

EBOOKLET

The Confidence-Expectation Connection: A Guide to Ridding Yourself of Harmful Expectations



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Introduction

Athletes that begin a personal coaching program with me usually do not understand the difference between confidence (a positive attribute) and expectation (a negative attribute), at least the way I define them. However, by the end of the first session, my students do understand. Most people think if you have high expectations, you also must have high confidence. The question I often get is: If I expect to win or expect to play well, doesn't that mean that I am confident that I can win or play well?

My answer is a big "NO." Even the sports psychology literature mixes the terms confidence and expectation, which I think is wrong. I however, define these terms for my students so they can understand how expectation and confidence are interconnected – that expectations are not healthy for developing supreme levels of confidence.

Here is my conclusion after working with 1000's of athletes: ***strict or high expectations can undermine and suck the life out of confidence.***

Let me explain my reasoning. First, some definitions are in order. Confidence is based on the strength of the belief in your ability or how strongly you think you can win. Expectation, on the other hand, are judgments and demands

that you place on your performance usually pertaining to outcomes or personal statistics such as the number of points scored in a game.

Confidence is simply a belief that precedes your performance such as when you see a good shot and feel like you will hit a good shot prior to execution. But confidence is void of strict expectations or the dire need to execute a good shot. In addition, a confident athlete does not judge the quality of the performance based on prior strict expectations, results or outcomes.

Thus, I define confidence and expectation to have different meanings; expectations are dire needs or demands that you place on yourself about the quality of your performance – sort of judgmental demands because you constantly judge the quality of your performance and outcomes based on prior expectations. They are typically focused on results or a standard you have for your performance.

Why are expectations so harmful to your confidence? First, you set yourself up for a win/lose proposition. You either achieve your expectations or you fail to achieve your expectations. Second, if you don't achieve your predetermined expectations, it's easy to question your ability that day either during or after your performance. Essentially, you set yourself up for failure before you even start.

Most athletes who have experienced success at any level, naturally have very high expectations for their performance. I think expectations naturally develop from success. Athletes then think that an expectation-filled mindset for competition is the norm. After all, shouldn't you expect great things from yourself? Expect the best and demand high levels of performance. It sounds good.

Although this type of thinking sounds correct – it is not ideal because it sets you up for disappointment and frustration if you don't execute on cue or achieve your expectations.

What makes expectations even more harmful is athletes elevate their expectations to an extent that prices in a level of perfection. For example, expecting to throw a no-hitter every game, expecting to hit perfect shots, or expecting to not make any errors in the hockey game are all examples of strict expectations that are unrealistic and almost impossible to achieve.

How many no-hitters did Nolan Ryan throw in his long, coveted career? Maybe a total of 6?

Ben Hogan, one of the best ball-strikers in the history of golf wrote that he only hit 3-4 shots just as he imagined in his mind during a round of golf and the rest of the shots were just good misses. And how many hockey games have you played when you made zero errors. So the more unrealistic or perfectionistic your expectations, the harder they are to

achieve – usually impossible to achieve, then the easier it is to fall short and judge your performance as inadequate or less than perfect.

This type of thinking leads me to the conclusion that expectations are really harmful to confidence and the ideal scenario is to have high levels of confidence (based on past performance and training) without the judgmental behavior that comes with expectation.

Thus, one of my “Formulas for Success” that I teach to my students is to develop high levels of confidence void of any expectations at all. To do this I help athletes replace expectations by setting manageable goals that are not based on judgmental behavior.

Four Case Studies on Harmful Expectations

To highlight the effects of high expectations on confidence and emotional control, I would like to share a few real-life case studies of students I have worked with from various sports.

(1) NASCAR Driver Gets Frustrated

A couple years ago, a top 10 NASCAR driver approached me with a specific problem he was experiencing in the car. He said that when the race did not go according to his plan, he would become very agitated, frustrated, and lose confidence altogether.

As we talked more about his thought process and past history, it was clear to me that his past success as a driver was actually working against him. Why? He had won races at every level of his career and his main goal was to win races and contend. But as time went on, his goals about winning turned into expectations about winning. He badly wanted to win races.

Having high expectations about his performance actually made him unravel when he did not reach his expectations.

When something went wrong with the equipment, such as a flat tire, this did not fit his expectations of winning or contending. And this is the danger of maintaining judgmental expectations. An athlete will likely become upset, frustrated, and even lose confidence when he or she can't meet the strict demands set for performance.

(2) Baseball Pitcher Loses Confidence

I worked with a college pitcher who maintained what I would deem as unrealistic expectations about his performance on the mound. As we talked about his goals for each game, it was clear to me that this ball player was placing very high expectations on his pitching performance.

