

SELF-PRESENTATIONAL EFFECTS OF SELF-TALK ON PERCEPTIONS OF TENNIS PLAYERS

*Judy L. Van Raalte, Britton W. Brewer, Allen E. Cornelius,
& Albert J. Petitpas*

Springfield College, Massachusetts, USA

Abstract: Sport psychologists have suggested that athletes who appear positive and confident to their opponents may gain a competitive edge (Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 1998). But are athletes who use positive self-talk actually seen as better competitors than those who use other strategies? To explore how athletes using self-talk are perceived, 94 undergraduate psychology students were shown segments of tennis matches in which dubbed positive self-talk, negative self-talk, or no self-talk was audible. An ANOVA conducted on participants' ratings of tennis players' ability level indicated a significant main effect for self-talk. Post hoc analyses revealed that players shown with dubbed positive self-talk were perceived to be significantly better athletes than when those same players were shown playing the same tennis points with dubbed negative self-talk or with no dubbed self-talk. The results of this study provide empirical support for the contention that observable self-talk has an effect on opponents and highlight the self-presentational effects of self-talk in sport.

Key words: Observable self-talk, Self-presentation, Tennis.

Researchers have used a number of approaches and research designs to study self-talk in sport. Starting with attitudes toward self-talk, research has shown that athletes and coaches use and value their athletes using self-talk (These & Huddleston, 1999; Wang, Huddleston, & Peng, 2003; Weinberg, Grove, & Jackson, 1992; Weinberg & Jackson, 1990). Observation of self-talk during exercise, sport practice, and competition has led to descriptions, evaluation,

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Address: Judy L. Van Raalte, Center for Performance Enhancement and Applied Research, Department of Psychology, Springfield College, 263 Alden Street, Springfield, MA 01109 USA. Phone: +1-413-7483388. Fax: +1-413-7483854. E-mail: jvanraal@spfldcol.edu

and categorization of self-talk (Chroni & Kourtesopoulou, 2002; Hamilton, Scott, & Neary, 2004; Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001; Hardy, Hall, & Hardy, 2004; Van Raalte, Brewer, Rivera, & Petitpas, 1994; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Brewer, & Hatton, 2000). Researchers have identified coach (Hardy, this issue; Zourbanos, this issue), sport (Hardy et al., 2004; Hatzigeorgiadis, Theodorakis, & Zourbanos, 2004), and competition-specific (Van Raalte et al., 2000) causes of self-talk. Various functions of self-talk including cognitive, motivational, specific, general, and other functions have been explored (Hardy, Gammage, & Hall, 2001; Hardy et al., 2004; Hatzigerogiadis, this issue; Weinberg et al., 1992). The relationship of self-talk to anxiety (Conroy & Metzler, 2004; Fletcher & Hanton, 2001; Hanton & Jones, 1999) and other affective states (Hardy, Hall, & Alexander, 2001) has been assessed. Finally, numerous researchers evaluating a variety of sports have assigned participants to particular self-talk conditions and then measured task performance (Dagrou, Gauvin, & Halliwell, 1992; Goudas, Hatzidimitriou, Kikidi, this issue; Hardy et al., 2004; Harvey, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2002; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2004; Landin & Hebert, 1999; Masciana, Van Raalte, Brewer, Branton, & Coughlin, 2001; Papaioannou, Ballon, & Theodorakis, 2004; Perkos, Theodorakis, & Chroni, 2002; Rogerson & Hrycaiko, 2002; Theodorakis, Chroni, Laparidis, Bebestos, & Douma, 2001; Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, & Kazakas, 2000; Van Raalte et al., 1995; Weinberg, Smith, Jackson, & Gould, 1984) or used self-talk as part of a performance enhancement package (Kendall, Hrycaiko, Martin, & Kendall, 1990; Kirschenbaum, Owens, & O'Connor, 1998; Mamassis & Doganis, 2004; Ming & Martin, 1996; Thelwell & Greenlees, 2001, 2003). These approaches to studying self-talk differ from each other in many ways, but share an important common perspective. Self-talk is considered to be an intra-individual phenomenon. Therefore, self-talk is seen as affecting the self-talking person only. Because self-talk is often spoken aloud and current definitions of self-talk in sport often include the broad gestures that accompany or occur in place of out loud talk (Van Raalte et al., 1994, 2000), it seems that considering the impact of self-talk on observers as well as the athletes themselves may lead to a more thorough understanding of self-talk in the sport environment.

