Goal Setting: the Concept

We often hear a lot of talk about goals and goal setting. At the beginning of the season coaches are often asked "What are your goals for your team this year, coach?" This is certainly a valid question even if it is not stated correctly; that is, the goals should be the team's goals, not the coach's goals for the team. But why do we even use goals? Setting goals has at least three purposes:

1. Setting goals enhances motivation, preferably focusing on internal motivation;

2. Setting goals encourages athletes (and coaches) to develop new skills and strategies to improve performance; and,

3. Setting goals helps focus attention on the task one hopes to accomplish.

Before moving on to the actual process, we need to discuss the various types of goals that one might want to accomplish.

First are the <u>time-line-related goals</u>. Basically there are two types of goals in this category, although they are often referred to by various names. One is the long-term goal, also referred to as the ideal or ultimate goal. In sports, this is typically the goal set to be achieved by the end of the season. For a team it might be to win a league championship or reach a certain win-loss record. For an individual athlete it might be to have a .325 batting average or swim a 26 second 50m freestyle. Sometimes we talk about even more distant long-term goals, such as becoming a professional athlete or qualifying for the Olympics. The other type of goal is the short-term goal, also referred to as an action, momentary, or situational goal. These are the specific goals that are the stepping stones which lead us up the path to the long-term goal. Coaches focus on short-term goals as they plan each practice session and prepare their team for an upcoming game or meet.

Another way to describe types of goals is to address what one wants to accomplish. Here we are talking about <u>mastery goals</u> and <u>competitive goals</u>.

<u>Mastery goals</u>, sometimes referred to as task oriented goals, focus on learning to perform skills. Unlike competitive goals, mastery goals are self-referenced. That is, athletes compare their current performance to their own previous performances with self-improvement being the goal. One of the nice things about mastery goals is that the athletes themselves are responsible for success or failure to achieve these goals.

<u>Competitive goals</u>, sometimes referred to as ego oriented goals, focus on outcomes, typically winning. These goals involve social comparison, i.e. comparing an athlete's or team's performance against that of another athlete or team. While there is nothing wrong with wanting to win, one problem with competitive goals is that it's possible to achieve a competitive goal, e.g. winning, without playing well. Another major problem with competitive goals is that an athlete or team does not have as much control over success or failure because they cannot control the performance of the opposition. Thus it is possible to perform your best but not accomplish a competitive goal. Although there is not an absolute answer to this problem, the best strategy seems to be to focus primarily on mastery goals and secondarily on competitive goals. Achieving mastery goals will likely lead to also accomplishing competitive goals.

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