

Effective ways to develop and maintain robust sport-confidence : strategies advocated by sport psychology consultants

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1 Running Head: Develop and maintain robust sport-confidence

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3 Effective ways to develop and maintain robust sport-confidence: Strategies advocated
4 by sport psychology consultants.

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Abstract

Based on recent evidence (Thomas, Lane, & Kingston, 2011), 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 four emerged for maintaining robust sport-confidence. Findings suggest 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.

Keywords: Robust sport-confidence; Sport psychology consultants; Signature-strengths; Pressure training; Stable sources of confidence

51 Effective ways to develop and maintain robust sport-confidence: Strategies advocated
52 by sport psychology consultants.

53 Self-confidence is frequently cited as an important part of successful sport
54 performance and has been shown to influence behaviors, attitudes, and sporting attainment
55 (Cox, Shannon, McGuire, & McBride, 2010). The two theoretical frameworks that have
56 predominantly been used to study self-confidence in sport are self-efficacy theory (Bandura,
57 1977, 1986, 1997) and sport-confidence (cf. Vealey & Chase, 2008).

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

73 In order to develop a framework that more appropriately captured the context of
74 competitive sport, Vealey, Hayashi, Garner-Holman, and Giacobbi (1998) built on self-
75 efficacy theory to develop the theory of sport-confidence. This term was defined as an

76 individual's belief in their ability to succeed in sport (Vealey, 1986, 2001). Specifically,
77 Vealey et al. (1998) suggested that athletes would depend on further sources of confidence in
78 the sporting setting as well as those identified by self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), with
79 social, cultural, demographic, and organizational factors also influencing the original sources.
80 Accordingly, the reconceptualized model of sport-confidence (Vealey, 2001; Vealey et al.,
81 1998) identified nine sources of sport-confidence under the three source domains of
82 achievement (mastery and demonstration of ability), self-regulation (physical and mental
83 preparation and physical self-presentation), and social climate (social support, coaches'
84 leadership, vicarious experiences, environmental comfort, and situational favorableness).
85 Initial research exploring the sources from which athletes derive their confidence identified
86 mental/physical preparation, mastery, and demonstration of ability to be salient sources
87 (Vealey et al., 1998; Wilson, Sullivan, Myers, & Feltz, 2004).

88 From a conceptual perspective, Vealey (2001) highlighted the need to identify a
89 variety of sources of confidence to maximize the ability of the athlete to draw on a salient
90 source at any given juncture. Vealey (2001) further suggests that the sources most important
91 to an athlete should be targeted when designing interventions to enhance confidence. In
92 addition to the sources of sport-confidence, Vealey (2001) proposed that the sport-confidence
93 model is multidimensional in nature and that both sources and types (i.e., what an athlete is
94 most confident about) of confidence should be considered. Vealey's model has received
95 support (e.g., Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007; Wilson et al., 2004) most notably
96 in suggesting the proposition that athletes' characteristics and organizational culture influence
97 their sources of sport confidence. Indeed, Hays and colleagues (2007) conducted a study
98 involving elite team and individual athletes and identified both types and sources of
99 confidence. From the nine sources of confidence reported, there were some sources
100 overlapping with those initially outlined by Vealey and her colleagues (1998), but also further

101 sources of confidence unique to the culture of world-class sport (e.g., trust, competitive
102 advantage, and innate factors). Taken together, the findings support the proposition that
103 sources and types of confidence will influence athletes' sport-confidence levels, and will also
104 vary depending on the organizational culture of the sport.

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

113 Research findings continue to support the model of sport-confidence (e.g., Hays,
114 Thomas, Maynard, & Bawden, 2009; Kingston, Lane, & Thomas, 2010). In particular, in
115 their follow-up study with world-class athletes, Hays et al. (2009) explored the role of
116 confidence in relation to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses it elicits in the
117 organizational culture of elite sport. Findings indicated that high sport-confidence facilitated
118 performance through its positive effect on athletes' cognitions, affect, and behaviors while
119 low sport confidence was synonymous with negative affect, faulty cognitions, and ineffective
120 behaviors. Factors responsible for debilitating athletes' sport-confidence (e.g., poor
121 preparation, pressure, and expectation) were also found. Interestingly, these debilitating
122 factors were directly related to the sources of sport-confidence initially identified by Hays
123 and colleagues in their 2007 study and highlight the important role that sources play in
124 athletes' confidence levels. While identifying multiple sources of confidence has been a key
125 message from the research findings, it has also been suggested that deriving confidence from

126 uncontrollable sources (i.e., unstable sources such as outcome-related accomplishments and
127 social support) will likely contribute to fluctuating confidence levels (Hays et al., 2009;
128 Vealey, 2001). Research findings therefore emphasize the need to assess an individual's
129 sources of confidence in order to design an appropriate intervention specific to their needs
130 that helps build and maintain confidence. In response to this need, Hays, Thomas, Butt, and
131 Maynard (2010a) introduced confidence profiling as a tool to explore an athlete's own
132 sources and types of confidence, and then later used the profile to implement a unique
133 cognitive-behavioral intervention (Hays, Thomas, Maynard, & Butt, 2010b).

