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Effective Ways to Develop and Maintain Robust Sport-Confidence: Strategies Advocated by Sport Psychology Consultants

CHRIS BEAUMONT, IAN W. MAYNARD, AND JOANNE BUTT

Sheffield Hallam University

Based on recent evidence, this study identified 10 strategies advocated by sport psychology consultants as effective at developing and maintaining robust sport-confidence in athletes. Due to the study’s exploratory nature, qualitative interviews were conducted and content analyzed. Six themes emerged for developing robust sport-confidence and 4 emerged for maintaining robust sport-confidence. Findings reveal a need to develop an athlete’s signature strengths, increase pressure experienced in training, and identify broad stable sources of confidence to develop robust sport-confidence. Consultants reported that maintaining robust sport-confidence occurs through constant development. Theoretical implications and future research directions are discussed.

Self-confidence is frequently cited as an important part of successful sport performance and has been shown to influence behaviors, attitudes, and sporting attainment (Cox, Shannon, McGuire, & McBride, 2010). The two theoretical frameworks that have predominantly been used to study self-confidence in sport are self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997) and sport-confidence (cf. Vealey & Chase, 2008).

Self-efficacy is defined as a judgment of one’s ability to organize and execute specific actions needed to produce a certain level of performance and is considered to be a fluctuating state rather than a fixed trait (Bandura, 1986). It is thought that efficacy beliefs influence one’s behaviors (i.e., actions), cognitions (i.e., thoughts), and affect (i.e., feelings) and are predicted by six main sources of information (Maddux & Gosselin, 2003). These sources are enactive mastery experiences (i.e., gaining belief from mastery and successful experiences), vicarious experiences (i.e., gaining belief from observing the successful experiences of others), verbal persuasion (i.e., gaining belief from the support of significant others including themselves), physiological and emotional states (i.e., gaining belief from associations made between performance and our physiological arousal and emotions), and imaginal experiences (i.e., referring to people gaining belief from imagining themselves, or others, behaving successfully). Although Bandura’s (1977, 1986, 1997) theory of self-efficacy was not developed specifically for the context of competitive sport, it made an important contribution to the study of self-confidence in sport, as it tended to be the focal theory underpinning implied strategies for designing confidence interventions for athletes (Vealey, 2001).

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Address correspondence to Chris Beaumont, 6 Kingfisher Court, Beamont Drive, Preston, Lancashire PR1 8UG, UK. E-mail: CBeaumont@live.co.uk

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To develop a framework that more appropriately captured the context of competitive sport, Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, and Giacobbi (1998) built on self-efficacy theory to develop the theory of sport-confidence. This term was defined as an individual’s belief in his or her ability to succeed in sport (Vealey, 1986, 2001). Specifically, Vealey et al. (1998) implied that athletes would depend on further sources of confidence in the sporting setting as well as those identified by self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), with social, cultural, demographic, and organizational factors also influencing the original sources. Accordingly, the reconceptualized model of sport-confidence (Vealey, 2001; Vealey et al., 1998) identified nine sources of sport-confidence under the three source domains of achievement (mastery and demonstration of ability), self-regulation (physical and mental preparation and physical self-presentation), and social climate (social support, coaches’ leadership, vicarious experiences, environmental comfort, and situational favorableness). Initial research exploring the sources from which athletes derive their confidence identified mental/physical preparation, mastery, and demonstration of ability to be salient sources (Vealey et al., 1998; Wilson, Sullivan, Myers, & Feltz, 2004).

From a conceptual perspective, Vealey (2001) highlighted the need to identify a variety of sources of confidence to maximize the ability of the athlete to draw on a salient source at any given juncture. Vealey further implied that the sources most important to an athlete should be targeted when designing interventions to enhance confidence. In addition to the sources of sport-confidence, Vealey proposed that the sport-confidence model is multidimensional in nature and that both sources and types (i.e., what an athlete is most confident about) of confidence should be considered. Vealey’s model has received support (e.g., Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007; Wilson et al., 2004), most notably in implying the proposition that athletes’ characteristics and organizational culture influence their sources of sport confidence. Indeed, Hays et al. (2007) conducted a study involving elite team and individual athletes and identified both types and sources of confidence. From the nine sources of confidence reported, there were some sources overlapping with those initially outlined by Vealey et al. (1998) but also further sources of confidence unique to the culture of world-class sport (e.g., trust, competitive advantage, and innate factors). Taken together, the findings support the proposition that sources and types of confidence will influence athletes’ sport-confidence levels and will vary depending on the organizational culture of the sport.

The most recent model of sport-confidence (Vealey & Chase, 2008) retains the original nine sources of confidence and includes three types that are particularly important for athletes: physical skills and training (i.e., the athlete’s belief that he or she can execute the necessary physical skills), cognitive efficiency (i.e., the athlete’s belief that he or she can mentally focus in competition), and resilience (i.e., the athlete’s belief that he or she can deal with a setback). The model also proposes that the organizational culture of sport (e.g., competition level) and the individual characteristics of the athlete (e.g., gender) will influence the sources and types of sport-confidence used.

