**Shooting With Confidence**

***Kevin Kinghorn***

The history of basketball is full of three o’clock superstars you’ve never heard of. They consistently hit nine out of ten shots from outside the three-point arc, and it’s not unusual for them to have made their last fifty free throw attempts. Absolute superstars they are. But they do all this at three o’clock—during team practices and pregame shootarounds. Once the eight o’clock tip-off comes, they’re completely different players. In games they suddenly become shaky free throw shooters, and their three-point percentage plummets toward single digits.

Ever hear of Josh Carrier? He played for the University of Kentucky from 2001 to 2005. During his senior year alone, Kentucky played on national television over a dozen times. But if you’ve never heard of him, it’s understandable: he was rarely on the floor. Although he was a highly recruited three-point specialist, and although from all reports he consistently torched the nets in practice, his shooting prowess never transferred to game-time situations. In limited playing time, he finished his career shooting 26 percent from the three-point line, 29 percent from the field, and a dismal 42 percent from the foul line.

Many college teams have their own Josh Carrier: a player who lights it up in practice and sometimes dominates team scrimmages. A player whom fans see in summer pickup games and then run off to hype to the skies in Internet chat rooms. But all these hopes end in disappointment. In the tense atmosphere of game situations, their confidence evaporates into thin air, and with it seems to go their talent as well.

**Why the Dramatic Drop in Performance?**

This kind of drop in a player’s performance is obviously linked to his emotions. We all have experiences on a daily basis that illustrate the truth that our emotions can greatly impact our physical bodies. Our hearts race and our palms sweat when we anticipate a first date. When we’re nervous about speaking in public, our mouths become dry. When we’re making a sales presentation to an important client, our hands shake. When we’re scared, we feel sick to our stomach and weak in the knees.

Athletes of all kinds know all too well the physical effects of emotions like nervousness and anxiety. Celtics great Bill Russell routinely used to throw up before big games. Billiard players talk about their arms feeling as though they weigh fifty pounds each when a crucial frame is on the line. For basketball players, it’s not difficult to imagine how the involuntary physical effects of emotional pressure might throw off their jump shot.

But what exactly is the source of these negative emotions for basketball players? And, more important, is there any way for a player to control these emotions? Is there any hope that three o’clock superstars can learn to channel the confidence they feel in practice to big games, where it really counts?

Let’s begin our diagnosis by noting that there are two different sources for such detrimental emotions. The first source doesn’t involve the player’s beliefs, but the second does.

**Oh My! What Was He Thinking?!**

Emotions can arise in us even before we’re aware of how stressful our situation is. Sometimes the sheer scope and unfamiliarity of an environment are enough to send emotions rushing through us, even before we’ve had time to reflect on what’s happening. Consider the special feel of a playoff game at tip-off time, or the deafening noise of a hostile crowd, or the confusion of a last-second scramble to try to run a play when the game is on the line. These things can cause a player to go into emotional overload. And with these acute emotions come the physical effects we fans have come to recognize. The player feels his head spinning. He loses his bearings on the court. We speak of a player getting “rattled” or looking like a deer caught in a car’s headlights.

The classic example of getting rattled in this way has to be Georgetown’s Fred Brown, who gave North Carolina the 1982 NCAA championship when he passed the ball to James Worthy in the closing seconds of the game. Of course, Fred was nearly outdone eleven years later when Michigan’s All-American center Chris Webber made repeated efforts in the closing moments of the game to ensure another Carolina victory, including calling a timeout that Michigan didn’t have.[[1]](#footnote-1) These are times when the emotions of the moment interfere with the brain’s ability to process information as it normally would, times that allow Dick Enberg to utter his trademark, “Oh my, what *was* he thinking?!”

Sports psychologists sometimes teach relaxation techniques to players. The players might be told to imagine themselves in a familiar or “safe” place like their practice gym. The players are taught to breathe deeply and slowly. These are techniques for combating the first kind of detrimental emotion: the kind that arises simply from the pressure and unfamiliarity of the moment. Sometimes these techniques work. But if you take a freshman point guard, and put him in a Final Four game televised around the world, and throw a full-court press at him that his coach didn’t have time to go over at the pregame meeting . . . well, I don’t care *what* breathing techniques he’s been taught, he’s going to get rattled!

**Shaky Beliefs = Shaky Jump Shot**

The second source of choke-producing emotions is more widely experienced than the first and is therefore of even more interest to us. This second source involves a player’s beliefs.

Everyday examples make clear the connection between beliefs and emotions. If you’re speeding on the highway and believe you see a policeman on the shoulder of the road holding a radar gun, you experience a rush of emotion. If you believe your child might have wandered off at the mall, you feel a sudden jolt of panic. If you’re a guy at the arena and you suddenly realize there are no urinals in the restroom you absentmindedly walked into, again there’s a rush of emotion.

In each of these cases, you want things to be a certain way. You desire not to get a speeding ticket; you desire not to lose your child; you desire that you not be caught in the ladies’ room. And when you believe that these desires might not be fulfilled, you experience a rush of blood and adrenaline and the corresponding emotions of fear and anxiety.

So it is in basketball. Every player wants to do well, to be a hero instead of a goat. Every player desires to make his next shot. But when a player starts to believe that the next shot might not go in, then the emotions of fear and anxiety start to surface. And we’ve already seen how such emotions can throw off a player’s shooting.

The interesting question now becomes: is there a way for a player to control her beliefs? When fans sense that one of their home players is playing tentatively, they sometimes yell, “C’mon! Shoot it!” They’re urging the player to trust in her ability, to believe in herself. But can a player *choose* to believe that her next shot will go in?

**You’ve Gotta Believe, Son, You’ve Gotta Believe**

Our everyday language suggests that we can sometimes choose what we will believe. We say things like, “I refuse to believe that,” “Why won’t you believe me?” and “I’ve decided that such a course of action would be a mistake.” Despite what this language suggests, however, there is a big looming problem. Philosophers have offered powerful arguments that no one is capable of *deciding* to believe *anything*.

To see the philosophical problem inherent in the idea of choosing to believe something, consider the difference between *believing* something to be true and *wanting* it to be true. Suppose I told you that Dennis Rodman was in a local bookstore signing copies of his latest book, *A Wallflower in the NBA*. You might take my word for it and believe that he’s in the bookstore. Wanting to let Rodman know what you think of his rapacious rebounding and shameless exhibitionism, you might also want him to be in the bookstore. So, as you hop in your car and head for the bookstore, you both *believe* and *desire* that he’s there signing books.

As you enter the store, you see that there is no book signing and that I was only pulling your leg. What happens to your desire? Well, nothing. You can still *desire* that Dennis Rodman be in the bookstore. You can even choose to *imagine* that he’s in the store. But you won’t be able to *believe* that he’s in the bookstore. And this is because our beliefs have a certain connection to the truth that our desires and imaginings do not.

Our beliefs—unlike our desires and imaginings—are *representational* in nature. They represent what we think is already true of the world. As the philosopher Bernard Williams (1929–2003) puts it, our beliefs “aim at true,” that is, “purport to represent reality.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, to hold a belief is to think that the belief represents some fact about the actual world. Now, if I could somehow choose to believe something, Williams points out, then I would realize that my belief stems from my own free *choice*, and thus doesn’t necessarily have any connection with facts about the actual world. But now we have a big problem. For, if I realize that my belief doesn’t necessarily have any connection with what’s true about the actual world, then it’s not a belief in the first place!

