

**On the Firing Line** (Thirty Second in a series)

## **Goals as Motivation**

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**“Virtually every athlete who consistently wins uses some form of goal setting”  
(US Olympic Committee Sports Psychology Program)**

You can almost hear the outcry: “Not another lecture on goal setting! We have heard that lecture a million times! I hate doing goal setting; I never know what to write and it does not motivate me at all!” These and similar sentiments are expressed by many athletes. How can this problem be resolved? What is an effective strategy for goal setting that is useful to the athlete? Can goals actually become motivators rather than just a painful chore performed to make the coach happy?

When Dan Durben rewrote the Civilian Marksmanship Program (CMP) 3 Position Air Rifle Summer Camp curriculum in 2004 (and revised it again in 2005 and 2006) with assistance from Dan Jordan and this author, we placed a strong emphasis on turning theory into action. Dan’s presentation on the topic of goals is a classic example of that teaching strategy in action and provides athletes with a way to learn to use goal setting as a powerful tool in their development. This article is adapted from that presentation.

Top athletes realize that effective goal setting is an integral part of their success. Goal setting gives an athlete an edge in:

- Direction – Goals tell you where you need to go and how to get there. “What do I need to do today to take me one little step closer to my goals... and my dreams?”
- Feedback – Goals tell you when you are making progress. You can tell if you are making progress or not, and in which areas. This allows you to alter your plans and training as needed.
- Motivation – Goals keep you going when you might otherwise give up. “I really want (a specific goal) and I know if I follow my plans I can accomplish what I want.
- Confidence – Goals provide the plan that make success more likely, rather than merely being random, which raises confidence, especially in competitions

Effective goal setting changes behavior. Merely setting a goal, or writing down a dream, does not make anything happen. This is no different than learning a new technique. Ultimately, it comes down to what the athlete actually does. Does the athlete actually change behavior in order to improve? An old joke states that one of the examples of insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a different outcome. A dynamic set of goals that the athlete works toward and modifies as circumstances dictate aids the athlete in actually changing behavior to improve.

Training is more productive, with more done in less time when goal setting is properly used. Imagine going to every training session with a plan of action so that the athlete knows exactly what needs to be done during that particular session. There is no time wasted in deciding what to do today nor is time wasted in activities that do not aid in reaching the goals.

Competition behavior is more focused resulting in less nervousness, again because there is a plan that has been planned ahead of time. The athlete knows what to do and how to do it.

Effective goal setting becomes a habit. Goal setting is most helpful when it becomes an automatic part of your day. Taking a few minutes each day to review and possibly revise your goals provides a chance to think about what was accomplished today, plan the activities for the next day, reflect on accomplishments already achieved, and to think about the future.

What are effective goals? Effective goals are SMART:

- Specific – Goals must specifically state what is to be achieved or performed. “Doing better.” is not a specific goal; it is a wish.
- Measurable – Goals must be measurable or in some manner have a way to tell if they have been achieved.
- Applicable – Goals must be relevant so that if time and energy are spent in reaching them, they actually aid in reaching the athlete’s long term goals.
- Realistic – Goals must be attainable yet challenging. If the goal is too easy, the athlete is bored and is not motivated to strive for improvement. If the goal is too hard, the athlete is demoralized and again does not strive for improvement.
- Timely – Goals must include a time component or time limit. Without the timeliness component, the goal is still only a dream or a wish. Even long term goals must have a time associated with them. This part of the goal focuses the athlete on thinking about what they need to do now.

Notice that this version of the “SMART” goal setting strategy differs from some of the more common versions. This is by design. The “A” for “Applicable” is important since not every goal is applicable to the athlete’s situation. Just because a particular goal is set does not mean that achieving it will assist the athlete in reaching their ultimate goals. Thus the important step of evaluating the relevance of a particular goal to the larger picture. In many other versions of the “SMART” strategy, the “A” stands for “Attainable”, which is discussed in the “Realistic” section.

Based on the “SMART” criteria, it becomes easy to spot wishes and dreams that have not matured into real goals. The most common “goal” is “I want to do my best.” While this is a good and true wish or desire, it is not a goal. Even the often heard “I want to win.” falls into the same category. The statements are not real goals because they lack specifics and a time component, among other problems.

There are three types of goals that are important to a complete set of goals. Note that these types also differ from many traditional presentations on goal setting.

- Outcome Goals – This type of goal covers those things over which the athlete has no direct control: win, medal, make a team, get a certain score, or make progress from current average.
- Behavior Goals – These are goals that are based on specific behaviors related to good performance – what you have to do to achieve the outcome goals.
- Action Goals – These are very specific actions taken to achieve the behavior goals.

A simplistic example might look like this.

- Outcome Goal – I will shoot a 90 in standing today.
- Behavior Goal – To accomplish this I will make sure my standing position is set up correctly on each shot.
- Action Goal – To accomplish this I will place the butt plate of my rifle in the same location in my shoulder on each shot.

More typically, each outcome goal will likely have many behavior goals associated with it. Each behavior goal will, in turn, have a large number of action goals associated with it.

The strategy for using these types of goals is: Set outcome goals, set related behavior goals, set related action goals, achieve action goals, achieve related behavior goals, achieve related outcome goals. All along the way, adjustments are made to the goals as circumstances dictate.

This strategy is used for both long term and short term goals. Long term goals, especially long term outcome goals, are the ones that motivate and excite the athlete. Short term goals are the ones that impact behavior now to take the athlete just that much closer to reaching those big goals. Only by having the shorter term goals can the longer term goals be reached, regardless of whether they are action, behavior, or outcome based. Long term goals don't work unless they lead to short term goals that impact behavior now. Similarly, only by having action goals can behavior goals be reached and only by having behavior goals can outcome goals be reached.

Here is a very small example of long term and short term goals working together as a set.

- Long term goal set
  - Outcome Goal – I will medal at the 2007 Junior Olympics.
  - Behavior Goal – I will be able to stay relaxed and focused on each shot during the competition.
  - Action Goal – I will practice relaxation and imagery three times a week.
- Short term goal set
  - Outcome Goal – I will shoot ten 10's in standing during training today while my teammates are watching me.
  - Behavior Goal – I will stay relaxed and focused on each shot today.
  - Action Goal – I will use imagery to visualize a perfect sight picture during each shot.

Of course, this is a very small, simplified example showing only one goal at each level. One must also ensure that goals cover the gap between today (the shortest of the short term goals) and the date of the major goal (the longest of the long term goals).

There are a number of goal setting ideas that will aid in learning to use goal setting as an integral part of your training.

- State goals in a positive manner.
- Write down goals in your journal.
- Set goals every training session.
- Keep goals challenging but realistic.
- Review goals – analyze.
- Setting behavior and action goals takes effort. Do it!

What if one or more goals are not reached? Do an honest assessment and ask, "Why Not?" If an outcome goal was not achieved was enough time allowed? Was the goal not reached because of external factors? Regardless, were the associated behavior goals achieved? If so, were they the right goals? Do you need to modify them? If behavior goals were not achieved, were the associated action goals achieved? If so, were they the right goals? Do you need to modify them? Were the associated behavior goals achieved? If so, were they the right goals? Do you need to modify them? If action goals were not achieved, what skills need more training? What was missing?

Using these strategies, athletes find that their goals actually draw them in to their training and they enjoy it more. Because they can see a clear path to realizing their goals and dreams,

they are motivated to keep working, even in those times when training and competition provide frustration. The athlete realizes that even that part of the experience is part of the journey of self discovery and mastery of their sport.

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)