

The Development of Self-Esteem

Professor Ken Fox

Good coaches are also good practical psychologists. They know that what is good for players is usually good for their match performance and this is especially true for the developing player. Some psychologists feel that the most powerful motivating force we have is the personal search for self-esteem. We constantly seek out ways of feeling good about ourselves, and spend the rest of our time trying to avoid situations that make us feel useless or a failure. The more we can learn about self-esteem, the more we can come to understand our players, their emotions, and their survival strategies, both on and off the field.

Self-esteem is our personal rating of our worth or value. It is a kind of score sheet we keep of all the good and bad things that happen to us. The things that we hold important to us count most and hopefully we come out on the positive side, so that we have some sense of self-respect and pride for who we are.

Youngsters find that appearance, performance in school and in sports, and personal relationships are important. Self-confidence is related to self-esteem, but is not the same thing (see Table 1).

Table 1:

Self-esteem	Feeling worth or value and that you are an 'OK person'.
Self-confidence	Feeling that you can meet the demands of situations you find yourself in.
Football-confidence	Feeling that you can meet the demands of <i>football</i> situations you find yourself in.

Confidence comes from believing that you can do the job successfully. The youngster who has learned from experience that he can beat defenders, will be more confident that he is good in the attacking role. Confidence is very much dependent on the situation. Even within football, players may be very confident in one position or with a particular tactic, but ask them to change and they may go to pieces for a while. Generally, the way to tackle a confidence problem is on the practice field. Self-esteem is more serious as it can affect the way the player tackles life in general as well as personal self-confidence on the field. Players with high self-esteem may not be the best players, but they will have a lot of characteristics that coaches enjoy and so it is in everyone's interest to try to help facilitate self-esteem development.

<p>High self-esteem players can be: Reliable, steady, solid Quietly self-confident, outgoing and creative Not afraid to take on a challenge or a calculated risk Learns from failure and treats it positively Self-accepting, understanding of strengths and weaknesses</p> <p>Low self-esteem players can be: Unreliable and unpredictable Either very quiet or cocky and frivolous Conservative, safe and less likely to go for it when it really matters Will either avoid risk or take on very high risks which have low chance of success Avoid failure at all costs Moody and often reactive</p>
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Table 2. Characteristics of high and low self-esteem

Self-esteem Development of Young Players

Although football should never be all things to a youngster, it can be a powerful arena for developing self-esteem. All youngsters need at least two things to develop a strong sense of self:

- to feel capable and effective
- to feel that they belong, are important and liked/loved.

1. Very young children aged up to 8 or 9 are not complex thinkers. They have an optimistic view of themselves and usually will have a natural sense of self-esteem. On the football field they believe that if they try hard they will do well and so are task-orientated. All the coach has to worry about is to make sure children get the opportunity to develop their skills and have fun.

2. Children aged around 9 to 13 spend a lot of time finding out where they rank among their 'gang' and so are more ego-involved. If they think they rank consistently lower than they should, then they have the choice of getting out or getting better. Many will choose to move away from football at this point. It is easier than feeling a failure, especially if they come to believe that they have no talent for the game. Many may never be seen on a football field again, which is a shame because we know that the prediction rate for identifying talent from this age group is low. The job of the coach at this point is to keep interest alive by retaining fun in sessions, concentrating attention on personal improvement, and convincing young players that they need to give themselves time to develop.

3. Adolescence is a more serious time in which a solid identity is shaped that will persist through into adulthood. This can mean a traumatic process of experimentation where youngsters flit from one activity to another searching for a 'high pay-off'. They are also dealing with a rapidly changing body and an

emerging sexuality. They have little experience and make lots of mistakes that knock their confidence. It is hardly surprising then that self-esteem is usually at its lowest in early adolescence. This is at a time when coaches are beginning to make greater demands on players. It is also a time when youngsters require the most sensitive treatment, so some care is required from the coach.

