



Building Confidence **Without Empty Praise**

Confidence isn't built by constantly telling athletes they're great. While encouragement and positive feedback are important, simply telling an athlete, **"You're amazing," "You're talented," or "You've got this"** does not automatically create genuine confidence. Confidence becomes stronger when athletes can **see evidence that they are capable of handling hard things.**

That evidence comes from experience. It comes from completing a difficult practice, learning a skill that once felt impossible, competing while nervous, recovering after a mistake, responding to coaching, staying committed through frustration, or continuing to work when progress feels slow. Each of those experiences gives the athlete another reason to believe, **"I've handled difficult things before. I can handle this too."**

This is an important distinction for coaches. We don't want an athlete's confidence to depend entirely on someone else convincing them that they are good enough. If confidence comes primarily from praise, the athlete may begin looking outside themselves for reassurance whenever they struggle. After a mistake, poor performance, or difficult practice, they may immediately need to hear, **"You're okay," "You're still good," or "I still believe in you."**

Instead, we want to help athletes develop confidence that can survive moments when things **aren't** going well. Real confidence does not mean an athlete always feels confident. It means they have developed enough evidence, skills, and self-trust to believe they can **respond effectively even when they feel nervous, uncertain, frustrated, or disappointed.**

For coaches, the goal is to move away from **empty praise** and toward **specific feedback, earned confidence, and athlete ownership. Specific feedback** helps athletes understand exactly what they are doing well. Instead of saying, "Great job," a coach might say, **"I noticed you made a mistake, reset quickly, and stayed focused on the next rep."** Now the athlete knows what behavior contributed to success.

Earned confidence develops when athletes connect confidence to

preparation, effort, improvement, and past experiences. They begin thinking, **“I can trust myself because I know what I've done to prepare.”** Their confidence is based on evidence rather than simply how they feel in the moment.

Athlete ownership happens when athletes learn to recognize that evidence for themselves. Instead of always asking the coach, **“Did I do good?”**, they begin asking themselves, **“What did I do well? What did I learn? How did I respond? What can I improve next?”**

That shift matters. The long-term goal isn't to create athletes who need their coach to continuously give them confidence. The goal is to coach athletes in a way that eventually allows them to **create, recognize, and rebuild their own confidence.**

A coach's belief can help start the process. But eventually, the athlete needs to be able to say:

“I don't just believe I can do this because my coach told me I can. I believe it because I have evidence that I can prepare, adjust, respond, and keep going when things get hard.”

That is confidence that can hold up under pressure.

The Problem With Empty Praise

Statements such as “You’re amazing,” “You’re the best,” and “You’re so talented” may feel encouraging, but they do not tell an athlete what they did well or how to repeat it.

When confidence depends on praise, athletes may look to the coach for reassurance instead of learning to trust themselves.

Relentless Confidence = Preparation + Evidence + Response

Section 1: Praise What the Athlete Can Control

Outcome praise focuses on what happened. Behavior and process feedback focuses on what the athlete did, what they can repeat, and what they can control.

Instead of	Try
“You’re a natural.”	“Your preparation is showing.”
“You’re so talented.”	“You stayed disciplined when that got difficult.”
“Great job!”	“You kept your technique together even when you were tired.”
“You’re the best player out there.”	“You competed hard on every possession.”
“Don’t worry—you’ll win next time.”	“What did today show you that you can improve before next time?”

Coach Reflection

What behaviors do I want my athletes to associate with confidence?

Section 2: Give Athletes Evidence

When an athlete says, “I can’t do this,” avoid immediately responding, “Yes you can!” Instead, help them find evidence.

Coach Questions

- ☐ What have you done in practice that shows you’re capable?
- ☐ When have you handled something like this before?
- ☐ What has improved over the last month?
- ☐ What part of this challenge can you control?
- ☐ What would your preparation tell you right now?

Coach Challenge

Write three pieces of evidence you could remind an athlete of when confidence drops.

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

Section 3: Don't Rescue Athletes From Discomfort

Confidence grows through the sequence:

Challenge → Response → Learning → Evidence → Confidence

If coaches constantly rescue athletes from mistakes, frustration, pressure, or failure, athletes lose opportunities to discover, “I can handle this.”

Coaching Prompt

“What do you think your next response needs to be?”

Reflection

Where might I be rescuing athletes too quickly?

Section 4: Use the Relentless 3

After practice or competition, ask these three questions:

1	WHAT DID YOU DO WELL?
2	WHAT DID YOU LEARN?
3	WHAT WILL YOU DO NEXT?

These questions shift athletes from needing validation to evaluating their own performance.

Notes: observations or athlete responses

Section 5: Change Your Coaching Language

Self-Check

“Does my feedback create dependence—or ownership?”

DEPENDENCE	OWNERSHIP
“Trust me.”	“Trust your preparation.”
“You’re fine.”	“What evidence do you have?”
“You’re amazing.”	“What can you control right now?”
“Don’t be nervous.”	“What did you learn?”
“You’ll definitely win.”	“What does your best response look like?”

Coach Self-Audit

During your next practice, track your feedback.

Feedback pattern	Tally
Generic praise	_____
Specific feedback	_____
Effort/process recognition	_____
Questions that encourage athlete reflection	_____
Corrections with a clear next action	_____
Opportunities for athletes to problem-solve	_____

After Practice

Where did I use empty praise?

Where did I help athletes recognize evidence of growth?

Did my athletes leave practice needing my confidence or building their own?

One change I will make at the next practice:
