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Shoot to Make, or Not to Miss? Athletic Confidence Extends Beyond the Field

What we can learn about confidence from athletes

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Kris Jenkins had just hit a game-winning three-pointer at the buzzer to give Villanova a 77-74 victory over North Carolina in the 2016 NCAA Men's Basketball championship. Now, he sat in the Villanova locker room hounded by members of the press, microphones pointed at his face like bayonets leading a media charge.

"Can you believe you hit that shot, Kris?" asked one reporter.

Jenkins started his response. "I believe every shot is going in, so..."

The reporter interrupted. "Every one?"

"Every one," Jenkins said emphatically. "So I thought that one was going in too."

Danny Young, director of basketball operations for the Northeastern University men's basketball team is not surprised by Jenkins's statement. "It's really about a mindset of shooting to make the shot versus shooting not to miss it," Young says.

While Jenkins's response may seem surprising and possibly even arrogant, it isn't to successful athletes and businessmen and businesswomen. Jenkins thinks all of his shots are going in.

Otherwise, why would he take them? This mindset exemplifies what may be the single most important factor in determining a person's success in athletics or their career: Self-confidence.

“Confidence comes from what you've already done well,” says Bill Cole, a sports psychologist who has worked with thousands of clients over the past 30 years including Olympic athletes, college athletes and even professional fighters. “There is no doubt in a successful athlete's mind. They say, ‘My training has been great. My coaching has been great. I expect to succeed.’ There is an assumption of success.”

This mindset is not limited to sports. Cole has provided his services to hundreds of business executives as well. “Successful business leaders have a vision of what success looks like,” says Cole. “They set goals. They believe in themselves.” Cole noted that just like athletes, successful executives practice constantly, leverage performance data, and create what Cole calls “success memories” to build confidence. “Suits. Uniforms. It's irrelevant,” he says. “Performance is performance.”

However, there is a correlation between the playing field and the boardroom, a connection that some of the top minds in the business world have looked to capitalize on.

Global consulting firm Ernst & Young created the Women Athlete Business Network partly to explore the impact of playing sports and a woman's success in business. The study found that 94% of C-suite women executives had played a sport, with 52% having played at the university

level, which is 13 points higher than women in other management positions. The study also shows that former women athletes earn 7% more than their non-athlete counterparts.

And that performance is not just limited to women. A 2014 study published in the *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies* noted that independent of gender or sport, “former student-athletes possess relatively greater leadership ability as well as more self-confidence and self-respect than others.”

In addition to having the “shoot-to-make mindset,” successful athletes have also learned to be comfortable with failure. Michael Jordan, Derek Jeter, Martina Navratilova, and countless other prominent sports figures have commented on how failing was an integral part of their success. Jenkins had the same perspective. “Even if it didn’t go in we would have just focused on the task at hand and got ready for overtime,” Jenkins said after his last-second game-winner. “You go back, learn, and reset.”

“I don’t think you can have success until you have failure,” said Young. He emphasizes that it is critical to focus on team culture because there will be very little risk-taking without it.

“Players can be driven by failure before,” says Young. “Without it, there would be a lack of drive. Of passion.”

Young noted that trust - coach to player, player to player, and even coach to coach - is one of the cornerstones of the Northeastern men’s basketball program’s success. “We bring our players in over Summer 2,” he says, referring to the second half of Northeastern’s summer semester. “We

bond and build chemistry. One year we did a military-style boot camp. But it could be a barbeque at the coach's house or bowling. It doesn't really matter. It's all about building trust." Young explained how trust leads to confidence, confidence leads to risk-taking and risk-taking leads to being willing to take that big shot.

While shooting a three-pointer in front of 74,000 screaming fans and 18 million more on television may seem daunting, Jenkins never viewed it that way. "You work and practice to perform at the highest level," said Jenkins. "You have built trust with your coaches and teammates. You just have to be ready for the moment."

When asked what he was thinking when the ball left his hands, Jenkins didn't hesitate.

"Ballgame."