134 It is clear that existing research and the subsequent intervention work has been driven
135 by the need for athletes to build confidence prior to, and maintain it during, competition.
136 Indeed, Hays and her colleagues (2009) reported that elite athletes struggled to regain
137 confidence if it was lost in the pressurized environment of competition. This finding supports
138 Vealey and Chase's (2008) suggestion that confidence remains a work-in-progress for
139 athletes and is a fragile construct. It is this concept of stability that has, for the most part, led
140 to researchers exploring what has been termed "resilient confidence" (Bull, Shambrook,
141 James, & Brooks, 2005; Vealey, 2001) in the past, and more recently "robust sport-
142 confidence" (Thomas et al., 2011). Specifically, in a study involving elite athletes, robust
143 sport-confidence was defined as a multidimensional and stable construct that allows athletes
144 to deal with setbacks and the constant psychological and environmental challenges that occur
145 in sport (Thomas et al., 2011). In addition, the construct was found to have six key
146 characteristics, these being multidimensional (i.e., made up of different types of confidence),
147 malleable (i.e., responds and reacts to negative factors), durable (i.e., stable over time), a
148 strong set of beliefs (i.e., the athlete truly believes in their ability), developed (i.e., not innate
149 but developed over time), and protective (i.e., acting as a buffer against negative factors).
150 Thomas and colleagues (2011) suggest that these characteristics may serve as a foundation

151 from which stable sport-confidence can be developed and have important implications for
152 sport psychologists. However, while Thomas et al. (2011) suggest such a development can
153 occur, specific strategies addressing how this can be achieved have not been identified. As
154 noted earlier, previous research (Hays et al., 2007) suggests developing controllable sources
155 of confidence may help athletes to sustain more stable levels of sport-confidence. Further,
156 Machida, Ward, and Vealey (2012) found that athletes' use of controllable sources of
157 confidence was predicted by personal characteristics such as adaptive perfectionism (i.e., a
158 drive to succeed, do the best on tasks, and an ability to be flexible when failing), task-goal
159 orientation (i.e., individuals are focused on mastery, personal improvement, and high levels
160 of competence), and a task-involving motivational climate (i.e., where effort, mastery, and
161 personal improvement are the focus). However, these factors also predicted the use of
162 uncontrollable sources, thus indicating that while the development of a task-orientation in
163 terms of the individual and the climate might help athletes focus on controllable sources these
164 factors may not reduce or remove uncontrollable sources (Machida et al., 2012). It is
165 therefore still unclear if developing these factors may contribute to the development of robust
166 sport-confidence.

167 Furthermore, while there are intervention techniques aimed at increasing confidence,
168 such as goal-setting (Kingston & Hardy, 1997), imagery (Garza & Feltz, 1998), self-talk
169 (Hatzigeorgiadis, Zourbanos, Mpoumpaki, & Theodorakis, 2009), hypnosis (Barker & Jones,
170 2006), and modelling (McAuley, 1985), it is also unclear if these traditional techniques are
171 effective at building and maintaining robust sport-confidence. Indeed, Thomas et al. (2011)
172 suggest the need to shift from a traditional view that high levels of confidence should be
173 developed to more of a focus on developing the strength of the belief across several sources,
174 in order to maintain robust sport-confidence over time. While existing research has provided
175 a solid foundation from which a sport-confidence intervention can be derived (e.g., salient,

176 controllable sources of confidence unique to each athlete and key psychological skills), it is
177 clear that there is still a need to further explore how robust sport-confidence is grown and the
178 strategies that sport psychologists use to develop and maintain the construct.

179 The purpose of this study was to explore how experienced sport psychology
180 consultants (SPC's) would advocate developing and maintaining athletes' robust sport-
181 confidence. Specifically, the study aimed to identify the strategies consultants perceived to be
182 effective at developing robust sport-confidence and also how they would help athletes to
183 maintain this form of confidence over time.

