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G IS FOR GOAL SETTING

Every athlete has a goal. Whether it's to win races, achieve a personal best, or simply make it through a grueling practice, the goals we set undoubtedly exert influence on our performance.



However, there's a lot more to goal setting than just stating what it is you ultimately want to achieve. To get the motivational support and performance boost that goals can provide, athletes must set goals systematically and have various types of goals.

This article will lead you through steps to setting goals so that your performance, satisfaction and quality of practice can all be enhanced. While this article is geared to your sport-related goals, the same steps can and should be used to set goals for all areas of your life.

Step 1: Know where you are headed

Five years from now, what do you want to be doing? One year from now? At the end of this season, what do you want to have achieved? All of these long-term goals are important to sit and write down because they give you something to commit to. It is also important to identify why you want to achieve these goals. This "why" should be something that is valuable to you more than it is to others. Once you identify your goals, close your eyes and picture yourself achieving them. Try to experience the feelings you expect to have when you achieve these goals.

On a weekly basis, reexamine your end-of-season goal. It is okay if you need to adjust it and make it more challenging or more realistic based on your circumstance. Make sure you keep your season goal in mind as you practice so you are aware that what you do today connects you to what you want to achieve in the future. At the end of each season, re-visit your yearly goal and at least once a month imagine yourself achieving your 5-year goal.

Step 2: Know how to get there

Ever get lost on the way to a meet? If you have, typically you knew where you were supposed to end up, you just didn't have a very accurate map of how to get there. Having a path towards your long-term goals is extremely important because what you want to achieve weeks, months, or years from now can only happen if you take the opportunity each day to make progress towards your longer-term goals. Each day ask yourself, "What can I do today to get myself one step closer to where I want to be?" Make sure you always have a short-term, specific goal you are working on. Whether it's a technique goal, a mental goal, or a nutritional goal, keep focused on your daily and weekly objectives so you can give yourself the best chance to reach your ultimate goals.

Step 3: Identify milestones of success

Having intermediate markers of success can help enhance motivation (ex., swimming a PR, qualifying for a specific meet, mastering a fundamental skill). These markers serve as points on your goal route that are important to you and are achievements you will be proud of. These milestones provide set standards so you know you are progressing along your goal path. They let you know that your hard work is paying off and give you confidence, encouragement, and enhance your commitment.

Step 4: Identify obstacles

Reaching long term goals is a very challenging process and there are a lot of uncontrollable factors that may keep you from reaching these goals. Look at your long term and short term goals and identify obstacles that may prevent you from reaching these goals. Injury, strength of the competition, and burnout are common obstacles swimmers face when trying to win meets, improve time, or work their hardest. If you list an obstacle you can't control, cross it off your list (if you don't control it, don't worry about it). If it is something you do control, make a plan for dealing with it when it comes up. By identifying obstacles and being prepared to overcome them, you are helping to ensure obstacles do not become excuses.

Step 5: Create a system

Everyone is a little bit different in how they set goals. Some set daily goals while others focus on what they want to accomplish on a monthly basis. Create a system that you can stick to that allows you to: a) Set specific, challenging goals, b) Measure progress towards these goals, c) Gain motivation and encouragement from your goals, and d) Focus on these goals every practice.

I suggest setting, at minimum, weekly goals. Maybe every Sunday *write three specific areas* you want to improve on. *Share these goals* with coaches, parents, and/or teammates so you have someone to hold you accountable to working on these goals and who can recognize when you achieve your goals. Each day before practice *review your goals* and remind yourself what you are working on and how this week's goals connect to your goals for the season. At the end of the week, *assess* whether or not you achieved your goals. If you didn't accomplish what you set out to do, make sure you honestly figure out why you fell short and try to control what you can in the future. If you did achieve even some of your goals, take a moment to reward yourself and feel proud that your hard work paid off.

Step 6: Set different types of goals

One of the biggest mistakes athletes make is setting goals focused only on the results of meets. While these outcome-oriented goals are important, they are often out of your control.

Therefore, it is essential to set process and performance goals as well.

- Process goals-fundamentals totally under your control (stroke, turns, attitude)
- Performance goals-"statistics" based on individual improvement (drop time, increase in sets)
- Outcome goals-focus is on comparisons to others (winning races, being the best)

Ultimately, you want to focus on your process goals since the more of the fundamentals you master, the more likely you are to reach your performance goals (good technique + good mentality=better time). When you reach your performance goals, you give yourself a better chance of achieving your outcome goals (you don't control if you win, you only control if you swim your best). By focusing on the process and what you control, you are trusting that the way you swim will lead to the performance you want.

Process ð Performance ð Outcome

Summary

Whether you are 14 or 41, goals are vital in providing direction, creating motivation, and enhancing commitment. Some people shy away from setting goals because they are afraid of being disappointed if they fall short. Other swimmers only set goals for meets or for their careers. It is important not to see goals as the ultimate indication of success or failure; rather they provide you with guidance so that you can stretch your abilities as far as possible. Very few people achieve every goal they set; therefore it is the progress you make towards these goals and the effort you exert in their pursuit that is the determinant of your success. If every day you get a little bit closer to where you want to be, consider that to be a successful day.

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GOAL SETTING EXERCISE

My strengths are:

Ø My plan for using and building upon these strengths:

Areas I can improve (mental, technique, fitness, nutritional...):

Ø Actions I will take to improve on these areas:

My goal for the season/week/month is:

Ø What will I do to achieve this?

Ø What obstacles might I face and how will I overcome them?

Ø What will result when I achieve this goal?

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