Research findings continue to support the model of sport-confidence (e.g., Hays, Thomas, Maynard, & Bawden, 2009; Kingston, Lane, & Thomas, 2010). In particular, in their follow-up study with world-class athletes, Hays et al. (2009) explored the role of confidence in relation to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses it elicits in the organizational culture of elite sport. Findings indicated that high sport-confidence facilitated performance through its positive effect on athletes’ cognitions, affect, and behaviors, whereas low sport-confidence was synonymous with negative affect, faulty cognitions, and ineffective behaviors. Factors responsible for debilitating athletes’ sport-confidence (e.g., poor preparation, pressure, and expectation) were also found. Of interest, these debilitating factors were
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directly related to the sources of sport-confidence initially identified by Hays et al. in their 2007 study and highlight the important role that sources play in athletes’ confidence levels. Although identifying multiple sources of confidence has been a key message from the research findings, it has also been implied that deriving confidence from uncontrollable sources (i.e., unstable sources such as outcome-related accomplishments and social support) will likely contribute to fluctuating confidence levels (Hays et al., 2009; Vealey, 2001). Research findings therefore emphasize the need to assess individuals’ sources of confidence in order to design an appropriate intervention specific to their needs that helps build and maintain confidence. In response to this need, Hays, Thomas, Butt, and Maynard (2010) introduced confidence profiling as a tool to explore an athlete’s own sources and types of confidence and then later used the profile to implement a unique cognitive-behavioral intervention.

It is clear that existing research and the subsequent intervention work has been driven by the need for athletes to build confidence prior to, and maintain it during, competition. Indeed, Hays et al. (2009) reported that elite athletes struggled to regain confidence if it was lost in the pressurized environment of competition. This finding supports Vealey and Chase’s (2008) suggestion that confidence remains a work in progress for athletes and is a fragile construct.

It is this concept of stability that has, for the most part, led to researchers exploring what has been termed “resilient confidence” (Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005; Vealey, 2001) in the past, and more recently “robust sport-confidence” (Thomas, Lane, & Kingston, 2011). Specifically, in a study involving elite athletes, robust sport-confidence was defined as a multidimensional and stable construct that allows athletes to deal with setbacks and the constant psychological and environmental challenges that occur in sport (Thomas et al., 2011). In addition, the construct was found to have six key characteristics: multidimensional (i.e., made up of different types of confidence), malleable (i.e., responds and reacts to negative factors), durable (i.e., stable over time), a strong set of beliefs (i.e., the athlete truly believes in their ability), developed (i.e., not innate but developed over time), and protective (i.e., acting as a buffer against negative factors). Thomas et al. (2011) implied that these characteristics may serve as a foundation from which stable sport-confidence can be developed and have important implications for sport psychologists. However, although Thomas et al. implied that such a development can occur, specific strategies addressing how this can be achieved have not been identified. As noted earlier, previous research (Hays et al., 2007) implies that developing controllable sources of confidence may help athletes to sustain more stable levels of sport-confidence. Furthermore, Machida, Ward, and Vealey (2012) found that athletes’ use of controllable sources of confidence was predicted by personal characteristics such as adaptive perfectionism (i.e., a drive to succeed, do the best on tasks, and an ability to be flexible when failing), task-goal orientation (i.e., individuals are focused on mastery, personal improvement, and high levels of competence), and a task-involving motivational climate (i.e., where effort, mastery, and personal improvement are the focus). However, these factors also predicted the use of uncontrollable sources, thus, indicating that although the development of a task-orientation in terms of the individual and the climate might help athletes focus on controllable sources, these factors may not reduce or remove uncontrollable sources (Machida et al., 2012). It is therefore still unclear if developing these factors may contribute to the development of robust sport-confidence.

Furthermore, although there are intervention techniques aimed at increasing confidence, such as goal-setting (Kingston & Hardy, 1997), imagery (Garza & Feltz, 1998), self-talk (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Mpourmpaki, & Theodorakis, 2009), hypnosis (Barker & Jones, 2006), and modelling (McAuley, 1985), it is also unclear if these traditional techniques are effective at building and maintaining robust sport-confidence. Indeed, Thomas et al. (2011)
implied the need to shift from a traditional view that high levels of confidence should be
developed to more of a focus on developing the strength of the belief across several sources
to maintain robust sport-confidence over time. Although existing research has provided a
solid foundation from which a sport-confidence intervention can be derived (e.g., salient,
controllable sources of confidence unique to each athlete and key psychological skills), it is
clear that there is still a need to further explore how robust sport-confidence is grown and the
strategies that sport psychologists use to develop and maintain the construct.

The purpose of this study was to explore how experienced sport psychology consultants
(SPCs) would advocate developing and maintaining athletes’ robust sport-confidence. Specif-
ically, the study aimed to identify the strategies consultants perceived to be effective at de-
veloping robust sport-confidence and how they would help athletes to maintain this form of
confidence over time.

METHOD

Participants

Ten (four female, six male) practicing sport psychology consultants aged between 32 and
63 years (mean age = 41.4 years, SD = 8.43) voluntarily participated in the study. The SPCs
were recruited via e-mail and were a purposive sample (Patton, 2002) with specific criteria
used to ensure that participants were appropriately qualified and suitably experienced. First,
SPCs had to be registered with both the British Psychological Society and the Health and Care
Professions Council—the professional bodies that regulate the delivery of sport psychology
in the United Kingdom. Second, SPCs had to have at least 10 years of experience working as
a sport psychologist. In total the SPCs had 10 to 30 years of applied experience (mean experience
= 16.8, SD = 6.18). In addition to these prerequisites, all participants were also accredited by the
British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences and had completed a doctoral qualification.

