



Goal Setting for Self Improvement in Athletics

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Goal setting can help athletes improve both their self confidence and athletic skills. It can also force athletes to confront certain realities about their ability and potential for improvement.

Putting the goals on paper and continually keeping them in mind can nurture commitment and ambition. Once the athletes achieve a goal after much persistent practice, they will enjoy a measure of success ...even if the scoreboard doesn't reflect their personal improvement.

At the first team meeting at the beginning of the season, the coach should discuss personal goal setting. The most important advice the coach can give is to make sure that each goal is (1) attainable and (2) important enough to make the athlete focus on it.

Such goals as "improve my shooting percentage" or "work for a faster sprint time" can help build a successful team because they emphasize personal improvement rather than a competitive rivalry.

To be most beneficial, the goals must be specific. Such generalities as, "I just want to do my best" are rarely motivational. Improvement can be made only after the athlete's abilities have been assessed and the specific areas needing improvement addressed.

The athletes should list their individual expectations for the season on index cards, both long-range goals (e.g., Why am I playing? What do I want to achieve?) and short-term goals (e.g., What must I work on every day to reach my long-range goal?) should be kept on file in the coach's office.

The coach should, in addition, discuss the importance of immediate goals (e.g., What is the purpose of today's practice in relation to my goal?). The coach may also want each athlete to list daily or weekly goals.

Coaches should discuss individual goals with each athlete privately, soon as they become familiar with the athletes and their capabilities.

Many athletes will set realistic long-range goals. Other athletes will have trouble setting attainable goals because they haven't correctly assessed their abilities or because their goals are non-specific. The coach may help this group revise its goals or set new ones.

As a reminder, the coach may post a finalized copy of personal goals in each athlete's locker. The coach and athlete should periodically meet to discuss the athlete's progress and update the goals.

The coach may use several approaches. First, instead of constantly pointing out athletes' weaknesses, the coach should stress the strengths of their performance. Since the athlete's confidence is constantly being challenged, the coach must be consistently positive. The coach must acknowledge individual achievement as it happens and should occasionally set up situations that will allow each player to be successful.

Awards for achievement sometimes work well, but they should not be doled out too freely.

As a second approach, coaches may stress the importance of imagining. The athlete can help achieve

specifically stated goals through a simple three-step process: relaxation, concentration, and visualization. The technique can be used before and during competition to encourage achievement and relieve self-doubt.

Whenever the athlete fails, the coach should suggest rethinking the competition and visualizing a successful finish.

Once the athletes have experienced the satisfaction of "seeing" a goal accomplished, they will find it easier to set and visualize the accomplishment of future goals. Each success, however minor, will produce increased self-confidence.

Ultimately, the athlete's ability to set a realistic goal and then work to achieve it may take on an importance that extends far beyond the athletic realm; it may last a lifetime.

Kathy Holloway, health/physical education instructor at Bolton High School in Alexandria, LA, has received numerous educational and teaching honors, including Teacher of the Year, District Coach of the Year, and the Louisiana HSAA Certification of Appreciation. She served as president of the Louisiana Coaches Association in 1985 and president of the National High School Athletic Coaches Association. She also served as a board member of the Gatorade Sports Science Institute®.

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