

The Power of Confidence: Coaching Strategies to Boost Performance in Rugby Players

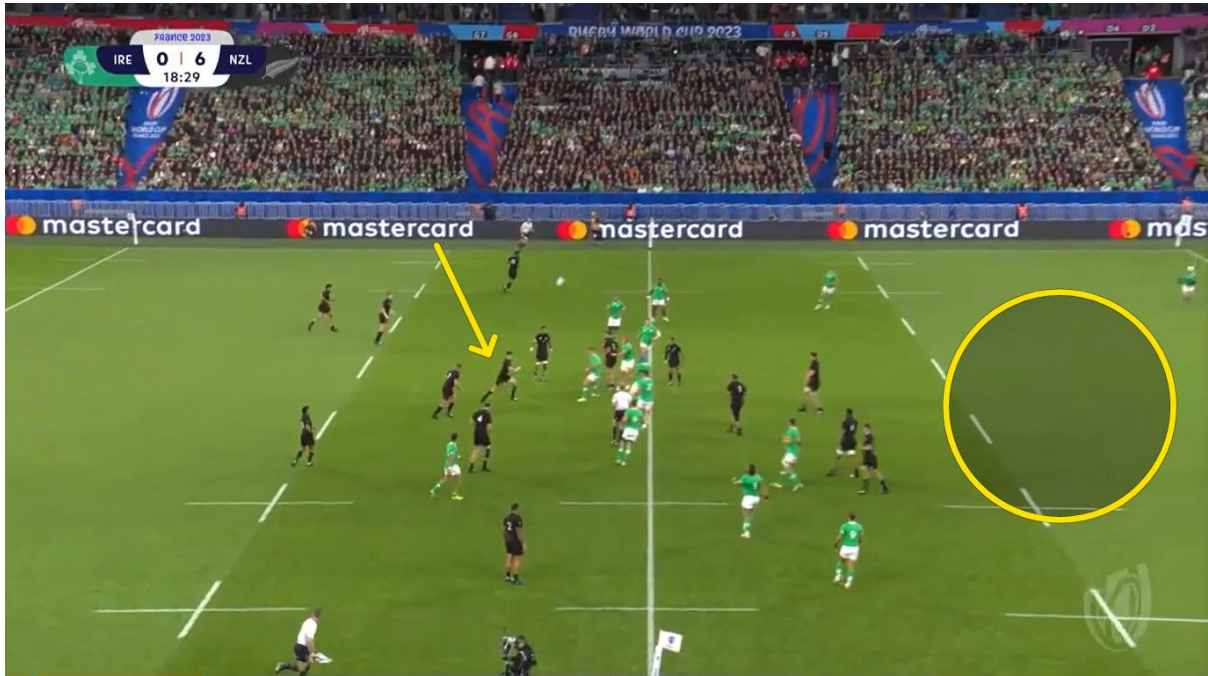
This topic was born of my own failures and experiences as a player. There were a few key moments in my 10-year professional career where confidence was a huge factor in my on-field production. In the first instance, I was playing with a Super Rugby Team that was touring Argentina. I had played in a very similar tour the year prior with a different Super Rugby Team. The previous experience gave me a feeling of superiority that carried onto the field. I took that into the pre-season and continued performing well. After a short break for Christmas, the Wallabies of the time were reintroduced back into training after the Spring Tour. The addition of these players into the squad immediately transformed my mindset to one of being an imposter of less talent. I had gone from feeling bullet proof to vulnerable simply due to the addition of international level players back into the squad. This was a recurring theme in my career. I played in the Top 14 competition with a number of international players and never felt comfortable, yet I played in the Top 14 competition with a team with only 1 international player, but I felt confident and performed strongly in this company. We consistently beat my first team which had all the international players. On reflection, it was a combination of a feeling of belonging and the coaches concerted effort to recruit me, as he believed in my ability, that were the determining factors in my improved performance outcomes.

The second instance was back in Super Rugby, with the addition of a coach whose methods weren't about instilling confidence in me as a player but directed towards testing my mental resilience. The coach often questioned mine, and other players', abilities to play at Super Rugby Level if we couldn't withstand his pressures. In this coach's mind, if the pressures he was placing on the players affected their performance, then surely these players were not up to coping with the pressure of Super Rugby, so our worth to the team was diminished. As confidence in my value to the team decreased, so too did my performance. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy and in the coach's mind, justified his perceptions around my mental weaknesses.