Coaching Strategies for Self-Esteem Development

1 Good Coaches Appreciate What Being Young is Like

We tend to judge youngsters' decisions on our own terms so they often seem like bad ones. Teenagers are rarely illogical, but do react to different pressures. The youngster who spends more time preening himself than practising with a ball is reacting to his perceived need to look right, to feel accepted by friends. This can seem more important than impressing the coach. It shouldn't necessarily be that way, but the search for self-esteem and the need to belong can explain a lot of decisions.

Similarly, the argument is often presented that football exists in a tough and competitive world, therefore we should throw young players 'in at the deep end'. This is a bit like asking young children to cross a busy road without training. Some will survive, but we would lose an awful lot of potentially good 'road crossers' on the way. The key is to teach good road crossing in steady incremental stages and keep as many trainees involved and alive as possible. The pressures of adolescence are quite different to those of young professional life and players should not be rejected on the grounds of their ability to cope with adult rules and pressures early in their development.

2 Good coaches communicate respect to young players

Youngsters know when they have made a serious mistake in play. They welcome constructive criticism and are likely to take "Don't worry about the mistake right now, just make sure you get tighter on him next time" as a helpful comment. No youngster benefits from derogatory comments from coaches from the side line, particularly after a mistake. Children with low self-esteem are already hypercritical of themselves, are likely to feel publicly humiliated, lose any respect for the coach, and their heads will drop for the rest of the game. It also confuses children, as often coaches relate much more respectfully away from the field of play. Good coaches combine constructive information with justly deserved praise. Any serious dissatisfaction with performance is tackled in private with the youngster given a fair opportunity to respond.

3 Good coaches make players feel responsible for their own achievements

Self-esteem is not only built out of feeling capable and successful, it is also formed from feeling a sense of responsibility for achievements. It is not simply the I 'did' it that is so important, but that youngsters feel that they did it

themselves. Children need to feel that they earned success and that it is deserved. Ironically, gifted players who feel that they were born with a natural talent are sometimes less likely to feel a sense of self-esteem, even though their performances might be excellent. Youngsters who fall into this trap need to be shown that they have a talent but that to get to the top is really down to them and their effort. This is why creating opportunities to experience self-improvement is so important for all levels of ability. Good coaches encourage players to monitor their improvement and are always ready to hand over ownership of success to the players.

4 Good coaches encourage risk-taking

The best way to distinguish between a low and high self-esteem performer is to look at the way they deal with failure. Players with low self-esteem are afraid of failure and will try to avoid it through safe play such that their play becomes tentative and lacking in creativity. Good coaches invite players to take risks, particularly in the attacking third, and make mistakes in practice and teach players to react to mistakes positively. In this sense coaches should praise and reward the behaviour or attempting the right move, regardless of the outcome. In coaching encouraging taking the shot is priority over whether or not it results in a goal.

5 Good coaches show that they care as much about their as their performance

Ironically, coaches can make the biggest impact on players' self-esteem by factors not necessarily related to football. Many youngsters hold their coach in high regard and one of the most powerful ways to help youngsters realise their self-worth is through the quality of the relationship. Referring back, youngsters need to feel valued, and understood, regardless of their capabilities. The need for this unconditional regard is sometimes much stronger and more powerful in its effect than the need for success at football. The best coaches through their relationships manage to convince children that they care about them as individuals and that they are valued members of the squad, regardless of their performance. Often all that is needed is a smile and the odd comment showing an interest in the youngster's life outside football. It sometimes comes as a relief to young players to realise that they can be worthy people regardless of their performance on match day.

Developing confident players

Dr Matt Pain

Self-confidence grows from getting better at specific tasks and integrating these successes into your sense of self. Football-confidence is made up of all the things a player believes he can do well (N.B. Psychologists sometimes refer to this type of confidence as self-efficacy).

The key then to coaching confidence is firstly to provide players with lots of opportunities for success, secondly, to promote awareness of these

successes when they happen (specific praise) and, thirdly, to minimize negative comments when successes don't happen (i.e. criticism).