Self-talk used during sport occurs in public settings and is therefore likely to involve self-presentational processes. Self-presentation is a form of impression management used by individuals to try to control the impressions that others form of them. Research on strategic self-presentation has shown

that people generally attempt to present themselves in the most favorable manner possible (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). Much of this self-presentational research has focused on the job interview, but the findings also appear to be applicable to the sport arena (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). In an overview of research on self-presentation, Kenrick, Neuberg, and Cialdini (2005) noted that people use self-presentational strategies to obtain desirable resources from others and to construct an ideal or preferred self-image. Self-presentational strategies are most likely to be used when people perceive themselves to be in the public eye (Buss & Briggs, 1984), when observers can influence the attainment of goals (e.g., Bohra & Pandey, 1984; Hendricks & Brickman, 1974), when the goals are important (Pandey & Rastagi, 1979; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000), and when observers' impressions may differ from the impression that one is hoping to project (Leary & Kowalski, 1995). The situations in which self-presentational strategies are most likely to be implemented are prevalent among athletes: (a) competitive athletes are often in the public eye, (b) observers and opponents can influence the outcome of sporting events and the attainment of important sport goals, and (c) observers' impressions (e.g., "this is not a very good athlete") may differ from the impression that a particular athlete is trying to project. Thus, a body of literature suggests that self-presentational strategies may play a role in the sport environment. Applied sport psychologists have also emphasized self-presentation in sport and have encouraged athletes to convey or present a positive, confident image to opponents because athletes who appear positive and confident gain a competitive edge (Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Zinsser, Bunker, & Williams, 1998).

In two studies, Greenlees and colleagues (Greenlees, Bradley, Holder, & Thelwell, 2005a; Greenlees, Buscombe, & Holder, 2005b) explored the effects of positive and negative self-presentational body language on observers. Specifically, they showed study participants videotapes of tennis and table tennis players exhibiting positive or negative body language while performing warmup exercises for competitive matches. Study participants then rated their impressions of a player's ability level. In both studies, Greenlees and colleagues found that participants rated players who used positive body language during warmup more favorably than players using negative body language. Further, participants indicated that they were less confident that they could defeat an opponent who used positive body language relative to an opponent who used negative body language.

Greenlees and colleagues (2005a, b) have shown that body language, used by athletes, influences the perceptions of observers. Their ingenious research design has allowed them to assess the effects of body language on observer perceptions separate from the effects of sport performance ability. That is, athletes shown exhibiting positive body language during stretching warmups were perceived to be better tennis and table tennis players than athletes exhibiting negative body language during warmups. The observers did not actually see the athletes competing in sport. These results suggest that body language has an important effect on observers' perceptions. It seems likely that verbalized self-talk used by athletes may play a similar self-presentational role and have similar effects on observers' perceptions.

It is possible, however, that body language had a significant effect on observers' perceptions of player ability in the Greenlees et al. (2005a, b) studies because the observers had no other means of judging player ability. That is, observers may have had to guess the athletes' ability and therefore assumed that positive body language was indicative of greater skill. Participants' judgments may have been less affected by body language if they had been able to observe the athletes competing. Body language may affect perceptions of sport performance ability only in the absence of sport performance data.

The challenge in answering the question "does body language and/or self-talk have an independent effect on observers during sport performance?" is that self-talk and sport performance are generally confounded. Negative self-talk typically follows poor performance (Van Raalte et al., 2000). Thus, unfavorable perceptions of competitors using negative self-talk may be attributable to their less skilled performances rather than to the unique effects of self-talk. Using the creative videotape approach of Greenlees et al. (2005a, b) as a starting point, it is possible, however, to assess the independent effects of self-talk on observer's perceptions. This can be done by holding sport performance constant and by varying the self-talk presented. Specifically, a particular sport performance can be videotaped, positive self-talk can be dubbed in for one experimental condition, and negative self-talk can be dubbed for another experimental condition. Based on the results of Greenlees et al. (2005a, b) and the claims of applied sport psychologists that it is important to self-present in a confident and positive fashion (Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Zinsser et al., 1998), it could be hypothesized that athletes shown in a sport situation with dubbed positive self-talk would be perceived more favorably than athletes shown with dubbed negative self-talk in the same