184 Method

185 Participants

186 Ten (four female and six male) practicing sport psychology consultants aged between
187 32 and 63 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.4$ years; $SD = 8.43$) voluntarily participated in the study. The
188 SPC's were recruited via email and were a purposive sample (Patton, 2002) with specific
189 criteria used to ensure participants were appropriately qualified and suitably experienced.
190 First, SPC's had to be registered with both the British Psychological Society and the Health
191 and Care Professions Council – the professional bodies that regulate the delivery of sport
192 psychology in the United Kingdom. Second, SPC's had to have at least 10 years of
193 experience working as a sport psychologist. In total the SPC's had 10-30 years of applied
194 experience ($M_{\text{experience}} = 16.8$; $SD = 6.18$). In addition to these pre-requisites all participants
195 were also accredited by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences and had
196 completed a doctoral qualification.

197 Procedure

198 Due to the exploratory nature of the study, interviews were selected as the method of
199 data collection and a semi-structured interview guide was developed based on existing
200 literature (e.g., Hays et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2011; Vealey & Chase, 2008). Following

201 institutional ethics approval, SPC's that met the criteria for inclusion in the study were
202 identified and contacted via email by the primary researcher to explain the nature and purpose
203 of the study. Following this initial contact and agreement to participate, follow-up emails
204 were sent to arrange a date and time for interviews to take place. Participants returned
205 consent forms prior to further contact and were then sent a set of standardized instructions
206 including the main areas from the interview guide to be explored. All interviews were
207 conducted over the phone by the first author. Telephone interviews have been used
208 successfully in previous sport psychology research (e.g., Gould, Collins, Laurer, & Chung,
209 2007). While it is acknowledged that it may be difficult to establish rapport with participants
210 when conducting interviews over the phone, pre-participation correspondence via telephone
211 conversations and emails further helped to establish rapport before interviews were
212 conducted. Before data collection began participants were read a set of standardized
213 instructions informing them again of the nature of the study and stating that all data would
214 remain anonymous and confidential. Pilot interviews were conducted with two SPC's who
215 met the inclusion criteria and were critiqued by two experienced researchers. During this
216 process some minor modifications were made to the content and structure of the interview
217 guide.

218 **Interview Guide**

219 A semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore participants' views. The
220 guide ensured that each participant was asked the same set of fundamental questions (Gould,
221 Jackson, & Finch, 1993) while also allowing participants to lead the conversation, elaborate,
222 and discuss their unique experiences as consultants (Patton, 2002). The interview guide
223 comprised five main sections which covered the two broad areas of building and maintaining
224 sport-confidence. The first section aimed to build rapport and covered introductory questions
225 about each participant's background and experience working as a SPC. The second section

226 explored participants' views on the nature of confidence and why it is important; it asked
227 participants to discuss confidence and how it influences sports performance. Participants
228 were also asked to define sport-confidence. In posing this question the researcher purposely
229 avoided using the term robust to prevent undue bias. The interview guide then moved onto
230 questions that probed participants' understanding of how confidence is developed (e.g., what
231 type of intervention work do you deliver to develop athletes' sport-confidence?). This was
232 followed by questions that addressed how participants would advocate maintaining
233 confidence over time (e.g., what strategies do you use to help athletes maintain sport-
234 confidence over time?). The final section covered any challenges or difficulties participants
235 have faced when working with athletes on the development of confidence (e.g., are there any
236 lessons you've learned about working with athletes on confidence?). Participants were given
237 an opportunity at the end of the interview to discuss anything they felt was relevant that had
238 not already been previously raised or discussed.

239 **Data Analysis**

240 Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author.
241 Interviews lasted on average 50.68 min ($SD = 7.89$). Transcripts of each interview were
242 content analyzed by three researchers adopting procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman
243 (1994). Specifically, researchers individually inductively coded raw-data themes (i.e., quotes
244 or paraphrased quotes representing meaningful thoughts) characterizing participants' views
245 on the deductively selected two broad areas of developing robust sport-confidence and
246 maintaining robust sport-confidence. The raw-data themes that were generated were
247 organized into groups of like responses to create lower-order themes, and like-lower-order
248 themes were then organized into higher-order themes. To ensure data trustworthiness, three
249 researchers analyzed the data independently at each stage of the analysis (i.e., generating raw-
250 data themes and the emergence of the lower and higher-order themes) and then reached

251 agreement during discussions that took place over a 6-week period. Engaging in this process
252 has been reported as a common method to minimize potential bias that can occur with only
253 one researcher analyzing the data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Finally, themes emerging
254 from the data were presented to an experienced researcher who was not part of the research
255 team (i.e., peer-reviewer). The role of the peer-reviewer was to probe for explanations of
256 decisions made regarding grouping and themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

257 **Results**

258 In accordance with the research question, the structure of the interview guide, and the
259 analysis, the results are presented within the two broad areas of strategies to develop athletes'
260 robust sport-confidence and strategies to maintain that sport-confidence.