Another way of putting this is to say that our beliefs are our “maps” of the world. Just as a map represents what’s true of the actual world, so, hopefully, do our beliefs. Imagine if a mapmaker were to *choose* where to put the borders of the fifty states. Suppose he says to himself, “I think I’ll put Florida up here today, and I’ll put Kansas on the East Coast, and I’ll make Wyoming the shape of an oval.” If a mapmaker realized that the map before him was simply the product of his own choices and didn’t therefore necessarily represent the actual borders of the fifty states, then he couldn’t consider it a genuine map. Similarly, if a person knows that his belief is merely the product of his own choice, then it simply cannot be an actual belief.

**He’s Sure Cocky, But It Works**

So the underconfident basketball player is in a real bind. Unless he can believe that his next shot is going in, his emotions will have detrimental effects on his performance. Yet, a player can’t believe such a thing simply by choosing to believe it, because our beliefs aren’t within our direct voluntary control.

Still, there are strategies that are available to the player who wants to shed the self-limiting effects of underconfidence. To understand these strategies, we first need to consider what it is that separates the underconfident player from the player who is brimming with confidence.

One characteristic of truly great players is that they all seem to have a ridiculously high level of confidence. I remember one postgame interview with Larry Bird in which the reported noted that Bird tended to be a streaky shooter. He asked Bird if, after missing a few shots in a row, he ever doubted his ability to take the final shot at crunch time. Bird replied that he *always* believes his shots are going in and that he is always surprised when one of them misses. He went on to say, “If I miss nine in a row, I expect the tenth one to go in for sure.”

Bill Walton tells another story about Bird’s unflappable confidence. One night Bird made a three-point shot against Phoenix, but the officials didn’t count it. When Celtics coach K. C. Jones began drawing up a play during the next timeout, Bird interrupted him: “To heck with the play,” he said. “Give me the ball and tell all the rest of the guys to get out of the way.” Walton recalls:

K.C. wasn’t in the mood to have his authority challenged.

“Shut up, Larry,” he said. “I’m the coach here.”

And then he started diagramming his play. “All right, now, Dennis, you take the ball out and get it to Kevin. Kevin you throw it to Larry and then everybody get the hell out of the way.”

The game was in Phoenix and Bird walked out of the huddle and went straight to the Suns’ bench. He stood in front of the Phoenix bench, turned to their players and said, “I’m getting the ball right here and I’m gonna put it in the hoop. Watch my hand as I follow through.

D.J. threw the ball the Kevin. Kevin threw the ball to Bird and Bird made the shot.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The reason this kind of confidence is remarkable is that our beliefs generally tend to develop from *evidence* that is presented to us. Just as a jury considers evidence and renders a judgment as to whether the defendant is guilty, so we, too, form most of our beliefs on the basis of what we think the evidence suggests.

Suppose we’re at a game when Larry Bird has missed nine shots in a row. (Of course, Bird probably never missed that many shots in a row in his life, but let’s assume this for the sake of argument.) Surely, we wouldn’t be confident that his next shot was going in. Based on the evidence of nine straight misses, we’d reckon that he’s just having a really, really bad day. Certainly we wouldn’t be confidently expecting his next shot to go in. Yet, Bird stated that he *would* confidently expect his next shot to go in. And I have no doubt that this is true in the case of Larry Bird.

Confident players like Bird seem to be unaffected by any evidence that would suggest that they aren’t shooting well and could very well miss their next shot. How can this be? Philosophers who study psychology have a ready explanation.

**The Power of Wishful Thinking**

Studies have shown over and over that a person who strongly *wants* something to be true will often come to *believe* that it is true. Everyday experiences also bear this out. Consider the heated rivalries in basketball over the years, like Duke versus North Carolina, Kentucky versus Louisville, or the Celtics versus the Lakers. Have you ever watched one of these games on TV with fans from each team in the same room? It’s amazing how each set of fans will scream at the referees throughout the game. Each side is absolutely convinced that the majority of the referees’ missed calls are going against their own team.

