

Confident players play better soccer

What to do — and what not to do — to boost players' self-confidence
by Sigurd Baumann, professional sports psychologist

Self-confidence: Everybody knows you can't succeed without it, whether in your personal life, at work or on the soccer field (for professional players, of course, these last two areas are one and the same). Still, German soccer fans and reporters were astonished a few years ago when Jürgen Klinsmann, then the coach of the national

team, described how important he thought it was: "Soccer is built on self-confidence," he said, explaining that it was his job to build his team's confidence step by step "so they have the necessary conviction going into the World Cup."

Whether as coaches or as players, all of us have experienced the powerful effect con-

fidence can have on match performance. But do we work to build our players' confidence — not just when things are going well, but in a crisis too? Sigurd Baumann gives us tips on how to develop and strengthen self-confidence.

Self-awareness and self-confidence

We often blame a lackluster performance on a failure of self-confidence, an unwillingness to take risks or a lack of creativity: for example, "Losing that game destroyed our self-confidence!" or "First we have to rebuild our confidence." And we also like to credit our victories to our "unshakable confidence."

So we know that self-confidence is an important prerequisite for success in soccer. And obviously, it's not permanently installed in us or our players, because we can gain it by winning today and lose it again tomorrow. However, not all players are subject to these ups and downs, and basic self-awareness plays an important role here. This quality is based on a general awareness of oneself and one's abilities. A person with a strong awareness of him- or herself possesses the inner assurance necessary to find satisfactory solutions, even in unknown and difficult situations. When we say, for example, "I'm a good soccer player," this has nothing to do with a particular opponent, position or game situation.

Self-awareness, therefore, is our answer to the question "Who am I?" It's a self-image formed from our upbringing and our life experience. **Self-confidence**, on the other hand, has more to do with our assessment of our abilities in a particular situation.

For example, a soccer player may have great confidence in his athletic ability, but in social situations — press conferences, public ap-

pearances or decisions in everyday life — he is tentative and insecure. When faced with difficulties, defeats or disappointments, this type of player is more likely to give up and walk away than a player with a greater degree of general self-awareness. The latter type of player is much less likely to doubt himself, even when he fails; instead he keeps doing all he can to succeed.

Self-confidence may be understood as an emotional attitude to oneself. It is based on past experiences, and its stability is profoundly influenced by general self-awareness. It is therefore subject to a variety of fluctuations: In some players it may drop almost to zero and have to be built back up again. It can also be described as situational or task-specific self-awareness. And in turn, self-confidence strengthened by overcoming specific difficult challenges can increase general self-awareness. This is especially true for young players. It's the coach's job to properly assess a player's self-confidence and constantly try to build it up and keep it up.

You can accomplish a lot just by talking to players one-on-one.

© AXEL HEIMKEN



Creating and strengthening self-confidence

Figure 1 gives an overview of the factors that can help coaches and players develop and strengthen self-confidence.

Good physical condition

Fitness is one of the most important prerequisites for self-confidence and motivation. For most players, being out of shape is a burden, destabilizing their attitude about themselves and making them less certain of succeeding.