Procedure

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, interviews were selected as the method of data
collection and a semistructured interview guide was developed based on existing literature
(e.g., Hays et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2011; Vealey & Chase, 2008). Following institutional
ethics approval, SPCs that met the criteria for inclusion in the study were identified and
contacted via e-mail by the primary researcher to explain the nature and purpose of the study.
Following this initial contact and agreement to participate, follow-up e-mails were sent to
arrange a date and time for interviews to take place. Participants returned consent forms prior
to further contact and were then sent a set of standardized instructions including the main areas
from the interview guide to be explored. All interviews were conducted over the phone by the
first author. Telephone interviews have been used successfully in previous sport psychology
research (e.g., Gould, Collins, Laurer, & Chung, 2007). Although it is acknowledged that
it may be difficult to establish rapport with participants when conducting interviews over
the phone, preparticipation correspondence via telephone conversations and e-mails further
helped to establish rapport before interviews were conducted. Before data collection began,
participants were read a set of standardized instructions informing them again of the nature of
the study and stating that all data would remain anonymous and confidential. Pilot interviews
were conducted with two SPCs who met the inclusion criteria and were critiqued by two
experienced researchers. During this process, some minor modifications were made to the
content and structure of the interview guide.
Interview Guide

A semistructured interview guide was developed to explore participants’ views. The guide ensured that each participant was asked the same set of fundamental questions (Gould, Jackson, & Finch, 1993) while allowing participants to lead the conversation, elaborate, and discuss their unique experiences as consultants (Patton, 2002). The interview guide comprised five main sections that covered the two broad areas of building and maintaining sport-confidence. The first section aimed to build rapport and covered introductory questions about each participant’s background and experience working as an SPC. The second section explored participants’ views on the nature of confidence and why it is important; it asked participants to discuss confidence and how it influences sports performance. Participants were also asked to define sport-confidence. In posing this question, the researcher purposely avoided using the term robust to prevent undue bias. The interview guide then moved on to questions that probed participants’ understanding of how confidence is developed (e.g., What type of intervention work do you deliver to develop athletes’ sport-confidence?). This was followed by questions that addressed how participants would advocate maintaining confidence over time (e.g., What strategies do you use to help athletes maintain sport-confidence over time?). The final section covered any challenges or difficulties that participants have faced when working with athletes on the development of confidence (e.g., Are there any lessons you’ve learned about working with athletes on confidence?). Participants were given an opportunity at the end of the interview to discuss anything they felt was relevant that had not already been previously raised or discussed.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Interviews lasted on average 50.68 min ($SD = 7.89$). Transcripts of each interview were content analyzed by three researchers adopting procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Specifically, researchers individually inductively coded raw-data themes (i.e., quotes or paraphrased quotes representing meaningful thoughts) characterizing participants’ views on the deductively selected two broad areas of developing robust sport-confidence and maintaining robust sport-confidence. The raw-data themes that were generated were organized into groups of like responses to create lower order themes, and like lower order themes were then organized into higher order themes. To ensure data trustworthiness, three researchers analyzed the data independently at each stage of the analysis (i.e., generating raw-data themes and the emergence of the lower and higher order themes) and then reached agreement during discussions that took place over a 6-week period. Engaging in this process has been reported as a common method to minimize potential bias that can occur with only one researcher analyzing the data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Finally, themes emerging from the data were presented to an experienced researcher who was not part of the research team (i.e., peer reviewer). The role of the peer reviewer was to probe for explanations of decisions made regarding grouping and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

In accordance with the research question, the structure of the interview guide, and the analysis, the results are presented within the two broad areas of strategies to develop athletes’ robust sport-confidence and strategies to maintain that sport-confidence.
Strategies to Develop Robust Sport-Confidence in Athletes

From a thorough review of the transcripts regarding strategies used by SPCs to develop athletes’ robust sport-confidence, 115 raw-data themes emerged and were organized into 18 lower order themes. These lower order themes were subsequently organized into six higher order themes that represented the different strategies that SPCs perceived to be effective for developing robust sport-confidence. These higher order themes were categorized as developing understanding and awareness, logging evidence, manipulating the coaching environment, tailor for the individual, using psychological skills, and developing an athlete’s signature-strengths (see Figure 1 for the full data tree of higher and lower order themes). The number of SPCs cited in each of the higher and lower order themes is provided in parentheses. Each higher order theme is discussed next with descriptive quotes used to provide context for the reader (Patton, 2002).

Developing understanding and awareness of confidence

This higher order theme contained responses relating to SPCs helping athletes to develop a deeper level of understanding and awareness of themselves and of their confidence. This theme consisted of three lower order themes: education and awareness (e.g., understanding themselves and what confidence is), exploring sources of confidence (e.g., where their confidence comes from), and operationalizing confidence (e.g., what confidence looks like to them).

