

Cognitive Techniques for Building Confidence and Enhancing Performance

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If you think you can do a thing or think you can't do a thing, you're right.

—Henry Ford

But with hard work, with belief, with confidence and trust in yourself and those around you, there are no limits.

—Michael Phelps, 2008, winner of 14 Olympic gold medals

The most consistent finding in peak performance literature is the direct correlation between self-confidence and success (see Chapter 9). Athletes who are truly outstanding are self-confident. Their confidence has been developed over many years and is the direct result of effective thinking and frequent experiences in which they have been successful. Because developing confidence is such a high priority for athletes and coaches who wish to become successful, understanding confidence and how to enhance it is an equally high priority for sport psychologists working in applied settings.

What we think and say to ourselves in practice and competition is critical to performance.

Confident athletes think about themselves and the action at hand in a different way than those who lack confidence. They have learned that the conscious mind is not always an ally, that it must be disciplined, just as their bodies have been disciplined, to respond effectively in the heat of competition. We all spend vast amounts of time talking to ourselves. Much of the time we are not even aware of this internal dialogue, much less its content. Nevertheless, thoughts directly affect feelings and ultimately actions:

THOUGHTS → FEELINGS → BEHAVIOR

Inappropriate or misguided thinking usually leads to negative feelings and poor performance, just

as appropriate or positive thinking leads to enabling feelings and good performance (Kendall, Hrycaiko, Martin, & Kendall, 1990; McPherson, 2000; Van Raalte et al., 1995).

Athletes who are truly outstanding are self-confident, and this confidence is not an accident. This chapter's central thesis is that confidence in competitive sport is the result of particular thinking habits. These thinking habits, when consistently practiced until they have become automatic and natural, enable athletes to both retain and benefit from the experiences in which they have been successful, and release or restructure the memories and feelings from the less successful experiences. The result of this selective perception is the priceless trait called confidence.

Confident athletes think they can, and *they do*. They never give up. They typically are characterized by positive self-talk, images, and dreams. They imagine themselves winning and being successful. They focus on successfully mastering a task rather than worrying about performing poorly or the negative consequences of failure. This predisposition to keep one's mind on the positive aspects of one's life and sport performance, even in the face of setbacks and disappointments, is a hallmark of the successful athlete, a trait Seligman (1991) refers to as "learned optimism." Having learned to be optimistic, these confident athletes get the most from their abilities. Their confidence programs them for successful performance.

If confidence is so critical to successful performance and personal growth, what can coaches and sport psychologists do to help promote self-confidence within their athletes? Many of the earlier chapters in this book have provided, either directly or indirectly, some answers to this question. For example, seeing improvement in physical skill and providing for a history of successful experiences builds both confidence and the expectation of future success. Coaches who observe the learning and performance guidelines outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 will be more likely to maximize successful skill development in their athletes. Effective coach-athlete interactions, as illustrated in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, are

likely to enhance each athlete's sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Practices that maximize such growth in athletes, whether the growth be in physical skills or personal development, lead to a more positive self-concept and increased self-confidence.

In this chapter we discuss techniques for improving confidence and performance by learning to use and control thoughts or cognitions appropriately. Developing and maintaining confidence for high-level competition requires that athletes recognize and then deliberately step away from many of the dysfunctional thinking habits they may have developed over the years. It is important that athletes understand how the mind works, how it affects their feelings and actions, and ultimately how it can be disciplined. Initially thoughts may appear to occur spontaneously and involuntarily—thus, beyond control. With the skills of intentional thinking, athletes can control their thoughts. They can learn to use self-talk to facilitate learning and performance. They can also learn to replace self-defeating thoughts with positive ones—thoughts that build confidence and the expectation of success. Such positive thought processes can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Key Definitions: Confidence, Mental Toughness, Optimism, Self-Efficacy

Most dictionary definitions of *confidence* will include phrases such as "a state of assurance" and "a belief in one's powers." The image of any great athlete (e.g., Tiger Woods, Serena Williams, Tim Duncan) usually includes this assurance. Joe Morgan, the former major league baseball all-star, expressed this thought when he said, "To be a star and stay a star, I think you've got to have a *certain air of arrogance about you, a cockiness, a swagger on the field* [italics added] that says, 'I can do this and you can't stop me.' I know that I play with this air of arrogance, but I think it's lacking in a lot of guys who have the talent to be stars"

(Ferguson, 1991, p. 425). For many, confidence can be thought of as a certain level of healthy arrogance.

The idea of "mental toughness" is certainly related to the concept of confidence. Through a series of interviews with international caliber athletes, Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton (2002) arrived at a definition of mental toughness as "the natural or developed psychological edge . . . that enables you to cope better than your competitors with the demands of performance . . . and to remain more determined, focused, confident, and in control." Furthermore they identified the most important attribute of mental toughness as "an unshakable belief in your ability to achieve your competitive goals." This study reinforces the importance of belief in oneself to the concept of confidence and also emphasizes that it can be developed through time and training.

A related concept important to the understanding of confidence is optimism, defined as "a tendency to expect the best possible outcome or dwell on the most hopeful aspects of a situation." In the world of sport and competitive performance, the propensity to look for opportunities to score, to win, to excel, regardless of the circumstances, is indispensable for success. Most important, any athlete or performer can systematically cultivate and develop this optimistic tendency, as the following pages will describe.

A fourth related concept is self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), which refers to the conviction that one can successfully execute the specific behavior required to produce the desired outcome (see Chapter 4 for a discussion of self-efficacy and its role in motivation and performance). It is useful to think of sport confidence as a relatively global concept, referring to one's overall attitude toward one's sport. Think of self-efficacy as a more specific type of confidence, referring to particular skills, techniques, and situations. Taken together, the concepts of confidence, mental toughness, optimism, and self-efficacy make up both a global and specific belief that "I can do it," which is essential for success, especially for athletic success. Without this belief, one automatically concedes an advantage to the opponent.

Perhaps the best example of the powerful impact of beliefs on performance occurred over a half century ago when Roger Bannister, a young English medical student, made history by breaking one of sport's most fabled physical and psychological barriers—running a mile in less than 4 minutes. Many today consider his run one of the defining athletic achievements of the 20th century. Until his 1954 race, it was considered physically and mentally impossible for the body to endure the punishment of such a feat. Individuals had even written treatises on why the body was physiologically incapable of running the mile in under 4 minutes. Bannister, however, believed that the mile could be run in under 4 minutes and, equally important, he was the person who would do it. He achieved the impossible not merely by physical practice but also by rehearsing in his head breaking through the 4-minute barrier so often and with so much emotional intensity that he programmed his mind and body to believe. What people do not realize, though, is that the greatest impact of his feat was on others. Within the next year, 37 runners broke the 4-minute barrier. The only thing that had changed was their belief system!

Common Misconceptions about Confidence

Misconception 1: Either You Have It or You Don't

Some people believe that confidence is an inherited disposition or trait that cannot be changed by training, practice, or experience. The truth is that the high self-confidence seen in outstanding athletes is not an accident or a random genetic occurrence over which athletes have no control. Instead, confidence is the result of a consistently constructive thinking process that allows athletes to do two things: (1) hang on to and thus benefit from their successful experiences, and (2) let go of or deemphasize their less successful experiences. Thus athletes gain confidence in the same way that they gain other skills

or attributes—through practice and repetition of the proper habits.

Misconception 2: Only Positive Feedback Can Build Confidence

Although positive feedback from teammates, parents, and coaches certainly helps to build confidence, it is possible to selectively perceive and reinterpret criticism, sarcasm, and negative comments as stimulating challenges and use them to build confidence. Instead of being mentally destroyed, athletes who choose to respond by reinterpreting the comments in a constructive way or using other active strategies to combat them may actually *gain* confidence. Thus, with the right attitude and thinking skills, athletes can gain confidence even under these circumstances or when overlooked or underestimated.

Misconception 3: Success Always Builds Confidence

It is generally true that “nothing succeeds like success,” but this is not the whole story. Successful high school athletes do not always make an easy transition to college competition, despite their years of previous success. Other successful athletes may lose their confidence because their past success becomes a form of pressure from which they cannot escape. Still other athletes who experience great success use their perceptual abilities to focus only on their weaknesses and to remember only their failures. Thus, successful athletes may limit their future success because they do not have the level of confidence that their accomplishments would suggest.

Logic would assert that confidence follows competence, that after having performed and accomplished at a certain level, confidence inevitably follows. Although seemingly obvious and often true, success or competence in no way guarantees confidence. Take the example of Michael Strahan, All-Pro defensive end for the New York Giants. Despite making 10 sacks and playing at his all-time best during the 1998 season, Strahan was plagued by self-doubt: “I thought I sucked, and we were losing. It was like I had no hope”

(King, 2001). How could a player of such obvious and demonstrated competence be so lacking in confidence? The answer lies in the often illogical and irrational nature of the human mind. Strahan’s mind was apparently focused on his mistakes, misses, and losses, rather than on his sacks, tackles, and successes, even though he had ample successes in his immediate past to draw strength and optimism from. Only when he disciplined his thinking with regular mental training sessions that incorporated visualizations of success did Strahan’s confidence come back, and with that confidence his Pro Bowl season, and his long-term dominance, were virtually assured.

