

CAN SETTING GOALS INFLUENCE MY PERFORMANCE?

The answer is yes they can! Evidence says that setting goals can influence your performance in four distinct ways:

- **Directing attention**
- **Mobilising effort**
- **Enhancing persistence**
- **Developing new learning strategies**

DIRECTING ATTENTION

Setting goals gives you a focus for your attention. A goal to help improve your sighting in open water, for example, will give you focus and place your attention on this task of improvement when you go training. When you are swimming, the process of having set the goal will enable you to remember and think about the task you have set yourself.

MOBILISING EFFORT

Goals can also increase your effort and persistence by providing feedback in relation to progress. By setting short-term process goals and seeing progress towards longer-term performance or outcome goals, it can help your motivation on a day-by-day basis as well as over time.

ENHANCING PERSISTENCE

If you have set a goal of improving your sighting ability in open water, setting process goals that feel manageable during training can be helpful. Here, the swimmer might set a process goal of only working on sighting during the warm-up. They might choose to work on one aspect each session, such as: lifting head only as high as is necessary; pressing down with hand and arm →

ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS

Helen Davis looks at how to use goal setting techniques to maximise your swim performance

Goal setting is a technique that sport psychologists employ regularly with athletes, as it is consistently a strategy that can assist athletes in achieving personal growth and peak performance. Goal setting has been shown to influence not only the performance of athletes of varied age and ability levels, but also linked to positive changes in important psychological states such as anxiety, confidence and motivation. For goal setting to be effective it is important to understand the process and the factors that can affect it.

WHAT IS A GOAL?

One of the most widely accepted definitions of 'goal' is "objective or aim of action defined as attaining a specific standard of proficiency on a task, usually within a specified time limit." Some sport psychologists like to make specific distinctions between types of goals; a preference of mine is to assess goals in terms of:

- **Outcome goals**
- **Performance goals**
- **Process goals**

OUTCOME GOALS

Outcome goals are exciting! These

represent a goal which is motivating but is not necessarily in your control, for example doing a personal best time in a 5km race.

PERFORMANCE GOALS

Performance goals monitor if you are on track. This is where you set small challenges for improvement, for example increasing distance in training by 500m every week.

PROCESS GOALS

Process goals are most directly in your control, these are steps that you can do on a daily basis in order to help you achieve goals, for example choosing a specific technical element, such as hand entry, to work on each time you go training.



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Helen has a BA (Hons) in Psychology, an MSc in Sport and Exercise Psychology and is currently working towards chartered status with the British Psychological Society. Helen is a qualified REBT Primary Practicum practitioner. She is also an active masters and open water swimmer.

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← during the catch phase or kicking extra hard for a moment during sighting. Once these processes have been worked and improved on, you are then more likely to increase working on sighting during your training sessions.

DEVELOPING NEW LEARNING STRATEGIES

Setting goals can influence performance through the development of new learning strategies. That is, when goals are set, strategies can be put in place to help you reach that goal. In the example of 'sighting', a strategy that could be put in place to help you achieve the goal might be: 'I will make a commitment to work on a different sighting technique every Wednesday and Saturday in training.'

