Goal-Setting Strategies for Coaches

Athletes can enhance their performance through goal setting; however, several factors and potential problems must be considered when establishing a goal-setting program.

B. ANN BOYCE  VALERIE KING

Rarely does the scoreboard tell the whole story. In fact, the outcome of many evenly matched teams/individuals is often decided just a little bit better than an opponent, a phenomenon commonly referred to as a "competitive advantage." With improvements in technology, coaching techniques, and strategies, the emphasis on having a competitive advantage is increasing. How can coaches give athletes an edge over opponents? Part of the answer lies in a strategy known as goal setting. Goal setting creates a focus of attention and action by simply identifying what it is one is attempting to accomplish (Harris & Harris, 1984). According to Locke (1968), specific and difficult (yet attainable) goals tend to enhance performance. While an abundance of literature supports the validity of goal setting as a mechanism for enhancing performance (e.g., Gould, 1986; Harris, 1982; Martens, 1987; Orlick, 1980; 1986), more emphasis needs to be placed on the development of effective and systematic goal-setting strategies. This article presents three aspects of goal setting: (1) the benefits of goal setting; (2) a process for implementing a goal-setting training program or strategy; and (3) factors and potential problems of goal setting.

The Benefits of Goal Setting
Coaches and athletes must know how to apply goal-setting strategies correctly. Often coaches and athletes identify goals that are too general, too easy, or too difficult and as a result, these goals are regarded as ineffective and are quickly forgotten. If goal-setting strategies are properly applied, several physical and psychological benefits (table 1) can result (Locke & Latham, 1984; Martens, 1987).

Process for Implementing a Goal-Setting Strategy
For goal setting to affect an athlete's performance, the coach must implement a goal-setting strategy. A three-phase (planning, implementation, evaluation) process broken down into seven steps for employing a goal-setting strategy was adapted from the work of Martens (1987) and Botterill (1983) (figure 1).

Planning Phase
Coaches must be able to identify the actions, skills, or responsibilities (step 1) that each athlete will per-
Goals must be objective in terms of distance, score, accuracy, and behaviors performed.

goals, more difficult goals are set, and success in terms of goal achievement and attainment of personal best can assist athletes in realizing their potential. Further, through the use of individualized performance goals, the least skilled athletes can improve right along with the most skilled athletes.

Third, goals should focus primarily on individuals as opposed to teams. Team goals often define responsibility (Martens, 1987) and place greater stress on the higher skilled players, while the lower skilled players may perceive themselves as noncontributing members. However, when a sport depends largely on cooperation (e.g., volleyball, softball, soccer), then team goals might be more appropriate. For example, a high school volleyball team might set a goal of executing a certain number of successful series of pass, set, and spike in a game. A defensive unit of a soccer team might set a goal focused on the number of minutes the ball is on their side of the field.

Following are the actions that fit the guidelines that have been discussed in the introduction. First, the action (step 1) is to identify actions, skills, responsibilities that are meaningful, controllable, and focused on the individual, not the team. This is important because individuals must feel they have control over their actions to achieve their goals.

Step 1 Identify Actions, Skills, Responsibilities
- meaningful
- controllable
- focus on individual—not team

Step 2 Measurement
- objective
- specific
- criterion for success

Step 3 Set the Goal
- difficult but attainable
- stated in a positive manner
- progressive short-term goals leading to a long-term goal

Step 4 Goal Clarification
- set target dates
- prioritize multiple goals

Step 5 Strategy/Plan
- achievement strategies

Figure 1. Implementing a Goal-Setting Strategy

Note: Model adapted from the work of Botterill (1983) and Martens (1984)
The number of individual goals should be kept to two or three and should be prioritized.

Short-term goals also tend to be more flexible and allow athletes and/or coaches to adjust the next goal to compensate for unexpected factors such as injury or illness. These goals should be set and evaluated in a systematic fashion. For example, at the second team meeting, goals were cooperatively set by the coach and athletes, and these goals were evaluated at a team meeting following each competition.

Clarifying goals is the fourth step in the planning phase. A target date for attaining the goals should be set to assist the athlete in making progress. It is not enough to state that a golfer will attempt to average 2.5 putts on 18 holes; it should also be stipulated when the golfer will accomplish this goal (e.g., by the fourth tournament of the season).