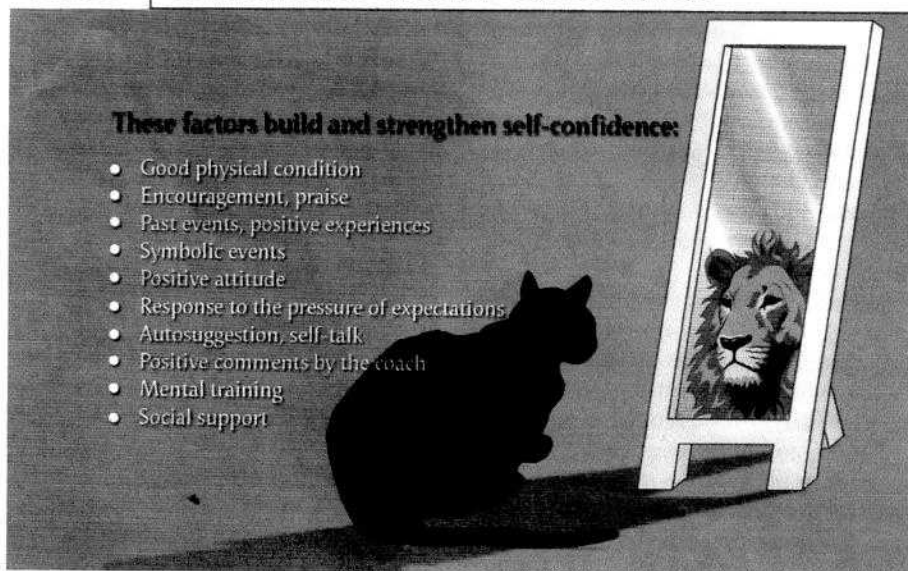
Encouragement and praise

Encouragement is most necessary when positive experiences are lacking and negative emotions such as resignation and frustration appear. In these cases, even minimal encouragement can have a powerful effect. Your choice of words plays an important role. Encouragement should be concrete in order to restore players' sense of their own abilities: "Today you showed that you've been learning

How to praise effectively:

- Praise more often at the beginning of the learning process than later on.
- Relate praise to specific actions, to heighten awareness of ability.
- The more immediate the praise, the more powerful its effects: "That's right!" "Keep it up!"

FIG. 1 INFLUENCES ON SELF-CONFIDENCE



at practice and that you're able to use what you've learned in a real match. That's something you can be very proud of!"

Praise can have an encouraging effect, especially on younger players. For them, praise can also be an expression of personal esteem. At higher levels, however, praise should be more specifically related to athletic ability.

Praise must be valid, i.e. based in reality and supported by positive experiences provided or arranged during practice. However, even well-meaning praise can be counterproductive. For instance, as soon as a timid player senses that you have expectations he may not

be able to fulfill ("You're a good player; you can do it!"), he may develop a fear of failure ("I'll never be able to do it!").

What not to do

To avoid undermining players' self-confidence, you should also avoid the following (see below):

- "Good ... but" statements
- Criticizing the person, not the action
- "If ... then" statements

Three big mistakes that weaken self-confidence instead of strengthening it:

"Good ... but ... !"

These statements are usually meant well, but they can reinforce self-doubt because in the player's mind, they negate or devalue the praise. For example:

"Good job getting through, but your pass wasn't so good."

Better:

Instead, clearly separate the positive from the negative and the past from the future, e.g. "Good dribbling — you did a good job of getting through!" This reinforces what the player did right. Then, at some point later on, you can point out the error: "We're going to work harder on your passing now; you have room to improve."

"Stop messing around!"

On a technique exercise, a player tries and fails a number of times. The coach's reaction is dismissive: "Stop messing around! Weren't you watching when I showed you?"

The player perceives this statement as a judgment on his personality: "You're obviously incompetent!" or "You just don't get it!"

Better:

"Let me show you again. Pay close attention to this body fake." The coach corrects the execution, and the player knows exactly what to work on. He is aware of his progress, which increases his self-confidence.

"If ... then ... !"

When the conscious and unconscious minds are out of sync, an internal conflict can arise. "If you play your position right, you'll be in the next game too." This type of conditional statement can provoke unconscious fears or resistance. The conscious mind says, "I'll do it!" The unconscious mind asks, "What if I don't?"

A demand that is not accepted by the unconscious mind creates internal opposition, which can lead to hesitation.

Better:

Don't attach conditions to the desired behavior: "You know how to play your position. Do you have any questions or problems that we should discuss?"