Misconception 4: Confidence Equals Outspoken Arrogance

Certain confident individuals in the world of sport are outspoken and brash, but there are just as many who carry with them an equally powerful quiet confidence. Names such as Muhammad Ali, Charles Barkley, and Deion Sanders are associated with loud and often abrasive levels of confidence, but other great athletes such as Emmitt Smith, Joe Montana, and Jackie Joyner-Kersey are every bit as confident on the inside while conveying politeness and modesty on the outside. For many athletes, difficulty in separating the quiet, internal, private confidence needed for success from the noisy, external, public confidence often portrayed in athletes by the media is a serious impediment. It is crucial for athletes to realize that they can be confident without being considered conceited or arrogant.

Misconception 5: Mistakes Inevitably Destroy Confidence

The greatest difficulty in gaining confidence is the fact that sports are played by imperfect human beings who periodically make mistakes. Too many athletes respond to their mistakes with weakened or diminished confidence. Ironically, these athletes actually *lose* confidence as they gain experiences playing their sport because they selectively attend more to the mistakes and errors that are inevitable in sport. Because of this

shortcoming, many athletes become more cautious, more tentative, and more fearful as they advance from the beginning to the end of their years in competitive sport. Other athletes build confidence despite repeated failures because they use their perceptual abilities to selectively attend to whatever small improvements and positive experiences occur. In fact, such positive self-monitoring and focus provide the foundation for intervention programs that have successfully enhanced performance (e.g., Kirschenbaum, Owens, & O'Connor, 1999). Thus athletes can learn to gain confidence even while making mistakes, and this is what the greatest athletes have always done.

Taken collectively, the preceding points all indicate that *confidence is a result of how one thinks, what one focuses on, and how one reacts to the events in one's life.*

Prerequisites for Gaining Confidence

Now that we have dispelled several myths about confidence and shown that confidence is within anyone's grasp, how does one gain confidence? The following four prerequisites provide a solid foundation for building confidence:

1. Understand the interaction of thought and performance.
2. Cultivate honest self-awareness.
3. Develop an optimistic explanatory style.
4. Embrace a psychology of excellence.

Understand the Interaction of Thought and Performance

The thoughts we have of our ability, of the demands we face, and of the environment we happen to be in determine to a large extent the way we feel inside at any given moment. Think "I have done this many times before," and you feel confident. Think "I am being taken advantage of," and you feel anger. Think "This practice is worthless," and you feel impatient and unmotivated.

These immediate feelings, in turn, directly affect performance, because they produce objectively verifiable changes in muscle tension, blood flow, hormone production, and attentional focus. For example, thoughts that anticipate failure lead to feelings of anxiety and, among other things, overall muscle tension and inappropriate attentional focus. When the wrong muscles are tense, or the right muscles are tense at the wrong times, coordination and timing are disrupted. The confident athlete deliberately directs his or her thoughts onto those aspects of the environment and self that produce powerful, confident feelings, so as to produce better and better performance.

Cultivate Honest Self-Awareness

Striving for control over one's thoughts and feelings is a process demanding honest self-awareness. Athletes must commit to becoming aware of what they say to themselves, what the circumstances are when the self-talk occurs, and what consequence follow from the self-talk. One must be willing to honestly pursue the question, "Am I really thinking in a way that will give me the best chance of success?" For most people who play sport the real opponent is within themselves in the form of ineffective cognitive habits. Athletes with great confidence have learned to win the battle with themselves. This is the most difficult battle that anyone will ever try to win, and it is also the challenge that makes sport such a great experience with so much potential for self-development and satisfaction.

Develop an Optimistic Explanatory Style

The term **explanatory style** refers to the way an athlete internally responds to and explains both the good and bad events that occur in his or her life. According to Seligman (1991), explanatory style is the hallmark of whether an individual is an optimist or a pessimist. This habitual style of interpreting events is developed in childhood and adolescence and "stems directly from your view of your place in the world, whether you think you are valuable and deserving, or worthless and hopeless" (Seligman, 1991, p. 98). The

concept of explanatory style is especially applicable to the competitive sport environment, in that sport participation inevitably involves setbacks, obstacles, and disappointments to which an athlete must respond optimistically if he or she is to retain confidence and continue investing time and energy. In the often hostile world of sport, explanatory style is a useful tool for helping athletes maintain optimism and confidence.

Explanatory style can be broken down into three dimensions. The first is **permanence**—the degree to which one feels events will repeat themselves and continue to affect one's life either negatively or positively. An athlete with an optimistic explanatory style will usually assume that a good or positive event, such as success, will repeat itself rather than be a fluke and they respond to bad events or setbacks with the explanation that they will not continue to occur, that they are isolated and rare. In contrast, the athlete with a negative explanatory style will tend to think that good events will not repeat themselves, but that bad events or misfortune will.

The second dimension is **pervasiveness**—the degree to which one feels that a particular experience will generalize to other contexts. The optimistic athlete will tend to assume that a good event or a success in one aspect of his or her game will positively affect other aspects, but that mistakes and difficulties will remain confined to their original context. A tennis player might assume on the basis of success with the first serve that the net game and ground strokes are also going to be successful. The more pessimistic athlete will tend to assume that a breakdown in one area of the game will spread to other areas and that successes will be limited to their original context.

The third dimension of explanatory style is **personalization**—the degree to which one sees him- or herself as the primary causal agent in events. Optimistic athletes will take personal credit for successes and progress and protect their confidence by explaining misfortune as the result of outside forces beyond their control (e.g., referee's decisions, exceptional play by the opponent). More pessimistic athletes will have the opposite tendency, to see successes as functions

of luck and circumstance rather than personal actions, but to see losses and setbacks as due to personal shortcomings.

When the preceding are combined, the athlete with an optimistic explanatory style thinks, "It's just these few mistakes that I'll soon correct, they don't affect the rest of my game, and they are balanced out by all these other things I did well." Compare this with the less effective pessimistic explanatory statement, "I made tons of errors, they spoiled every part of my game, and they're going to keep on happening." An athlete's tendency to interpret events along these dimensions is learned and reinforced through experience. By learning techniques of productive self-talk and selective perception, and then employing these techniques in practice and competition, athletes can systematically cultivate optimism and gain confidence.

The preceding does not mean that one ignores mistakes or adopts a totally unrealistic view of one's ability and circumstances. Taking notice of one's errors or shortcomings is a great way to grow, as long as it is done with an eye to the bigger question, "How do I use this to help me improve?" For example, watching a game film and noting technical errors is a good idea, as long as the athlete (a) simultaneously makes note of the good points revealed on the film, (b) decides right then and there what to do about those errors, and (c) *while correcting those errors remains focused on his or her good points and bright future*. Athletes with great attitudes *do* criticize themselves occasionally, but this criticism is always constructive and kept in perspective. To summarize, an optimistic explanatory style is one in which errors are treated as temporary, specific to that one practice or game or correctable, and atypical of one's potential, whereas one looks at successes as more permanent, more general, and certainly more indicative of one's true abilities.

One caveat, however, for excessive optimism comes from a golf study by Kirchenbaum, O'Connor, and Owens (1999). They found that individuals could be overly optimistic, having such *positive illusions* about their skill and control that they make poor decisions. For example, across all skill levels, they found performance

suffered on challenging holes because of too aggressive shot selection. An intervention in which golfers were taught more conservative and realistic shot selection led to better performance. A useful guideline here is the phrase "conservative strategy and cocky execution" (Rotella, 1995). This refers to setting realistic, short-term expectations and game plans, and then totally, completely, and utterly committing oneself to following them through.

Embrace a Psychology of Excellence

As has been already mentioned, confidence in competitive performance is the result of a consistently constructive thinking process, a process in which one's thoughts about oneself, one's sport, and one's experiences in that sport are all aligned to produce energy, optimism, and enthusiasm. Here are a few components of an approach, an overall psychology of excellence, that has a better chance of resulting in a pattern of constructive thinking, energy, optimism, and enthusiasm:

1. *Go for your dreams.* Get excited about doing the best that you can, even things that few people have ever done before. Believe that great things are possible.
2. *Focus on your successes.* Deliberately use your capacity for free will to dwell on and emphasize your day-by-day accomplishments, improvements, and episodes of great effort. After every practice session or competition (not just after the successful ones), file away in a training journal at least one instance of success, one instance of improvement, and one instance of great effort.
3. *Be your own best friend, biggest fan, and greatest coach.* Give yourself the same helpful advice and total support you routinely give to your very best friends. At the end of each day create the image of the most positive and helpful person you have ever known and talk to yourself the way that person would.
4. *Create your own reality.* Interpret the events in your sport in a way that opens you up to greater and greater chances for success.

If your performance early in a contest (e.g., first at bat, first field goal attempt) does not go well, take it as a signal that you are getting all the kinks out of your motion now and expect to do better as the game goes on. Conversely, if performance in the early rounds is good, take it as a signal that you are in a great groove and expect it to continue.

All athletes searching for the "mental edge" that will take their game to the next level must honestly look inside and understand the source of their thinking habits, explanatory style, emotional tendencies, and beliefs about themselves. Are those habits of mind determined by a perspective that encourages mediocrity, or are those habits of mind based on a personal perspective dedicated to success, achievement, and the realization of potential? This is an ongoing personal mental battle that each athlete must enter and win to realize their dreams. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to learning the skills that will make this possible.

