

Development Characteristics and Cultivation Paths of Young Athletes' Sports Confidence from the Perspective of the Self-Efficacy Theory

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Abstract

This paper explores the development characteristics of young athletes' sports confidence based on the Self-efficacy Theory and proposes targeted cultivation paths. Through literature research and practical analysis, it is found that the sports confidence of young athletes presents unique characteristics in different age stages, sports events, and competition situations. The self-efficacy theory provides an important theoretical framework for understanding and enhancing the sports confidence of young athletes. According to this theory, effective measures can be taken in terms of successful experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal to cultivate and strengthen the sports confidence of young athletes, and promote the improvement of their competitive level and overall development.

Keywords: *young athletes, sports confidence, Self-efficacy Theory, cultivation paths*

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I. Introduction

Young people are the future and hope of the development of sports. Their level of sports confidence not only affects their current competitive performance but also has a profound impact on their long-term sports career development. Sports confidence refers to the belief and confidence that athletes have in their ability to successfully complete sports tasks when facing various competition situations. The self-efficacy theory was proposed by American psychologist Albert Bandura. This theory emphasizes the core role of an individual's belief in their own ability in behavior decision - making and motivation activation, providing a powerful theoretical basis for the study of young athletes' sports confidence. In-depth research on the development characteristics of young athletes' sports confidence and exploration of effective cultivation paths based on the self-efficacy theory are of great significance for improving the competitive ability and mental health level of young athletes.

II. Overview of the Self-efficacy Theory

The Self-efficacy Theory was proposed by the renowned American psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1970s^[1]. As a core component of the Social Cognitive Theory, this theory emphasizes the interaction among an individual's cognition, behavior, and environment, exerting a profound influence across numerous fields. It uniquely explains how individuals assess their own capabilities and how such assessments impact their behavioral motivation and performance, providing a crucial perspective for understanding human behavior. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgment of their ability, belief, or self-perception regarding whether they can complete a specific activity at a certain level. This perception is based on subjective feelings and is related to the individual's confidence in successfully performing behaviors to achieve desired outcomes.

The formation and development of self-efficacy are influenced by four key factors. Success experiences are the most direct and crucial influencing factor. An individual's past successes can strongly enhance self-efficacy. Repeated successes reinforce confidence and raise the level of self-efficacy, while continuous failures can lead to self-doubt and a decrease in self-efficacy^[2]. Vicarious experiences also play a vital role. When an individual observes someone with similar abilities achieving success, it will enhance their self-efficacy, and vice versa^[3]. In terms of verbal persuasion, positive words such as encouragement and recognition from significant others can enhance an individual's self-efficacy, while negative evaluations can lead to a decrease^[4]. Emotional arousal cannot be ignored either. Positive emotions enhance self-efficacy, while excessive negative emotions can interfere with the individual's judgment of their abilities and weaken self-efficacy^[5].

A multitude of scholars have embarked on extensive and in-depth research into the Self-Efficacy

Theory within the realm of sports. Their investigations have painstakingly dissected the theory from various dimensions. For instance, they've explored its impact on different sports disciplines, how it varies according to the age of athletes, and the role it plays within the context of team dynamics. This comprehensive exploration offers a rich array of perspectives for comprehending the sports confidence of adolescent athletes. By delving into the application of the Self-efficacy Theory across diverse sports settings, ranging from high-pressure competitive arenas to the routine of daily training, it becomes possible to gain a more profound understanding of its underlying mechanism of action. This enhanced comprehension not only supplies theoretical underpinnings and practical guidelines for bolstering the sports confidence of adolescent athletes but also streamlines the formulation of highly customized scientific training and psychological counseling strategies. These strategies are designed to more effectively meet the unique requirements of young athletes, thereby fostering their growth and development within the sports arena.