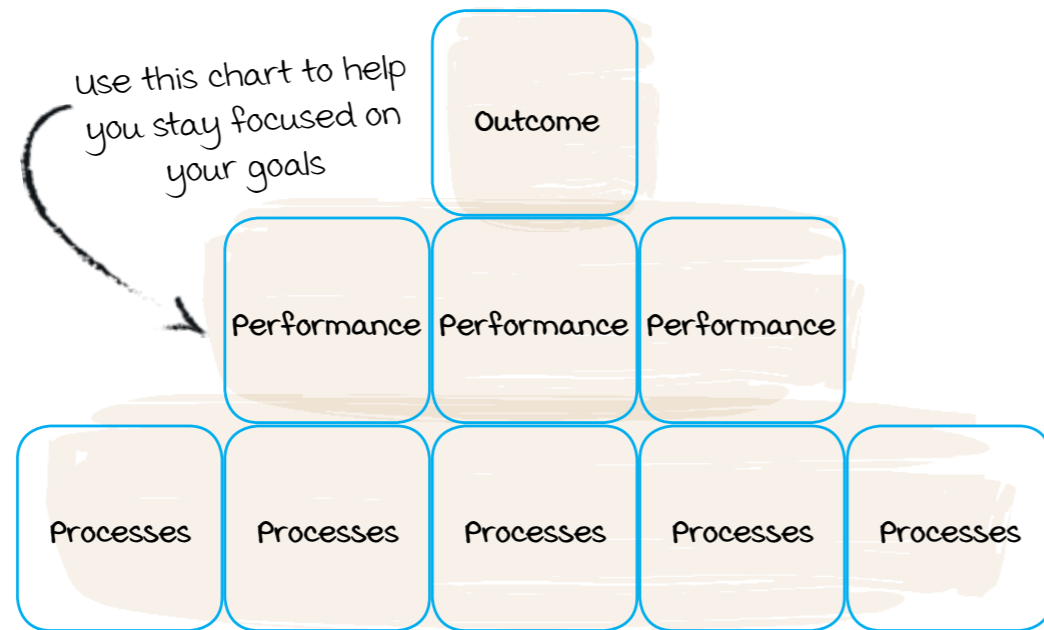
PRIORITISE PROCESS, PERFORMANCE AND OUTCOME GOALS

Goals should be based on your own levels of performance, rather than solely on the outcome of winning and losing. Society places a great emphasis on winning, and it is often difficult not to focus on the final time or outcome of a competition. Sport psychologists have found that the best way to work with athletes is to focus on performance and process goals. Too much emphasis placed on outcome goals (like winning or times in swimming) at the time of competition can create anxiety. This can result in the athlete focusing on the consequences of success or failure instead of the task at hand.

Outcome goals are not inappropriate, rather, it is important to recognise that problems can arise when individuals focus on outcome goals to the exclusion of performance goals and process goals. If you are able to meet process and performance goals, then the outcome goals will usually take care of themselves.

GOAL SETTING STORY

One of my favourite stories of goal setting comes from John Naylor, a US backstroke Olympic champion who was at the pinnacle of his career in the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.



Naylor calculated that he would have to cut two seconds off his time in the 200 metres backstroke to win a medal at the Olympic Games. He felt that this was impossible, so instead of focusing on his long-term goal of winning a medal at the Olympics, he decided to break up the task into manageable short-term process goals.

The Olympics were two years away, and he worked out that he would have to knock off one second per year. As there are 12 months in a year, he figured he would have to knock off 0.08

seconds each month. Finally, because there are four weeks in a month, he would have to shave off 0.02 seconds each week.

Naylor felt he could do this! Thus, achieving short-term weekly goals (process goals) of reducing his time by 0.02 seconds became his goal. The result was a gold medal at the Olympics!

Many athletes are great at setting goals, but lack specific action plans for reaching them. Specific action plans can really help in achieving goals. Here are some guidelines to help.

Develop goal achievement strategies

Setting goals without also setting appropriate strategies for achieving them is like setting a goal to drive from London to the Isle of Skye but forgetting to take a map or set the sat nav! Be systematic in your planning of goals, write down action plans for reaching them. The point here is that specific action plans can really help in achieving goals.

Provide support for goals

Social support is an important factor in keeping people motivated and persistent, especially when there are obstacles preventing goal attainment. Enlist the help of teammates, parents, teachers, spouses and friends in providing support for your goals.

Get feedback on goal progress

Goals plus feedback produce significantly higher performance than goals alone or feedback alone. An outside person can provide feedback to you, or you can give yourself feedback and keep a log of your achievements.

Self-monitoring can be done after every practice. Assessing your progress towards goals can be achieved by comparing the log of achievement with your goals.

Evaluating goal progress

This is really important in the goal setting process. Evaluation provides specific information on how you are progressing towards your goals. Periodically evaluating goals can help individuals know when to re-evaluate their goals, but can also keep motivation and confidence high.

Have a go!

Have a go at setting some goals for yourself for your winter training or upcoming season.

Key aspects to include:

- Set outcome, performance and process goals
- Follow the general goal setting principles
- Evaluate regularly to assess how you are doing

GENERAL GOAL-SETTING PRINCIPLES TO FOLLOW

SET SPECIFIC GOALS

One of the most consistent findings from goal-setting literature is that specific goals produce higher levels of performance than no goals or general "do your best" goals. Identifying goals in behavioural terms is also important. For example, telling yourself to "sight really well" in a river would not be as helpful as telling yourself that you want to kick hard, every time you sight.

SET REALISTIC, BUT CHALLENGING GOALS

Another consistent finding is that goals should be challenging and difficult, yet attainable. Goals that are too easy do not present a challenge and will lead to less effort. This could in turn lead to a mediocre performance. Conversely, setting goals that are too difficult will often result in failure. This can lead to frustration and lowered self-confidence, decreased motivation and performance. A realistic look at one's chances of success is needed; it is a balance between setting oneself up for failure and pushing oneself to strive for success. In this middle ground reside challenging, realistic, attainable goals.

SET BOTH SHORT AND LONG-TERM GOALS

Setting both short and long-term goals helps to keep motivation and performance high over time. Short-term or process goals are important because they provide feedback concerning progress towards the long-term goal. Progress goals allow you to focus on those small increments, which may make goals seem more attainable than would an otherwise seemingly impossible long-term goal – remember John Naylor!

SET GOALS FOR PRACTICE AND COMPETITION

Daily practices encompass much more time commitment than do competitions, which is why it is important to set practice and training goals. Practice goals should focus on both performance and non-performance outcomes. In addition, practice goals should focus on quantity or quality of skill mechanics and should push you past your comfort zone. Practice goals should be difficult enough to encourage you to strive to improve in some way every day; remember the sighting goals here.

WRITING DOWN YOUR GOALS

Not only should goals be written down, they also should be recorded in a place that can easily be seen. Have a go at using the chart above – it can help you remember and stay focused on your goals!

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