Coaching strategies for developing confidence

The confidence of a young player is the sum of all the thoughts they have about themselves as a footballer. Coaches and parents greatly have a massive impact on these thinking processes and have a significant role in developing the confidence of a player.

There are 3 main ways that confidence is developed:

1. Success breeds confidence.
2. Modelling successful players.
3. Social persuasion.

1. Success breeds confidence

Achieving success is the most important factor determining a player's confidence. Regardless of any coach intervention, if players get plenty of time on the ball to try new things, to experiment freely, and to reach new targets and goal, they will achieve the small successes that add up to a confident player.

As a coach it is important that the coaching tasks are designed to enable consistent and frequent success for all players. This could mean differentiation and grouping according to ability.

If you're working on a shooting practice make sure that players are scoring more often than they miss. By carefully 'racking up' the challenge as the practice develops players should still be able to achieve consistent success.

By setting achievable and realistic goals that are written down and ticked off when completed, the player gets to see real progress and this helps reinforce each success and build confidence further.

2. Modeling successful players

"If he can do it, I can do it as well." When players see someone succeeding at a skill, their confidence will increase. This process is more effective when the model is of a similar ability. Although not as strong as past experience, modelling is particularly helpful when a player is unsure of herself.

Demo's are more effective for building confidence if done by an average player rather than the coach. Picking out good examples of skill during a practice and getting the whole group to watch is also an effective confidence builder. The same process can be used post match, especially if video is available.

Getting players to 'take a free kick *as if* you're David Beckham' will bring out the natural modelling ability of young people. Stepping into another's shoes and acting can have an immediate and powerful effect on confidence.

3. Social Persuasion

Social persuasion relates to positive and negative feedback, which can have a strong influence on confidence, and is an area where the coach can play a major role. Most people can remember times where something said to them significantly altered their confidence. Where positive persuasions increase self-efficacy, negative persuasions decrease it. It is much easier to decrease someone's confidence than it is to increase it.

It's much more effective to deliver specific feedback ('great body shape when holding off the defender') than general comments such as 'well done' or 'good effort' etc.

Be careful not to overdo the positive feedback to the point where it becomes meaningless:

Children cannot be fooled by empty praise and condescending encouragement. They may have to accept artificial bolstering of their self-esteem in lieu of something better, but what I call their accruing ego identity (self-confidence) gains real strength only from wholehearted and consistent recognition of real accomplishment, that is, achievement that has meaning in their culture." (Erik Ericsson, developmental psychologist).

Consistently remind players of past successes. This can be done when reviewing a session by highlighting examples of skill and asking each player to recall for themselves the things they did well. By logging these in a training diary, the player has a constant source of confidence information to refer to. If a player is struggling for form, remind them of good performances and recall specific successes. If video is available, show the best moments.

Some specific points on how to use language more effectively:

- Make your feedback expressive – use superlatives rather than 'good' or 'well done'. For example, you might offer feedback to a player who has just made a long run and finished with a poor pass: '*Terrific* run James, relax on the pass next time, and keep making those *fantastic* runs!' Notice the feedback sandwich – positive – improvement – positive.
- Be aware of your tone of voice and the words you emphasise: 'I love how *hard* you work,' could sound patronising to some players, 'I *love* how hard you work,' has a clear ring of affirmation to it.
- Reduce the 'but' and increase the 'and'. 'Great dribble down the wing, *but* next time look up and you'll see the pass.' The use of 'but' effectively wipes out all the positive impact of the first half of the

sentence. Instead try 'Great dribble down the wing, *and* next time look up and you'll see the pass.' Using 'and' maintains the positive nature of the first part of the feedback and ensures that the instructional part is seen as positive and not slightly critical.

- Tell players what you want not what you don't want. 'Don't stop moving after making the pass.' Instead, 'Keep moving and looking for space after making the pass.'

Social persuasion also includes players' own positive self-talk. Encourage players to talk about the things they do well. 'Boasting' to the coach and to each other after a good game is natural in young people and good for confidence building.