

Train Your Brain:

Peak Performance through Mental Training

Geordie Bigus
Centreville High School

Excelling in sport athletics can be a daunting task, especially at the high school level. The numerous demands teenagers face on a daily basis adds a unique challenge to achieving optimal performance. Adolescents must deal with the dynamics of their family, friends, and teachers, as well as trying to manage the time they spent on their homework, with their team, and their family and friends. Plus, they have to deal with a little thing called puberty, which makes it all the more difficult.

The purpose of these handouts is to discuss some simple sport and exercise psychology topics that will help you put it all together and make it work. Hopefully, these lessons will help you make your sport experience that much more successful. You don't need to read these chapters in sequential order. Feel free to read what interests you and go from there. Please note that the info presented in these lessons is by no means meant to undermine anything taught by your coach. This info is simply a review of some popular trends in sport psychology that are meant to enhance performance.



Chapter 5: Goal-Setting

"We need to know where we are going and how we plan to get there. Our dreams and aspirations must be translated into real tangible goals with priorities and a time frame. All of this should be in writing, so that it can be reviewed, updated, and revised as necessary."

— Merlin Olsen, NFL Hall-of-Fame Quarterback

We've examined how a goal-setting program can enhance your self-confidence and keep motivation at a high level. So, now let's take a look at what you need to remember when designing a goal-setting program for yourself or your team.

Setting Your Goals

Sorry to say, but goal-setting is not as simple as saying "let's win the championship," or "let's do our best." A goal-setting plan needs to address several key concerns to make sure all the bases are covered. Here are some guidelines that one should follow:

Set **SPECIFIC** goals and make them **MEASURABLE**.

- ◆ Setting specific goals will help to keep you on track and focused on what needs to be done. General goals such as saying you

want to "do your best" or "work hard everyday" are admirable, but they lack the details needed to progress. Specific instructions regarding what to do are needed. This allows goals to be easily measured in terms of progress and compliance. A goal to complete 3 sets of 15 repetitions of 150 lbs. on the bench press can be easily determined if it was achieved or not. Depending on success or failure, improvements and adjustments can be recognized and easily made.

- ◆ Set specific, objective goals. By objective, we mean that the goal must be stated in measurable terms. For example, a golfer might set a goal of only 30 putts for a round. You must avoid subjective goals that are based on the opinion of the evaluator, such as being voted the MVP of your team. If you want to be the MVP, that's fine, just don't use it as a goal.

CHALLENGE yourself, but be REALISTIC.

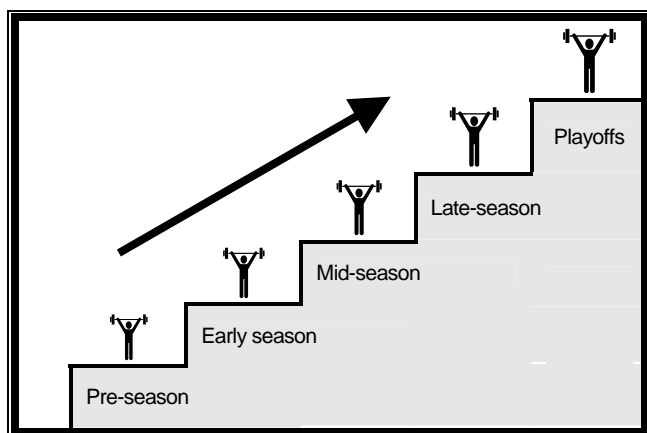
- ◆ Make sure you start where you are, and increase your goals accordingly. Make sure your progression is healthy and realistic. Keep in mind that as you become more fit and near your full potential, the room for improvement gets smaller. If you make your goals too difficult, there's a better chance you'll fail and feel discouraged. Conversely, if your goals are too simple, you won't feel much satisfaction by attaining them.
- ◆ Set reachable and challenging goals. This applies to every goal set. You must find the middle ground between hard unachievable goals and easy, non-motivating goals. This is a good place for you to work with your coach in setting your goals. But, make sure you are involved in setting these goals so that you feel responsible for the goals. This will keep you motivated to achieve them.

Be POSITIVE.

- ◆ Goals that use negative terminology, like "I don't want to false start," or "don't lift your head up," focus on potential errors and increase the likelihood that what you are trying to avoid will actually occur.
- ◆ Positive phrases or words guide behavior by specifically stating the desired action. So, instead of using the previously mentioned negative phrases, you might want to say "hold your start," or "keep your head down."

Set SHORT- and LONG-TERM goals.

