



Goal Setting: A Mental Management Approach

Coaches have a duty to ensure that we produce healthy well-balanced athletes. That process often begins in helping your students set realistic but challenging goals. **By Dieter Wilhelmi**

Goals have two functions in sport. They are used as a reference to assess competitive and training performance and are also used by coaches as a focal point for players to determine pre-competition and competition strategies.

Goals often influence how performances are viewed by both the coach and player alike.

There are many different types of goals. These include:

1. Career goals

Generally long-term goals that are often established by the player. If they are not achieved (such as being able to play on the ATP or WTA Tours) then players may cease their active participation in their sport.

2. Performance goals

Performance goals specify performance outcomes against a pre-determined reference standard. For example, the performance goal may be to improve tournament success. The performance standard may be to reach semi-finals in six pre-determined tennis tournaments. Ultimately, they are the performance outcomes upon which all training plans and competitive schedules are based. Performance goals are often established by the athlete but are often influenced by the coaches' expectations.

Coaches set goals constantly. In the training and competition environment they will usually relate it back to the development of the player (physically, technically or mentally) and or their expected competition performance level. Most players understand the importance of consulting with their coaches and coaches generally assist these players in making the goals realistic, achievable and time-bound.

Steps To Goal Setting

1. History And Goal Awareness

Investigate past performance in relation to goals achieved. This will establish an historical framework for developing new goals that are realistic. This is followed by an investigation of the types of goals that are required.

2. List Goals In Order Of Priority

It is important for coaches to ensure that this goal inventory is balanced. By this I mean "has the player listed any goals outside of their tennis environment?" As coaches, we have a duty to ensure that we produce healthy well-balanced athletes. If we don't, then it will ultimately affect their performances, either through burnout or injury.

3. Goal Selection

Each goal should be assessed for appropriateness and a hierarchy of possible goals should be established. Criteria for selection should include an achievement level that is considered by the player as difficult but reachable. Goals selected need to be agreed upon by both the player and coach and should be measurable and observable.

The Mental Management Approach

Often coaches and athletes set out their goals based on the SMART acronym. That is goals have to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound.

But this tried and proven system barely scratches the surface of what goal setting is actually all about. To truly understand goal setting, one must develop a psychological understanding of performance and how it relates to skilled execution and self image. Performance is the function of three mental processes:

1. The Conscious Mind (thoughts)

It is critical in sports to have the right thoughts (pictures). One of the key mental management principles is that "it is not what you say that is important but what you picture." You may say to yourself "I will not serve a double fault on this point". But what are you actually picturing? The answer is generally "double fault". And surprise, surprise - the result is often a double fault!

It is crucial to understand that negative feedback does not work. By saying to your athletes "don't take your racquet back too high on your forehand" you are actually getting them to picture a higher take back!

The next key component to understand is that the conscious

mind can only think of one thing at a time For an expert level of performance we need to execute many things simultaneously - almost as if they are automatic.

2. The Subconscious Mind (skilled execution)

The sub-conscious develops skills through practice until they can almost be performed automatically (without conscious thought). In sports coaching we call it the autonomous state, which generally refers to an expert level of performance. Practice alone does not make skills perfect. Only *perfect* practice makes perfect!

We have all witnessed tennis players of all standards practicing a mistake repeatedly until they became *perfect* at making the mistake! The key principle in the subconscious mind is that it moves you to whatever the conscious mind is picturing.

3. The Subconscious Mind (self-image)

Have you noticed that often in tight matches, the same few people somehow miraculously escape to move on to another round? This is because they have the self-image of being a winner and because the conscious mind constantly reminds us of our *self image*.

The critical difference between elite performers and champions lies in their self- image. The champion expects to win while the other one doesn't.

A player must have the self-image and belief that they are going to become Australian Open champion before they can do so. Ultimately performance is defined by what you are expecting to achieve and competitors can only rise to the level of their own personal expectation.

The Principle of Reinforcement

The more you think about, talk about and write about something, the more you increase the possibility of making that thing happen. Consequently, players and coaches should avoid thinking or talking about poor or negative performance. They should always be concentrating on solutions rather than focusing on the problems. Research has found that if you vividly imagine something twelve times it has the same mental imprint as if you have actually achieved it. What is more important to understand is that the subconscious mind cannot differentiate between correct or incorrect information. So if you tell it often enough that you are a champion tennis player your subconscious will believe it!

Triad State of Analysis

When the conscious mind, the sub-conscious mind and the creative-sub conscious mind come together the athlete experiences what we would call the '*flow*' state. In other words, you can not do anything wrong on the tennis court. Every shot

seems to hit the line, even net cords go over! This state is experienced by each player in different ways. Bjorn Borg once stated that when he reached this state the ball seemed to grow the size of a football and the game seemed to be played in slow motion enabling him to reach all shots effortlessly.

Goal Setting

If you ask most aspiring tennis players what their goals are you often get responses such as "wanting to win Wimbledon or, becoming a full time professional tennis player". However, what they are really expressing are *wishes* because the difference between a goal and a wish is a *plan*. Winston Churchill put it so eloquently "failing to plan is planning to fail".

Here is a simple process that binds all this psychological theory into a simple and yet highly effective goal setting program. There are three steps:

1. Students should state their goal as if they have already achieved it.

For example: "I have won the 16/u NSW junior championships in 2005.

Purpose: This develops the self-image and will assist the player in developing mental coping strategies that will reduce the risk of choking. Don't forget that if your player does not believe it, then realistically they have little if no hope of ever winning it.

2. State the pay value.

For example: "I want to win the 16/u NSW Junior Championships to prove to my parents that all the hard work was worth it."

Purpose: By writing down **the** benefits of achieving their goal students will maintain motivation levels through difficult periods.

3. Write down their plan - how are the students going to achieve their goal?

For example: "I physically and mentally train three times a week. In addition, I work three times a week on my technique. I ensure this through my competition program that has been carefully planned...."

Purpose: Without a plan they will never reach their goal. (*remember, failing to plan is planning to fail*).

Once the player has completed this process, get them to write it out on cards and place them everywhere. Ask them to read these cards every day for 10 minutes. This is a tool by which athletes can mentally condition themselves every day. It maintains their motivation levels, assists in the building of visual rehearsal skills, builds their self-image (which controls their performance levels) and increases their confidence levels. '!>

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Players like Serena Williams often succeed through the strength of their self image.