Self-Talk

The key to cognitive control is **self-talk**. The frequency and content of thoughts vary from person to person and situation to situation. You engage in self-talk any time you carry on an internal dialogue with yourself, such as giving yourself instructions and reinforcement or interpreting what you are feeling or perceiving (Hackfort & Schwenkmezger, 1993). This dialogue can occur out loud (e.g., mumbling to yourself) or inside your head. Self-talk becomes an asset when it enhances self-worth and performance. Such talk can help the athlete change cognitions, regulate arousal and anxiety, stay appropriately focused, and cope with difficulties. For example, Gould, Eklund, and Jackson's (1992a, 1992b) studies of Olympic wrestlers indicated that self-talk was a technique that the wrestlers used to foster positive expectancies and appropriately focus attention. These wrestlers also reported more positive expectancies and task-specific self-talk prior to their best

versus worst performances. In another qualitative study, Gould, Finch, and Jackson (1993) investigated the stress-coping strategies of U.S. national champion figure skaters and found that their two most common coping strategies were (a) rational thinking and self-talk and (b) positive focus and orientation maintenance.

Self-talk becomes a liability when it is negative, distracting to the task at hand, or so frequent that it disrupts the automatic performance of skills. For example, a study of observed self-talk and behavioral assessments with junior tennis players found that negative self-talk was associated with losing, but it failed to show a relationship of positive self-talk to better performance (Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, & Petitpas, 1994). The authors concluded that the tennis players may have internalized their positive self-talk and thus the researchers could not observe it as readily as negative self-talk. Other experimental studies found that positive self-talk led to better performance than negative self-talk for individuals completing fairly simple tasks (Dagrou, Gauvin, & Halliwell, 1992; Van Raalte et al., 1995) as well as complex tasks such as bowling and golfing (Johnston-O'Conner & Kirschenbaum, 1986; Kirschenbaum, Ordman, Tomarken, & Holtzbauer, 1982).

Negative self-talk becomes especially destructive when an athlete uses general labels such as *loser*, *choke artist*, and the like. When athletes hold these negative perceptions of themselves, they will often behave in ways that will confirm these expectations. According to prominent cognitive-behavioral psychologist, Albert Ellis, and his colleagues (Ellis, 1988; Ellis & Dryden, 1987; Grieger & Boyd, 1980), evaluating and labeling oneself this way is both destructive to one's mental health and completely irrational. Although it is possible and often desirable to rate one's *behavior* (such as test performance or execution of a sport skill), there is no logical or rational reason to label *oneself*, because what we call our "self" is a very abstract, theoretical concept and impossible to confirm with any certainty. Furthermore, even if one's self could be empirically proven, it would include so many different traits, characteristics, and performances, and would

be so ever changing, that rating and labeling it would be impossible. Ellis argues for eliminating self-rating and labeling altogether. This point will be further developed later in the discussion of irrational and distorted thinking.

The use of negative self-talk by athletes affects not only their immediate performance but also their overall self-esteem and, in extreme cases, can lead to acute depression. Seligman (1991) has described **depression** as nothing more than a disorder of conscious thought—depressed people simply think awful things about themselves and their future. Their symptom, negative self-talk, is their disease. Because depression results from consistently using negative thought, changing this habit to positive self-talk will help cure the disease.

Raising self-esteem through effective self-talk, however, takes time and patience. A conscientious effort to screen out negative memories and statements, to ignore so-called experts when they set limits on your abilities, and to focus the mind on present strengths and desired outcomes is required. Self-esteem and confidence begin and end in the mind of the individual, with self-talk playing the primary and most powerful role in feeding the mind. Cognitive-behavioral techniques can be effectively used for enhancing and maintaining self-esteem (Branden, 1994; McKay & Fanning, 1994). By fostering healthy self-esteem, sport psychologists can enhance the personal growth and development of athletes as well as their performance.

Before we address the matter of how specific types of self-talk can be used in different situations to help achieve excellence in learning and performance and to promote confidence and self-esteem, we want to remind you that the interview research reported in Chapter 9 found many athletes stating that their best sport performances occurred when they had no thoughts at all. The athletes were so immersed in the action that it just seemed to happen without conscious thought. Tim Gallwey, author of *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1974), Bob Rotella, author of *Golf Is a Game of Confidence* (1996), and others have stressed that peak performance does not occur when athletes are thinking about it. They

emphasize learning to turn performance over to unconscious or automatic functions—functions that are free from the interference of thought.

It may be desirable to strive for such thought-free performance, but athletes usually *do* think when performing. In fact, they engage in sport related self-talk outside of practice as well as before, during, and after both practice and competition (Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001). There is even evidence that more self-talk occurs in competition settings than in practice settings and that the greatest use occurs *during* competition compared to before or after performance (Hardy, Hall, & Hardy, 2004a). In addition, individual sport and skilled athletes use self-talk more frequently than team sport and less skilled athletes (Hardy, Hall, & Hardy, 2004b). This self-talk affects athletes' self-concept, self-confidence, and behavior. Therefore, it is important that coaches and sport psychologists teach athletes to recognize and control their thoughts. Once athletes can do this, they are far more likely to experience those desirable episodes of unconscious immersion. If used properly, thinking can be a great aid to performance and personal growth. The question should not be whether to think but what, when, and how to think. The rest will take care of itself.

The uses for self-talk are almost as varied as are the different types of sports. For example, effective coaches and sport psychologists can use self-talk to aid athletes in learning skills, correcting bad habits, preparing for performance, focusing attention, creating the best mood for performance, and building confidence and competence.

Self-Talk for Skill Acquisition and Performance

Researchers have found that planned, constructive self-talk can enhance skill acquisition and performance (e.g., Cutton & Landin, 2007; Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Goltsios, Theodorakis & Perkos, 2008; Theodorakis, & Chroni, 2002) just as planned, destructive self-talk (i.e., "I will miss the bull's eye") impairs performance (Cumming, Nordin, Horton, &

Reynolds, 2006). The nature of self-talk should change as performers become more proficient. During early learning, skill acquisition is usually aided when self-instructional talk is used to remind the performer of certain key aspects of the movement. For example, cue words such as "step, swing" in tennis and "step, drop, step, kick" for a soccer punt foster cognitive associations that aid in learning proper physical execution. Even on the beginning level, self-talk should be kept as brief and minimal as possible. Oververbalization by the coach or athlete can cause paralysis by analysis. With learning, the goal is to reduce conscious control and promote the automatic execution of the skill. Thus, as skills are mastered, self-talk becomes shorter and less frequent, and it shifts from technique mechanics to strategies and optimal feelings.

The effectiveness and content of self-talk also depend on the nature of the task. Skills that are self-paced—that is, initiated by the performer when he or she is ready (e.g., pitching, shooting free throws, bowling, archery, golf, any kind of serve) provide more opportunity for preprogramming successful execution. Again, if the skills are well learned, the nature of the self-talk should focus on what the performer is trying to achieve rather than the physical mechanics of the act. For example, in the book *The Courtside Coach*, Bunker and Young (1995) suggest that a server in tennis should think or see "deep outside corner" to specify the landing area of the serve. Similarly, a pitcher might think "high and inside," or a free throw shooter might simply say, "arch and swish." With reactive, externally paced skills such as spiking in volleyball, fast breaking in basketball, or volleying in tennis, the performer needs to rely more on responding correctly automatically because there is not enough time to separately program each movement. This being the case, athletes in these sports must learn to use the naturally occurring pauses in the game (changing sides of the court, time-outs, out-of-bounds) as opportunities to control their self-talk and set themselves up for success by focusing on what they want to achieve when the action begins again.

One study, however, did find that skilled tennis players improved their volleying performance after they were taught a two-word (*split, turn*) self-talk sequence in which they separately said the words and timed each to specific reactions and movement on the court (Landin & Hebert, 1999). The players attributed the success of the self-talk to its directing their attentional focus. They also reported increased confidence. Other studies found improved competitive performance in ice hockey goaltenders who participated in a mental skills program consisting of a centering and self-talk intervention (Rogerson & Hrycaiko, 2002) and improved soccer shooting performance for elite under-14 female soccer players who received a self-talk intervention (Johnson, Hrycaiko, Johnson, & Halas, 2004). These findings suggest that self-talk enhances performance on externally paced skills as well as on self-paced skills.

Self-Talk for Changing Bad Habits

Athletes will need to use self-talk when they want to change a well-learned skill or habit. To change a bad habit, it is usually necessary to intentionally force conscious control over the previously automatic execution and to then direct attention to the replacement movement. Self-talk can facilitate this process. The more drastic the change, the more detailed the self-talk in the relearning phase. For example, if a tennis player is attempting to change from a two-hand to a one-hand backhand, considerable *self-instruction* may be required. In this case the athlete must verbally redirect the entire swing motion. However, if the change is merely to get behind the ball and hit it a little bit earlier with more weight on the front foot, then a simple cue may be all that is necessary.

When an athlete uses self-talk in this way, it is essential that the content of the statements focus on what they want to happen not on what they want to avoid. If not, the head is merely filled with the negative image, making the appropriate actions even more difficult to execute. For example, rather than saying, "Don't stay on your back foot" when hitting a backhand, use a cue

such as "step-hit." An additional bonus with this type of short but "desired action" oriented self-talk is that it reinforces the habit of making thoughts positive. Remember, "Winners say what they want to happen; losers say what they fear might happen."