The lower order theme education and awareness captured SPCs’ views on the importance of increasing an athlete’s awareness. These views were characterized by phrases such as “knowing their methods,” “being aware of their thoughts and feelings,” “understanding where they are,” and “increasing their awareness of what confidence is.” Therefore, SPCs were keen to use an educational approach to help athletes develop robust sport-confidence through becoming more aware of their own confidence. This theme was evidenced by one SPC who stated, “You can have an effect [positive] on someone’s confidence without using any techniques as such but rather just talking to them about what confidence is.”

Another lower order theme, exploring sources of confidence, explained four SPCs’ views on the importance of breaking confidence down into different areas so athletes can gain belief from varied sources. In particular, it is having this wider array of sources that serve as a mechanism to build robust sport-confidence. One SPC explained this process in the following way: “You’ve got to try and create a broader base of where they can source confidence from, so if those dominos are knocked down their house of cards is not going to collapse.” Similarly another SPC stated, “The wider the range of sources of confidence and the more things an athlete is confident about the more robust that confidence is likely to be.”

Three SPCs also perceived that operationalizing confidence, or describing what confidence looks like to an athlete and what their desired behavioral outcome would be, was an effective strategy to develop robust sport-confidence. One SPC explained this theme: “My first job whenever someone says to me they want to work on developing confidence is to really clean-up what that looks like to them, what actually is that in behavioral terms.”

Logging evidence

SPCs also described how recording evidence was an effective strategy for developing robust sport-confidence because it provides athletes with clear information about their performance that highlights they can succeed. Specifically this higher order theme comprised five lower order themes: reflecting (e.g., seeing the big picture), diaries (e.g., recording thoughts and statistics daily), monitoring improvements (e.g., tracking changes in performance), modeling/vicarious
Figure 1. Strategies identified by sport psychology consultants to develop robust sport-confidence. Note. The number of sport psychology consultants cited in each of the higher and lower order themes is provided in parentheses.
experience (e.g., seeing players who have left the academy and become professionals), and videos (e.g., a montage of their ability).

The lower order theme of reflecting was discussed by five SPCs. In this theme, SPCs referred to a variety of strategies effective for developing robust sport-confidence. These reflecting strategies included viewing “what went well in their performance as well as areas to improve on,” “previous positive experiences,” and “seeing the big picture.” SPCs perceived these strategies to develop more robust sport-confidence because they encouraged athletes to focus on positive aspects of their performance and previous successful experiences rather than solely on aspects on which they can improve. These strategies also developed robust sport-confidence by helping athletes to keep negative experiences in perspective by reflecting on how these individual incidents fit in with their overall performance. Thus, athletes were engaged in the reasons to believe why they can be successful. This was highlighted by one SPC:

I tend to do quite a few reflective exercises with people, reflecting on the bigger picture rather than getting too bogged down in any individual component . . . building those barriers up to that fluctuation in confidence by helping them to reflect upon the whole of their performance at that point in time.

Another lower order theme, discussed by four SPCs, was the use of diaries to help athletes regularly record their feelings, thoughts, and performance data. Specifically, SPCs perceived this strategy to help highlight “where the athlete is right now and how they have improved” and described this as an effective way to develop robust sport-confidence, as one SPC discussed:

I like using diaries with performers. I like them to record performance statistics and their own thoughts on what’s worked well, what’s improved . . . that can be a really good mechanism to enable the athlete to understand the progress they are making.

Modeling/vicarious experience was a strategy discussed by four SPCs. Specifically, SPCs asked athletes to identify role models to help them develop their own belief that they can also achieve this level of performance. This theme is highlighted by one SPC:

I’ve tried to utilize professional players who have come through the academy. I get them for just five minutes to talk . . . and hearing about some of those stories from others is quite powerful because these are people who have been through the process that the current academy players are working through.

**Manipulating the coaching environment**

This higher order theme described how SPCs encouraged coaches and athletes to manipulate the training environment as an effective way to develop robust sport-confidence. This theme was composed of two lower order themes: working with/through coaches (e.g., getting the coaches to implement the interventions) and manipulating the training environment (e.g., training under pressure).

Six SPCs discussed the lower order theme of working with/through coaches. This theme captured the view that an effective way to develop robust sport-confidence is to first educate the coaches, which then enables coaches to deliver the interventions to the athletes, as one SPC stated:
Often the best work you do is if you work with the coach and the coach delivers the information. . . . What I spend more time doing is talk to coaches about these sorts of ideas and then often the coach might go away and work out how to put it into practice, because they know the athlete better and they see the athlete more.

The lower order theme of manipulating the training environment was discussed by six SPCs and referred to creating pressure situations in training by “creating challenging environments within training” and “testing athletes’ skills using repetition.” Manipulating the training environment also involved developing a mastery-oriented climate where athletes could acquire new skills and refine existing ones to help develop robust sport-confidence, as highlighted by the following quote:

If an athlete is confident then they don’t experience that same feeling of threat [that they do in competition] and they’re able to perform, so it’s very important that athletes are systematically introduced to pressure in the training environment so they learn how to execute a skill under the similar constraints or demands that there will be in competition.