Past events and positive experiences

Self-confidence is largely the result of positive experiences. Therefore you should always consider the effects your exercises and training methods are likely to have. A rigid approach characterized by demonstration, imitation and correction may produce rapid results but is unlikely to reinforce players' self-confidence in game situations. That's why training activities should feature or include the following aspects:

- independent application of previously learned techniques in structured game situations, e.g. numbers-up attacking, and
- independent experimentation with various possibilities in unstructured game situations, e.g. creating passing options.

By releasing players from the dominant authority of the coach in this way, we help make them conscious of their ability to make decisions for themselves. By arranging and structuring their own positive experiences, players focus their awareness on their own abilities and become better at assessing themselves.

Positive experiences are also created when difficult tasks are perceived as challenges. Do your players have the skills and the self-awareness or confidence they need to meet the challenge — a tough opponent, for example? If not, be careful! If a task makes players nervous, they'll play it safe and avoid risks instead of taking chances and going for the goal.

Symbolic experiences

(*"If they can do it ..."*)

If players have no experiences of their own to fall back on, they can still gain self-confi-

dence by watching or hearing about the successes of other individuals or teams like them. The idea behind these symbolic experiences is: "If they can do it, I can too!" Comparing one's own abilities with those of others enables players to draw conclusions about how they would perform in the same situation. This method of building confidence works especially well when preparing for matches, but it can be quickly diminished by players' actual (potentially negative) experiences.

The right attitude

The term "attitude" plays a major role in soccer. We often hear or read that a player or an entire team has an attitude that is "attack-oriented" or "defense-oriented," "aggressive" or "nervous," "right" or "wrong."

"Attitude" refers to an internal willingness to think, feel and act in a certain way.

Attitude guides behavior, even when players are unaware of it. However, they can make themselves aware of it at any time.

An attack-oriented player takes advantage of every opportunity to score, while a defense-oriented player concentrates on keeping opponents from scoring.

A stable attitude is one that is centered on your ultimate objective. Awareness of the objective lets players focus completely on the match and keeps them from underestimating a supposedly weaker opponent. Speaking of opponents, there are two basic attitudes toward them — see the box below.

Dealing with expectations

Imagination, self-confidence and the willingness to take risks have the best chance to develop when players' freedom of choice is uninhibited by outside influences. When players are performing for the benefit of someone else, e.g. for coaches, club directors or spectators, they face feelings of guilt and obligation (especially in youth and amateur soccer) that can cause them to fail.

"If you think I absolutely have to win this game, that's your problem."

Boris Becker used the quote above to free himself from the pressure of media expectations, demonstrating a healthy self-awareness that could not be shaken, even by defeat. Of course, he was also one of those athletes who are stimulated and motivated by public pressure — thanks precisely to his self-awareness and his focus on success.

Timid, inexperienced players with low self-confidence, on the other hand, tend to be made extremely nervous by the expectations of others. The feeling of "I must" puts them on the defensive, which prevents attack-oriented thinking: They become more involved with themselves and their fears than with the task at hand. And of course, the coach's expectations fall into this category as well.

A fundamental principle of athletic performance is: Players must be able to immediately turn thoughts into actions.

Attitude to self and opponents (underestimation/overestimation)

One's attitude to oneself ...

... and to one's own abilities should always be positive. In particular, players' assessments of themselves should never be dependent on how they do in match play. That's because match performance is fairly unstable: You win some, you lose some. You shouldn't get too excited when you do win, and you shouldn't condemn yourself when you lose. It's much smarter to figure out what went wrong and use your defeats as opportunities to learn for the next match. Those who spend too much time and energy worrying about their mistakes easily lose their self-confidence.

One's attitude to one's opponent ...

... has a great deal of influence on one's self-confidence and on whether players make full use of their abilities.

Underestimating an opponent tends to create false confidence. Players concentrate less, as giving 100 percent seems unnecessary. If the opponent plays better than expected, they usually can't readjust their attitudes in time.

Overestimating an opponent leads to a decrease in self-confidence. Players become less aggressive and let the opponent control the game.

To go into a game with the "right" attitude to your opponents, focus on their specific strengths ("Martinez is fast; don't let him get

to the ball first"), weaknesses ("Wagner doesn't like playing defense, so get right in there if we win the ball") and unique characteristics ("Edwards tends to choke in the box, so stop him and block the path to the goal"). Insecure players need to know what they're up against and what they need to do.

Vague instructions are unhelpful, e.g. "Don't let Martinez get away from you," "Take advantage of Wagner's weakness on defense" or "Watch out for Edwards on penalty shots." Comments like these increase the challenge for insecure players, making them even more insecure because they have to figure out for themselves what they're supposed to do.

Therefore you should avoid unconditional commands like "you must" or "you must not." Like anxiety, this type of directive will prevent you from achieving the objectives embodied in the principle above (see also Fig. 2).

Self-talk and autosuggestion

Self-talk can set players up to play successfully. Players should conduct these internal conversations consciously so they remain aware of their objectives. You'll find examples and coaching tips in the box below.

Positive comments by the coach

By expressing yourself the right way, you can give players' self-talk a significant boost. As a general rule, your comments should be formulated in terms of specific objectives, giving players motivation and a sense of purpose that they can convert directly into action.


Again, it's important to avoid negative statements and complicated instructions. The easier it is for players to carry out your instructions, the more confidence they will have.

Mental training and visualization

Most likely you yourself have prepared for an important match by calling up mental images of past successes. Reviewing a series of events in detail is called visualization, and it's a form of mental training. It's a way for players to prepare for specific game situations such as free kicks, headers and crosses. By training their ability to visualize, players can instantly call up scenes while playing.

FIG. 2 VERBALIZING YOUR EXPECTATIONS

If your thoughts aren't free, then neither are you!

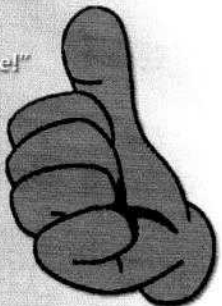


Wrong

- "I have to win!"
- "I can't afford to blow this!"
- "Hopefully I won't make a mistake!"

Right

- "I'm going to take advantage of every opportunity!"
- "I can get through this!"
- "I'm totally focused!"



And mental images can unleash powerful emotions in a way that words cannot. Repeated associations of images of successful play with feelings of self-confidence, accomplishment and happiness can aid significantly in dealing with actual game situations.

Social support

Support is especially important for players who are rebuilding their confidence, e.g. after

It's easier to believe in yourself when you're not the only one!

recovering from a serious injury or an "off" season.

Coaches, teammates and friends must work to nip self-doubt in the bud. Nothing is more unsettling for a troubled player than the feeling that his coaches and teammates have stopped believing in him. There is no substitute for personal respect (which has nothing to do with performance) as an aid to regaining lost or shaken confidence.

	Wrong	Right
Self-talk	<p>Thought patterns colored by self-doubt or overly focused on opponents distract players from what they're doing and lower their self-confidence.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "This player's too fast for me!" • "I'm totally outclassed!" • "I guess we don't have a chance." • "There I go making the same mistake again." • "Coach is upset with me anyway." 	<p>Focus your thoughts on the task at hand, i.e. on the game and not on the score.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I know I can shut this player down!" • "Let's play a fast combination and give them a surprise!" • "We're going to work on putting receivers in position now." • "I don't care what these players' names are; I'm just going to focus on how they play."
Coaching	<p>Focusing on what to avoid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We can't afford to take risks." • "We can't let them score." • "We can't risk getting a yellow card." • "Don't be so nervous!" • "Don't play a square pass!" • "Don't get distracted!" 	<p>Focusing on what to do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We're not afraid to attack!" • "We're going for the goal!" • "We're aggressive, but we play fair." • "Go ahead and dribble!" • "Pass it forward!" • "Focus on what you're doing."