What’s behind this phenomenon? Well, both sets of fans strongly desire that their team win, and this subconsciously affects what they believe about the referees. Each side may even insist that they are “setting their biases aside” and are just describing what is “objectively” going on in the game. But we know better. Philosopher Francis Bacon (1561–1626) put his finger on the problem when he said, “Whatever a man wishes were true, that he more readily believes.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

High school and college coaches will probably be the first to agree with Bacon’s statement. Coaches must often deal with parents who are convinced that their son is destined for stardom and can’t understand why he isn’t getting more playing time. Parents can also be among those who encourage their son to enter his name into the NBA draft, when the rest of the world can see he isn’t anywhere near ready. What’s going through the minds of these parents? Francis Bacon’s statement says it all.

Players like Larry Bird want to win and want to succeed so much that they can be oblivious to anything that would suggest that they somehow *shouldn’t* take the last shot of the game. Again, this confidence serves them well on the court. But what of the player who lacks confidence? If desiring something to be true tends to lead a person to believe that it is true, does this mean that underconfident players really don’t desire to make their next shot or to be the star of the game?

Well, of course they desire these things. However, there is another factor that affects a person’s beliefs. Bacon was right to point out that our desires often affect our beliefs. However, it’s also true that *fears* can have a powerful, opposing effect on beliefs. Consider the case of a child who fears that there might be monsters lurking under his bed. Such fears may be so acute that he comes to believe that there actually *are* monsters under his bed. And this belief arises, of course, despite the fact that he desires all monsters to be kept well away from him.

So, just as wishful thinking can lead us to believe something we wish were true, so our fears can make us believe something we wish were *not* true. A basketball player undergoing a crisis of confidence desires—like Larry Bird—to make his next shot. But his self-belief will be hindered by the fear of failing, of losing the game, of being the goat.

**He’s Not Just My Coach, He’s My Therapist**

As we saw earlier, the underconfident basketball player cannot simply *choose* to believe that his next shot is going in. But there are two broad strategies that can be adopted in an attempt to counteract the detrimental effects brought on by lack of self-belief.

The first strategy is to increase the player’s *evidence* that he will make his next shot. Again, a person’s beliefs will follow involuntarily from his assessment of the evidence. He cannot simply choose to believe something when he thinks the evidence points in another direction. But if a player somehow acquires more evidence suggesting that he will hit his next shot, then his beliefs would naturally tend to follow in that direction.

Both coaches and sports psychologists have recognized the benefits of setting goals in practice. The goal might be to make a winning basket in a simulated last-minute situation, to make two free throws so the team won’t have to do extra running, or to make a certain number of shots in a row in a shooting drill. Indiana’s Steve Alford used to set the goal of “hanging the net,” and he wouldn’t end his shooting drills until he swished one in such a way that the net would hang. Fortunately, the baskets he practiced on didn’t have metal nets.

Coaches are wise to end practices when such goals are met. That way, the shooting successes from practice tend to stick in a player’s head more than the failures. Coaches also encourage players to visualize themselves nailing jumpers over and over. They encourage players to act confidently, to remember past successes in games, and to engage in positive self-talk. When these strategies work, they have the effect of bombarding the player with evidence on top of evidence that she is a great shooter. When the player then thinks about her next shot, there is so much positive evidence fresh in her mind that she naturally forms positive beliefs about the prospects for her next shot going in.

The success of these strategies varies considerably. Some people have an easier time brushing aside past failures than others do. But when these strategies work, they succeed because they increase the evidence a player has that his next shot will go in.

The second strategy doesn’t seek to increase a player’s evidence or even change his beliefs. Instead, it seeks to decrease the *negative effects* of a player’s beliefs. Specifically, the strategy seeks to lessen the impact of a player’s beliefs on his emotions.

A player’s underconfident beliefs about his next shot can cause performance-diminishing emotions like fear, anxiety, and tension. Players know that there may be serious consequences if they miss. Again, no player wants to be the goat, to let down his team and the fans. But coaches can make this situation better or worse.

