

Believe in yourself, Rory, you can do it

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

Self-confidence – the belief that you can successfully perform a desired behaviour – plays a significant role in how athletes perform.

Physical preparation is vital for the enhancement of self-confidence. Knowing you are fit – and skilled – makes you feel good so you can perform, at your best. Success enhances self-confidence, leading to further successes.

For some athletes, having self-confidence comes natural to them, but for others it can be something they struggle with over the course of their athletic career.

It seems to me that a great golfer, like Rory McIlroy has developed a lower self-confidence than he had when he won so many competitions. For a reminder, Rory is a four-time major champion, winning the 2011 US Open, 2012 PGA Championship, and in 2014 the Open Championship and PGA Championship. However, since then – nowt.

Thirteen years after winning his first US Open and maiden major at Congressional – and 3,599 days since winning the 2014 US PGA – McIlroy looked set to finally get back in the winner's circle when he led by two shots with five holes to play. However, suddenly, loss of self-confidence can lead to disaster. Muscle-memory congeals.

In the US Open this year, McIlroy twice had a one-shot lead at Pinehurst No. 2 until he choked and closed with three bogeys in his last four holes, missing a 30-inch par putt on the 16th hole and a par putt from just inside 4 feet on the 18th hole.

Commentators think that he will be haunted for the rest of his life after choking a golden opportunity to end his major drought, as Bryson DeChambeau snuck in to win his second US Open title.

Losing self confidence suddenly

However, maybe his support team will draw his attention to Jana Novotna who, playing Steffi Graf in the 1993 Wimbledon women's tennis final, was in a strong position. She led the match 6-7, 6-4, and had a game point at 4-1 in the third and final set. She was in a virtually unassailable position. Despite this, suddenly, she lost her self-confidence. And she went on to lose the game, as Graf won the final five games of the match and the Grand Slam title.

As the experts stated, Novotna 'choked' during the final set. However, she learned. Her moment



of Wimbledon success finally arrived in 1998. After defeating Venus Williams in a close quarter final, Novotná avenged the previous year's loss by beating Martina Hingis in the semifinal in straight sets. She won the singles title by defeating veteran Nathalie Tauziat in the final in two sets, thus becoming the oldest first-time Grand Slam singles winner in the Open Era at 29 years and nine months.

So, Rory may yet come back and return to his winning ways of long ago.

"An important key to self-confidence is preparation," stated Arthur Ashe who won three Grand Slam titles in singles and two in doubles. Ashe was the first black player selected to the United States Davis Cup team, and the only black man ever to win the singles titles at Wimbledon, the US Open, and the Australian Open.

Athletes that allow the smallest amount of self-doubt into their thinking will most likely see a decrease in their performance. Self-confidence can make or break an athlete's performance because it facilitates concentration, affects goals, increases effort, and more. All of these are key aspects in performing well, and it is all due to increased self-confidence.

Sustaining and enhancing self-confidence

A key role of a coach is to sustain – and enhance – self-confidence of their charges. "Your chances of success in any undertaking can always be measured by your belief in yourself," said Robert Collier, an American whose sport was writing self-help books in the 20th century.

"If you don't have confidence, you'll always find a way not to win,"

warned Eleanor Roosevelt, whose 'sport' was serving as the First Lady of the United States from 1933 to 1945, during her husband President Franklin D. Roosevelt's four terms in office, making her the longest-serving First Lady of the United States. (It was after the death of FDR, that the maximum terms in office was reduced to two.)

Attitude – the way you home in on challenges and opportunities – changes everything. Like waves breaking in the seashore, they are a part of life. Seek solutions. Gradually – step by step, that is – you will have a track-record that will make you proud – and boost your self-esteem.

"Confidence is the most important single factor in this game, and no matter how great your natural talent, there is only one way to obtain and sustain it: work." These words come from Jack William Nicklaus, nicknamed The Golden Bear, an American retired professional golfer. Widely considered to be one of the greatest golfers of all time, he won a record 18 major championships, three more than second-placed Tiger Woods.

"Confidence doesn't come out of nowhere. It's a result of something... hours and days and weeks and years of constant work and dedication," said Roger Thomas Staubach (born February 5, 1942), nicknamed 'Roger the Dodger', 'Captain America' and 'Captain Comeback', named to the Pro Bowl six times during his 11-year NFL career. In November 2018, Staubach was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, becoming one of only four recipients associated with American Football to receive that distinction.

'Nothing is impossible'

Human nature does not change. "Skill and confidence are an unconquered army," wrote George Herbert (3rd April 1593 – 1st March 1633) a Welsh priest whose sport was poetry and oratory, some 280 years ago.

"Nothing is impossible – the word itself says 'I'm possible!'" joked Audrey Hepburn whose sport was acting, and who – by a panel of experts, who probably had not clapped eyes on Helen of Troy – was named 'the most naturally beautiful woman of all time'.

"You've got to take the initiative and play your game. In a decisive set, confidence is the difference," admitted Chris Evert Lloyd who, from 1979 to 1987, was world No. 1 tennis player. She won 18 Grand Slam singles championships and three doubles titles.

"Confidence is contagious. So is lack of confidence," warned Vince Lombardi (1913 – 1970) the head coach of the Green Bay Packers, 1959-1967. Under his leadership, the Packers won five NFL Championships in seven years, including the first two Super Bowls.

"At a young age winning is not the most important thing... the important thing is to develop creative and skilled players with good confidence," stated Arsène Wenger OBE, a French former player, the manager of Arsenal where, from 1996 to 2018, he was the longest-serving and most successful boss in the club's history.

"Helping young people realise that they are good at even just one thing – no matter how trivial to others it may seem – boosts their self-confidence and nurtures it to grow," wrote Fr Vlad – now aged 85 – whose sport – apart from his

'stay-fit-and-young' routines – endeavors to help people fulfill their potential.

Joseph "Joe" William Namath, made it clear that, "when you have confidence, you can have a lot of fun. And when you have fun, you can do amazing things." Nicknamed 'Broadway Joe', he was a very successful quarterback in the American Football League and National Football League during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1985, he was elected to the 'Pro Football Hall of Fame'.

Believing in yourself and being a winner

Venus Williams, a former world No. 1 in both singles and doubles, won seven Grand Slam singles titles, five at Wimbledon and two at the US Open. She is widely regarded as one of the greatest tennis players of all time and said: "Some people say I have attitude – maybe I do... but I think you have to. You have to believe in yourself when no one else does – that makes you a winner right there."

To raise your own self-confidence, try to remember that somebody – perhaps your coach or even a family member – believes in you. Engage in mental preparation through, imagery, reflective thinking, positive self-talk, goal setting, meditation and concentration training.

Maintain a positive mindset. Think in positive ways at all times. Talk upbeat to yourself. Call to mind your previous successes. Respect yourself and don't be too harsh on own performances. Eat well and sleep well, respect your mind and body – and learn to laugh at yourself. Become one of your own best friends.

Writing this piece reminded me how, in 1997, soon after I returned from Wexford where I had preached a retreat at St Peter's seminary, and was alone in his office with Fr Basil (globally known as Cardinal Hume), he suddenly turned to me and said: "You know, I am not as thick as I used to think!"

I blurted out: "You? Thick? Never!"

Having failed the Ampleforth Scholarship exam, it seems, according to enquiries I made, his mother never let him forget it.

Maybe, that sense of inadequacy – and the scruples from which he suffered – nourished his humility and keep his feet firmly on the ground even while his heart was high up there with God and he was held in Himalayan high esteem by all who knew him.

The Queen called him 'My Cardinal' and ten days before he died awarded him her highest honour, The Order of Merit (OM).