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# Confidence in College Athletes

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**Kimberly Halpin**

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## **ABSTRACT**

I researched the processes used by intercollegiate athletes to maintain confidence throughout their sports career, including how they prepared for games/competitions, how they dealt with pressures, and how other factors affected their performance and thought process during games. For this research, I created and administered an online survey to 70 college athletes across four sports. I found that many things gave the athletes confidence in themselves to play their sport such as family and preparation. However, some things also lowered the respondents' confidence levels such as failing and negativity. Results imply that athletes, for the most part, seem confident and optimistic. The majority of participants had past struggles with confidence, but were able to overcome them with the support of teammates, coaches, family, and friends.

## **INTRODUCTION**

I feel that this topic of interest is important to learn about because a person who is not an athlete could learn to appreciate sports more, why athletes participate in sports, and what makes them compete with their heads up when the odds are against them. Learning about sport confidence is also learning about self-confidence people can carry over into other life situations. I found the results to be quite inspiring.

I am doing this research project because I am interested in finding out how athletes' confidence increases or decreases due to certain events that happen during their performance. I am not an athlete so I do not know what it takes to maintain confidence while playing a sport, or even how to regain confidence if something goes terribly wrong and then the team, coach, and fans become disappointed due to a player's poor performance. I am sure that confidence is an important thing to have if one is involved in sports, especially when things seem impossible for

that particular person. I am interested to learn about my research subjects, to learn about their different perspectives on confidence in sports, and what each individual goes through before, during, and after the game. Overall, I hope to find out how college athletes gain and maintain their confidence throughout playing a sport despite hardships/low points/failures/injuries/pressure.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The research question examined in this study is how college athletes gain and maintain their confidence while playing a sport despite hardships/low points/failures/injuries/pressure. In all likelihood, there are many different reasons why an athlete's confidence may be high or low at any given time. The intent of this study is to provide a better understanding of which factors impact an athlete's confidence during their sports career. Identification of these factors could improve athletes' ability to play the sport that much better.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Confidence, Concentration, and Competitive Performance of Elite Athletes: A Natural Experiment in Olympic Gymnastics* by Burke D. Grandjean, Patricia A. Taylor, and Jay Weiner. The article was about a study done unknowingly on the 2002 Olympics women's gymnastics, "when the vault was set too low", "5 cm too low" to be exact. The study was designed to see if the vault problem had such a carryover effect". (Grandjean, Taylor, and Weiner, 320-321). Although this article did not deal with exactly what I was trying to research, I found a particular statement of interest and it dealt with confidence. "Because the equipment was not right, the result of the competition is questionable...The American coach, Bela Karolyi, agreed: "It handicapped 50 percent of the gymnasts here. It takes away all your confidence"...American competitor Elsie Ray added that her "confidence was really down after vault, and it definitely

carried over””. (Grandjean, Taylor, and Weiner, 321). That shows that major injuries can have a drastic effect on an athlete’s confidence.

*The Identification and Determination of Effectiveness of Images for Building, Maintaining and Regaining Confidence: The Athlete’s Perspective* by Lindsay Ross-Stewart. This article was about a study on how athletes use imagery as a way of “building, maintaining, and regaining confidence” and how well the images were perceived as effective for each person involved in the study. (Ross-Stewart, 11). The study showed that “MG-M imagery was perceived to be the most effective just as it was the most used”. (Ross-Stewart, 48). Melissa Bochiario states in her thesis, *The Use of Imagery by Collegiate Athletes During Their Off-Season* that, “MG-M imagery is imagery that represents effective coping and mastery of challenging tasks” I am assuming the types of imagery that the authors talked about athletes using is like when some of the athletes in my survey said that they visualize before games.

*Who do athletes compare to: How the standard of comparison can affect confidence levels in athletes* by Ryan Matthew Schultz. This article was about a study done on college undergraduates and how their confidence is affected when they “compare [their] confidence to the most confident athlete [he/she] know[s]”. Women’s efficacy was affected more by the test than the men’s efficacy. To gather results they used the State Sport-Confidence Inventory (SSCI). It is a way to “measure how confident an athlete feels at one particular moment in time”. (Schultz, 4-5).

*Sources of Sport Confidence of Master Athletes* by Rodney C. Wilson, Phillip J. Sullivan, Nicholas D. Myers, and Deborah L. Feltz. This article was the closest related to my research topic; it was about “sources of sport confidence and their relationship to trait sport confidence with master athletes”. The authors used the “Sources of Sport Confidence Questionnaire

(SSCQ)” and “found that high school and college athletes gained most of their confidence in their sport from physical and mental preparedness, social support, mastery, demonstration of ability, and physical self-presentation factors”. (Wilson, Sullivan, Myers, and Feltz, 369-370). The results show that the study was more of a broad and open-ended questionnaire, like mine.

Sport confidence was measured in many different ways and there was no right or wrong way to do it. The existing research supports the importance of confidence in athlete’s performance, and suggests the following factors influence confidence. The confidence of an athlete was important and could be changed within seconds, but also strengthened over time, and it did not matter what sport he/she played or how old he/she was.

### **METHOD and PROCEDURE**

I prepared a survey using [www.Zoomerang.com](http://www.Zoomerang.com). I developed questions that pertain to athletes. I thought those questions would be appropriate since they incorporate factors that might affect an athlete’s level of confidence. I also included basic questions about demographics (sex, age, ethnicity, student status).

I used an online survey to gain useful information from participants in the easiest and quickest way possible. I emailed the survey (along with an explanation for my study) to a random sample of MNSU student athletes after receiving IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval to administer the survey. I obtained current rosters of the following MSU sports: men’s baseball, hockey, swimming, golf, and women’s softball, hockey, swimming, and golf. I chose baseball (for men), softball (for women), and hockey for team sports, swimming and golf for individual sports. I made it random by selecting every fourth athlete on each of the eight different rosters; twelve athletes from each of those eight rosters were emailed the survey for a total pool of 96 athletes. However, due to unknown email addresses, 26, so only 70 athletes

received the survey). After seven days from the day I sent out the survey, the survey closed. Then I reviewed and analyzed the results.

## **RESULTS**

Within a day, 70 people received the survey. Thirty people viewed it and within a week, 26 people had completed my survey (that means that 87% of the people who viewed the survey chose to take it, overall there was a 37% return rate out of 70 people). All respondents were Caucasian, undergraduates, and between the ages of 18 and 24. Thirty-six percent were male, 64% female. The respondents had been playing sports between 1 and 17 years. Eight percent played individual sports, 52% played team sports, and 40% played both types of sports.

Besides the five sports mentioned earlier (baseball, softball, hockey, swimming, golf) various respondents also reported in a wider variety of sports throughout their life such as tennis, volleyball, basketball, soccer, figure skating, track, gymnastics, football, cross-country, diving, and water skiing. Of the respondents, 80% had been voted MVP, 96% had been the captain or assistant captain at one point during their sports career, 92% had won a tournament either as a team or individually, 32% had been seriously injured while playing a sport, 33% had been penalized during a game, 48% had been personally yelled at by their coach, and 44% had been pushed to play sports by their parents.

Regarding the questions related to confidence, 86% said it would make them feel more confident as an athlete if they were close to or had bonded with their teammates, 22% said that their confidence level decreased if they lost a game even though they had played with their best effort, 84% said that their confidence increased if they won a game while 16% said that their confidence level remained the same if they won a game. Four percent rated their current confidence level as being fair, 68% said good, and 28% said excellent.

To psych oneself up for a game/race, many of the athletes provided similar strategies. The most popular strategy was listening to music such as fast-paced music, Van Halen's "Right Now" as one person wrote. Other ways were getting excited, visualization, clear mind, focusing, stretching/warming up, positive thinking/self-talk ("nobody stands a chance against me"), breathing exercises, talking to teammates ("I actually try to prepare and focus more than I try to psych myself up"), and one person said "knowing that God is at my side."