sport situation. The current research was conducted to explicitly test the hypothesis that athletes shown using positive self-talk would be perceived more favorably than would the same athletes shown using negative self-talk. Because past sport related self-presentational research (Greenlees et al., 2005a, b) involved only male participants, both male and female participants were included in the study although no predictions about gender effects were made.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were 94 undergraduate psychology students (46 females and 48 males) who volunteered to participate. Participants were primarily Caucasian (84%), but American Indian or Alaskan native (1%), Asian or Pacific Islander (3%), Black not of Hispanic origin (2%), Hispanic (3%), and other or unknown (6%) were also represented. Participants were an average of 18.69 ($SD = 1.30$) years of age.

Design

The study involved a 2 (gender of participant) x 3 (self-talk: positive, negative, or control) x 2 (gender of athlete in video) between-participants design. Thus, male and female participants viewed and evaluated a male tennis player with dubbed positive self-talk, a male tennis player with dubbed negative self-talk, a male tennis player shown with no self-talk, a female tennis player with dubbed positive self-talk, a female tennis player with dubbed negative self-talk, or a female tennis player shown with no self-talk.

Stimulus materials

Videotapes. Intermediate ability level tennis players, whose skill level was assessed by the Head Varsity Tennis Coach, were videotaped during competitive tennis matches. One match involved two women playing tennis and the other match involved two men. Match videotapes were edited to four-minute segments and duplicated. Positive and negative self-talk videotapes were created for each match by dubbing in either positive or negative statements.

Self-talk statements were generated from self-talk that had been observed being used by competitive tennis players in previous research (Van Raalte et al., 1994, 2000). The self-talk statements were generally in the second person, a pattern of self-talk use that has also been observed among exercisers in field settings (Gammage, Hardy, & Hall, 2001). The self-talk statements were tested for appropriateness of content in a pilot study. Twelve pilot participants were given written copies of self-talk statements and asked to categorize them as either positive or negative self-talk. Inter-rater agreement of 94% was found for the self-talk statements used in the study.

For the women's match, a player missed a short ball at 38 sec into the videotape. On the positive self-talk tape, "Hey, that's all right, good hustle!" was dubbed. On the negative self-talk videotape, "Ugh! You are so slow, you should have gotten that" was dubbed. At 85 sec into the videotape, a player hit the ball out of the court. Positive self-talk dubbed was "That's all right, a little more top spin on it. You're still in it." Negative self-talk was "Geez! You think you could swing a little harder next time?" Finally, after a cross-court winner at 110 sec into the videotape, the positive self-talk dubbed was "Yes! Nice shot! Keep it up!" and the negative self-talk was "You are so slow. You got lucky on that one!" The same process was followed for the videotape of the men's match. At 68 sec, following a lost point the positive self-talk was "Swing a little harder like that, there you go." Negative self-talk was "Come on, you gotta make that shot. You gotta hit it harder, you sissy!" At 133 sec, following a double fault, positive self-talk was "You're all right, you're OK, just serve better." Negative self-talk was "God! I cannot serve. All I gotta do is hit it in that stupid box!" At 238 sec into the tape, following a forehand lob, positive self-talk was "Nice shot, nice placement, nice lob." Negative self-talk was "You are so lucky! That was about to go so far out!" For all videotapes, dubbed self-talk was all that was audible to viewers. The control videotapes included no dubbing.

Tennis Evaluation Questionnaire. An 8-item questionnaire was designed for the needs of this study to assess participants' perceptions of tennis players viewed on videotape. Participants used 9-point scales to rate tennis players' ability level, competitiveness, concentration, aggressiveness, consistency, effort, enjoyment, and likelihood of winning a particular match. For example, participants were asked "How good a tennis player is Jason?" and rated their responses on a scale ranging from "not very good" to "very good." This format was used for all 8 items. A composite measure of

participants' ratings on these 8 items ($\alpha = .90$) served as the primary dependent measure in this study. Participants also indicated how well they thought that the videotaped athlete played tennis in the points that they saw on a scale ranging from 1 (not very well) to 9 (very well).