Self-Talk for Attention Control

Self-talk can also help athletes control their attention (e.g., Gould et al., 1992a, 1992b; Hardy et al., 2001; Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, & Theodorakis, 2007; Landin & Hebert, 1999). It is often easy to be distracted during competition and practice. For example, when athletes allow themselves to wander into the past ("If I had only made that last putt") or focus on the future ("If I birdie the next hole, I'll be leading the field"), they will have difficulty executing the present shot. Once again, focusing the mind on what is desired *right now* ("head down, smooth") gives the athlete the best chance of making the correct shot. Several books, including *Golf Is a Game of Confidence* (Rotella, 1996), have emphasized the importance of remaining in the present tense. (For further elaboration and specific examples, see Chapter 16.)

Self-Talk for Creating Affect or Mood

Researchers have found that affective cues can enhance performance. For example, runners who say "fast" or "quick" have been found to increase their speed (Meichenbaum, 1975). Golfers who use swing thoughts such as "smooth" or "oily" produce swings that appear smoother and more controlled (Owens & Bunker, 1989). Power words such as "blast," "hit," and "go" are important aids in explosive movements, helping to create the desired mood state (Owens & Bunker, 1989). As an example, a sprinter in the starting blocks will get a faster start by saying "snap" or "explode" than by thinking about hearing the gun because the appropriate self-talk will directly trigger the desired movement when the gun sounds (Silva, 1982). Otherwise, the athlete must process the fact that the gun went off and then start. For a long-distance run, an athlete may wish to shift

word cues throughout the race. During the initial portion, words that encourage consistent pace and energy conservation may be most appropriate. During the middle portion of the run, words that encourage persistence and tuning in to the body are important, whereas the finish requires speed and power. Corresponding cues might be "do it," "go," and "sprint." Each word should have an emotional quality that is linked to the appropriate movement quality or content (Meichenbaum, 1975).

Self-Talk for Changing Affect or Mood

In a similar manner, the use of appropriate self-talk can help an athlete change his or her mood to achieve a desired emotional state. Golf legend Sam Snead learned in high school that simply recalling the phrase "cool-mad" helped him control his temper so that it worked for him rather than against him (Rotella, 1984). Hanton and Jones (1999a) demonstrated that competitive swimmers who perceived their precompetitive anxiety symptoms as debilitating could be taught to use self-talk interventions to reinterpret them as facilitative and thereby enhance their performance. Finn (1985) advises underaroused athletes to use a combination of self-talk and rapid breathing to reach a desired emotional state. Statements like "Come on, rev up, it's time to go all out!" alternated with rapid breathing or high-intensity running will increase the athlete's heart rate and produce a new mood state more favorable for peak performance. Use of the right affective cues can ultimately help lead to the best potential for peak performance.

Self-Talk for Controlling Effort

Self-talk can be an effective technique to help maintain energy and persistence. It may be difficult for some athletes to get started in the morning, at practice, or in the first few moments of a contest. Others may have difficulty changing a tempo or maintaining effort. Phrases such as "go for it," "easy," "pace," "pick it up," "cool it," "hold onto it," "push," "stay," and so forth can be very effective in controlling effort (Harris & Harris, 1984). Athletes can use self-talk not only

to direct action but also to sustain it (Tod, Iredale, & Gill, 2003; Thellwell & Greenlee, 2003), such as during a tedious or fatiguing practice. An emphasis on effort control is essential because it helps athletes recognize the importance of hard work in achieving success. And if by chance the athletes do not succeed, they are more likely to attribute failure to insufficient effort and therefore want to work harder in the future. Coaches should note that this is a much more productive attribution strategy than blaming lack of success on factors such as luck, poor officiating, or the weather.

Self-Talk for Building Self-Efficacy

As mentioned previously, the term *self-efficacy* refers to one's expectation of succeeding at a specific task or meeting a particular challenge (Schunk, 1995) such as sinking this free throw or beating this opponent. Efficacy expectations affect performance because they determine how much effort athletes will expend on a task and how long they will maintain effort when confronted with setbacks and obstacles. Many studies have shown that athletes with high self-efficacy outperform those with lower self-efficacy on strength, endurance, and skill tasks (Kitsantas & Zimmerman, 2002; Mahoney, Gabriel, & Perkins, 1987; Weinberg, Gould, & Jackson, 1979). Research also shows that efficacy beliefs are vulnerable and need constant reinforcement when confronted with failures (Rongian, 2007) and that efficacy lowers when imaging being unconfident (Nordin & Cumming, 2005). These studies illustrate how powerful efficacy expectations are and, just as important, demonstrate that an individual's preexisting expectations of efficacy can be enhanced to improve performance.

According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is influenced by verbal persuasion, both from others and from self in the form of self-talk. Mahoney (1979) also states that self-talk is a useful method for building the self-efficacy expectations of athletes. For example, when Hatzigeorgiadis, et al. (2008) implemented a self-talk intervention, both self-efficacy and tennis performance improved in the experimental group compared to the control

group. Hanton and Jones (1999b) found that an intervention that included cognitive restructuring strategies led to increases in confidence levels just prior to competition.

Gould and colleagues found that junior tennis coaches (Gould, Medberry, Damarjian, & Lauer, 1999) and elite college and national team coaches systematically encourage their athletes to develop positive self-talk (Gould, Hodge, Peterson, & Gianni, 1989). The coaches in the 1989 study also rated the encouragement of positive self-talk as the third most effective strategy for developing self-efficacy, ranking physical practice first and modeling confidence by the coach second. Coaches can utilize these sources of self-efficacy in two important ways. First, coaches can provide feedback to athletes on their success through highlight CDs or DVDs of actual performance. Second, coaches can actively express (model) confidence in an athlete's ability to perform well before the entire team by referring to his or her previous successes and bright future. These studies indicate how effective positive self-talk is for enhancing self-efficacy.

Self-talk also plays a crucial, self-effective role in rehabilitation from injury. Ielea and Orlick (1991) found that athletes who recovered exceptionally fast from ankle and knee injuries had a significantly higher frequency of positive self-talk concerning the process of their recovery than did athletes who healed more slowly. It appears that positive self-talk directly influences one's belief in the body's healing power and thus in the actual healing process itself.

Self-Talk for Increasing Adoption and Maintenance of Exercise Behavior

Many studies in the area of exercise behavior have implicated self-efficacy cognitions as a significant factor in predicting adoption and adherence to an exercise program (see McAuley and Blissmer, 2000, for a review). Self-efficacy cognitions are a mediator of behavior change, that is, the mechanism by which interventions affect exercise behavior (Dishman, et al., 2004). These findings suggest that appropriately modifying

self-efficacy cognitions toward exercise contribute to exercise adoption or adherence.

Identifying Self-Talk

Appropriate use of the preceding kinds of self-talk will enhance self-worth and performance. The first step in gaining control of self-talk is to become aware of what you say to yourself. Surprisingly enough, most people are not aware of their thoughts, much less the powerful impact they have on their feelings and behavior. By getting athletes to review carefully the way in which they talk to themselves in different types of situations, they and the coach or sport psychologist will identify what kind of thinking helps, what thoughts appear to be harmful, and what situations or events are associated with this talk. Once athletes develop this awareness, they usually discover that their self-talk varies from short cue words and phrases to extremely complex monologues, with the overall content ranging from self-enhancing to self-defeating. The key is to know both when and how to talk to yourself.

Successful athletes have learned to identify the type and content of thought associated with particularly good and particularly bad performances. Most athletes find different thinking during successful and unsuccessful performances. Identifying the thoughts that typically prepare an athlete to perform well and to cope successfully with problems during performance can provide a repertoire of cognitive tools for the enhancement of performance. The use of these same thoughts in future performance environments should create similar feelings of confidence and direct performance in much the same way. When an athlete can re-create these positive thoughts and bring them to the new environment, the athlete can be said to be *taking control* of his or her mind.

Most athletes discover that during an unsuccessful performance their mind actually programmed failure through self-doubt and negative statements. The body merely performed what the

mind was thinking. Examples might include an athlete's thinking before a competition, "I never swim well in this pool" or "I always play poorly against this opponent" and then going on to swim or compete exactly as prophesied. Obviously, future performance would be enhanced if athletes could eliminate dysfunctional and self-defeating thoughts, but before such thoughts can be eliminated, they need to be identified. Three of the most effective tools for identifying self-talk are retrospection, imagery, and keeping a self-talk log.

Retrospection

By reflecting on situations in which they performed particularly well or particularly poorly and trying to re-create the thoughts and feelings that occurred prior to and during these performances, many athletes are able to identify typical thoughts and common themes associated with both good and bad performance. It is also beneficial to recall the specific situation, or circumstances, that led to the thoughts and resulting performance. Viewing videotapes, CDs, or DVDs of actual past performances helps the athlete recount the action by heightening the memory of the event. If this technique is used, not only should the actual performance be filmed but, ideally, the time before the contest begins, the time-outs or breaks during the contest, and even the time right after the contest ends. Thoughts during all of these times play a major role in determining the quality of one's present performance, one's expectations regarding future performance, and even one's feelings of self-esteem.

Imagery

Another technique is to have athletes relax as deeply as possible and then try reliving a past performance through imagery, recreating all relevant sensory experiences, such as how a moment felt or sounded. Obviously, this technique is more effective if athletes have been trained in imagery (see Chapter 14 for suggestions). Athletes who are effective at imagery can

usually describe exactly what happened during the competition and what thoughts and feelings preceded, accompanied, and followed the performance. After athletes have relived past performances through imagery, it may be helpful to have them write down the recalled thoughts, situations, and outcomes. If it is not disruptive, the athletes may even want to talk into a tape recorder as they are imaging.