261 **Strategies to Develop Robust Sport-Confidence in Athletes**

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

273 **Developing understanding and awareness of confidence.** This higher-order theme
274 contained responses relating to SPC's helping athletes to develop a deeper level of
275 understanding and awareness of themselves and of their confidence. This theme consisted of

276 three lower-order themes: education and awareness (e.g., understanding themselves and what
277 confidence is), exploring sources of confidence (e.g., where their confidence comes from),
278 and operationalizing confidence (e.g., what confidence looks like to them).

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

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

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

301 **Logging evidence.** SPC's also described how recording evidence was an effective
302 strategy for developing robust sport-confidence because it provides athletes with clear
303 information about their performance that highlights they can succeed. Specifically this
304 higher-order theme comprised five lower-order themes: reflecting (e.g., seeing the big
305 picture), diaries (e.g., recording thoughts and statistics daily), monitoring improvements (e.g.,
306 tracking changes in performance), modelling/vicarious experience (e.g., seeing players who
307 have left the academy and become professionals), and videos (e.g., a montage of their
308 ability).

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

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

324 Another lower-order theme, discussed by four SPC's, was the use of diaries to help
325 athletes regularly record their feelings, thoughts, and performance data. Specifically, SPC's

326 perceived this strategy to help highlight "where the athlete is right now and how they have
327 improved", and described this as an effective way to develop robust sport-confidence, as one
328 SPC discussed:

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

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

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

339 **Manipulating the coaching environment.** This higher-order theme described how
340 SPC's encouraged coaches and athletes to manipulate the training environment as an
341 effective way to develop robust sport-confidence. This theme comprised of two lower-order
342 themes: working with/through coaches (e.g., getting the coaches to implement the
343 interventions) and manipulating the training environment (e.g., training under pressure).

344 Six SPC's discussed the lower-order theme of working with/through coaches. This
345 theme captured the view that an effective way to develop robust sport-confidence is to first
346 educate the coaches, which then enables coaches to deliver the interventions to the athletes,
347 as one SPC stated:

348 Often the best work you do is if you work with the coach and the coach delivers the
349 information...what I spend more time doing is talk to coaches about these sorts of
350 ideas and then often the coach might go away and work out how to put it into practice,

351 because they know the athlete better and they see the athlete more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

396 The lower-order themes of imagery, process focus, and psychological competition
397 plans were discussed primarily in relation to SPC's preparing athletes for competition. SPC's
398 taught athletes to use imagery to build robust sport-confidence and talked about this skill
399 being effective to help athletes believe in themselves (e.g., viewing the past good
400 performances/skills) in the build-up to competitions. In the lower-order theme of process

401 focus SPC's perceived this to build robust sport-confidence because it enabled athletes to
402 focus on the task at hand in training and competition. This process focus was linked to
403 performance outcomes, as one SPC discussed:

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

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

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

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

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

425 The approach that I take is that they're working on their strengths at least equally to

426 their development areas. I think it's very important for all athletes to have absolute
427 clarity on the things that they're really good at, that set them apart, that enable them to
428 do what they do, and then make sure that they're able to bring that to competition.

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

430 In response to interview questions related to maintaining robust sport-confidence 38
431 raw-data themes were generated. These raw-data themes were organized into 13 lower-order
432 themes which, in turn, were then organized into four higher-order themes that represented the
433 different strategies SPC's perceived were effective at maintaining robust sport-confidence.
434 These themes were labelled as continuation of the development process, influence the
435 athlete's environment, stable beliefs, and reinforcing abilities, and are presented in detail
436 below (see Figure 2 for the full data tree of higher- and lower-order themes). The number of
437 SPC's cited in each of the higher- and lower-order themes is provided in parentheses.

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

445 Continuing the strategies used to develop robust sport-confidence was a lower-order
446 theme in which SPC's discussed that the strategies used to maintain robust sport-confidence
447 over time do not differ to the strategies used to develop it. This view was captured by the
448 quote "I don't think that's any different really, I think all those strategies are set up to enable
449 the client to start to maintain robust sport-confidence". Similarly, another SPC stated
450 "I think the underlying principles of what you work on are essentially the same thing...the

451 processes that you are using to either gain or maintain strong belief are relatively consistent”.