Demographic questions. Participants reported their age, gender, and race/ethnicity on a demographic questionnaire.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the six videotapes of intermediate level tennis players competing in a match. Thirty-five participants viewed videotapes with dubbed positive self-talk, 29 viewed videotapes with dubbed negative self-talk, and 30 participants viewed control videotapes with no dubbed self-talk. Upon completion of the videotapes, participants completed the tennis evaluation questionnaire and the demographic questionnaire. All participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that submission of completed questionnaires indicated their consent to have their responses considered in it.

RESULTS

A 2 (gender of participant) x 3 (self-talk: positive, negative, or control) x 2 (gender of athlete in video) between-participants ANOVA was conducted with the composite measure of participants' ratings on the tennis evaluation questionnaire serving as the dependent measure. Results indicated no significant interactions and no significant effects for gender of athlete shown in the video. There was, however, a significant main effect for gender of participant. Males rated the athletes shown ($M = 35.00$, $SD = 10.63$) as significantly more competent tennis players than did the female participants ($M = 33.19$, $SD = 14.20$), $F(1, 94) = 5.16$, $p < .03$, partial Eta squared = .06. There was also a statistically significant main effect for type of self-talk, $F(2, 94) = 7.97$, $p < .001$, partial Eta squared = .16. The Bonferroni post hoc procedure revealed that players who were shown with dubbed positive self-talk ($M = 34.11$, $SD = 12.47$) were perceived significantly more favorably than those same players shown with dubbed negative self-talk ($M = 31.62$, $SD = 12.28$), or no self-talk ($M = 29.83$, SD

= 10.26). Similar results were found when responses to the single item, "How well did the athlete play in the points that you saw?" served as the dependent measure, $F(2, 94) = 3.67, p < .03$. Athletes who were shown using dubbed positive self-talk ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.56$) were perceived more favorably than athletes shown using dubbed negative self-talk ($M = 3.97, SD = 1.99$), or no self-talk ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.62$).

DISCUSSION

Sport psychologists have highlighted the importance of athletes presenting a confident persona on the playing field (Weinberg & Gould, 2003; Zinsser et al., 1998). To this end, applied sport psychologists, coaches, and athletes have touted the value of a number of strategies including the use of self-talk (e.g., Thiese & Huddleston, 1999; Van Raalte & Silver-Bernstein, 1999; Wang, Huddleston, & Peng, 2003; Weinberg, 1988; Weinberg et al., 1992; Weinberg & Jackson, 1990). A body of literature shows that self-talk affects the performance of athletes, exercisers, and those performing sport tasks (Dagrou et al., 1992; Hardy et al., 2002, 2004; Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2004; Landin & Hebert, 1999; Masciana et al., 2001; Papaioannou et al., 2004; Perkos et al., 2002; Rogerson & Hrycaiko, 2002; Theodorakis et al., 2000, 2001; Van Raalte et al., 1995; Weinberg et al., 1984). This study was designed to determine if self-talk also affects perceptions held by sport observers. Dubbing positive and negative self-talk in videotaped tennis matches it was possible to vary self-talk of particular athletes while keeping the level of play consistent. Thus, the effects of athlete self-talk on observer perceptions could be evaluated independent of tennis players' ability. The results of this research indicated that athletes shown using positive self-talk during particular tennis points were perceived significantly more favorably than were the same athletes when shown using negative self-talk or no self-talk while playing the same tennis points.

The self-presentational effects demonstrated in this study highlight the social nature of sport and one of the ways in which self-directed behavior, such as self-talk, can affect others in the sport environment. Of course, it is possible to argue that self-talk that is spoken aloud is not a solely self-directed process. The debate among sport psychologists about whether or not verbalized or observable self-talk is purely self-directed echoes an ongoing debate in the mainstream psychology literature over the nature of