He wanted to throw a no-hitter every time he stepped on the mound. Throwing a no-hitter is equivalent to a perfect game in baseball – that is if you are the pitcher. A no-hitter is very

hard to accomplish and rarely happens to even the best pitchers in baseball.

So what do you think happened when his chances of a no-hitter were quashed when someone from the opposing team got a hit off him? That is right – he became upset and lost his composure for a few innings and by that time he would give up a few more hits!

(3) Golfer's Perfectionism Leads to Low Confidence

Many of the golfers I work with have perfectionistic tendencies. I have not discovered if these tendencies are because of the personality of golfers or the game itself makes for perfectionism (most likely a combination of both), but I also see this in many other sports too.

Anyway, one golfer I worked with had the expectation to hit perfect shots on the course. This is impossible in the game of golf. You can't make a perfect swing every shot, hit the ball in the center of the club, have a perfect flight to the shot, and have it land next to the pit or right on the target on every shot.

The game of golf is about managing misses instead of hitting perfect shots. So this golfer essentially started the round with an unrealistic expectation to hit the ball perfectly every shot. When he hit his first bad or even marginal shot, he would

start to question his swing mechanics and wonder if he would hit the ball well enough to score a low round that day.

This opened the gate for more mental errors. He would start to analyze the mistake and try to fix it on the course, which led to making more bad swings. Soon he would be so distraught with his inability to hit perfect golf shots that he wanted to just get off the course and go work on his golf swing.

(4) Baseball Hitter's Stats Get in the Way of At-Bat Focus

Do you ever go into a game thinking that you need to score at least 10 points in the basketball game, break 75 in the golf game, or create at least 3 assists each soccer game?

Statistics are important in sports, don't get me wrong, and can be used to improve your performance, especially to help you modify practice time. But the problem is that too many of my students have expectations about achieving their own statistical milestones.

This particular student was way too concerned about his batting stats because he knew the scouts would be paying attention to his stats that year. He thought that getting signed with a good collegiate team depended on the quality of his statistics.

Thus he would go into each game focusing on his hitting stats with specific expectations for hitting, which caused him to focus on the results instead of the process. As you can see, expectations often cause you to judge yourself in a game based on your preconceived demands. When he did not reach the desired hitting performance he felt he needed to reach, his performance got even worse because he would question his hitting ability and lose confidence.

I have presented four of many examples in sports about how expectations focused on results, desired statistics, and unrealistic demands can sabotage your performance and negatively affect your confidence, especially when you don't achieve your judgmental expectations.

What is the Solution?

It might be obvious to you by now that I advocate a mindset void of expectations altogether. I teach my so-called "formula for success" to all my personal coaching students and peaksports.com members. This formula is a basic mental skill that all my students must master. The formula includes the following:

Dr. Cohn's Mental Game Formula for Success #1

- ❖ Athletes must perform with no expectation and replace strict expectations with high levels of confidence and manageable objectives (or process goals).

Many athletes find it difficult to perform without any result or performance expectations unless I am able to help them replace expectations (occupy their mind) with something more conducive to a process focus void of the judgments that come with expectations.

Many athletes apply a “formula” that I think is a recipe for disaster – high expectations and low confidence. Do you expect perfection, but do not have the confidence to back it up? It should be just the opposite – and this is often a revelation for some of my students when I define the terms in my above formula and further discuss the ramifications of expectations on performance.

Thus, having high confidence and manageable objectives gives you a positive, process focus in place of judgmental strict expectations and specific outcome-orientated results.

Therefore, three steps in the formula are:

1. Identify strict, unrealistic expectations that affect your confidence negatively.
2. Understand how to harness the power of confidence and how confidence differs from expectations
3. Replace expectations with manageable objectives.
Focus on manageable objectives or what I call mini-goals or process goals, but do not turn them into expectations.

Let's take a closer look at these steps in the formula.

Step 1: Identify Your Own Limiting Expectations

This is the most difficult task for many of my students because expectations have become a natural part of their mental game and performance. When I talk about expectations, I refer to the strict demands you place on your performance. Instead of generating confidence, expectations become a desperate need for athletes – “I MUST finish in the top 10 this week, or the race is a failure.”

If you are familiar with my philosophy about mental coaching, you know that focusing on results is not the best mindset for peak performance.

Below are some signs to help identify strict expectations

- ❖ Your “goals” focus on outcomes or results only.
- ❖ You constantly judge your performance based on personal standards.
- ❖ You become upset when you do not perform up to your own standards.
- ❖ You lose confidence when you do not achieve your personal standards.
- ❖ You expect to attain certain game statistics during your performance.

- ❖ On the occasion you perform up to your own standards, you feel no reward from this because you were “supposed to” perform that well.