As a result of this period for me as a player, I have read widely to consider why I suffered these periods of low confidence and written a version of this essay, from a player's perspective, in my head a thousand times over the years. I constantly question how I could better have maintained my confidence levels to ensure high level performance. Why was I confident against international level players, but felt like a lesser player with them in the side?

As a coach, I vowed to never make players feel like this. Not simply because it erodes the coach/player relationship, but for the far more selfish reason in that I believe confidence is a massive driver of performance, and the coach can set a tone within the team that fosters confident, capable, calculated risk takers.

Beauden Barrett, in a World Cup Quarter Final against the team ranked Number 1 in the world, identified space, chip kicked and regathered, leading to the All Blacks first try of the match. It eschewed more tactically conservative options to execute a confident, but riskier, play.



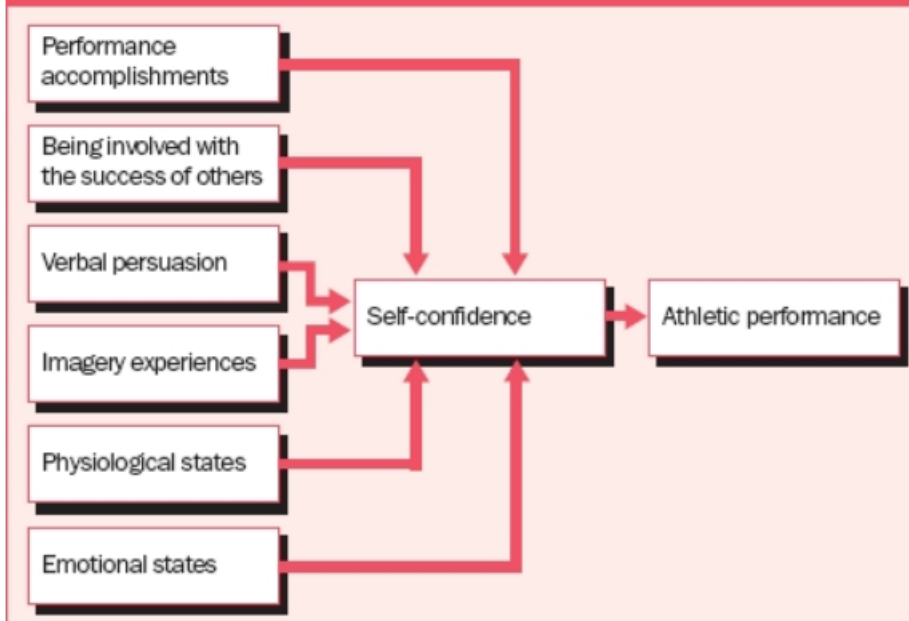
To me, this was a prime example of player confident in their skill and decision making, but also confident he had the backing of the team and coaching team to pursue all opportunities his confidence and skill could create.

In this essay, I've changed my reflection from that of a player questioning why my confidence fluctuated, to that of a coach, questioning how I best instil confidence. How can I be a person who fosters confidence within the playing group both individually and collectively to nail those moments like Beauden Barrett? I wanted to explore the importance of confidence in rugby, the role of coaching in building and sustaining it and how to utilise a player's confidence as a tool to drive exceptional performance.

Rugby is a sport that demands a unique combination of physical prowess, mental resilience, and strategy. Confidence, or belief in one's abilities, plays a pivotal role in performance. Confidence is not merely psychological, but a tangible force that can shape individual and team performance outcomes.

In Figure 1, Hamilton (2023) adopted Bandura's Self Efficacy Theory to highlight elements creating confidence.

Figure 1: Model of self-confidence (adapted with permission from Feltz, 1984)



Confident players are more likely to take risks, make assertive decisions, and execute skills with precision. Jones and Harwood (2008) found a positive correlation between confidence and performance in soccer players, highlighting the direct impact of psychological factors on on-field success. The phenomenon is called psychological momentum and confidence is derived from positive psychological momentum.

Effective coaching builds and nurtures confidence in rugby players. Adopting strategies that not only enhance physical skills, but also cultivate a positive mindset among their players to generate positive performance outcomes.

One of the most fundamental strategies in building confidence is positive reinforcement. Actively acknowledging and praising players for their efforts and achievements. This creates a positive feedback loop, reinforcing the belief that hard work and dedication lead to success. Informal comments during training sessions which are strengths-focused, positive reinforcement and encouragement lead to self-belief (Mallett, 2009).