**Tailor for the individual**

This higher order theme related to SPCs discussing the importance of considering the individual needs of each athlete for robust sport-confidence to be effectively developed. This higher order theme consisted of two lower order themes: consideration of individual differences (e.g., understand the person in front of you) and relationship development (e.g., having a good sport psychologist–athlete relationship).

Consideration of individual differences was a lower order theme discussed by nine SPCs in which it was emphasized that when developing robust sport-confidence it is important to think about the characteristics of each athlete because different strategies work with different athletes. This was characterized by one SPC who explained, “It’s about having a very solid understanding of the person in front of you and developing an intervention with them that’s most suited to help them move forward” and another who stated, “I think depending upon the client and understanding their particular strengths leads you towards using different strategies.”

**Using psychological skills**

This higher order theme described how SPCs used different psychological skills to develop athletes’ robust sport-confidence. This theme consisted of five lower order themes: goal-setting (e.g., setting specific realistic targets), imagery (e.g., seeing yourself be successful), reframing/restructuring (e.g., reframing cognitions), process focus (e.g., focusing on the processes under the athlete’s control), and psychological competition plans (e.g., race day plans).

In the lower order theme of goal setting, SPCs highlighted the need for an athlete to “know what you’re trying to achieve” as an important element of building robust sport-confidence. One SPC talked about helping athletes “regulate expectations” so that they are not trying to achieve unrealistic goals. Furthermore, four of the SPCs noted the importance of using all goal types (outcome, performance, and process) at certain times depending on the athlete’s competition cycle but tended to emphasize the importance for athletes to have specific training goals when working to build robust sport-confidence as well as “process goals” relating to the procedures they have to go through to achieve success.

SPCs referred to reframing/restructuring as an effective strategy to develop robust sport-confidence and highlighted that it is effective because it enables athletes to rationalize what they are experiencing and to rethink the way they approach varying situations. One SPC talked about “using evidence to reframe their thinking” (e.g., using performance statistics
and evidence of successful performances) as a way to help the athlete develop a more robust sport-confidence in their own abilities based on objective, real data.

The lower order themes of imagery, process focus, and psychological competition plans were discussed primarily in relation to SPCs preparing athletes for competition. SPCs taught athletes to use imagery to build robust sport-confidence and talked about this skill being effective to help athletes believe in themselves (e.g., viewing the past good performances/skills) in the build-up to competitions. In the lower order theme of process focus SPCs perceived this to build robust sport-confidence because it enabled athletes to focus on the task at hand in training and competition. This process focus was linked to performance outcomes, as one SPC discussed:

*I try to get the athlete away from preoccupying their thoughts on the outcome of a competition or an event and try to get them to focus on the processes of their performance that will enable them to achieve that overall performance outcome.*

Similarly, having a psychological competition plan was viewed as enabling athletes to arrive at competition feeling most confident, as one SPC discussed:

*Trying to develop reasonably effective, yet flexible, race day plans, so it's along the idea that “If I do these things then I've got the best chance possible of having a good race,” ... if you've got these things down in terms of plans for the day, if you tick them off, then you might be in a position to think on the start line “I've done the things I need to do and I know if I do these things regularly I usually perform well.”*

**Developing an athlete's signature strengths**

This higher order theme comprised one lower order theme categorized as developing an athlete's signature strengths. SPCs stated that getting athletes to understand and develop their own strengths ensures they are focusing on the positive aspects of their own performance. In describing this approach, it was clear that having a signature strength, or strengths, allowed each athlete to know what they do well and how they can influence performance on competition day, thus, helping develop a competitive advantage and a more enduring level of confidence. This was evidenced by two SPCs who stated

*I really am focused now on strengths and trying to get people to be aware of the good attributes they have. Sometimes we forget to focus on the really good things and that for me is where a lot of the confidence-related work that I do is now focused.*

The approach that I take is that they’re working on their strengths at least equally to their development areas. I think it’s very important for all athletes to have absolute clarity on the things that they’re really good at, that set them apart, that enable them to do what they do, and then make sure that they’re able to bring that to competition.

**Strategies to Maintain Robust Sport-Confidence in Athletes**

In response to interview questions related to maintaining robust sport-confidence 38 raw-data themes were generated. These raw-data themes were organized into 13 lower order themes that, in turn, were then organized into four higher order themes that represented the different strategies that SPCs perceived were effective at maintaining robust sport-confidence. These themes were labeled as a continuation of the development process, influence the athlete's environment, stable beliefs, and reinforcing abilities, and they are presented in detail next (see
Figure 2. Strategies identified by sport psychology consultants to maintain robust sport-confidence. *Note.* The number of sport psychology consultants cited in each of the higher and lower order themes is provided in parentheses.

A continuation of the development process

This higher order theme contained responses relating to SPCs’ views that maintaining robust sport-confidence over a period of time is about continuing the work completed to develop confidence. Within this higher order theme there were three lower order themes: continuing the strategies used to develop confidence (e.g., further use of the development strategies for maintenance), continuous monitoring of performance (e.g., looking at how the athlete can constantly develop), and continuation of goal setting (e.g., constantly reevaluating and setting goals).

Continuing the strategies used to develop robust sport-confidence was a lower order theme in which SPCs discussed that the strategies used to maintain robust sport-confidence over time do not differ to the strategies used to develop it. This view was captured by the quote “I don’t think that’s any different really, I think all those strategies are set up to enable the client to start to maintain robust sport-confidence.” Similarly, another SPC stated, “I think the
underlying principles of what you work on are essentially the same thing . . . the processes that you are using to either gain or maintain strong belief are relatively consistent.” The lower order theme of continuous monitoring of performance was discussed in terms of helping athletes to consistently reflect on what is “good in their game,” to critically analyze successful performances, as well as “helping somebody explore where they might need to improve, where they might need to change, and where they might need to tinker.” In the lower order theme of continuation of goal-setting SPCs discussed a need to make sure goals are set so that athletes “continue to have something to work towards” and as a strategy to “remind them where they’re going with what they’re doing,” which SPCs felt would help maintain robust sport-confidence.

**Influence the athlete’s environment**

This higher order theme comprised responses from SPCs stating that influencing both the training and competitive environment within which the athlete operates is an effective way to maintain robust sport-confidence. Specifically, this theme comprised three lower order themes: manipulating training (e.g., creating an environment to foster belief), environmental cues (e.g., having triggers in the environment that are always there), and working through others (e.g., working alongside the coach).

The lower order theme of manipulating training was discussed by four SPCs who highlighted the importance of developing a training environment that allows athletes to experience success and one that gives them appropriate feedback for maintaining robust sport-confidence over time. One SPC discussed using the training environment in the following way:

Are they [athletes] getting feedback from practice in terms of executing their skills so they’ve got reason to believe they can go out and know ‘I can do this because I’ve been doing it all week at the level which I know is required to succeed.’ So a lot of it is that you’re getting the right kind of feedback from practicing your skills.

Environmental cues was a lower order theme in which two SPCs discussed the importance of developing cues/triggers that are always present, hence are an effective way to maintain robust sport-confidence over time. One SPC explained this theme in the following way:

There needs to be triggers in the environment that are always there. It might be a trigger of a bowler at the top of his run where he looks down at his mark, a trigger that makes him get into the right mind-set or emotional state to bowl well, but that marker must always be there. It helps him [the athlete] maintain that robust confidence, knowing that he has that.

**Stable beliefs**

This higher order theme contained responses relating to SPCs confirming that helping athletes develop more stable confidence beliefs will help in the maintenance of robust sport-confidence over time. This higher order theme was composed of three lower order themes: restructuring/reframing (e.g., changing cognitions), multiple sources (e.g., increasing an athlete’s sources of confidence), and continual awareness (e.g., continuing to be aware of their own confidence needs).

The lower order theme restructuring/reframing captured the views that getting athletes to change their thoughts in terms of “shifting from an outcome to a process focus,” or in terms of “changing an athlete’s attributions of success and failure,” were important factors in the long-term maintenance of robust sport-confidence, as highlighted by two SPCs:
A lot of it is to do with looking at the attributions the athlete gives for their performance successes or failures and being able to rationalize them is quite important so that the athlete is consistently developing more functional attributions.

Helping people to reframe their thinking in the sense of ‘I haven’t got the outcomes that I want but my processes and my performances are good. . . . If I keep doing the things I’m doing there’s every reason to believe I’ll get the results I want.’

Two SPCs discussed the lower order theme of multiple sources. This captured the view that for robust sport-confidence to be maintained it needs to be more multidimensional and sourced from both a broader range of different areas and from more internal sources. The use of multiple sources was explained by two SPCs:

One of the things important for athletes to be able to maintain robust sport-confidence is to develop internally derived sources of confidence, because if they’re constantly deriving it externally then it won’t be maintained because those sources won’t always be there.

What you’re hoping to see is that they [athletes] are showing more types [of confidence] so their confidence is becoming more multi-dimensional and they are demonstrating that they are sourcing their confidence from a broader range of areas so if some aspects are removed they have other aspects to fall back on.

**Reinforcing abilities**

This higher order theme encompassed responses from SPCs that centered on reinforcing an athlete’s abilities to help maintain robust sport-confidence over time. This higher order theme comprises three lower order themes: reminders (e.g., reminders of their accomplishments), strengths (e.g., reinforcing their strengths), and improvements (e.g., seeing long-term improvements).

These lower order themes were all focused on helping athletes to remember their accomplishments, what they have done well, and the positive qualities that they possess as a way of reinforcing their ability. The strategies relating to these three themes were often used in combination by the SPCs. One SPC explained how they encouraged athletes to engage in the process of reminders and strengths in the following way:

Often I’ll use reminders that direct the athlete’s attention towards things that they’re good at, that they’ve accomplished, and that they can achieve. Little laminated reminder cards that reinforce their key strengths, what they’ve done in the last month that has enabled them to be in the position that they are, or that reinforce the performer’s performance statistics. . . . That can be a very powerful thing for them.

**DISCUSSION**

The purpose of the current research was to explore the different strategies experienced SPCs would advocate to develop and to maintain robust sport-confidence in athletes. The strategies that SPCs felt were effective were discussed in detail and recorded to enable other practitioners to understand how they may be able to help athletes develop, and maintain, robust sport-confidence.