Below are a few questions you can ask yourself to flush out any expectations:

- ❖ What results do you demand of yourself before the competition even starts?
- ❖ What personal statistics, such as points per game, do you feel you should achieve based on past performances, and would you be upset or frustrated if you did not reach these stats?
- ❖ Do you maintain unrealistic “goals” for your performance before competition? In which areas do you have to be perfect?
- ❖ Do you try to live up to other people’s expectations? What expectations do you adopt or take on from others – parents, coaches, or teammates?
- ❖ Do expectations about your scoring (or your team’s scoring) limit you when you exceed these expectations, keeping you stuck in a comfort zone?
- ❖ Do you generalize today about how you SHOULD perform based on past performances?
- ❖ Do you engage in name-calling with yourself or maintain negative personal descriptions such as “I’m a choker,” which influence your confidence?
- ❖ Are you easily frustrated when you don’t perform up to your minimum personal standards? What are the ways you think you should perform?

- ❖ Do you dwell and beat yourself up about how badly you performed?
- ❖ Do you have sudden temper tantrums over small errors during competition?

Step 2: Perform with Confidence - not Expectation

A priority for your mental game is to focus all your energy on the process, also called the present moment, instead of outcomes or results. Focusing on results only serves to set expectations on your performance. Process goals or what I call manageable objectives help you focus attention on execution only, if applied correctly.

The next step is to understand confidence and how this differs in its application to your performance. Confidence is a belief in your ability to execute a task at the most specific level. Confidence can also be the general belief in your ability to win or be successful.

How does confidence differ from expectation?

- ❖ Confidence precedes your performance or execution.
- ❖ Confidence is not judgmental about how well or poorly you are performing.
- ❖ Confidence thrives on momentum and good performance.
- ❖ Confidence is focused on the present moment and your ability to execute instead of the desire for obtaining outcomes or final results.

- ❖ Confidence is rational and built from training and past performances, expectations are usually irrational and outcome focused.
- ❖ Expectations chase results, positive results lead to confidence.

Step 3. Replace Expectations with Process Goals

What are the steps for establishing process goals?

1. Decide which aspects of your performance you want to improve or focus on that day.
2. Set one or two process goals that will help you focus on execution.
3. If you recognize that you are getting ahead of yourself or thinking about results or focused on expectation, refocus on your process goals.

What are examples of process goals?

- ❖ Golf: Pick a specific target on every shot
- ❖ Tennis: Increase first serve percentage
- ❖ Hockey: Focus on quality back checking
- ❖ Football: Commit to the play call
- ❖ Swimming: Improve rhythm in the pool

I think you get the idea now. Process goals focus on the small tasks you need to do in the present moment that will help you perform well. The purpose of process goals is to help you

become immersed in the present moment only and not really for the benefit of reaching small goals.

Do not evaluate or judge if you are achieving your process goals! Although it's rewarding to reach your goals, I don't want you to assess or judge whether you're on track because they will turn into expectations in this case. If you do, you are not focused on the process. Later, after the competition ends, you can assess how well you did with your process goals. In other words, reflect and evaluate on your performance after game time not during the game.

The Confidence-Expectation Connection

I hope that you now understand the connection between confidence and expectations. You have learned that maintaining strict, perfectionistic, or unrealistic expectations can actually damper your feelings of confidence, especially when you feel your expectations - or the expectations you think others have for you - are not being met.

Identifying and replacing expectations with manageable objectives or process goals must be a priority for you to develop ultimate self-confidence. This booklet is designed to be used in connection with "*The Confident Athlete.*"

Take the first step now by identifying the expectations that undermine your confidence and limit your performance. This step alone will make a big difference in your mental game performance as it does with many of my personal coaching

students. If you want personal help identifying and dispelling your expectations and improving your confidence, please contact me via email or phone.

Peak Performance Sports Products and Services

About Dr. Patrick Cohn

Dr. Patrick Cohn helps athletes and teams worldwide from a variety of sport backgrounds improve mental toughness for sports. As the president and founder of Peak Performance Sports, LLC (Orlando, Florida), Dr. Cohn is dedicated to instilling confidence, composure, focus, and teaching powerful mental game skills to help athletes, teams and corporate professionals perform at maximum levels. Dr. Cohn also teaches sports parents and coaches of young athletes how to help athletes achieve peak performance through sports psychology training. In addition, he teaches his mental game coaching system, the MGCP certification program (Mental Game Coaching Professional) to qualified coaches, trainers, and sports psychology students in training. Peak performance Sports, LLC also owns and manages two leading online mental training sites for athletes, coaches and sports parents at

<http://www.peaksportsnetwork.com> and
<http://www.kidssportspsychology.com>

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