III. Development Characteristics of Young Athletes' Sports Confidence

Age-stage Characteristics

(1) Childhood (under 12 years old)

At this stage, young athletes' understanding of sports is relatively simple. Their sports confidence mainly comes from direct successful experiences and positive evaluations from coaches and parents. At this time, they are curious and optimistic about their own abilities. Compared with the competition results, they pay more attention to the fun brought by the sports process. For example, on the children's football field, as long as the young players score a goal, they will be extremely excited and confident. Even if the team loses the game in the end, they still have full confidence in their abilities. Zhao Qiang and others ^[6] found through research that the sports confidence of children at this stage is mostly constructed based on immediate positive feedback, and its stability is relatively low.

(2) Adolescence (13 - 17 years old)

With the growth of age and the gradual deepening of sports training, young athletes pay more and more attention to the comparison between themselves and others, and the influence of vicarious experiences on their sports confidence becomes increasingly prominent. They often compare their performance with that of teammates or opponents at the same level. Once they find that they are inferior to others in some aspects, they are likely to have self-doubts, thus weakening their sports confidence. At the same time, the competition pressure they face at this stage gradually increases, and the impact of competition results on their sports confidence also becomes more prominent. For example, in the youth track and field championships, some athletes may worry about whether they can achieve good results in the competition after seeing their competitors achieve excellent results, which in turn affects their performance and sports confidence in the competition. Li Li^[7] pointed out that adolescent athletes are likely to have self-cognitive fluctuations due to comparing with others when facing competition, affecting the continuous development of their sports confidence.

(3) Early Youth (around 18 years old)

At this stage, young athletes have a deeper understanding of sports skills and competition strategies. Their sports confidence is based on a relatively stable self-cognition. Successful experiences are still important for their sports confidence, but at the same time, they can view failure more rationally. By analyzing the reasons for failure, they can adjust their training and competition strategies, thus maintaining or enhancing their sports confidence to a certain extent. For example, in a youth basketball game, some athletes will take the initiative to analyze the problems in the game after losing, and improve their abilities through targeted training, thereby enhancing their confidence in future games. Zhang Yong and others^[8] showed through research that young athletes in the early youth stage have certain self - reflection and adjustment abilities, and the development of their sports confidence is closely related to the deepening of self-cognition.

Characteristics of Sports Events

(1) Individual Events

In individual events such as track and field and swimming, the construction of athletes' sports confidence highly depends on their own training level and competition results. This is because in individual events, results are closely related to personal abilities, showing a direct corresponding relationship. When athletes achieve success and excellent results in the competition, this achievement will prompt them to give a higher degree of recognition to their own abilities, thus greatly enhancing their sports confidence, as if injecting a shot of boost into them, making them full of fighting spirit in subsequent training and competitions. However, once they encounter failure, due to the highly individualized characteristics of individual events, athletes are more likely to fall into the quagmire of self-doubt. This self-doubt, like a haze, will cause a relatively large blow to their sports confidence.

For example, after a sprinter successfully breaks their personal best result, they will feel a strong sense of confidence and look forward to their performance in subsequent competitions, as if victory in the future is within reach. But if they lose in an important competition due to unexpected mistakes, they are likely to question the techniques formed through long-term training and their own abilities. This kind of doubtful emotion, like a shadow, will inadvertently affect their confidence state in the next competition, making them a little more hesitant and nervous when facing challenges. Liu Mei^[9] found through research on different individual-event athletes that the sports confidence of individual-event athletes is obviously affected by performance fluctuations, and their evaluation of their own abilities is relatively direct and sensitive.

(2) Team Events

In team events such as basketball and football, the shaping of athletes' sports confidence does not only depend on personal abilities. Team atmosphere, teammate relationships, and the overall team performance also play a crucial role. In a united, cooperative, and harmonious team atmosphere, athletes can draw strong confidence from the strong support of their teammates and the successive victories of the team. Even if an individual makes mistakes during the game, the encouragement of teammates and the excellent performance of the team are enough to help them maintain their confidence. Conversely, if there are numerous internal conflicts and poor coordination within the team, the sports confidence of athletes is likely to be negatively affected. For example, if a football team has smooth cooperation and continuous victories in the game, every player in the team will be extremely confident in themselves and the team. But once the team frequently has internal conflicts and its competition results decline sharply, the sports confidence of the players will also drop significantly.