SPCs identified six key strategies they would advocate to develop robust sport-confidence (i.e., logging evidence, developing understanding and awareness, manipulating the coaching environment, tailor for the individual, using psychological skills, and developing an athlete’s
signature strengths) and four key strategies they would advocate to maintain robust sport-confidence (i.e., a continuation of the development process, influence the athlete’s environment, stable beliefs, and reinforcing abilities). The findings support several strategies found in recent sport-confidence literature. Specifically, logging evidence, using psychological skills, and reinforcing abilities support previous suggestions that interventions based on key sources of confidence such as performance accomplishments, demonstration of ability, and preparation might help develop and maintain robust sport-confidence. The findings are also consistent with previous research emphasizing the need to increase self-awareness (Hays et al., 2007) and to identify and broaden athletes’ sources of confidence to develop and maintain robust sport-confidence (Thomas et al., 2011). Furthermore, the strategy of tailoring to the individual demonstrates the importance of adopting idiographic methods to assess and understand an athlete’s own confidence prior to offering unique confidence enhancing intervention solutions. Confidence profiling is one such method that has been developed and successfully used to design and implement a cognitive-behavioral intervention focusing on sport-confidence enhancement (cf. Hays, Thomas, Butt, et al., 2010; Hays, Thomas, Maynard, et al., 2010). Of importance, however, findings from the current study also offer some unique insights into how robust sport-confidence may be developed and maintained. The finding of developing an athlete’s signature strengths as a strategy to develop robust sport-confidence implies a potential source of confidence not outlined previously in the literature. Interviewed SPCs referred to this strategy as an approach to consultancy within which one of the outcomes is to build robust sport-confidence. Specifically, this strategy involved helping athletes focus on developing aspects of their performance at which they excel and that set them apart from other athletes. Although there is a lot of literature around strength-based approaches in mainstream positive psychology (e.g., Biswas-Diener, 2010), little knowledge exists on applying this approach in a sporting context (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). Furthermore, the theme of developing an athlete’s signature strengths went beyond merely developing a strength. Consultants emphasized that the actual process for athletes to understand their strengths and how to develop and use these strengths to gain a competitive advantage was important and part of the approach. Although seemingly analogous to the competitive advantage source of confidence found in Hays et al.’s (2007) study, that particular source referred to athletes gaining an advantage from seeing their opponents cracking under pressure rather than focusing on an individual’s own, controllable, performance characteristics to gain an advantage. This finding on the use of strengths therefore implies a potential new strategy for developing robust sport-confidence, and further research is required to explore strategies and techniques that may allow the development of athletes’ strengths to occur.

The present findings also identified that manipulating the coaching environment was a potentially effective way to develop and maintain robust sport-confidence. Creating optimal environments is a line of research receiving increasing attention through the influx of talent development and mental toughness research. Of interest, the themes that emerged in this study indicated the need for a challenging/pressure training environment in addition to developing a mastery-oriented environment. These findings echo some of the research exploring how to build mental toughness, which has highlighted the need to create a harsh practice environment together with a positive training environment (e.g., Weinberg, Butt, & Culp, 2011).

Although previous research has noted the importance of developing mastery-oriented climates to help develop controllable stable sources of confidence (i.e., Machida et al., 2012), the present study also identifies creating a challenging practice environment (e.g., putting athletes in pressure situations) to build robust sport-confidence as an additional strategy. Future research is warranted to fully explore the role of pressure training for building robust sport-confidence. However, it is plausible, because of how SPCs described using this strategy, that
it could be part of athletes’ feeling fully prepared for competition and experiencing accomplishments in training, which have previously been identified as salient sources of confidence (Hays et al., 2007; Vealey et al., 1998). Specifically, SPCs in this study referred to adding pressure to training as a way to remove feelings of threat from the competitive environment so athletes could execute their skills in similar situations to those experienced in competition, and hence could be comfortable in their environment. The elite athletes in Hays et al.’s (2009) study indicated that if confidence waivered in the pressure-inducing environment of elite competition it was difficult to regain it, and, thus, emphasized the importance of building robust sport-confidence prior to entering the competitive environment. Taken together, the research findings point toward the use of athletes experiencing training accomplishments and engaging in skill repetition as part of preparations for feeling confident. This pressure training theme found in the present study offers a practical recommendation for how to further athletes’ training preparations as a source of robust sport-confidence for competition.

It has been implied that athletes need to constantly work on developing and maintaining sport-confidence (Vealey & Chase, 2008). Similarly, research findings focusing on robust sport-confidence support this notion that sport-confidence is not fully developed but it needs to be constantly worked upon (Thomas et al., 2011). Strengthening this support, the SPCs in the present study perceived that robust sport-confidence was effectively maintained primarily through the continuation of the same processes that were used in the midst of its development. This therefore implies a need for SPCs to be constantly working with athletes on the development of robust sport-confidence. Furthermore, educating athletes around the importance of continuing to monitor and develop their confidence is required to ensure robust sport-confidence can be effectively maintained. Developing an athlete’s self-regulation and awareness skills are reported to be key attributes associated with the successful development of talented athletes (e.g., MacNamara, Button, & Collins, 2010). It remains crucial for SPCs to continually help athletes to become self-regulated and provide them with strategies to help adhere to psychological skills training. Findings of this study highlight the important role that SPCs can have in building and maintaining athletes’ robust sport-confidence. Specifically, SPCs need to be given adequate time when working with athletes to ensure that development strategies can be implemented, reassessed, and continually used over a long period to allow robust sport-confidence to be maintained.