Self-Talk Log

Not all athletes can use retrospection and imagery to remember accurately how they thought and felt or what circumstances triggered their thoughts and feelings. Even athletes who are comfortable using these tools run the risk that time and personal impressions may distort the memory of actual thoughts and circumstances. Keeping a daily diary or self-talk log of thoughts and performance situations is an excellent tool for accurately creating awareness of self-talk. Thoughts should be transcribed as soon after they occur as possible. Athletes in sports such as golf, archery, rowing, and running have found it beneficial to have a recorder present while they perform so they can directly tape their thoughts and a description of the situation as they occur.

When keeping a log, the athlete should address such questions as, When I talk to myself, what do I say before, during, and following my good performances? Not only what thoughts, but how frequently am I talking to myself? When playing poorly, do I deprecate myself as a person? Do I stay in the present moment, or revert to dwelling on past performance? Do I call myself names and wish I were still sitting on the bench? Does the content of my self-talk center on how I feel about myself, or how others will feel about me, or on letting down my friends and teammates, or on how unlucky I am?

If there is a problem in thinking, the goal is to identify the problem and its boundary points in specific terms. This means that each athlete must be able to answer questions such as, When do I have negative thoughts? Do I begin doubting myself even before I have a chance to perform?

For example, when a whistle blows, do I automatically assume it is directed at me? If I have been fouled, do I start worrying from the moment the whistle blows until after I have shot the free throw, or do I begin worrying only after I walk to the free throw line? Athletes must be able to specify the initial cue that caused them to start worrying or thinking negatively to gain control over their thoughts. Also, when do they stop saying self-defeating things? Such detailed knowledge will help in planning an effective intervention. For instance, if worry begins with the referee's whistle, then this is the cue with which an alternate thought pattern should be linked.

It is also important to monitor self-talk during practice as these times play an important role in developing typical thought and behavior patterns. More specifically, the athlete should identify what is said when performing exceptionally well, after making mistakes, after teammates perform poorly, after having difficulty performing a new skill or strategy, when fatigued, and after the coach criticizes performance. Often the pattern of thoughts found during competition is merely a reflection of what occurs during practices. Learning to recognize and control the nature of self-talk during practices provides the foundation for effective thinking during competition.

Techniques for Controlling Self-Talk

Using the preceding self-monitoring tools is only the *first step* in the process necessary for producing performance-enhancing thoughts and eliminating disabling thoughts. In fact, paying too much attention to negative thoughts or thoughts associated with poor performance can be detrimental if they are not linked to some action or change process. Once awareness of negative talk and feelings is heightened, the coach or sport psychologist should immediately instruct the athlete in how to start dealing with these thoughts. Similarly, when good performance is analyzed, it should be with the intent of capitalizing on the state of mind that existed during that performance in the hope of being able to

purposefully duplicate it in the future. In this section we present techniques for controlling self-talk. The effectiveness of these techniques in enhancing sport performance has been well documented. In fact, a meta-analysis by Meyers, Whelan, and Murphy (1996) calculated a greater effect size for cognitive restructuring interventions ($n = 4$, $d = .79$, $SD = .36$) than that found for goal setting ($n = 3$, $d = .54$, $SD = .15$); mental rehearsal ($n = 28$, $d = .57$, $SD = .75$); and relaxation interventions ($n = 25$, $d = .73$, $SD = 1.65$). Techniques for controlling self-talk include:

Thought-stoppage

Changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts

Countering

Reframing

ABC cognitive restructuring

Affirmation statements

Mastery and coping tapes

Video technology

Thought Stoppage

If an athlete's self-talk is too frequent and thus distracting, or if the talk produces self-doubt, it must be terminated. Getting rid of such thoughts often makes it possible to break the link that leads to negative feelings and behaviors and an inappropriate attentional focus. The technique of **thought stoppage** provides one very effective method for eliminating negative or counterproductive thoughts (Meyers & Schleser, 1980). The technique begins with awareness of the unwanted thought and uses a trigger to interrupt or stop the undesirable thought. The trigger can be a word such as *stop* or a physical action such as snapping the fingers or clapping one hand against the thigh. Each athlete should choose the most natural trigger and use it consistently.

Thought stoppage will not work unless the athlete first recognizes undesirable thoughts and then is motivated to stop them. Developing the commitment necessary to improve the quality of an athlete's self-talk is not as easy for the

coach and sport psychologist to accomplish as it sounds. This process requires athletes to invest some time in monitoring the frequency and content of their self-talk and then truly deciding to change this talk for the better. For example, even after using the typical tools for creating awareness of thoughts, one young professional golfer would not admit negative statements were affecting her golf. As a method to convince her of the severity of the problem, she was asked to empty a box of 100 paper clips into her pocket. Each time she had a negative thought, she had to move a clip to her back pocket. At the end of the golf round she had shot an 84 and had 87 paper clips in her back pocket! The process of actually counting paper clips, each of which represented a self-defeating thought, made her dramatically aware of her problem and motivated her to try thought-stoppage (Owens & Bunker, 1989).

Thought-stoppage is a skill, and, as with any other skill, it is best to first experiment and become comfortable with it during practice before using it in actual competition. An effective way to practice thought-stoppage is to combine it with imagery. Instruct the athletes to select a typical dysfunctional thought, or thought pattern, they would like to eliminate. Next they should close their eyes and as vividly as possible imagine themselves in the situation in which they usually have those thoughts. Once the situation is re-created, practice interrupting the thought with whatever trigger is selected for thought stoppage. Repeat until the athletes can effortlessly and automatically eliminate dysfunctional talk and accompanying feelings of worry and anxiety.

During the earlier stages of thought-stoppage practice, athletes may want to visibly use their trigger. Saying "stop" out loud not only makes athletes more conscious of their wish to stop excessive or negative talk but serves several additional functions. It helps the coach and sport psychologist to monitor whether athletes are doing what they were instructed to do. If an athlete's body language is showing frustration or disgust with play, his or her thoughts probably are too. The coach and sport psychologist who sees no visible thought-stoppage trigger during these circumstances should directly confront the

athlete by asking him or her what thoughts are occurring. This will serve to reinforce awareness and the need to stop negative talk immediately. The other advantage of visibly practicing the technique is that athletes realize they are not alone in their need to deal more effectively with self-talk. The technique is particularly effective when becoming more positive is a team effort and responsibility. Thus, this is a good time to encourage athletes to be supportive of one another rather than critical or sarcastic. When one high school basketball coach instituted such a program halfway through his season, he was so impressed with the outcome that he attributed turning a losing season into a winning season to his athletes' learning to control negative talk and body language and becoming supportive rather than critical of one another.

Learning to turn off negative or inappropriate thoughts takes time, particularly when negative thought patterns have become the athlete's habitual mode of response to adversity (Cautela & Wisocki, 1977). Frustration over the recurrence of negative thoughts may be lessened if the coach or sport psychologist draws the parallel to trying to unlearn some well-established error in physical technique. Old habits change slowly, whether they are physical or cognitive, and they only change with considerable motivation and practice. The more practice an athlete employs, the less likely negative thought patterns are to recur.

Even with practice it may be difficult for some to suppress an unwanted thought (e.g., "Don't think about the umpire"). In fact, studies by Wegner and his colleagues (Wegner & Erber, 1992; Wegner, Schneider, Knutson, & McMahon, 1991; Wenzlaff, Wegner, & Klein, 1991) have demonstrated that individuals deliberately trying to suppress unwanted thoughts often find themselves even more preoccupied by the thoughts they are trying to escape. Similar results have occurred within sport research (Dugdale and Ecklund, 2002; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000; Janelle, 1999). Wegner, Ansfield, and Pilloff (1998) also found the effect when trying to suppress action. That is, participants were more likely to over-shoot the hole when putting, particularly under

the stress of cognitive load, when they received instructions to *avoid* overhitting the ball. The researchers explained these failures (i.e., doing the opposite of what one intends) with the theory of ironic processes of mental control (Wegner, 1994, 1997). For an interesting discussion of the implications this theory has for sport psychology research and interventions, see Janelle (1999), Hall, Hardy, and Gammage (1999), and Taylor (1999).

These findings indicate how important it is for athletes to use negative or self-critical thoughts as the stimulus or trigger to deliberately focus the mind on a desired process or outcome. This leads to the next technique for controlling thoughts—changing self-defeating thoughts to self-enhancing thoughts.

Changing Negative Thoughts to Positive Thoughts

Although it makes sense to stop negative thoughts altogether, sometimes this cannot be accomplished. An alternative is to learn to couple any negative thought with a positive thought that either provides encouragement and support or appropriately redirects attention. The coach or sport psychologist should instruct athletes to extinguish unwanted thought as soon as it is recognized and then immediately practice switching to a positive or more appropriate thought. If, for example, a gymnast finds himself saying, "This new move is really hard—I'll never get it right!" he should learn to follow this phrase immediately with "I've learned lots of hard moves before, so I know if I'm persistent I can learn this one too."

Another advantage for teaching this technique along with thought stoppage is that it takes pressure off athletes who initially doubt their ability to control their thoughts. Although these athletes think they cannot control what thoughts first enter their head, they usually will accept their ability to control the thoughts that follow. For example, for the golfer who used the "paper clip" technique to become aware of her many self-defeating thoughts, her goal in working with cognitions was simply to reduce

the dysfunctional statements that were not followed by self-enhancing statements. Not having to worry about the occurrence of a self-defeating statement took considerable pressure off her. Each day she was able to reduce the number of paper clips that stood for negative thoughts not followed by positive thoughts, and in time she was able to get rid of the recurring pattern of dysfunctional talk.