Characteristics of Competition Situations

(1) Important Competitions

In important competitions, young athletes often bear greater pressure, and their attention to the competition results is extremely high. This situation makes their sports confidence very vulnerable to influence. If athletes can perform well and achieve good results in important competitions, this will undoubtedly greatly enhance their sports confidence. At the same time, it will plant positive seeds in their hearts, generating a strong positive psychological suggestion for future competitions, like lighting a bright lamp on their competitive path, making them full of confidence and motivation in subsequent journeys. Conversely, once they lose in an important competition, this may cause a heavy blow to their sports confidence, resulting in a significant decline in their sports confidence, and may even leave an indelible psychological shadow in their hearts. For example, in highly influential competitions such as the youth table tennis championships, some athletes seem to be reborn after winning the championship. They show a more confident and calmer attitude in subsequent competitions, and every move reveals firmness and confidence. However, those athletes who unfortunately lose in key competitions may fall into deep self-doubt about their own abilities for a period of time. This kind of doubt, like a haze, shrouds them, affecting their performance in subsequent competitions and making it difficult for them to fully unleash their strength on the field.

(2) Regular Competitions

Compared with important competitions, regular competitions bring relatively less pressure to athletes. In this relatively relaxed situation, athletes are more likely to relax and naturally play at their normal level. This is because the stakes aren't as high, allowing them to focus on the pure joy of the sport and the process of honing their skills. Therefore, every successful experience in regular competitions is like a trickle, constantly converging, helping to gradually accumulate athletes' sports confidence. These small victories, whether it's nailing a difficult maneuver or contributing to a team win, create a positive feedback loop. They reinforce the athletes' belief in their abilities and make them more eager to take on new challenges.

Even if there are mistakes or losses in regular competitions, due to the relatively low attention paid to the results by athletes, they are often able to face failure with a more peaceful mindset. Instead of being devastated, they view it as an opportunity for growth. They are more likely to learn lessons from failure, such as identifying areas for improvement in their technique or strategy. By analyzing what went wrong, they can adjust their mindset in a timely manner, seeing setbacks not as dead - ends but as detours on the road to success. This resilience helps them continue to maintain their sports confidence, just like every setback on the growth path becomes a stepping stone for their progress. This continuous cycle of learning and growth through regular competitions is fundamental to their long - term development as athletes.

IV. Cultivation Paths of Young Athletes' Sports Confidence Based on the Self-efficacy Theory Accumulating Successful Experiences

Coaches need to tailor training goals that are both challenging and feasible according to the actual levels of young athletes. These goals should be phased and hierarchical, enabling athletes to continuously gain

successful experiences as they gradually achieve these goals. For example, for a young swimmer, the coach can first set a small goal of improving the 50-meter freestyle result by 1 second within a month. After the athlete achieves this goal, a higher goal can be set, such as improving the 100-meter freestyle result by 3 seconds within three months. In this way, as athletes continuously achieve their goals, they can truly feel their own progress and improvement in ability, thereby enhancing their sports confidence.

In addition, coaches should also organize appropriate competitions in line with the athletes' training levels and abilities, creating opportunities for them to succeed. These competitions can be internal competitions among athletes of the same age and level, or small-scale regional events. For instance, schools or clubs can regularly organize youth basketball friendly matches, allowing athletes to train themselves in the competitions, accumulate experience, experience the joy of success, and thus enhance their sports confidence.

Providing Vicarious Experiences

In the process of cultivating the sports confidence of young athletes, providing vicarious experiences is an effective strategy. Coaches can purposefully organize young athletes to watch the competition videos of outstanding athletes in the same event, with a particular focus on the successful examples of those who are similar in age and technical level. This is because the similarity in age and technical level can make it easier for young athletes to empathize, thus enabling them to more profoundly understand the possibility of success.