452 The lower-order theme of continuous monitoring of performance was discussed in
453 terms of helping athletes to consistently reflect on what is “good in their game”, to critically
454 analyze successful performances, as well as “helping somebody explore where they might
455 need to improve, where they might need to change, and where they might need to tinker”. In
456 the lower-order theme of continuation of goal-setting SPC’s discussed a need to make sure
457 goals are set so that athletes “continue to have something to work towards” and as a strategy
458 to “remind them where they’re going with what they’re doing”, which SPC’s felt would help
459 maintain robust sport-confidence.

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

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

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

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

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

485 **Stable beliefs.** This higher-order theme contained responses relating to SPC's
486 confirming that helping athletes develop more stable confidence beliefs will help in the
487 maintenance of robust sport-confidence over time. This higher-order theme comprised of
488 three lower-order themes: restructuring/reframing (e.g., changing cognitions), multiple
489 sources (e.g., increasing an athlete's sources of confidence), and continual awareness (e.g.,
490 continuing to be aware of their own confidence needs).

491 The lower-order theme restructuring/reframing captured the views that getting
492 athletes to change their thoughts in terms of "shifting from an outcome to a process focus", or
493 in terms of "changing an athlete's attributions of success and failure", were important factors
494 in the long-term maintenance of robust sport-confidence, as highlighted by two SPC's:

495 A lot of it is to do with looking at the attributions the athlete gives for their
496 performance successes or failures and being able to rationalize them is quite important
497 so that the athlete is consistently developing more functional attributions.

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

501 Two SPC's discussed the lower-order theme of multiple sources. This captured the
502 view that for robust sport-confidence to be maintained it needs to be more multi-dimensional
503 and sourced from both a broader range of different areas and from more internal sources. The
504 use of multiple sources was explained by two SPC's:

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

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

513 **Reinforcing abilities.** This higher-order theme encompassed responses from SPC's
514 that centered on reinforcing an athlete's abilities to help maintain robust sport-confidence
515 over time. This higher-order theme is comprised of three lower-order themes: reminders (e.g.,
516 reminders of their accomplishments), strengths (e.g., reinforcing their strengths), and
517 improvements (e.g., seeing long-term improvements).

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

523 Often I'll use reminders that direct the athlete's attention towards things that they're
524 good at, that they've accomplished, and that they can achieve. Little laminated
525 reminder cards that reinforce their key strengths, what they've done in the last month

526 that has enabled them to be in the position that they are, or that reinforce the
527 performer's performance statistics...that can be a very powerful thing for them.

528 **Discussion**

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

534 SPC's identified six key strategies they would advocate to develop robust sport-
535 confidence (i.e., logging evidence, developing understanding and awareness, manipulating
536 the coaching environment, tailor for the individual, using psychological skills, and
537 developing an athlete's signature-strengths) and four key strategies they would advocate to
538 maintain robust sport-confidence (i.e., a continuation of the development process, influence
539 the athlete's environment, stable beliefs, and reinforcing abilities). The findings support
540 several strategies found in recent sport-confidence literature. Specifically, logging evidence,
541 using psychological skills, and reinforcing abilities support previous suggestions that
542 interventions based on key sources of confidence such as performance accomplishments,
543 demonstration of ability, and preparation might help develop and maintain robust sport-
544 confidence. The findings are also consistent with previous research emphasizing the need to
545 increase self-awareness (Hays et al., 2007) and to identify and broaden athletes' sources of
546 confidence in order to develop and maintain robust sport-confidence (Thomas et al., 2011).
547 Furthermore, the strategy of tailoring to the individual demonstrates the importance of
548 adopting idiographic methods to assess and understand an athlete's own confidence prior to
549 offering unique confidence enhancing intervention solutions. Confidence profiling is one
550 such method that has been developed and successfully used to design and implement a