A good way to first implement this technique is for athletes to make a list of self-defeating things they typically say and would like to change. Athletes can often generate this list from the self-talk log discussed earlier. Meichenbaum (1977) has emphasized that it is important for athletes to specify when they make these self-defeating statements and what causes them to make such statements. The goal is to recognize what the situation involved and why the negative thought occurred. Athletes should then identify a substitute positive statement. It may be helpful to make a list with each self-defeating thought on one side and the preferred self-enhancing statement directly opposite the negative thought (see Table 15-1).

Notice that the self-enhancing statements in the table always bring the athlete back to the present time and personal control of the situation. The coach or sport psychologist may also want to couple relaxation techniques with this technique as most negative thoughts occur when an individual is under stress and, therefore, usually overaroused physiologically. Instruct athletes to stop their negative thought and then take a deep breath. As they feel relaxation spreading with the long, slow exhalation, say the substitute self-enhancing thought.

There is nothing unusual about having negative thoughts, and even the greatest athletes have anxious or negative thoughts on occasion. Tennis legend Arthur Ashe once feared "he wouldn't get a single serve in the court" just before his U.S. Open championship. Bobby Jones, the famous golfer, was standing over a 2-foot putt that would allow him to win the U.S. Open when he had the thought, "What if I stub my putter into the ground and miss the ball entirely and lose the tournament?" These champions, however, did not store their negative thoughts away where

Table 15-1 Examples of Changing Negative Thoughts to Positive Thoughts

Self-Defeating Thoughts

Change to Self-Enhancing Thoughts

I can't believe it's raining. I have to play in the rain.

No one likes the rain, but I can play as well in it as anyone else.

You dumb jerk.

Ease off. Everyone makes mistakes. Sluff it off and put your mind on what you want to do.

There's no sense in practicing. I have no natural talent.

I've seen good players who had to work hard to be successful. I can get better if I practice correctly.

This officiating stinks; we'll never win.

There's nothing we can do about the officiating, so let's just concentrate on what we want to do. If we play well, the officiating won't matter.

Why did they foul me in the last minute of play—I'm so nervous, I'll probably choke and miss everything.

My heart is beating fast. That's OK, I've sunk free throws a hundred times. Just breathe and swish.

We'll win the meet only if I get a 9.0 on this routine.

Stop worrying about the score; just concentrate on how you're going to execute the routine.

The coach must think I'm hopeless. He never helps me.

That's not fair. He has a whole team to coach. Tomorrow I'll ask what he thinks I need to work on the most.

I don't want to fail.

Nothing was ever gained by being afraid to take risks. As long as I give my best, I'll never be a failure.

I'll take it easy today and go hard next workout.

The next workout will be easier if I go hard now.

Who cares how well I do anyway?

I care, and I'll be happier if I push myself.

This hurts; I don't know if it's worth it.

Of course it hurts, but the rewards are worth it.

they could build themselves into a mental block. Instead, Ashe and Jones stopped those thoughts and replaced them with positive thoughts. The key is not to give in to these negative thoughts and allow them to control and dominate the mind. Make the last thought in any string or sequence of thoughts self-enhancing. This is possible if you become aware of your negative self-talk and use it as a signal to *stop*, *cope*, and *take control*.

The recommendations presented above are based on research conducted with athletes and

nonathletes from individualistic cultures (e.g., the United States, Western Europe). Recent research suggests that the relationship of self-talk to performance may be different for individuals from collectivist cultures (e.g., China, Singapore) and, if true, self-talk interventions such as changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts may not be appropriate for them. This concern comes from the finding by Peters and Williams (2006) that Asians had significantly more negative self-talk than European Americans during dart-throwing performance and that their

negative self-talk related to better performance. Conversely, as previously found, the opposite occurred for European Americans. Additionally, cross-cultural research suggests that a self-critical versus self-enhancing orientation is a characteristic of collectivist individuals' self-concepts, and is necessary for self-improvement (Kitayama, 2002; Kashiwagi, 1986). The dart throwing findings may not replicate (Peters & Williams, 2008), nevertheless, sport psychologists and coaches should consider an athlete's culture when designing self-talk interventions.

Countering

Changing negative to positive self-statements probably will not achieve the expected behavioral outcome if the athlete still *believes* in the negative statements. For example, an athlete might change his or her talk from "I will never be able to run this offensive pattern; I'm just not quick enough" to "I can too; I'm as quick as anyone else." The athlete is merely going through the outward motions of being positive if the real belief system is still saying, "No, I can't; I really am too slow."

Athletes will rarely be able to accomplish something if they truly believe they cannot. Furthermore, the motivation even to try will be eroded if there is no belief that one's efforts will ultimately yield success. Bell (1983) proposes that in such instances merely directing one's thoughts toward desired actions may not be enough. Instead, the athlete may have to identify and build a case against the negative self-statements that are interfering with effective performance. Bell suggests using the tool of countering under these circumstances. **Countering** is an internal dialogue that uses facts and reasons to refute the underlying beliefs and assumptions that led to negative thinking. Rather than blindly accepting the negative voice in the back of the head, the athlete argues against it.

When learning to use counters, it is important that the athlete actually describe the evidence necessary to change an attitude or belief. In the preceding example, the coach or sport psychologist might try helping the athlete identify issues such as, What makes me think I am

slow? Have I ever in the past played with good speed? Am I as fast as any of the other athletes? If yes, are they successful at running this offense? What might be causing my slowness, and can I do anything to change it? If I am not quite as fast as some of my teammates, do I have any other talents that might compensate for this, such as using my good game sense to read the situation faster so I can react more quickly? What other skills do I have that might help me learn this offensive pattern?

Any or all of the preceding approaches should provide some evidence for refuting either the athlete's slowness or the importance of only speed in being successful at the offensive pattern. The more evidence and logic there is to refute the negative belief structure, the more effective the counters will be in getting the athlete to accept the positive statement; and the more firmly the athlete believes in the counters, the less time it will take to turn the thinking around. Later it may be possible for the athlete to identify the negative or irrational thought and simply dismiss it with phrases such as "No, that's not right," "Who says I can't?" or just plain "Bull."

In his discussion of countering, Bell (1983) makes another excellent point. Sometimes thoughts are neither correct nor incorrect—they cannot be verified. Bell suggests that what is more important is determining whether a given thought *helps* an athlete reach his or her goals. Encourage athletes to ask themselves, "Is this thinking in my best interest? Does this thinking help me feel the way I want to or does it make me worried and tense? Does this thinking help me perform better?" When athletes realize that thinking certain thoughts can only be detrimental, it becomes sensible, and thus easier, to stop them or change them.

Reframing

Another effective technique for dealing with negative self-talk is **reframing**, described by Gauron (1984) as the process of creating alternative frames of reference or different ways of looking at the world. Because the world is literally what we make it, reframing allows us to transform what appears at first to be a weakness

or difficulty into a strength or possibility, simply by looking at it from a different point of view. Gauron encourages athletes to cultivate the skill of reframing because it helps athletes control their internal dialogue in a positive, self-enhancing manner. Almost any self-defeating statement or negative thought can be reframed, or interpreted from a different perspective, so that it aids rather than hinders the athlete.

An important element of reframing is that it does not deny or downplay what the athlete is experiencing or encourage the athlete to ignore something troublesome. Instead, by reframing, the athlete acknowledges what is happening and decides to use it to his or her best advantage. For example, if an athlete was saying, "I'm feeling tense and anxious about playing today," he can reframe the statement to "I'm feeling excited and ready." Similarly, an athlete dwelling on the *problems* of improving a skill or the *struggle* of a performance slump can turn these situations to his advantage and maintain a positive attitude by focusing on the *possibilities* of achieving a new level of skill and the *opportunity* present in each new performance.

Research support for the positive effects of reframing comes from a study that compared the mental preparation of teams who met or exceeded their goals in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics to teams that failed to meet expectations at the Games (Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Pederson, 1999). Gould et al. found that members of the more successful teams reported that they were able to "reframe negative events in a positive light." Additional support comes from research by Hanton and Jones (1999a) who improved performance in nonelite swimmers by teaching them to reframe their anxiety symptoms as facilitative rather than debilitating to performance.

Identifying Irrational and Distorted Thinking

In addition to dealing with negative self-talk and self-doubt, athletes need to realize that they may also be engaging in cognitive distortions and irrational thinking. According to Ellis (1982), athletes fail to reach their goals and perform

below their ability primarily because they accept and endorse self-defeating, irrational beliefs. Ellis identifies four basic irrational beliefs that negatively affect athletes' performance. If athletes accept any of these beliefs (let alone two or three of them), or any of their variations, their progress and satisfaction will be blocked. These four irrational beliefs are (1) I *must* at all times perform outstandingly well, (2) others who are significant to me (e.g., teammates and coaches) *have to* approve and love me, (3) everyone has *got to* treat me kindly and fairly, and (4) the conditions of my life, particularly my life in sports, absolutely *must* be arranged so that I get what I want when I want.