Fans easily pick up on the fact that some players are on a short leash. The coach puts them in, but he’s quick to pull them out as soon as they commit a silly foul or miss a defensive assignment. Fans see that some players shoot hesitantly because they’re looking over their shoulders, afraid that a single miss will find them sitting on the bench—and staying there. And so they yell at the coach, “Give him a chance!” or “Leave him in to see what he can do!”

One big reason why this kind of “quick hook” from a coach is detrimental to a player is that the negative consequences of a single missed shot are too great. The player has too much riding on the shot going in. If a player believes that his next shot might not go in, intense feelings of fear and anxiety may arise. For often there is simply so *much* to fear.

Now, contrast all this with the attitudes of players who mount great comebacks. One of the frequent accompaniments of great comebacks is that, at some point, the coach gives a speech to the players along the following lines: “O.K., forget about what’s happened. Go out there and shoot. Just shoot the ball, then keep shooting it, then shoot it some more.”

It’s amazing what players can do when all the pressure is taken off. We say that the team is playing like it’s got “nothing to lose.” And this is a pretty accurate description. For there is no longer much to fear from a single missed shot. The coach has removed the bad consequences—and thus the fear—of missing.

A great example of this strategy comes from coach Rick Pitino and player Kenny Walker, when both were with the New York Knicks. The Knicks’ half-court offense was essentially to throw the ball in to Patrick Ewing, who would either try to score from down low or kick it out to a guard. If neither of these things worked, and if the shot clock was winding down, they’d swing the ball around to the weak side, and Kenny Walker, the small forward, would usually have an open twenty-footer. The problem was that Walker wasn’t making very many of these shots. He was undergoing a crisis of confidence.

Pitino told Walker, publicly, that the day he *stopped* taking that shot was the day he would cease to be a New York Knick. This wasn’t an attempt to create evidence for Walker or get him to believe that his next shot was going in. Instead, it was an attempt to take away the negative consequences of a missed shot—and thus to lessen the effects that Walker’s underconfidence had in producing emotions like fear.

Pitino’s strategy didn’t produce a miracle. Walker was always going to be a slam-dunk champion, never a pure shooter. But the strategy was right on the money. My guess is that it had as positive an effect on Walker’s jump shot as any shooting drill ever did.

**Job Security for the Sports Psychologist**

In the end, underconfident basketball players will never be able to overcome the philosophical problem that they can’t simply *choose* to believe that their next shot is going in. In the long term, as philosopher Tom Morris reminds us, the best strategy to build confidence is to build competence. “Great confidence,” he says, “is rooted in great preparation.”[[5]](#footnote-5) But in the short term, as we’ve seen, there are strategies that can be adopted by players, coaches, and sports psychologists alike. First, they can try to increase a player’s evidence that he *will* make his next shot. Second, they can try to lessen the negative impact of a player’s beliefs on his emotions.

Because strategies do exist to help the underconfident player, there will always be a market for sports psychologists. And this is good news for all of us. After all, sports presenters will need experts to interview when the next Fred Brown or Chris Webber make a bonehead play and we all want to find out, “What *was* he thinking?!”

1. Since Dean Smith won both of his championships in these extraordinary circumstances, conspiracy theorists might want to examine this. Did someone at Carolina invent some sort of device or substance that discombobulates opposing players in the waning moments of really big games? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bernard Williams, “Deciding to Believe,” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 136, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bill Walton with Gene Wojciechowski, *Nothing But Net* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 103. Readers may also recall the dramatic final scene in the movie *Hoosiers*—recently named the best sports movie of all time in an ESPN poll—when the championship hopes of the Cinderella Hickory Huskers are down to one last shot, and star player Jimmy Chitwood confidently says to his coach, “I’ll make it,” and proceeds to do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Francis Bason, *Novum Organon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1855), bk. 1, sec. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tom Morris, *The Art of Achievement* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel, 2002), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)