By watching these videos, athletes gain more than just a visual impact. More importantly, they can deeply learn the exquisite technical movements of outstanding athletes. For example, when watching a basketball game video, young athletes can carefully observe how outstanding players use skillful footwork to get rid of defenders and how to accurately grasp the shooting timing. At the same time, they can also learn a wealth of competition strategies. For instance, in a football game, they can learn how to make tactical arrangements according to the opponent's lineup and the situation on the field, whether to adopt an offensive strategy or a defensive - counterattack strategy. In addition, learning about psychological qualities is also crucial. For example, in the face of competition pressure, outstanding athletes can maintain calmness, focus on the game, and not be distracted by external factors. More critically, seeing athletes with similar conditions achieve success will plant seeds of hope in the hearts of young athletes, inspiring them from the bottom of their hearts and making them firmly believe that they can also achieve excellent results through hard work. For example, after carefully watching the wonderful competition video of an outstanding gymnast of the same age, a young gymnast will be impressed by the opponent's graceful and smooth movements, stable performance, and confident demeanor. This intuitive feeling will make him full of confidence in his own training and future competitions. He will feel that he is not inferior in terms of physical fitness and technical ability. As long as he puts in enough effort, he also has the potential to reach the same or even a higher level.

In addition, coaches can invite outstanding athletes or retired athletes with excellent achievements to enter the training environment of young athletes and have in-depth face-to-face exchanges with them. These outstanding predecessors can unreservedly share their valuable training experiences, such as how to develop a scientific and reasonable training plan and how to maintain concentration and enthusiasm during long-term and boring training. In terms of competition insights, they can talk about how to adjust their mentality at critical moments and how to deal with various unexpected situations. At the same time, sharing the experiences of overcoming difficulties and setbacks is also particularly important, enabling young athletes to understand that success does not come easily. Everyone will encounter troughs, but as long as they persevere and have the courage to face them, they can get out of difficult situations.

This face-to-face communication method has unique advantages. It can enable young athletes to more intuitively perceive the possibility of success. Compared with simply watching videos, communicating with outstanding athletes in person allows young athletes to feel their charm and characteristics up close. This real-life contact will greatly enhance the sports confidence of young athletes. For example, when inviting a badminton player who has won the world championship to a youth badminton training camp, the champion can share in detail with the young players his growth journey from the initial ignorance when entering the training camp, through countless arduous sessions and setbacks in competitions, and finally to standing on the podium of the world championship. When talking about facing difficulties, he can share how he still firmly believed in himself in the face of continuous defeats, and finally achieved a breakthrough and success by constantly adjusting his training methods and mentality. Such sharing has a powerful motivating effect on young athletes, enabling them to muster the courage and confidence when facing difficulties in their own training and competitions.

Conducting Positive Verbal Persuasion

During the training and competition of young athletes, the timely and appropriate positive verbal persuasion of coaches is a key link in helping them maintain a good mentality and enhance their sports confidence. Coaches need to pay close attention to the performance of athletes at all times, whether it is the

daily practice on the training ground or the intense competition on the field, and keenly capture every moment of progress and outstanding performance of athletes.

When athletes make progress or perform outstandingly, coaches should give specific and sincere affirmation and praise. This kind of praise should not be perfunctory but should accurately point out the strengths and progress of the athletes. For example, when a young track - and - field athlete improves his starting technique in training, the coach can say, "your starting movement today is very standard. Your reaction speed has significantly increased, and the rhythm of connecting the subsequent acceleration is also well - grasped. This is the result of your hard training. You've made remarkable progress!" Another example is that in a basketball game, if a player successfully executes the tactics arranged by the coach and creates many scoring opportunities for the team, the coach can praise, "You performed steadily in this game. The tactical execution was in place. Your judgment of the situation on the court was very accurate, and you grasped the passing timing just right. You have very well driven the offensive rhythm of the whole team." Through such specific praise, athletes can clearly know what aspects they have done well, thus strengthening these advantages and further enhancing their self-confidence.