self-presentation. Researchers such as Buss and Briggs (1984) have considered self-presentation to be a limited behavior that occurs primarily under restricted social conditions when people are focused on the impression that they are making on others such as in a job interview, at a wedding, or when giving a speech. In most other social settings, people are seen as expressing their genuine qualities and not using self-presentational strategies to make a particular impression. Jones and Pittman (1982) have identified situations in which they believe self-presentation does not occur, including when people are intensely involved in a task (e.g., sport competition), when experiencing strong emotions (e.g., anger, joy), when involved in ritualized social encounters (e.g., paying for groceries), or when concerned with the integrity of their behavior (e.g., talking to a therapist). Schlenker and Pontari (2000) argued quite effectively that these definitions and limitations that connect self-presentation with underlying specific interpersonal motives underestimate the prevalence of self-presentation in social behavior. They provided counter-examples to those of Buss and Briggs (1984) and Jones and Pittman (1992) indicating, for example, that, sport settings are often rife with self-presentational displays. Schlenker and Pontari (2000) suggested that the use of a broad, inclusive definition of self-presentation, which describes self-presentation as occurring even when it is not the main focus of an interaction, is in line with the concept of self-presentation popularized in the sociology literature by Goffman (1959). Goffman considered self-presentation to be a condition that is inherent in the nature of social life.

The broad conceptualization of self-presentation advocated by Schlenker and Pontari (2000) may be particularly appropriate for the sport arena, where self-presentational effects occur even when the main goal of an athlete's behavior is not self-presentation. Indeed, the results of Van Raalte et al. (2000) suggest that competitive tennis players are most likely to use negative self-talk to express their frustration after a performance error. The results of this study indicate that athletes who use negative self-talk to express frustration following a tennis point may be perceived less favorably than they would have been if they had verbalized positive self-talk after the same point. Future research assessing athletes' awareness of the self-presentational effects of self-talk and the ways in which self-presentational self-talk is used strategically may shed more light on this issue. As suggested by Jones and Pittman (1982), some athletes may rarely self-present. Other athletes, such as tennis player John McEnroe, may be aware of the self-

presentational effects of self-talk and use observable self-talk, theatrical skills, and physical sport skills to their advantage (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000).

The results of this research highlight the beneficial effects of expressed positive self-talk on observers' perceptions of sport performance. Because the positive self-talk used in this study contained instructional and motivational elements, further exploration of the self-presentational effects of self-talk may be warranted. Further, there may be some circumstances, in which negative self-talk also has a beneficial self-presentational effect. For example, some athletes may be self-critical to create the impression that they are just having an off day. "That was terrible!" might be said aloud so that it is interpreted as "I am surprised that I missed that shot, usually I perform at a much higher level." Thus, an athlete may fume and swear to try to create the impression that the current performance is below his or her usual high standard of play.

Self-critical self-talk may be used in other sport situations to avoid criticism or punishment from a coach. Self-talk such as "That was awful, I can do better. I can't believe I missed that shot!" may be designed to show the coach that the athlete is really trying hard. Athletes' self-criticism may actually cause a coach to feel that additional comments are unnecessary, as verbal criticism for the error has already been administered. An athlete who uses this type of negative self-talk may be less likely to be reprimanded by the coach than an athlete who is quiet or positive in the same circumstances.

In contrast to the previous examples that highlight circumstances where negative self-talk may be used in an effort to create favorable impressions of competence or favorable outcomes, some athletes may use negative self-talk purposefully to create impressions of low ability. Thus, an athlete may use self-talk in an attempt to appear to be unprepared or a poor performer regardless of his or her actual ability level. This "sandbagging" behavior is most likely to occur when a competitor feels pressure to succeed (a situation that can be exacerbated by being favored in a match), and when a competitor is being evaluated by someone who has not seen previous performances. Sandbagging can be used to create a low baseline of expectation against which future behaviors can be judged (Gibson & Sachau, 2000; Shepperd & Socherman, 1997).

Finally, it is possible that negative self-talk may be used as a form of self-expression, to display humility or modesty. People who are modest and avoid deceptive self-promotion are viewed positively across cultures

(Holtgraves & Dulin, 1994). Therefore, athletes who use negative self-talk may be perceived favorably on a personal level when using this type of self-talk as compared to when using positive self-talk. Being perceived in a favorable manner and appearing likeable may be more important to some athletes than intimidating opponents or winning competitions. Further research exploring the self-presentational effects of a broad range of self-talk including negative, instructional, and motivational self-talk may be able to explicate these possibilities.

