

GOAL SETTING IN SPORT: WHAT COACHES CAN LEARN FROM RESEARCH

JIM DENISON

*Department of Leisure Studies
University of Waikato*

ABSTRACT *Many sport psychologists believe that goal setting is an effective way for athletes to improve their performance. In this paper I discuss how coaches can help their athletes set goals. Specifically, I discuss the importance of using short and long term goals; defining reasonable goals; establishing appropriate goal attainment strategies, and providing athletes with feedback regardless of whether they reach their goals. Finally, I suggest how goal setting can also enhance an athlete's life outside sport.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive sports climate, athletes' physical skills alone are insufficient to achieve top results. To perform at their best, athletes must become aware of the various cognitive strategies that can be used to enhance their performance (Loehr, 1986; Murphy, 1995; Orlick, 1986). One such strategy that every athlete can employ is goal setting. Stated very simply, goals direct attention and action, they activate energy and effort, they improve persistence, and they motivate the development of appropriate task strategies (Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Locke & Latham, 1984).

Goal setting, however, is not new to sport. Every athlete has a sense of what goals are. But most athletes tend to use ineffective goal setting techniques. Common mistakes include, setting goals that are too general; setting unrealistic goals; not establishing a series of interrelated goals, and setting goals but not following through on them (Burton, 1984; Gould, 1985). According to Gould (1983), for goal setting to be effective, a number of important factors must be taken into consideration. One of these factors, he believes, is that coaches must provide their athletes' with a systematic approach to the goal setting process. Coaches, Gould (1983) adds, are in many ways responsible for their athletes' physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Therefore, they must be familiar with the various strategies available to assist their athletes' growth and development, both on and off the field. The purpose of this paper is to use research findings to outline how coaches can use goal setting as a means to ensure that their athletes have a positive, enjoyable, and healthy sport experience.

SHORT AND LONG TERM GOALS

The first aspect of goal setting that coaches must understand is that goals can be classified into two types, short term and long term (Locke & Latham, 1984). Long term goals, such as becoming a champion or competing in the Commonwealth Games, serve to increase motivation and interest in an activity. Used alone, however, they are ineffective. A person cannot become a champion or compete at

the Commonwealth Games unless more immediate goals are established and achieved. These more immediate goals, known as short term goals, establish the necessary steps one must take to achieve his or her long term goal.

Serving as an analogy of the relationship between long and short term goals, Gould (1983) compares goal setting to a staircase. He sees the long range goal at the top of the stairs, one's present level of ability at the first step, and the steps in between representing a progression of short term goals. For example, a young rower's long term goal may be to represent New Zealand in the Olympics. To accomplish this goal, however, he or she must achieve a series of short term goals that may include winning a local championship, or earning provincial selection. These successive approximations provide athletes with valuable information regarding their progress toward their long term goal.

Establishing Reasonable Goals

A common mistake athletes and coaches make when setting short and long term goals is to set unrealistic goals. For example, a young swimmer who focuses on winning the New Zealand championships when she can't even qualify for the finals will very likely become disheartened and quit. Although goals should be hard, they must be realistically based on the athlete's current level of ability and experience. According to Gould (1983), "the top of the staircase may be a difficult, even lofty, long term goal, but between the first and last steps there should be a number of progressively more difficult, realistic short term goals" (p. 7).

To establish reasonable short and long term goals coaches and athletes need to communicate with each other. They should find time before or after practice and discuss some specific objectives for the season. Together they should choose two or three that seem reasonable and that will require a strategy and some persistence to achieve. Unfortunately, this is an inexact science, for goal setting is an on-going process. Therefore, coaches and athletes must be flexible and willing to change their goals if they appear too easy or too hard. As a general rule, however, specific challenging goals that are difficult but attainable lead to better performances from people than moderately difficult goals, easy goals, or do your best goals (Locke & Latham, 1984). For example, goals stated in vague terms - such as throwing the discus further, or increasing one's shooting percentage in netball - are often ineffective. Specifically stated goals include: making seven out of ten shoots within five feet of the basket in netball, or winning two out of three lineouts in rugby. These goals give athletes something concrete and meaningful to aim for.

Goal Attainment Strategies

Defining a list of reasonable short and long term goals is only the first step in the goal setting process. In order for athletes to attain their goals, coaches must outline some specific strategies for them to follow. For example, if a basketball player's goal is to raise his free throw percentage ten points, then a specific plan for achieving this goal must be developed. In this case, the player may decide to shoot an extra one hundred free throws a day. Similarly, a field hockey player trying to improve the accuracy of her wrist shot may take fifty extra shots on goal from various spots around the field.

In addition, coaches should caution their athletes against setting goals that require them to exceed their present physical capabilities. Every athlete develops and adapts to training at a different rate, and improvement is a gradual process. Therefore, to avoid injury and burnout coaches should set realistic time spans for their athletes' to reach their short and long term goals. This may mean sacrificing quick results, but I believe that every precaution should be taken to avoid overtraining; the risks are too high. Furthermore, every athlete should be inspired and excited by his or her goals, not disillusioned and depressed.

Providing Feedback

When athletes reach their goals it is essential that coaches provide them with feedback. This will reinforce each player's motivation to participate, and increase his or her satisfaction and desire to remain on the team (Duda, 1992). Appropriate feedback consists of praise or encouragement, along with some constructive criticism and instruction to ensure future improvement. For example, coaches can hold follow-up meetings where progress toward goals is discussed and new goals are set. In addition, practice and game statistics that show progress toward goals can be posted.

As well as providing athletes with feedback when they meet their goals, it is equally important that coaches provide their athletes with feedback when they fail to reach their goals. In this instance goal modification may be required. Modification, however, cannot occur every time an obstacle arises. For one purpose of goal setting is to motivate people to overcome barriers. However, continued failure will decrease motivation. So, if an athlete lacks the necessary skills, or is injured, for example, his or her goals may need to be readjusted or their direction altered while he or she improves with further training or heals. Otherwise, encourage your athletes to be patient and to continue working toward their goals.

To ensure that your athletes do continue to work toward their goals several techniques can be used. Most importantly, all goals should be written down and placed where they can be seen every day. Some good places to post one's goals include the bathroom mirror, or the locker room wall. According to Gould (1983), the athlete should then develop the following routine: "each day read his or her goals and think about what to do to accomplish them; and at the end of the day, evaluate his or her progress by asking, 'What did I do today to accomplish my goals?'" (p. 7). This will hopefully prevent athletes from setting goals but not following through on them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, coaches need to understand the enormous influence they have upon the athletes they coach. According to Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack (1986) athletes have five to ten times more contact with their coach than with any other adult, and receive the most pervasive and effective information about what makes life worth living from these interactions. Furthermore, what young people need from adults, more than anything else, according to Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack (1986), is purposeful, meaningful goals toward which to channel their

energies. Without goals, Csikszentmihalyi and McCormack (1986) add, "individual's behaviour can easily become self-destructive and leave them in an emotional morass" (p. 417). For this reason it is vital that coaches understand *how* to help their athletes set reasonable, worthwhile goals toward which to direct their attention and energy. Hopefully the guidelines presented in this paper which are based on an emerging body of research will assist coaches' understanding of this very important process.

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