosters a deep desire to practise and develop golf skills.

Confident players also set themselves challenging goals and maintain a strong commitment to them. They also heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure and often attribute failure to insufficient effort ('I need to work harder') or a lack of knowledge and skills they can acquire.

This outlook produces more personal accomplishments and helps players focus on themselves and their efforts rather than on uncontrollable factors such as the conditions or other players. In short, confident players rarely seek excuses for poor performance.

Players' beliefs about their confidence can be developed by four main sources of influence: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal.

These operate in a hierarchy: performance accomplishments have a greater effect on confidence than vicarious experience, which in turn has a greater effect than verbal persuasion. This article focuses on the top two factors.

Performance Accomplishments

The most effective way of creating a strong sense of confidence is through mastery experiences. Successes build a robust belief in one's personal confidence. Performance accomplishments can be in the form of past results, statistics, or particularly through carefully structured practice goals. Clearly, competition successes can have a major impact on confidence, but coaches should not underestimate the confidence gained through effective goal-setting and well-structured practice that the player sees has direct relevance for on-course play.

The best way to achieve success is to set achievable goals and set up drills, challenges and games that help players improve their skills. Although obvious, it is important these are structured situations that bring a fair chance of success (and offer opportunities for feedback and coaching advice) and avoid placing players in situations where they are likely to fail.

Knowledge of simple goal-setting techniques will help you develop individual and group practices more effectively. When using goal setting, you should try to measure success in terms of player self-improvement rather than triumphs over others.

In short, performance accomplishment can be seen as the 'I've done it before, so I can do it again' form of confidence. It is the strongest form as it is based on practical experience of success. As a coach said to me recently, the most confident players are 'doers'.

The written confidence exercise presented here (in the form of an England flag) is a great way of getting players to become more aware of their recent accomplishments. While the flag design



Role models: Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods

may be inappropriate for your use, simply getting players to reflect on two or three strengths, relevant achievements, winter improvements, and what has gone well in preparation for the season is a useful and practical way of coaches helping players to gain a more confident mind-set.

Vicarious Experience

The second way of creating and strengthening confidence is through the vicarious experiences provided by other players. Seeing players of similar ability succeed by sustained effort raises belief in another player that they too possess the capabilities to master the skills needed to improve and be more successful.

The best way of obtaining positive vicarious experiences is to get players to observe other players who are close in ability to them. Even the greatest players have had role models – Tiger Woods used Jack Nicklaus' 18 major wins as an inspiration. But whoever your player chooses as their model, make sure they watch them practice or during their most influential and inspirational moments.

We learn so much through imitating successful models, so get them to spend time watching and learning their skills. Remember as a coach the use of appropriate models in demonstrations to players can also raise confidence when teaching groups.

In short, vicarious experience for confidence refers to 'if they can do it, then so can I'. Vicarious experience can also refer to seeing yourself succeed, hence if players can visualise themselves executing certain shots, managing pressure, holing key putts and performing well these positive images can also have an effect on confidence.

Next month, part two of this article focuses on verbal persuasion and emotional arousal, with a team confidence exercise for you to try.

A Confident Frame of Mind	
Strengths: •Off the tee hit most fairways •Mentally tough •Good course management	Improvements: •Putting technique so much stronger •Fitter/stronger than best season •Warm up well structured
Achievements: •Won order of merit last year •Lowest over 3 rounds total •Matchplay champion	Preparation: •Skills challenges, practice so much more organised •Shooting low regularly now
My Edge I Never Give Up! I'm a fighter	



Dr. Brian Hemmings has been lead psychologist to England Golf since 1998, is author of the book 'Mental Toughness for Golf: The Minds of Winners', and is author of a fully online Golf Psychology Coaching Certificate course (see www.golfpsychologycoaching.com for full details). For a price reduction type in the promotional code PGA to reduce the price from £295 to £219.