There is some research that has explored the effects of negative verbalizations on others in sport, but this research has primarily focused on trash-talk. Trash talk is the «verbal taunts that players direct at their opponents during contests» (Eveslage & Delaney, 1998, p. 239). Polasek, Roper, and Halloran (2004) assessed trash talk use by professional athletes. They found that athletes use trash talk as a result of being the target of opponents' trash talk, to intimidate or distract opponents, to motivate themselves and increase the intensity of a game, to feel a sense of domination or control, and to express frustration. Not surprisingly, athletes who used trash talk were aware of the effects their talk had on opponents and used those effects to their advantage where possible. Interestingly, a number of the reasons that athletes gave for using trash talk were beneficial to themselves (e.g., increase motivation, feel a sense of control, express frustration) and were not fully other-opponent focused.

Thus, it seems that when trash talk is entered into the equation, sport talk exists on a continuum that ranges from primarily other-directed talk (i.e., trash talk), to verbalized self-talk, to silent, internal self-talk. Along this continuum the relative contribution of self-directed and self-presentational effects may vary. Thus, trash talk, which is primarily other-directed, may affect opponent perceptions while still having some impact on the athlete generating the talk (increasing motivation, gaining a sense of control). Verbalized self-talk may affect both the athlete and observer perceptions. Internal self-talk, which is clearly less observable, may have the majority of its effects on the athletes using the self-talk. However, even internal self-talk may have repercussions for observers and have self-presentational effects if internal self-talk increases confidence or includes self-critical statements that generate body language (Greenlees et al., 2005a, b).

The idea of a sport talk continuum may have conceptual merit, but has yet to be validated empirically. The continuum idea may be useful in determining the relative roles of self-directed and self-presentational effects

of each type of self-talk and may spark interest in research comparing the effectiveness of various types of self-talk to each other. The self-talk explored in the current study was verbalized or observable self-talk. It is likely that observable self-talk differs from internal self-talk in its effect on match observers. This contention is bolstered by the finding that athletes' internal, silent self-talk, is uncorrelated with their external or expressed self-talk (Van Raalte et al., 1994). Self-presentational issues or concerns may play a role in explaining the lack of a relationship between internal and expressed self-talk. Future research examining the role of self-presentation in self-talk in sport is warranted.

The current study was limited by the fact that the perceptions of player ability were made by a convenience sample of college undergraduates watching videotapes of match play rather than by actual tennis opponents. The videotaping was necessary to allow match ability and play to be held constant while self-talk was varied. With the accumulation of evidence that self-presentational body language (Greenlees et al., 2005a, b) and self-talk affect observers' perceptions, it might be valuable to evaluate the effects of self-talk on observers and opponents in field settings. It seems likely that positive self-talk will affect observer and opponent perceptions during actual tennis matches or other sport competitions in ways that are similar to the findings of this study. However, there is some indication from the literature that the effects of self-talk in laboratory studies can differ from those found in field settings (Van Raalte et al., 1994). Future researchers may gain additional power to detect the effects of self-talk on observers by employing within-subjects designs that allow each participant to view all types of self-talk being evaluated.

The results of this study also demonstrated a significant main effect for gender. Male observers rated the tennis players as being significantly more skilled than did female observers of the videotapes. Perhaps the female observers were less cognizant of the tennis skill needed to compete at the level of play shown on the videotapes than were the male observers. The fact that there were no significant interactions with gender of the match observers indicates that male and female match observers rated the athletes shown on videotape in similar ways. That is, males and females both rated the athletes more highly when they were shown using positive self-talk than when they were shown using negative self-talk or no dubbed self-talk.

Research on the causes, types, and functions of self-talk and ways in which self-talk affects performance has helped expand understanding of

some of the “ntangibles” in sport. The results of this study have shown that in addition to the direct effects of self-talk on an athlete’s performance, self-talk may also impact sport outcomes by altering observer and possibly opponent perceptions of a particular athlete. The results of this study, by demonstrating the self-presentational effects that self-talk has on sport observers, add to the discussion of self-talk.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the effects of self-talk on the others’ perceptions. Using videotaped tennis matches and dubbing positive and negative self-talk it was possible to vary self-talk while keeping the level of play consistent. The results of this research indicate that observable self-talk does affect observer perceptions of ability, as has been suggested by sport psychologists (Weinberg & Gould, 2003). Athletes who use positive self-talk are perceived to be better athletes than are the same athletes when they use negative self-talk.

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