551 cognitive-behavioral intervention focusing on sport-confidence enhancement (cf. Hays et al.,
552 2010a; Hays et al., 2010b). Importantly, however, findings from the current study also offer
553 some unique insights into how robust sport-confidence may be developed and maintained.
554 The finding of developing an athlete's signature-strengths as a strategy to develop robust
555 sport-confidence suggests a potential source of confidence not outlined previously in the
556 literature. Interviewed SPC's referred to this strategy as an approach to consultancy within
557 which one of the outcomes is to build robust sport-confidence. Specifically, this strategy
558 involved helping athletes focus on developing aspects of their performance that they excel at
559 and that set them apart from other athletes. While there is a lot of literature around strength-
560 based approaches in mainstream positive psychology (e.g., Biswas-Diener, 2010) little
561 knowledge exists on applying this approach in a sporting context (Gordon & Gucciardi,
562 2011). Furthermore, the theme of developing an athlete's signature-strengths went beyond
563 merely developing a strength. Consultants emphasized that the actual process for athletes to
564 understand their strengths and how to develop and use these strengths to gain a competitive
565 advantage was important and part of the approach. While seemingly analogous to the
566 competitive advantage source of confidence found in Hays et al.'s (2007) study, that
567 particular source referred to athletes gaining an advantage from seeing their opponents
568 cracking under pressure rather than focusing on an individual's own, controllable,
569 performance characteristics to gain an advantage. This finding on the use of strengths
570 therefore suggests a potential new strategy for developing robust sport-confidence and further
571 research is required to explore strategies and techniques that may allow the development of
572 athletes' strengths to occur.

573 The present findings also identified that manipulating the coaching environment was a
574 potentially effective way to develop and maintain robust sport-confidence. Creating optimal
575 environments is a line of research receiving increasing attention through the influx of talent

576 development and mental toughness research. Interestingly, the themes that emerged in this
577 study indicated the need for a challenging/pressure training environment in addition to
578 developing a mastery-oriented environment. These findings echo some of the research
579 exploring how to build mental toughness which has highlighted the need to create a harsh
580 practice environment together with a positive training environment (e.g., Weinberg, Butt, &
581 Culp, 2011).

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

601 robust sport-confidence for competition.

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

620 **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

621 One potential limitation of this study is the small sample size with only ten SPC's
622 interviewed. It was, however, felt that the extensive applied experience of these consultants
623 offset the small sample size. A second limitation of this study is that it does not provide
624 strategies that might be more tailored to male or female athletes. Previous research has
625 documented gender-based differences in confidence sources (e.g., Hays et al., 2007; Vealey

626 et al., 1998) and debilitating confidence factors (Hays et al., 2009). While the SPC's in this
627 study had a broad range of experiences (i.e., working with individuals, teams, males and
628 females) it is important for future research to consider effective strategies for building robust
629 sport-confidence specific to male and female athletes. It is also important to consider that
630 while all SPC's had over 10 years applied experience they were not all full-time consultants
631 and often had a split role working in academia. The various roles of SPC's might influence
632 their experiences in how they consult with athletes, teams, and/or working through coaches
633 (Anderson, 2000). Furthermore, it must also be noted that the strategies discussed here for
634 developing and maintaining robust sport-confidence are strategies advocated by SPC's.
635 Before these strategies can be said to be effective at building and maintaining robust sport-
636 confidence empirical research is required to test these strategies, both individually and when
637 delivered as part of confidence-intervention programs.

638 The present study therefore has implications in terms of potential future research. As
639 stated previously, the strategies outlined in the present study need to be tested to ensure they
640 are effective at developing and maintaining robust sport-confidence. It is also plausible that
641 certain strategies might be more effective for male or female athletes. Based on the findings
642 of this study, research could assess techniques that allow the development of signature-
643 strengths to assess how this strategy can be effectively implemented into training and
644 competition preparations and the effect it has on robust sport-confidence. Also, while
645 previous research has noted the importance of training accomplishments, physical
646 conditioning, and skill repetitions as part of athletes feeling fully prepared for competition,
647 findings from the present study indicate that SPC's are utilizing pressure training as one way
648 to help athletes build and maintain robust sport-confidence. Future research is warranted to
649 identify and develop the mechanisms that underpin pressure training and the subsequent
650 effectiveness of these interventions on developing and maintaining robust sport-confidence.

651 In addition, when viewing the results from the present study in conjunction with Machida et
652 al.'s (2012) finding that task-orientation (i.e., focusing on personal improvement and
653 mastery) predicted the use of controllable sources of confidence, this suggests the need to
654 help athletes develop internal sources in the form of a task-goal orientation, which may help
655 develop and maintain robust sport-confidence. Further research could therefore be conducted
656 to assess if there is a connection between robust sport-confidence and either internal sources
657 of confidence or task-goal orientation, or if developing a task-goal orientation allows for
658 robust sport-confidence to be better maintained over time.

