



the extra gear

Mental Toughness Training for Peak Sport Performance

9601 Gayton Rd. | Suite 206 | Richmond, VA 23238 | 804-754-THE X

Effective Goal-Setting Procedures for Enhanced Sport Performance

Dana R. Blackmer, Ph.D.

Introduction

Goal-setting can be an important part of any athlete's training plan, whether their goal is to improve their physical skills, mental skills, or just get more enjoyment out of their sport. Setting goals can help athletes focus on what's most important, increase their effort and motivation to stick with their plan, consider new strategies regarding how to accomplish their goals and help them track their progress. As anyone who has ever set a New Year's resolution knows, however, setting goals is easy; reaching goals is tough. That's why, for example, research shows that about 50% of people who begin an exercise program discontinue it within six months

Problems With Goal-Setting

There are at least three problems that make effective goal-setting difficult for athletes. First, goal-setting isn't very exciting. Most athletes are eager to learn mental skills that are seen as more interesting, like imagery training, for instance. Unfortunately, goal-setting has gotten a bad reputation as being too simple to be of any help and too boring to spend time doing. Second, many people think goal-setting procedures take too much time. They may feel that they have such limited time that it would be better to spend the time practicing their sport. Third, and perhaps most importantly, few athletes know how to set the right kind of goals. Many well-intentioned people mistakenly set *outcome goals* (more about this later). Because they don't know how to set effective goals, they end up abandoning them in frustration after a short time. Let's take a look at these problems more closely and outline some strategies for how to deal with them.

- *Problem 1 – Goal-Setting Is Considered Boring.* The best defense against this problem is to emphasize how effective goal-setting is. The vast majority of research done on goal-setting in sport and business settings show that it has a dramatic effect on performance. Research done specifically on goal-setting and athletic performance also shows a significant effect. In fact, I would go as far as to say that creating an effective goal-setting plan may give you the biggest performance bang for your buck of any mental skills technique. In addition, most elite athletes see goal-setting as an important part of their performance-enhancement plan. For example, a survey of over 300 Olympic athletes found that every one of them practiced some type of goal setting to help enhance performance. These athletes also found their goal-setting plans to be highly effective in enhancing their performance. Additionally, a survey of 44 sport psychology consultants who work with Olympic athletes indicated that goal-setting was their most frequently used intervention strategy. The bottom line here is this: Goal-setting may not be terribly exciting, but it is, without a doubt, terribly effective.
- *Problem 2 – Goal-Setting Takes Too Much Time.* Setting goals does take some time, at least in the beginning. Once you've put in the initial investment, however, goal-setting pays off and actually saves you time because it helps you stay focused and motivated. It's often tough to find enough time to train. If you have set effective goals, your time will be spent more efficiently

because you will spend your training time involved in the kinds of activities that will be most helpful to you to attain your goals. The time it takes to set effective goals is more than made up for by the efficiency they will bring to your training program.

- *Problem 3 – Athletes Frequently Set the Wrong Kinds of Goals.* One of the most common mistakes in goal-setting is creating too many goals about how you perform compare to others. Attaining goals like winning a competition or beating a rival depend, not only on your performance, but also on the performance of others. Goals that depend on how you compare to others are called **outcome goals**. Outcome goals can be motivating, but relying solely on them can make it difficult for you to get motivated in the short-term, especially if your outcome goal is so far in the future that it doesn't create the sense of urgency that can help you get up early on a cold winter morning to train. Relying solely on outcome goals, (for example, finishing first in an important competition), can also leave you frustrated if another competitor happens to have the competition of their life in the same competition you wanted to win.

Setting Performance and Process Goals

Instead of relying on just outcome goals, set goals for your personal performance independent of others. Obtaining a personal best in a particular race, making 20 consecutive serves, or making 80% of your foul shots are examples of **performance goals**. Performance goals are helpful because they focus you on what you need to accomplish to compete at your peak and reach the outcome goals that are most important for you.