Such thinking is counterproductive because it negatively influences self-concept, self-confidence, and performance. Once identified—a task that may take considerable soul-searching—these self-defeating types of beliefs need to be modified. Here are some irrational thoughts and cognitive distortions that are common among athletes (the first eight are from Gauron, 1984):

- Perfection is essential
- Catastrophizing
- Worth depends on achievement
- Personalization
- Fallacy of fairness
- Blaming
- Polarized thinking and labeling
- One-trial generalizations
- Shoulds
- Emotional reasoning

Let's take a look at each of these thought patterns along with some suggestions for modifying such irrational and distorted thinking.

Perfection is essential. One of the most debilitating irrational ideas for athletes (and coaches too) is that one must be thoroughly competent and successful and achieve everything attempted. No one can consistently achieve perfection. Individuals who believe they should will blame themselves for every defeat, every setback.

Their self-concept will likely suffer and they may start a fear-of-failure syndrome. Furthermore, they will put such pressures on themselves to do well that both their enjoyment and performance will likely suffer. There is always value in *striving* for perfection, but nothing is gained by *demanding* perfection.

Catastrophizing. Catastrophizing often accompanies perfectionistic tendencies, as the athlete believes that any failure will be a humiliating disaster. Catastrophizers expect the worst possible thing to happen. Unfortunately, expecting disaster often leads to disaster! Individuals become plagued by what-ifs. "What if I lose today?" "What if my parents are embarrassed when I strike out?" Realistic evaluations of the actual situation and setting appropriate goals help combat perfectionistic thinking and catastrophizing.

Worth depends on achievement. Too many athletes believe they are only as good as their accomplishments, what they win. Correspondingly, they think they must excel in order to please others. Try asking an athlete or coach to describe who he or she is without mentioning his or her sport or success rate! Athletes must learn to value themselves for more than what they do in sport; worth as a human being is based on factors other than achievement outcome.

Personalization. Athletes who personalize believe they are the cause and focus of activities and actions around them. They think that everything people do or say is some kind of reaction to them. They also have a tendency to frequently compare oneself to others, trying to determine who is better, who gets more playing time, and so forth.

Fallacy of fairness and ideal conditions. You feel resentful because you think you know what is fair but other people will not agree. "Fair" is usually a disguise for just wanting one's personal preferences. "Ideal conditions" means that coaches should carve out the easiest possible path for athletes to follow. It is irrational to think that things will come easily or that the world of

sport should somehow be fair—that each investment of time and energy should deliver an equitable level of success, or that everyone on a team or in a sport program should be treated the same. Holding these expectations will inevitably produce frustration, because in reality coaches do treat players differently; one's efforts, improvements, and achievements are not always noticed; and the breaks of the game are often unfair. Coming to grips with unfairness and learning to stay composed is one of sport's great lessons.

Blaming. This takes two forms, you hold other people responsible for your actions and feelings, or you blame yourself for every problem or outcome. Making excuses or assigning fault to others gains nothing. Athletes must learn to replace external attributions with attributions that are within their control: "Success comes from effort and working hard to develop one's full potential, whereas failure comes from lack of effort or insufficient practice of key fundamentals." Athletes often learn their attributions from coaches. If coaches blame failure on external factors, athletes will too. This subtly leads athletes to expect failure under similar future circumstances—for example, playing in a certain arena or a weird time of the day. Coaches and sport psychologists should provide appropriate internal attributions for successes and failures. When athletes realize they are responsible for and in control of their performance, their confidence will grow after good performance and they will have more confidence in turning current failures into future successes. Accepting complete responsibility for everything, however, is equally nonproductive. For example, "We lost because I missed that last free throw." This irrational blame can lead to potential problems such as loss of confidence and the thought, "The coach and my teammates must really hate me." Instead, help athletes to be realistic and honest in evaluating performance outcome.

Polarized thinking and labeling. Polarized thinking is the tendency to view things as black or white, good or bad, with no middle ground. This all-or-nothing thinking often leads to failing

to learn from every experience and using judgmental labeling—the identification or description of something or someone with an extreme evaluative word or phrase, such as “choker,” “butterfingers,” “airbrain,” “loser.” Once established and internalized, these negative labels are difficult to erase—*labeling is disabling*. Coaches and sport psychologists should instead set a good example and stress that athletes avoid any kind of negative evaluative language, judgmentalism, and absolute thinking.

One-trial generalizations. This cognitive distortion results from reaching a general conclusion based on a single incident or piece of evidence. For example, if something bad happens once you might expect it to happen over and over when similar circumstances present (“I can’t golf well in the rain”). If these conclusions are based on only one or two experiences, then some careful analysis can usually lead athletes to negate them. If they are based on many experiences, then practicing under perceived negative conditions until success is achieved will often produce effective evidence to repudiate the initial negative generalization.

Shoulds. These people have a list of ironclad rules about how they and other people should act. People who break the rules anger them and they feel guilty when they violate the rules. Such inflexibility and self-righteousness can cause serious problems for self and interpersonal relations.

Emotional reasoning. You believe that what you feel must be true—automatically. If you *feel* stupid and boring, then you must *be* stupid and boring. Such people are more likely to have problems with adverse emotions because they tend to generalize them as personal characteristics versus just a transitory emotion.

Modifying Irrational and Distorted Thinking: ABC Cognitive Restructuring

Irrational beliefs often underlie much of the stress and resulting self-defeating thoughts and

feelings athletes experience during athletic performance and in life in general. Unfortunately, athletes often are unaware that the culprit is maladaptive beliefs and thinking. Instead they think the circumstance or event caused the deleterious emotional reaction and behavior. For example, a basketball player misses a critical free throw in the final seconds of a game and ends up feeling worthless and fearing similar circumstance in the future. The typical athlete probably thinks his missed free throw causes thoughts and anxiety (see Figure 15-1). In actuality the *assumptions* the athlete made are the cause. In this case, irrational assumptions such as perfectionism, worth-depends-on-achievement, or personalization may have been the culprit.

The coach or sport psychologist can help athletes reduce their self-caused pressure by getting them to identify and dispute their irrational assumptions. One excellent way to do so is to use Albert Ellis’s rational emotive therapy procedure (Ellis & Dryden, 1987), sometimes referred to as ABC cognitive restructuring. The process begins by getting athletes to keep a daily record in which they record not only their upsetting thoughts but also the resulting feelings and behavior and the negative events that triggered them (see Figure 15-1). In column A they briefly describe the activating event in terms of what happened, what they saw and heard. In column B they record the exact content of their dysfunctional self-talk, that is, whatever they think or say out loud that could be interpreted as debilitating. In column C they record the resulting emotional and behavioral consequences. To help determine what they should record, have the athletes use Steinmetz, Blankenship, and Brown’s (1980) five criteria for deciding whether self-talk and underlying beliefs are rational or irrational, productive or unproductive.

1. Are the beliefs based on objective reality? That is, would a mixed group of people all agree that the event happened the way you perceived it, or do you exaggerate and personalize experiences?
2. Are they helpful to you? Self-destructive thoughts are usually irrational.

ABC Cognitive Restructuring

A. Activating Event	B. Beliefs or Interpretations	C. Consequences	D. Dispute
Briefly describe the actual event that led to the feelings and behavior	Record the actual dysfunctional self-talk and, if appropriate, include mental pictures	Identify feelings, bodily reactions, and behavior	Write rational response(s) to the automatic thoughts
Fouled in final ten seconds with game tied – missed free throw	<p>"I lost the game for the team." <i>(personalization)</i> <i>(blaming)</i></p> <p>"I always choke in pressure situations." <i>(overgeneralizations)</i> <i>(catastrophizing)</i></p>	Depressed, tensed up, blew defensive assignment after free throw	<p>"Hey, I'm disappointed but that was just one point out of 40 minutes of play."</p> <p>"I missed this shot, but there are other times when I've come through under pressure. I'll put extra time into free throw practice and work on staying loose and positive."</p>

Figure 15-1 Example of how to use ABC cognitive restructuring to identify and modify irrational and distorted thinking

3. Are they useful in reducing conflicts with other people, or do you set up a me-versus-them situation?
4. Do they help you reach your short- and long-term goals, or do they get in the way?
5. Do they reduce emotional conflict and help you feel the way you want to feel?

After completing the ABC steps across a designated number of days, the athletes are ready for the next critical step, which entails trying to rebut or dispute their self-criticism. The first step is to reexamine the self-talk under column B to determine the irrational beliefs or distortions in thinking that might underlie what appeared, on the surface, to be automatic dysfunctional statements. Record the underlying beliefs in column B after the self-talk statement. In many cases, more than one thinking error may have led to the self-talk. For example, see Figure 15-1 for what occurred when the athlete missed the free throw. Identifying the underlying irrational beliefs and thinking distortions helps athletes discover the

erroneous or illogical aspects of their initial self-talk. Once done, the athletes are ready to substitute more rationale and productive thoughts in column D. If a particular dysfunctional thought often occurs (e.g., saying "I always screw up" or something equivalent after every disappointment), the person will want to frequently repeat the substituted rational statement until it is believed. Incorporating one of the quick relaxation techniques discussed in Chapter 13 before saying the statement may increase susceptibility to believing the statement. For example, take a deep, complete breath and with the exhalation say, "Lighten up! It's human to make mistakes. Learn from it and move on." The preceding may be difficult, but it gets easier and easier with practice. The ultimate goal is to create such awareness in the athletes that when they have dysfunctional thinking, they immediately recognize and dispute it.