659 **Practical Implications**

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

671 It is also advantageous for SPC's, coaches, and athletes to understand the importance
672 of continuously engaging in strategies to maintain robust sport-confidence. SPC's in this
673 study suggested a variety of logging evidence type strategies (e.g., use of video, modeling, or
674 diaries to monitor improvements) to help athletes think about their confidence longer-term
675 rather than building confidence as a quick-fix solution. SPC's also taught athletes a variety of

676 psychological skills such as imagery, goal-setting, and cognitive restructuring to facilitate
677 building and maintaining robust sport-confidence.

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

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

698

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769

Figure Captions

770

Figure 1. Strategies identified by sport psychology consultants to develop robust

771

sport-confidence.

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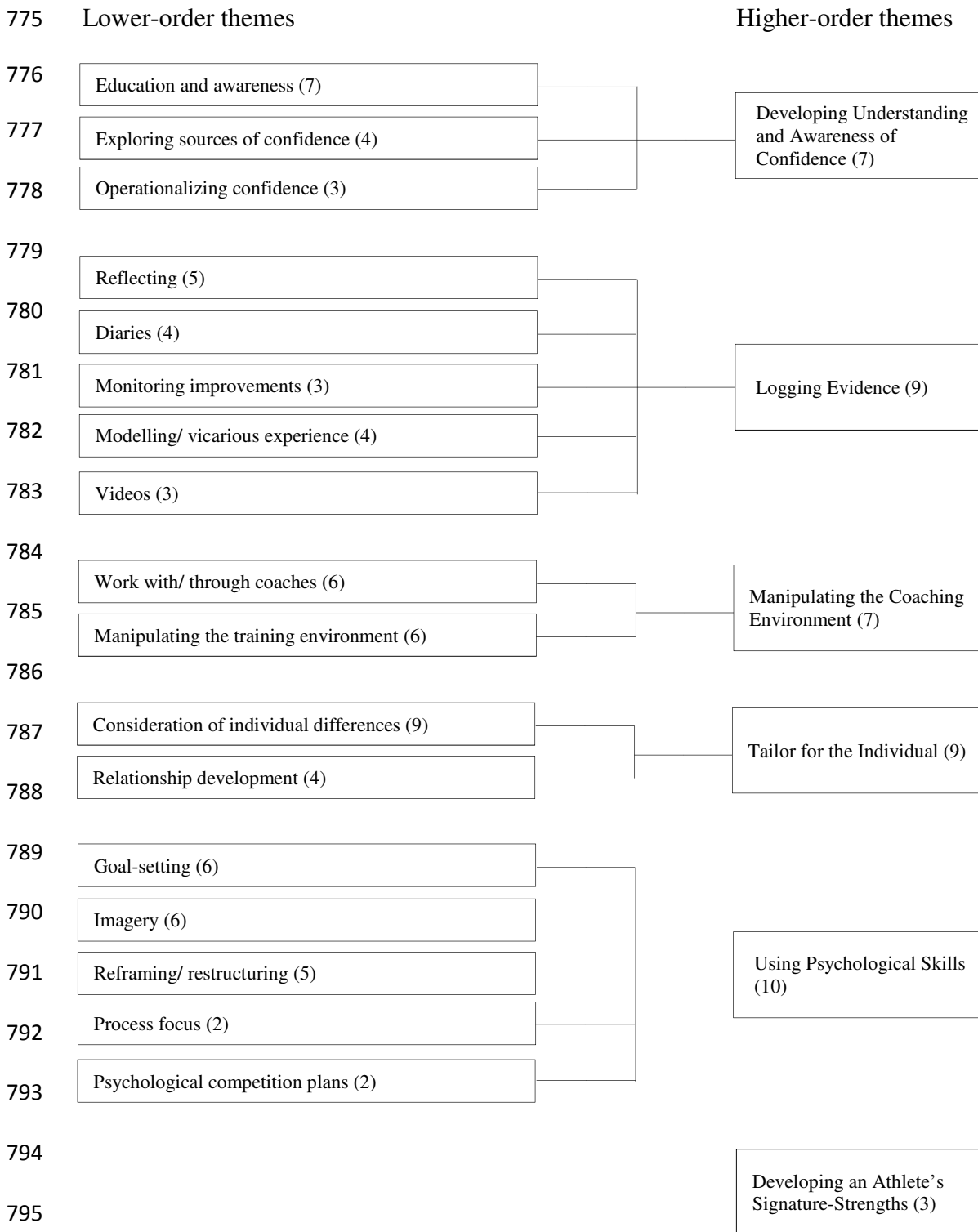
Figure 2. Strategies identified by sport psychology consultants to maintain robust

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sport-confidence.