When athletes encounter difficulties or make mistakes, the attitude and way of speaking of coaches are particularly important. At this time, coaches should abandon the method of criticism and blame and instead assist them in analyzing problems with an encouraging and guiding attitude. For example, when a young tennis player makes consecutive mistakes in a game, resulting in a lag in the score, the coach can walk up to the athlete, pat him on the shoulder, and say gently, "Don't worry. Let's analyze the situation just now. Look, you played very well in the beginning. Your serve and forehand shots were very threatening. Maybe it's because of the opponent's tactical adjustment that you're a little less adaptable. But it doesn't matter. We can adjust the rhythm. You can try to move the opponent more and use your speed advantage. You will surely regain your form." This positive way of verbal persuasion can not only make athletes feel the care and support of the coach but also help them calm down, rationally analyze the problems, and better cope with difficulties while maintaining confidence.

At the same time, we should not overlook the crucial role that parents play in the growth of young athletes. As the closest people to the athletes, the attention and support of parents have a profound impact on the psychology of athletes. Parents should always pay attention to the training and competition of their children, giving full affirmation and encouragement for every little progress in daily training or outstanding performance in competitions. Similarly, when children encounter setbacks, they should give timely comfort and support. For example, after a child loses an important game, he may be in a very low mood. At this time, the parent can gently hug the child and say, "Honey, I saw your efforts in the game. You fought hard for every ball. Your fighting spirit really makes me proud. This failure is just an experience. It can help you see your own shortcomings. We can analyze the problems together. You will surely do better next time. I believe in your ability." These positive words from parents are like warm sunshine, which can dispel the haze in the child's heart, make them feel the unconditional love and support of the family, and thus greatly enhance their sports confidence, making them more determined and braver when facing future challenges.

Regulating Emotional Arousal

Effectively regulating the emotional arousal of young athletes is of great significance for enhancing their sports confidence. This requires starting from two main aspects and taking multiple measures to create a good psychological environment for young athletes. On the one hand, through carrying out special psychological training, we can help them comprehensively master the methods and techniques of emotional regulation. First is relaxation training. Before training or competition, athletes often feel anxious due to the tense atmosphere and anticipation of the results. Coaches can guide athletes to implement relaxation training, such as deep-breathing exercises. Let the athletes inhale slowly, filling their abdomen with air, feeling the expansion of the abdomen, and then exhale slowly, feeling the contraction of the abdomen. Repeat this process to help them focus their attention and relieve tension. Progressive muscle relaxation is also an effective method. Starting from the feet, tighten the foot muscles for a few seconds, and then suddenly relax, feeling the change of the muscles from tension to relaxation. Do the same for the muscles of the legs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, arms, shoulders, neck, and face in sequence, allowing the whole-body muscles to relax.

At the same time, carrying out mental imagery training is also an indispensable part. Coaches can guide athletes to visualize the picture of their victory in the competition in their minds, imagining details as much as possible, such as the warm applause of the audience, the exciting moment of crossing the finish line, and the excited hugs of teammates. Through this vivid mental imagery, athletes' self-confidence and positive emotional experiences are strengthened, enabling them to enter a confident and motivated psychological state before the competition.

In addition, in the face of the inevitable pressure and setbacks in the competition, carrying out targeted psychological training can improve the athletes' psychological adjustment ability when facing difficulties. For

example, simulate various unexpected situations in the competition, such as falling behind in the score, making key mistakes, etc., allowing athletes to exercise their ability to cope with pressure in the simulated situation, learn how to remain calm in adversity, adjust their mentality, and find solutions to problems. Through repeated training, when athletes are really faced with competition pressure and setbacks, they can respond more calmly and not lose confidence due to temporary difficulties.