Formally, coaches can incorporate regular feedback sessions where individual strengths are highlighted. This personalised approach not only fosters a sense of accomplishment but also provides specific areas for improvement, empowering players to enhance their skills and contribute more effectively to the team. Utilising the technical tools at our disposal, such as Sportscode or Hudl, a coach can put a literal highlight on an effective action, with the aim of driving repeat performances of that effective moment. The visual cue of circling the player, individualises the feedback and reinforces the positive loop.

This now allows the player mental skill development. Visualisation of the highlighted moment and goal setting towards repeat actions of this effective moment can enhance

players' confidence. The review/individual feedback process effectively leads to a guided imagery session. Guided imagery can help visualise successful performances, creating a mental blueprint for success. A coach can encourage visualisation, effectively harnessing the power of the mind to enhance performance (Roychowdhury, 2023). Better resourced teams may be able to involve a Sports Psychologist to assist in these areas but at a basic level, integrating these techniques into training routines contributes to the holistic development of players, equipping them with mental tools to confidently navigate the challenges of the game.

Team cohesion enhances individual confidence, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual and team dynamics. As a coach this can be enhanced by effective retention of players and recruiting the right players for the team. Ideally, the longer a team can stay together, they form connection beyond simply the field and tie emotional bonds that can forge a team togetherness. This togetherness and understanding can offer a performance bounce, both psychologically and with connected skill. Whilst I don't have access to the data, Gainline Analytics have been known to be successful in demonstrating the performance benefits of cohesion.

Confident players are more likely to exhibit superior technical skills on the field as confidence positively correlates with skill execution. Taylor and Taylor (1997) found that players who reported higher confidence levels demonstrated greater technical proficiency, emphasising the symbiotic relationship between psychological and technical prowess. This is a chicken and egg moment. Is the confidence derived from the fact the player executes the skill well or is the skill well executed because the player is confident? Either way, the coach can take advantage of the confidence and demonstrated skill by designing and implementing ways gameplans can exploit this skill and confidence. To the player, the coach is demonstrating the ultimate faith by playing a certain way because of a player's certain skill set. This can further add to the players confidence and therefore, performance. It correlates to other parts of coaching too, showing a demonstrated understanding of your playing groups profile and implementing tactically around that profile.

Rugby is a high-pressure sport that demands quick thinking and sound decision-making, especially in critical moments. Confidence equips players with the mental resilience to make assertive decisions under pressure. Players who trust their abilities are more likely to take calculated risks, leading to innovative plays and strategic advantages. This adaptability is a hallmark of confident players, contributing to their overall effectiveness on the field. Coaches can equip players with the confidence to makes sound decisions by repetitively mimicking game like situations and highlighting successes immediately within the training session. Boss, Mohr and Buss et al (2015) show that deliberate practice with both *high-* and *low-frequency* intermittent feedback results in a strong improvement of early procedural skill acquisition. *High-frequency* intermittent feedback, however, results in even better and smoother performance. Coach feedback doesn't have to be purely positive in nature, as error correction and

then successful change breed both resilience and confidence in the player. Skill mastery is the confidence giver.

Confidence is contagious within a team. When individual players exude confidence, it creates a positive ripple effect that permeates the entire squad. A confident team communicates more effectively, collaborates seamlessly, and supports each other in both success and failure. This furthers the earlier point regarding cohesion. Vealey et al. (1998) found that a collective belief in the team's abilities fosters a winning mentality, influencing performance outcomes. Coaches, therefore, play a pivotal role in creating a team culture that nurtures and sustains confidence among all players. The balance must be created to ensure that confidence doesn't tip over into complacency or overconfidence. Taylor (2008) believed "prime confidence demonstrates faith in your ability and your preparation. It should not, however, cause you to expect success; this belief can lead to arrogance and overconfidence." The coach's confidence in a player must be realistic to achieve the best performance outcome.

Confidence stands as a linchpin in the realm of rugby, influencing the performance of individual players and shaping the outcomes of entire teams. Coaches play a central role in instilling and nurturing confidence through a combination of positive reinforcement, mental upskilling, and the creation of a supportive team culture. In harnessing the symbiotic relationship between confidence, psychological momentum and on-field performance, coaches can create an environment where players develop into high performers.

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