Additionally, set goals for what you have to do during a race to perform your best. Improving the efficiency of your stroke by 10%, increasing your VO_{2max} by 5ml/kg/min, or increasing your bench press weight by 5% are examples of **process goals**. Think of process goals as the specific things you need to do to reach your performance and outcome goals. Setting a combination of outcome, performance, and process goals will help you stay focused, increase your motivation, and help you structure your training.

Other Effective Goal-Setting Practices

In addition to setting a combination of outcome, progress and process goals, here are some other tips to help you create effective goals that will help you enhance your performance:

- Create specific, measurable goals (see "SMART" goals below)
- Set both long- and short-term goals
- Set positive, not negative, goals (what you will do, not what you won't do)
- Make goals moderately difficult
- Create target dates to achieve goals (think of what you want within the next two weeks)
- Create goals for both training and competitions
- Create strategies to achieve goals (what do you need to do to get up on that cold morning?)

- Write down your goals (this one is very important!)
- Share goals publicly to obtain support from others
- Track goal progress and being flexible in changing goals, if needed

Use Your “SMARTS”

Time-management consultant Hyrum W. Smith created this acronym to help people remember some of the most important aspects of effective goal-setting. Keep these things in mind as you create each of your goals:

- S = Specific – Run faster is too vague. Finishing a 10K in less than 45 minutes is specific.
- M = Measurable – Quantify goals. Use numbers detailing how often, how many, how much.
- A = Action-Oriented – Goals should imply actions that you need to take.
- R = Realistic – Make your goals moderately difficult, but reachable.
- T = Timely – Create goals that you can reach in a reasonable time.
- S = Self-Determined – Set your own goals, ones that are meaningful to you.

The Process of Effective Goal-Setting

This 10,924 foot high mountain, frequently climbed by cyclists racing the *Tour de France*, has twenty-one switchbacks, and each one has a sign counting them down to the top. When riders climb Alpe d’Huez, passing each sign is an indication that they have reached another sub-goal on the way to their ultimate goal.

Keeping the image of Alpe d’Huez in mind is a good way to think about how to map the road to your ultimate sports goal of the year. Here’s what you can do: Take a pad of paper and draw a mountain on the top half of the page (if you’re not a nature-lover, use the “Goal-Setting Worksheet” at the end of this handout – it works just as well). At the top of the mountain write the goal you wish to achieve for this year – your ultimate goal, like winning a State championship. Make the goal moderately difficult, but attainable. You should be 60% to 80% sure that you can reach this goal if you practice hard. After this, write some short-term goals that you need to reach on your climb toward your ultimate goal. These might include some of the performance and process goals described above, like losing 10 pounds, making 85% of your serves, or attending every group practice session. Structure these sub-goals so that most of them can be reached in about 2 to 4 weeks each. After this, write these sub-goals next to a switchback of the mountain, and draw a road up through every switchback to your ultimate goal at the summit.

The next step is crucial. Underneath your mountain, write down each sub-goal on the left side of the page. Next to each sub-goal list what strategies you will use to attain each one. For example, if one of your sub-goals is to improve your 100 meter free style swim by 5 seconds, a strategy to attain this goal might be to practice short intervals in the pool three times a week. Remember to make them specific

and measurable. You can also have goals to improve your mental skills. If one of your sub-goals is to increase your confidence, you could use the strategies of practicing imagery and thought-control techniques during your warm-ups and training.

After you've listed your strategies for reaching each sub-goal, hang your masterpiece on the refrigerator where you will see it every day. Publicly displaying your goals will help keep you focused, enlist the support of your family or roommates, and might even keep you away from those late-night raids of the refrigerator.

Goal-setting works best when you focus on one goal at a time. Many people get bogged down by working on too many goals at once. Also, remember to be flexible. Sometimes goals need to be modified, especially if you're new at goal-setting. Changing goals is not a sign of failure; it merely helps you become more specific about what you need to do now, considering information you didn't have at the time you originally set your goals.

Follow these principles of effective goal-setting and you won't become one of those people who just sets goals this year – you'll be one of the few people who reach them!

For more information on goal-setting and other mental skills techniques to improve sport performance, contact sport psychologist Dana Blackmer, Ph.D. at Dana@TheExtraGear.com or visit The Extra Gear online at www.TheExtraGear.com.