Less enlightened coaches and athletes might fear that modifying irrational beliefs such as perfectionistic demands and taking excessive responsibility for performance outcome may take the

edge off an athlete's competitiveness. This fear is unfounded. Reflecting back to an athlete's best moments in competition almost always reveals the opposite. Helping athletes eliminate irrational beliefs and develop more adaptive thoughts will go a long way toward improving performance and, perhaps more important, personal growth.

Constructing Affirmation Statements

Feelings of confidence, efficacy, and personal control will be enhanced if coaches and sport psychologists assist athletes in constructing personal affirmation statements. **Affirmations** are statements that reflect positive attitudes or thoughts about oneself. They are statements about what you want, *phrased as if you already had it*. For example, in 1985 Ivan Lendl had a record of 9 wins and 12 losses against John McEnroe. Lendl then started writing each day in a notebook, "I look forward to playing John McEnroe." By early 1991 his record against McEnroe had improved to 19 wins and 15 losses, and Lendl had won the last 10 straight matches (Wishful Inking, 1991).

The most effective affirmations are both believable and vivid. They are also often spontaneous and thus capture the feelings of a particularly satisfying and successful experience (Syer & Connolly, 1984). "I am as strong as a bull," "I fly down the finish line," and "I really come through under pressure" are all good examples of positive affirmations. Note that each of these expresses a personal, positive message of something that is happening in the present.

Team slogans can also serve as affirmations: "Winners think they can and they do"; "See it, think it, believe it, do it"; "Say yes to success." Each slogan can become a recipe or formula for success provided it is internalized. As just noted, a good source of affirmations is positive statements that might naturally have occurred with previous successful performance. Another way to build affirmations is to have each athlete make a self-esteem list and a success list (Gauron, 1984). The **self-esteem list** contains all of the athlete's positive attributes—all of his or her perceived assets, strengths, and positive qualities. The **success**

list contains all of the athlete's successes thus far. The goal is to use one's own personal history in an enabling way by reviewing, reexperiencing, and visualizing previous success experiences.

The self-esteem and success lists serve to remind the athlete of how capable he or she is and how deserving of being successful. This is not the time for modesty but for honest reflection on all of one's positive qualities and successes. Rushall (1979) has emphasized that once this positive frame of reference is established, the athlete should write specific affirmation statements that are *positive action-oriented* self-statements affirming capabilities and what he or she would like to do; "I play well under pressure" rather than "I know I can play well under pressure." Affirmations should be in the present tense and worded in a way that avoids perfectionist statements that may be impossible to live up to, such as "I always . . ." or "I never"

Once formulated, how can these statements be best used to foster confidence and the desired goal of the affirmation? Gauron (1984) suggests having a number-one affirmation to work on each day, especially when feeling bummed or going into a slump. An athlete may want to write the statement 10 to 20 times each day on a piece of paper or on a card that can be carried around and pulled out and read during free moments. Once the affirmation becomes so integrated into the conscious mind that it is completely believed and made automatically, the athlete can select another affirmation to work on. Other techniques for utilizing affirmations are to post them (singularly or in combination) in places such as one's bedroom, bathroom, locker, or screen saver. There is also merit in recording affirmations on cassette tapes and playing them whenever possible, such as between classes or before going to bed.

Designing Coping and Mastery Self-Talk Tapes or Files

Every individual has the capacity to program his or her mind for successful thoughts. Some athletes do it naturally; others must learn how to be effective thinkers. One very effective method

for training the mind to think in a confident, success-oriented way is through the use of mastery and coping tapes or digital audio files such as an MP3 for an iPod. For a mastery tape or file the athlete records his or her own voice describing an outstanding performance in which events proceed precisely as desired, including the ideal thoughts, feelings, and emotions experienced just before, during, and after performance. Recalling a past great game or great day of competition may help the athlete get started in this process. Feedback from the coach might help in preparing the script. If the technology is available, the athletes might even want to put the voice-over on a video of their performing exactly as wanted. Combining the self-talk with a musical background that creates the desired emotions is also helpful.

The concept with the mastery tape or file is to be playing perfectly and in complete control of the situation. Speak slowly and provide pauses when recording the self-talk to allow the mind time to fully visualize each of the described or depicted scenes. Listening or watching a mastery rendition of the perfect performance over and over helps program the conscious and subconscious mind for success.

Because perfect performances are rare and because obstacles and setbacks are likely to occur in even the best of circumstances, producing and listening to a **coping tape or file** is an effective way of programming the mind to maintain confidence, control, and focus in the face of difficulties. Coping tapes or files allow the athlete to practice dealing with negative and anxious thoughts and situations, including all the potential things that could go wrong. The situation might be one in which the athlete makes a foolish mistake and loses mental or emotional control. The athlete then rehearses the strategies needed to regain control and confidence. This is an excellent opportunity to practice thought stoppage, reframing, or any of the other techniques mentioned in this chapter and in other

chapters, such as the arousal control techniques in Chapter 13.

The coping tape or file includes a description of the negative situations and accompanying maladaptive self-talk and feelings followed by a description of an appropriate strategy and self-statements for dealing effectively with the situation(s), including experiencing optimal thoughts and feelings. It should be stressed that the emphasis on a coping tape or file is not on the stressful or distracting situation described but on the process by which the athlete regains control and confidence when confronted with these situations. Listening over and over to this type of self-talk will help create a sense of well-being so that if the same situation occurs in real life the athlete will already have practiced coping with it successfully. Once athletes learn the skill of imagery, they can listen to the tape or file and actually visualize successfully coping with what is described.

Use Highlight Videotapes, CDs, or DVDs to Enhance Performance

Modern video technology can also be used to help athletes gain confidence and improve skills (Ives, Straub, & Shelley, 2002). Video cameras are now so easy to use, and so common, that almost any athlete or team has access to enough raw footage from which a personal or team highlight video can be created. All that is necessary is to identify the beginning and ending points of a few scenes of peak performance. It is particularly desirable to select performances in which athletes can see themselves excelling at the skills or strategies that currently need emphasis. An audio input can add an athlete's or team's favorite musical selection to serve as the sound track to their video images. Watching well-executed play while recalling the self-talk, emotions, and sensations that accompanied the scenes serves as a form of imagery rehearsal, which can affect the body in many positive ways (see Chapter 14).

Summary

There is a direct correlation between self-confidence and success. Confident athletes think about themselves and the action at hand in a different way than those who lack confidence. The difference is that the confident athlete's self-talk and internal imagery are consistently positive and enthusiastic. The self-enhancing thinking of confident athletes is likely to lead to enabling feelings and good performance, just as the inappropriate or misguided thinking of athletes lacking in confidence is likely to lead to negative feelings and poor performance. Athletes can learn to use self-talk to build confidence and to facilitate learning and performance. The first step for an athlete in gaining control of thinking is to monitor self-talk to become aware of what kind of thinking helps, what thoughts are occurring that appear to be harmful, and what situations or events are associated with the talk. Three of the most effective tools for identifying self-talk are retrospection, imagery, and keeping a self-talk log.

Once awareness of self-talk and feelings, particularly of dysfunctional talk, is heightened the coach or sport psychologist can instruct the athlete in how to start dealing with these thoughts. Techniques such as thought stoppage, changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts, countering, reframing, ABC cognitive restructuring of irrational and distorted thinking, and constructing affirmation statements are possible tools for producing performance-enhancing thoughts and eliminating disabling thoughts. Using mastery and coping tapes or files and video technology can also enhance confidence and performance.

Using these tools will require an investment of time and faith on the part of the athlete, and there is no guarantee that immediate improvements will result. As with any other training method that truly enhances performance, the results of training the mind to think effectively will emerge gradually, in precise correlation to the athlete's persistence and commitment (Brewer & Shillinglaw, 1992). Some athletes may be hesitant to take this step, just as there are athletes who do not use recent innovations in strength, endurance, and skill training. The athletes, however, who do invest that persistence and commitment to improving their self-talk will find their efforts well rewarded.

Study Questions

1. Describe how the self-talk of a successful athlete is different from that of an unsuccessful athlete. Give five examples of the self-talk from each.
2. What is the relationship between (a) self-talk and self-esteem and (b) self-confidence and self-efficacy?
3. Compare and contrast optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles in terms of the three dimension of explanatory style. How would you rate yourself on each of these?

4. Name and describe the six uses for self-talk. Using any sport setting, provide an example of each.
5. Susie, a varsity golfer, is concerned that her self-talk may be having an adverse effect on her play. What three techniques could she use to become more aware of her self-talk and how might she use them?
6. Describe how a coach or sport psychologist might help athletes use the techniques of thought stoppage and changing negative thoughts to positive thoughts.
7. How does countering a negative self-statement differ from reframing? Give examples of both in response to the statement "I'm always getting beaten on my opponent's first serve."
8. List and describe eight types of irrational and distorted thinking. Provide an example for how you can use the ABC cognitive restructuring intervention to help an athlete modify his or her irrational and distorted thinking.
9. When John monitors his self-talk, what five criteria should he use to determine whether his self-talk and underlying beliefs are rational or irrational?
10. What are the guidelines for writing and repeating affirmations?
11. How does a mastery tape or file help an athlete develop appropriate self-talk?
12. What is the purpose of a coping tape or file, and how is this purpose accomplished?
13. How might a videotape, CD, or DVD be designed and used to enhance an athlete's confidence and performance?

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