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### Table 1. Benefits of Goal Setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improved athletic performance (productivity and quality)</td>
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<td>Clarification of expectations</td>
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<td>More effective and efficient practice sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aversion of boredom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhancement of intrinsic motivation</td>
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<td>Greater feelings of pride in achievement</td>
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<td>Increased satisfaction with performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enhanced self-confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased willingness to accept future challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased liking of the task</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: List adapted from Locke & Latham (1984) and Martens (1987)

### Table 2. Guidelines for Goal Setting

1. Goals should be meaningful to both the coach and athletes.  
2. Goals need to be performance-oriented.  
3. Goals should be individualized and not oriented toward the team.  
4. Goals must be objective and measurable.  
5. Goals must be specific.  
6. Goals must include a criterion for success.  
7. Goals must be realistic but challenging.  
8. Goals should be stated in a positive manner.  
9. Progressive short-term goals should lead to a long-term goal.  
10. Goals should have a target date for completion.  
11. Goals should be few and should be prioritized.  
12. Goals should be accompanied by strategies for achievement.  
13. Goals must be recorded and monitored.  
15. Goals must be reinforced or supported.

### Table 3. Common Mistakes when Setting Goals

- General goals are set too many goals are set  
- Failure to set performance goals in preference over outcome goals  
- Failure to modify unrealistic goals  
- Failure to support goals  
- Failure to monitor and evaluate goals  
- Failure to realize that not all athletes will be enthusiastic when goal setting

Note: List adapted from Gould (1986)
should be prioritized. Too many goals may confuse and become a burden to athletes. Also, records must be kept on each of these goals; therefore, logistics must be a considered.

Step 5 in this phase is the development of a plan or strategy for achieving the goals. Achievement strategies for accomplishing goals should be jointly developed by the coach and athlete. For example, if the goal is to improve starting time out of the starting blocks by .05 seconds, then the athlete might engage in 10 extra timed starts at the beginning and ending of each practice.

Implementation Phase
During the implementation phase, the coach and athletes should collect information and monitor the progress towards goal attainment (step 6). Athletes can keep a notebook to chart their individual progress while coaches should also keep records of their athletes' goal attainment (Harris, 1982). Contracts between coaches and athletes may also facilitate the goal-setting process.

Athletes must also be held accountable for goal attainment through monitoring and feedback practices. Athletes should be encouraged to write goals on paper and sign it. Without these accountability measures, goal setting is less effective. Athletes must take the goals they set seriously and continually strive to meet them.

The last guideline for this step is one of reinforcement or support. Athletes should receive support from the coach, parents and teammates to reinforce their goals.

Evaluation Phase
The last phase consists of providing feedback and evaluating the goals (step 7). If a goal has been accomplished, there are two options: reset the criterion for the goal to a higher level (return to planning phase, step 3), or work on another goal (return to planning phase, step 1). If the goal has not been reached, then the coach and athlete should adjust the goal (return to either planning or implementation phase) to accommodate the athlete's present level of performance and provide motivation.

Factors and Potential Problems
Athletes can enhance their performance through goal setting; however, several factors and potential problems must be considered when establishing a goal-setting program. Coaches must recognize individual differences. When establishing a goal for an individual, coaches should consider such individual differences as: the current level of performance, the athlete's level of commitment, the opportunities available, the athlete's potential, and obstacles such as fear of failure (Danish & Hale, 1983; Harris, 1985).

A potential problem related to goal setting involves society's definition of success: "winning." This problem may also extend to parents and their child/athlete. The child's reasons for participating in sport may be to play, to have fun, and to be with friends, whereas the parents may view sport as a way of preparing a child for a professional career in sport and winning may be very important to parents (Hopper & Jeffries, 1990).

The most common mistakes that coaches and athletes make when setting goals is that they do not adhere to the guidelines (table 3). For example, the goals set are either too general or outcome-related instead of controllable by the athlete. Athletes who are not interested in goal setting may set a goal that is too unrealistic and use that as excuse for not improving. One way to attack this problem of goal apathy is to work with athletes who are interested in goal setting and accentuate their progress and success to gain the interest of apathetic athletes.

Goal setting is relatively easy for coaches to employ in their athletic programs. A systematic three-phase, seven-stage model can help coaches and athletes in the goal-setting process. While this strategy will require some initial time and thought, it has great potential for enhancing athletes' performance, which can benefit the athletes and their teams by providing them with a competitive edge.

The authors would like to thank Dr. Linda Bunker for her assistance with the editing of this article.

References

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