

* **You Gotta
Have Faith**

“Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right,” Henry Ford said. Obviously, he knew that our expectations for success and belief in our own abilities can affect our performance.

In the early 1970s, psychologists conducted an experiment in which they objectively measured the strength of study participants. Each person was told to arm-wrestle another person. Both parties believed that the objectively weaker one had a clearly superior level of strength. In 10 of the 12 matches, the weaker opponent prevailed. Their beliefs about who had superior strength mattered more than real physical strength.

Having faith in yourself means believing that you can win even after you get caught with a kick or punch.

It's a given that you need confidence to win. The top martial artists and competitors, however, have more than that. They have faith, a solid foundation of self-belief that transcends the outcome of any performance. It's close to what psychologists call self-efficacy, a belief in one's ability to successfully perform a task or action. It's task specific and grounded in self-belief.

Self-efficacy works together with skill and motivation to produce success. You have to want to achieve the outcome and possess the ability to do so. When both conditions are met, the nature and degree of self-efficacy will often decide the winner.

Leading sports psychologist Robert Nideffer argues that the distinction between confidence and faith is an important one for the competitive athlete. While confidence can be easily shaken, faith endures. As Nideffer says, “Faith is believing in the absence of success.” If you're practicing

PHOTO BY RICK HUSTEAD

a form while preparing for a rank test and you make the same mistake twice in a row, faith is what allows you to proceed confidently, assured that your next attempt will be successful.

In 1994, 20 years after losing his world heavyweight boxing title, George Foreman chose to re-enter the ring against the undefeated Michael Moorer. Many scoffed at the idea of the 50-year-old competing, let alone fighting for a title. Moorer dished out a hefty dose of punishment for nine rounds and seemed to be headed for victory. Foreman, however, showed amazing heart and maintained faith in his ability. In the middle of the 10th round, he delivered a straight right to Moorer's chin, sending him to the canvas. Moorer couldn't recover during the 10-count, and Foreman once again was the heavyweight champion of the world.

One reason skilled athletes "choke" in competition is they allow themselves to get absorbed in some mistake. Instead of refocusing and driving forward, they react to the error emotionally and entertain self-critical thoughts like "That was so stupid," "I can't handle this pace" or "I thought I was better than this."

It's important to not let mistakes damage your self-belief. You must prepare

yourself to know that there will be time to process and learn from your mistakes, but that time is not in the middle of a competition. Your faith in your ability allows you to plow through adversity.

Even the greatest competitors make mistakes or suffer defeats. They don't cease to be great because they err, but they do continue to be great because of how they respond to their errors. A foundation of faith and self-belief can defend your heart and mind against destructive thoughts that seek to undermine your confidence. Without negative thoughts interfering, you can fully commit to action and not worry about the outcome. You can strive for excellence without being burdened by a need for perfection.

How do you acquire this kind of powerful faith? By choice and commitment. You must first acknowledge that the pursuit of excellence is your responsibility. With that responsibility comes the need to chart a course of action, a plan for how it will be achieved. Then you must continuously commit to giving your best effort in following the plan.

Psychologist and pragmatist philosopher William James said: "There is but one cause of human failure. And that is man's

lack of faith in his true Self." That faith is rarely, if ever, bestowed on anyone. It's cultivated and earned by daily choices, like choosing not to ruminate or tolerate destructive thoughts. Instead, you must focus on thoughts and actions that promote your best performance. Always move forward, looking for opportunities to learn, growing from mistakes rather than suffering from them. Strive for your personal best rather than for perfection. ✕

About the author:

Dr. Randy Borum is a professor at the University of South Florida. He's a licensed and board-certified psychologist recognized by the National Institute of Sports Professionals. To contact him, visit www.blackbeltmag.com.

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