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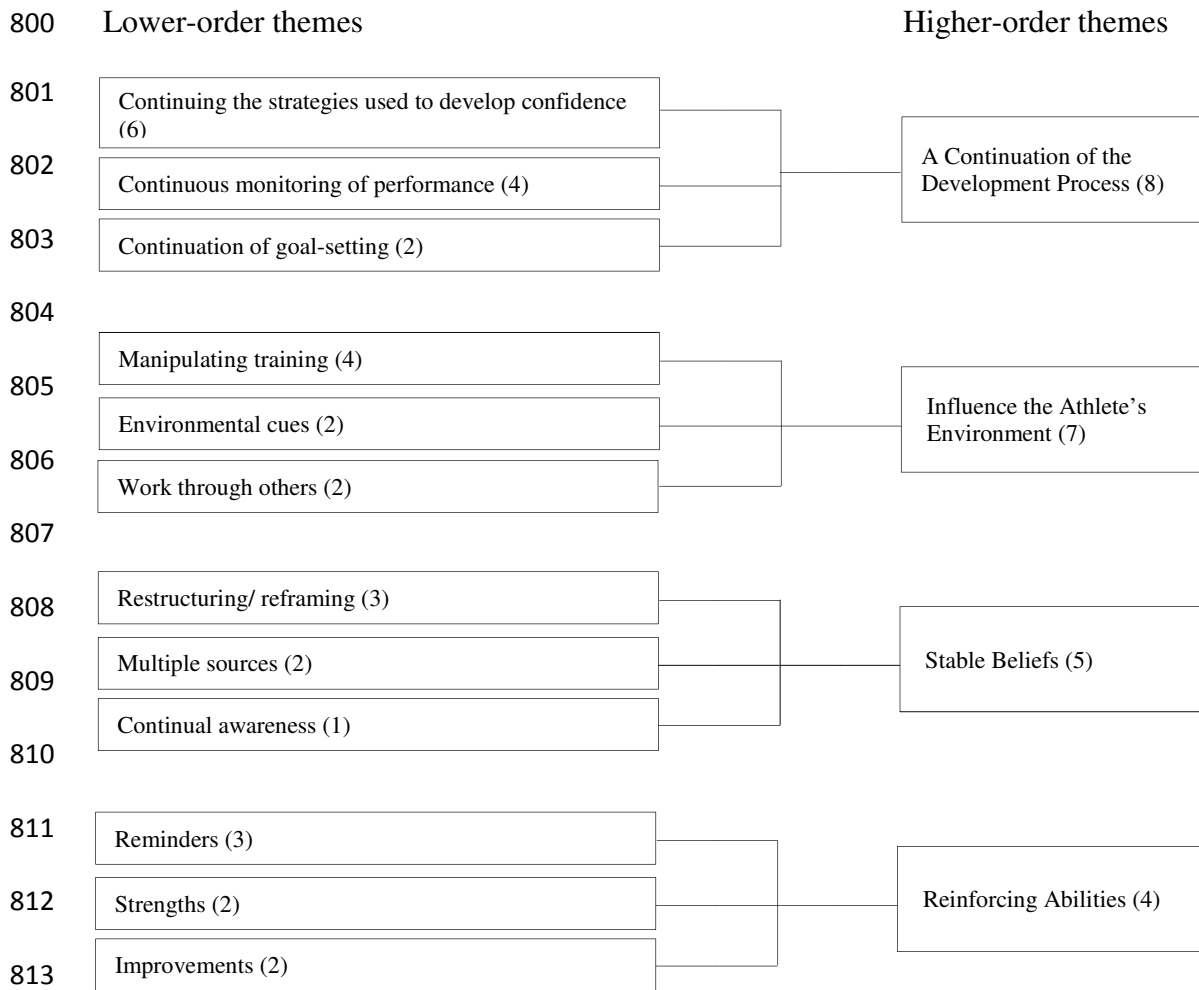
Develop and maintain robust sport-confidence



796 *Figure 1.* Strategies identified by sport psychology consultants to develop robust sport-
 797 confidence.

798 *Note:* The number of sport psychology consultants cited in each of the higher- and lower-
 799 order themes is provided in parentheses.

Develop and maintain robust sport-confidence



814 *Figure 2.* Strategies identified by sport psychology consultants to maintain robust sport-
815 confidence.

816 *Note:* The number of sport psychology consultants cited in each of the higher- and lower-
817 order themes is provided in parentheses.