**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

One potential limitation of this study is the small sample size with only 10 SPCs interviewed. It was, however, felt that the extensive applied experience of these consultants offset the small sample size. A second limitation of this study is that it does not provide strategies that might be more tailored to male or female athletes. Previous research has documented gender-based differences in confidence sources (e.g., Hays et al., 2007; Vealey et al., 1998) and debilitating confidence factors (Hays et al., 2009). Although the SPCs in this study had a broad range of experiences (i.e., working with individuals, teams, male and female individuals), it is important for future research to consider effective strategies for building robust sport-confidence specific to male and female athletes. It is also important to consider that although all SPCs had more than 10 years’ applied experience, they were not all full-time consultants and often had a split role working in academia. The various roles of SPCs might influence their experiences in how they consult with athletes, teams, and/or working through coaches (Anderson, 2000). Furthermore, it must also be noted that the strategies discussed here for developing and maintaining robust sport-confidence are strategies advocated by SPCs. Before these strategies can be said to be effective at building and maintaining robust sport-confidence, empirical research is required.
to test these strategies, both individually and when delivered as part of confidence-intervention programs.

The present study therefore has implications in terms of potential future research. As stated previously, the strategies outlined in the present study need to be tested to ensure they are effective at developing and maintaining robust sport-confidence. It is also plausible that certain strategies might be more effective for male or female athletes. Based on the findings of this study, research could assess techniques that allow the development of signature strengths to assess how this strategy can be effectively implemented into training and competition preparations and the effect it has on robust sport-confidence. Also, although previous research has noted the importance of training accomplishments, physical conditioning, and skill repetitions as part of athletes feeling fully prepared for competition, findings from the present study indicate that SPCs are utilizing pressure training as one way to help athletes build and maintain robust sport-confidence. Future research is warranted to identify and develop the mechanisms that underpin pressure training and the subsequent effectiveness of these interventions on developing and maintaining robust sport-confidence. In addition, viewing the results from the present study in conjunction with Machida et al.’s (2012) finding that task-orientation (i.e., focusing on personal improvement and mastery) predicted the use of controllable sources of confidence implies the need to help athletes develop internal sources in the form of a task-goal orientation, which may help develop and maintain robust sport-confidence. Further research could therefore be conducted to assess if there is a connection between robust sport-confidence and either internal sources of confidence or task-goal orientation, or if developing a task-goal orientation allows for robust sport-confidence to be better maintained over time.

Practical Implications

The findings also have applied implications for SPCs, coaches, and athletes. One potential strategy to build and maintain robust sport-confidence is to help athletes become aware of, and develop, their own unique strengths. Knowledge of a unique strength and how it can be used appears to help athletes enter competition with a perceived competitive advantage. For this to happen most effectively, it will require the integration of the athlete, the SPC, and the coach, because unique strengths were not described as solely psychological but related to athletes’ tactical, technical, and physical conditioning elements of performance. It is possible that current knowledge on types of sport-confidence (i.e., Hays et al., 2007; Vealey & Chase, 2008) can be expanded to incorporate signature, or unique, strengths, and confidence profiling (Hays, Thomas, Butt, et al., 2010) might be one method that could be used to help athletes develop this awareness and these strengths.

It is also advantageous for SPCs, coaches, and athletes to understand the importance of continuously engaging in strategies to maintain robust sport-confidence. SPCs in this study implied a variety of logging evidence type strategies (e.g., use of video, modeling, or diaries to monitor improvements) to help athletes think about their confidence longer term rather than building confidence as a quick-fix solution. SPCs also taught athletes a variety of psychological skills such as imagery, goal setting, and cognitive restructuring to facilitate building and maintaining robust sport-confidence.

Confidence in sport has traditionally been associated with positive psychological strategies such as positive self-talk, previous performance accomplishments, and positive outcomes (e.g., demonstrating ability and winning successful performances). This study also highlighted that SPCs regularly advocated pressure training and putting athletes into challenging situations in training to build robust sport-confidence. Thus, for coaches, finding a balance between building a positive environment and a pressure-experiencing training context environment is
important and might help athletes feel more fully prepared for competition, which again may strengthen preparation as a source of confidence. Finally, findings may also have implications for the training of sport psychology consultants that go beyond using traditional psychological skills training to build robust sport-confidence. As part of supervised experiences, trainee SPCs should be equipped with new knowledge on strength-based approaches to consultancy and in the use of pressure training.

To conclude, given the importance of confidence in sport performance and the difficulty of increasing confidence once involved in a competition (Hays et al., 2009), the development of robust sport-confidence is critical. Findings of this study begin to highlight some key strategies that can be used and emphasize the need for continuous engagement in building confidence in order to maintain robust sport-confidence. In particular, influencing an athlete’s environment, developing stable beliefs across multiple sources of confidence, and reinforcing positive abilities appear to remain central to SPCs’ work with athletes and coaches in building and maintaining robust sport-confidence.

REFERENCES