- ◆ Very similar to making your goals specific is making them time-based. Without a time-line, you may procrastinate.
- ◆ Think about what you want to have accomplished in 3-6 months. These are your **long-term goals**. It's okay to think past this 6-month window, but understand that research tends to show that goals stretching out beyond this time period may be too long to keep you interested and motivated. Try to re-evaluate your long-term goals every 2-3 months.
- ◆ To stay on track to reaching your long-term goals, set goals with short timelines to keep you on track. These **short-term goals** will tell you what you will need to do on a daily/weekly basis. The completion of short-term goals not only provides immediate feedback, but a sense of accomplishment. Intermediate goals can be thought of as the major steps to be achieved in route to accomplishing your long-term goals.
- ◆ A comprehensive goal-setting program will directly link daily or weekly activities to expectations for upcoming competitions, as well as with season or career goals. For example, a detailed, monthly strength program (short-term) focused on increasing your overall strength by 5% by the end of each 4-week cycle, so that you can be ready to perform at your peak during the playoffs in 5 months (long-term).



GOAL-SETTING STAIRCASE

Use a chart, such as this “goal-setting staircase,” to track the progression from easy to more challenging short-term goals leading to your long-term goal.

Focus on the PROCESS and your PERFORMANCE.

- ◆ Not surprisingly, when most athletes talk about their goals, they cite such outcomes as winning games, championships, or beating their competition. While it's not wrong to set outcome goals, don't place too much emphasis on them. Instead, for every outcome goal that is set, write down several performance or process goals that need to be met along the way. If set properly and achieved, these performance and process goals will lead to the desired outcome.

Set PRACTICE and COMPETITION goals.

- ◆ Far too often, coaches and athletes focus solely on competition goals. Bearing in mind the large amount of time you spend in practice, it only makes sense to set goals in practice as well. Not only will this make practices more interesting, but it will help you keep up your competitive edge.

RECORD your goals.

- ◆ Goal-setting plans need to be written down and kept nearby so that they can be easily seen. Record your goals on 3"x5" index cards or formulate a complex behavioral contract.

Make goals PERSONAL.

- ◆ Set goals with your personality in mind. You must have your own personalized goals. This will make them more meaningful.
- ◆ Now the hard one: set your goals in conjunction with the team's goals. Obviously, what sport you are playing will affect the difficulty of accomplishing this guideline. Typically, the team must get together and set the team goals first. Then, the coach will assist each individual athlete in setting his or her goals within the constraints of that athlete's role on the team.

Make your goals ADJUSTABLE.

- ◆ Make your goals flexible enough to accommodate unexpected challenges or changes in your original plan. Obstacles such as an injury, family emergency, or a free trip to Hawaii may force you to modify your goals. Conversely, you may find yourself progressing so quickly that your original goal is looking too easy and you need to step it up a bit.
- ◆ Evaluate frequently. You and your athletes want to know how you are progressing towards achieving the goals you have set. Relatively frequent evaluation will help keep the athletes motivated as they see progress or encourage them to work

harder if they are behind. It also lets you examine the effectiveness of your practice plans and make adjustments as necessary.

Effective Goal Setting

Locke and Latham (as cited in Weinberg & Gould, 2003) proposed a 7-step process to maximize the effectiveness of a goal-setting program in sport:

1. **Set appropriate goals.** Develop your goals systematically, adjust goals for practice and competition, and optimize goal difficulty. Optimizing goal difficulty refers to setting dream goals (very challenging unless performing at a high level), realistic goals, and self-acceptance goals (lowest level of performance that you would feel is acceptable).
2. **Develop goal commitment.** Participate in the goal-setting process, ask for support from your family, teammates, and coaches, and reward yourself when you reach a goal.
3. **Evaluate barriers to goal attainment.** Identify any barriers that you may face. Do your best to eliminate them or plan a method of avoiding them if they do occur.
4. **Construct an action plan.** Make sure you set short-term goals that lead you to your long-term goals.
5. **Obtain feedback.** Ask for feedback on whether or not you are on track to achieving your goals.
6. **Evaluate goal attainment.** Once you get to the point where you should have reached your goals, take the time to see if you have in fact achieved them.
7. **Reinforce goal achievement.** When you reach your goals, commend yourself and reinforce your good work. Take an objective look at how you did and get ready to do it again.

Use your “SMARTS” to set your goals.

- ◆ **Specific.** Explain exactly what is to be done.
- ◆ **Measurable.** Make sure you can quantify your goal. If you can't measure it, how would you know if you're improving?
- ◆ **Action-oriented.** Keep goals focused on personal action and what needs to be done. Focus not only on what you want to achieve, but how you plan to achieve it.
- ◆ **Realistic.** Make sure your goals can be reached.
- ◆ **Time based.** Make sure you give yourself enough time to achieve your goals, but not too much time.
- ◆ **Self-determined.** Make sure you're the one setting you goals. If you are getting help, make sure you have just as much input, if not more.

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