



Self-Talk: What is it? Where does it come from?

By: Jeff Anderson
MS in Psychology
(Specialization in Sport Psychology)

Web: peakathleticconsulting.com

One of the key points in sports psychology is the idea that what we think about has a big effect on our performance. In fact some people say that what you think; you do. In addition, and to be more specific, the idea of self-talk has become a major area of emphasis for athletes, coaches, and sport psychologists. In fact, the idea that self-talk (our inner thoughts) affects performance transcends into business, education, and home as well, and there is no safe haven from which to escape this voice inside you. This psychological phenomenon can work miracles in your life or completely cause you to freeze up, choke, and under-perform. Regardless of your age, location, social status, or affiliations the voice follows you and critiques every move you make.

For years as an athlete I would catch myself talking (thinking) inside my head either to pump myself up (you got this!) or berate myself for mistakes and failures (wake up, you are better than this!). The higher I climbed in athletics the tougher I was on myself. More success just brought more self-expectation; and when I failed I heaped more criticism on myself. It didn't matter what the circumstances were; the little voice inside my head was there as a reminder that I wasn't doing the best I could. I tried to remedy this by working harder and longer to perfect my physical performance but the voice remained. It constantly reminded me I was not good enough.

While in graduate school I really began to examine this idea in more detail and wondered where this voice was coming from. As both a collegiate and professional baseball pitcher I remembered many occasions where I would

catch myself talking silently, often negatively, inside my head before games, or even before certain pitches in the middle of a game. Here I was a professional baseball athlete questioning my own ability in comparison to those around me.

So why do we have this voice? And is everyone, athlete and non-athlete susceptible to its effects? What about age difference? Does this affect all ages? I even spent a few days contemplating whether younger athletes were even cognizant of this voice. Did they notice it during competition the same way I did? I had wondered if they could even understand this concept with which I was still trying to grasp myself. The answer must be yes but how could I prove it?

As it turned out, my thirteen year old daughter came to my rescue.. During a recent volleyball tournament, which her team won: District Champs! She was serving during one important set and had rolled off about five or six great serves in a row as if she were a serving machine. Then on her next serve she missed badly, a complete mis-hit. When the match was over she came over and sat by us in the bleachers. After we did the congratulatory high fives for a nice win and some small talk, I asked "what happened on that serve there at the end?". Her response floored me and fueled my fire for this article.

(Understand; my daughter knew I was working on my graduate school degree but she did not know what my degree field was.)

She said "I just got this voice in my head that I **had** to make this serve, and that it **had** to be a good one". It was amazing to me that she recognized this on her own so I asked "what were you saying to yourself during the previous five or six serves?" she replied "nothing". "Nothing?" I replied with a question in my voice, "ya; nothing" she responded, she said "I was just serving".

Here was direct proof that young athletes do recognize, and are affected by the same voice, even if they do not know where it comes from. Her voice causes just as much distraction

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as my voice does. This distraction is very strongly related to a decline in performance as well. It plays favorites to no one. But before we discuss how this inner voice affects athletes we need to discuss where that voice comes from.

So where does the voice come from? Is it our intuition? Is it our sixth sense? Can it be symbolized as our good and bad (angel vs. devil) voice? What is it? And why is it always complaining, regardless of the circumstances? If I'm doing good this voice focuses on what I could do better, if I'm struggling then I'm the worst athlete on the field; I'm stupid, I'm an idiot, what are you thinking? It often is so blunt as to tell me I suck and I might as well give up!

Research has shown that infants and toddlers are very aware of their surroundings. They can't communicate verbally in language yet but they are constantly receiving communication from the adults raising them. They understand that loud noises are scary, that tonal changes in Mommy's voice either mean she is happy, angry, or sad, and they feel these emotions inside. Their voice is developing and the communication which takes place in their household has a huge effect on how they will eventually talk and think about themselves. If Mom and Dad expect them to do certain things and they fail, their voice will be there to remind them they were not good enough. This voice stores the event and brings it back at just the wrong time.

So does this mean that we can all blame Mom and Dad for our negative inner voice? No, not at all, we have many Moms and Dads in our lives. There's the teacher who made you feel like a failure, a highly critical coach can bring about doubt very quickly, or the boss who felt your effort wasn't up to company standards. Talk about ammunition for our inner voice, it is no wonder we always compare ourselves to the success of others.

Our inner voice has been with us from our beginning and is so deeply ingrained in us that whether we like it or not it is a part of who you are. Controlling this voice becomes the mission as we fight back against a success driven environment such as ours. Outside pressure to

perform puts the focus on results rather than the process; creating a distraction in the mind which then confuses the body. Whether you are an accomplished athlete who has practiced the necessary skills and understands how their body should function or the recreational athlete who participates for fun the voice inside our heads can have a detrimental effect on performance.

To be continued.....