Respondents who said that bonding with their teammates gave them more confidence explained why: it is more fun ("fun and confidence as a team go hand in hand"), it provides more support/encouragement/positive reinforcement, "it makes/breaks a team," they learned they will not be judged for their mistakes, they feel more responsible for their part, more things are accomplished, they felt more comfortable and, less tense, and finally, "with a team one can accomplish anything."

The athletes reported that many things provided them with confidence in themselves to play their sport such as family, teammates, self, coach, faith, preparation, supporters in general, friends, doing well, God, and previous feelings of accomplishment/success. However, some things also lowered the respondents' confidence levels, such as failing, negativity, getting yelled at, coaches, "dad's negative perspective," being penalized for mistakes, poor performances, consecutive bad games, bad practices, and body pains.

To be an athlete meant many different things to the respondents: someone who has passion for the sport, "being a leader," hard work/effort, "being mentally and physically gifted," to have a sense of pride, improving yourself as a person, "being a role model for people," learning positive life lessons, having a commitment to something, "being healthy, being a part of

a team,” “playing a sport to the best of your ability,” and lastly, “to be responsible to more people than just yourself and your family”.

Some athletes said their confidence goes down when they lose a game, even if they played their best. The following explains why: “it means that other people are better than I am,” and “even though I feel good about giving my best effort, I know it wasn’t good enough to win and that can be discouraging”. On the other side, that did not seem to affect other athlete’s confidence as reflected in the following responses: “when we don’t win, we evaluate what we have not done so it motivates us to practice and prepare more for the next tournament thus improving our confidence,” there is nothing you can do if the other team wins, “every games gives you the experience to make you better in the next game,” and finally, “sometimes people have off days and sometimes people have good days. You can’t always play well all the time. If you never fail, you will never know what it feels like to succeed”.

Finally, pressure was one other factor that affected some athletes’ level of confidence. Most of the people said pressure did not really affect them. Respondents explained why: pressure goes down with an increase in preparation, “I play better in a pressure situations,” pressure made some athletes “want to try harder,” and increase in pressure equals an increase in confidence, “pressure in golf is unbelievable, it can break you down at any moment, [but] mostly the pressure causes you to focus more and trust your skills,” it is a motivational factor, it makes playing fun and exciting, and lastly, “pressure makes me feel better cause it means that people know you can do it”. However, one athlete said, “Pressure lowers [their] confidence because [they] are so nervous”.

## **INTERPRETATION**

The results mean that athletes, for the most part, seem confident and optimistic. Almost every respondent reported having struggles in the past when engaging in sports, but being able to overcome them with the support of teammates, coaches, family, and friends. The support gave them a boost in their level of confidence to play their sport. For most, their belief in themselves that they could play better became stronger. The reported importance of confidence in athletic performance did not differ based on the gender of the respondent or the sport they played. The results suggest that if a team knows its teammates, works hard, and has fun together, the team's confidence overall is likely to be high and improve with each game, whether they win or lose, because they know they are all in it together and will be there to help a teammate in need. If an athlete plays an individual sport, having a self-reliant and confident attitude is key. Obviously, if athletes in individual sports have the support of coaches, family, and friends that will help since they cannot rely on teammates for encouragement. They may also feel more pressure from coaches, family, and fans versus athletes playing on a team sport since they are in the spotlight most of the time and are solely responsible for their success or failure.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research question examined in this study was how do college athletes gain and maintain their confidence while playing a sport despite hardships/low points/failures/injuries/pressure? Based on the subjective responses of athletes in this study, it appears that many athletes have similar attitudes and experiences related to sports and that there are multiple sources from which athletes get confidence, as well as several factors affecting the maintenance of each athlete's confidence level. Overall, the survey provided important information, but

obtaining a larger and more diverse sample of athletes to participate would have made the results even more intriguing.

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