On the other hand, great attention should be paid to creating a positive, harmonious, and relaxed atmosphere in the training and competition environment. Coaches and teammates should respect and support each other, jointly building a positive team environment. Excessive competition may lead to tense relationships among athletes, and blame will undermine the confidence of athletes. Therefore, these negative factors must be avoided.

For example, organize various team-building activities in the training team, such as outdoor development, team games, etc. Through these activities, team cohesion and the relationship among team members can be enhanced. In outdoor development activities, athletes need to cooperate with each other to complete various tasks. This not only allows them to better understand each other's strengths and specialties but also cultivates the spirit of teamwork. In team games, everyone can communicate and interact in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere, relieving the pressure brought by training.

At the competition site, a good atmosphere can also be created through various means. For example, play soothing music to allow athletes to relax before the competition and reduce their nervousness. Setting up encouraging slogans is also an effective way, such as "Believe in yourself, you're the best!" "Every challenge is an opportunity for growth!", etc. These slogans can bring positive psychological hints to athletes imperceptibly. Through these measures, the nervousness of athletes can be relieved, enabling them to participate in the competition in a good atmosphere, thereby enhancing their sports confidence and giving full play to their strength in the best state.

V. Conclusion

The development of sports confidence among adolescent athletes is intricately intertwined with age, sport events, and competition scenarios, each contributing uniquely to its formation. Age exerts a profound influence, with younger athletes often drawing confidence from immediate accomplishments, while older ones base it on more sophisticated self-evaluations. Different sport events, whether individual pursuits like gymnastics or team-based endeavors such as volleyball, shape confidence in diverse ways. Competition scenarios, ranging from high-stakes tournaments to routine training matches, further modulate an athlete's self-assurance. Cultivation strategies grounded in the self-efficacy theory are of paramount significance for the holistic growth of these young athletes. By capitalizing on success experiences, vicarious learning, positive verbal persuasion, and emotional regulation, these strategies can significantly enhance their sports confidence, thereby not only boosting performance but also fostering mental resilience. However, despite the progress achieved, a vast expanse of unexplored territory remains. Future research could delve deeper into the nuanced interplay between these factors and the long-term impact of various cultivation strategies, potentially refining our understanding and optimizing the development of sports confidence among adolescent athletes.

The development of sports confidence in adolescent athletes is significantly influenced by age, sport events, and competition scenarios. In terms of age, during childhood, their confidence mainly stems from immediate success and external affirmations, with low stability. In adolescence, they begin to compare themselves with others, and vicarious experiences and competition results have an increasing impact. In early youth, their confidence is based on stable self-awareness, enabling them to respond rationally to failure. In different sports, confidence in individual events depends on personal training and performance, while in team sports, it is also affected by team-related factors. In competition scenarios, the success or failure in important competitions has a huge impact on confidence, while daily competitions are conducive to the gradual accumulation of confidence. Based on the self-efficacy theory, we can effectively cultivate and enhance the sports confidence of adolescent athletes through ways such as accumulating success experiences, providing vicarious experiences, giving positive verbal persuasion, and regulating emotional arousal. These measures can not only improve their current competitive level but also play a crucial role in their mental health and long-term sports career development, shaping their tenacity and providing continuous motivation.

Coaches, parents, and sports workers shoulder the heavy responsibility of cultivating the sports confidence of adolescent athletes. They need to deeply understand the self-efficacy theory and, in light of different age groups, sport types, and competition scenarios, adopt precise and targeted measures. Coaches should design personalized training programs, parents should provide consistent emotional support, and sports workers should create a favorable sports environment. All parties need to cooperate closely. Meanwhile, it's crucial to recognize that this development process is intricate and dynamic, as the sports confidence of adolescent athletes can be influenced by a multitude of internal and external factors. Therefore, in the future, in-depth research into its development laws and influencing factors is necessary. This will enable the

improvement of cultivation methods, effectively promote the all-round development of youth sports, and cultivate more outstanding talents, thus contributing to the prosperity of the sports industry.

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