Research on the benefits of using goals to increase athletic performance has shown that performance generally increases for athletes that use goals consistently (2). There are a multitude of studies involving goal setting ranging from specific sports, specific groups within a sport, and improving exercise adherence (1,4,9). Some authors and strength and conditioning coaches have discussed goal setting within a training facility in a general sense (3,6). The fundamental assumption of goal setting is that the sustained struggle for improvement is more important than any single goal; similarly, training consistently is more important than any single repetition. The purpose of this article is to move beyond generalities and show how a systematic goal setting approach can be paired with training athletes.

**KEY GOAL SETTING PRINCIPLES**

There are three types of goals (process, outcome, and performance), which are categorized primarily based on the degree of controllability the athlete has. Process goals are the most controllable and focus on areas such as technique or form. Outcome goals are the least controllable and are inclusive of both the athlete and the opponent. In terms or controllability, performance goals lie somewhere in between the former and the latter, and are independent of the opponent. A one-repetition maximum (IRM) or the time it takes to complete one lap or circuit are examples of performance goals. A systematic approach to goal setting should include all three types of goals in a pyramid-type design with process goals as the base representing the greatest quantity and outcome goals as the peak. Figure 1 provides several application principles to consider when applying a goal setting system for athletes.

Strength and conditioning coaches have a significant advantage over sport coaches when it comes to using a systematic goal setting approach because strength and conditioning coaches typically measure and record pertinent data (e.g., repetitions, sets, resistance, and time for each exercise). On the other hand, it may be difficult for a soccer coach to record athlete performance on a dribbling drill during practice, for example.

It is important for strength and conditioning coaches to understand that it is worth the investment of time and effort to use effective goal setting strategies for their athletes. Possible rewards for the additional efforts include athletes being more focused on the task at hand, exhibiting greater attention to form and technique, experiencing improvements in motivation through increased confidence, improving the relationship between the athlete and coach, and developing a more complete record of achievements. The records of achievement and the resulting increase in self-confidence should not be overlooked as these are powerful tools that can be used to remind athletes of their successes during times when competitive outcomes are not in their favor.

**FIXING COMMON GOAL SETTING MISTAKES**

There are some frequently made mistakes regarding the application of goal setting principles. First, making goals very specific is critically important. For instance, “getting stronger” is too vague of a goal and should be adjusted to something such as “improve IRM by 10%.” Second, and perhaps the most difficult principle for coaches and athletes to adhere to, is the level of difficulty. It is often assumed that using a substantial improvement of 25% as a goal, even if it takes longer, is best because that will motivate the athlete to a higher level. However, this approach misses a valuable opportunity; as discussed in a previous NSCA Coach article, athlete motivation is increased via demonstrating competence (5). If a 25% improvement is the ultimate goal, then it can be used as a long-term goal with five incremental goals of 5% improvement as short-term goals. The athlete ultimately achieves the same level of long-term improvement, and as each 5% increment is reached, they demonstrate competence.

How goals are displayed is a frequently underutilized tool at the strength and conditioning coach’s disposal. There are a variety of methods available for this ranging from pencil and paper to apps on smartphones. It is fairly common to see oversized goal boards on display at training facilities. For example, creating additional buy-in from athletes and sport coaches by including them in the process of deciding which goals get displayed and what the goal board looks like is a simple first step. One possibility is to have individual and team goals displayed as paper bricks posted on a wall in a “brickyard” of sorts. When an athlete or team earns a paper brick for achieving the stated goal, it can be taken from the brickyard and used to build a brick wall or house. This scenario can serve as a visual reminder for athletes and teams about their training goals. This type of visual approach checks off all the boxes for improving athlete motivation and can foster a more competitive training approach across groups on the same, or different, teams. This is also a great way to improve communication about what goals are needed and how well the athletes are performing in training.

On the other hand, a goal board with few achievements can be highly disheartening and may result in reduced effort for all involved. Strength and conditioning coaches should remember that the objective is to get athletes to experience goal achievement resulting in increased self-confidence, so they should not be hesitant to lower a goal for an athlete, group, or team when needed. That is not to imply that a missed goal today means lowering the goal tomorrow, but consistent goal achievement is the objective and repeated failed attempts at a goal may reduce athlete self-confidence and motivation. Strength curves and repetition maximum charts are known to vary by individuals based on a variety of factors (e.g., muscle group, level of training, etc.), so goal attainment should also be expected to vary from athlete to athlete (7).
SAMPLE GOAL SETTING PROGRESSION

Figure 2 is a sample progression for an athlete targeting improvement on the barbell back squat over the course of a single semester. This process began with the sport coach and the athlete identifying lower body strength as critical to the athlete’s on-field performance. Then the strength and conditioning staff selected the back squat as the most appropriate exercise to improve lower body strength in this scenario. It was determined that a 20% increase of 1RM for the back squat by the end of the semester was a reasonable and beneficial goal. From there, three microcycle goals were identified to get the athlete from the current performance on the back squat to the long-term goal. The first microcycle consisted of developing a simple technique checklist for each repetition that the strength and conditioning staff or teammates could use to ensure proper technique and safety. Plus, using teammates to help coach their peers is another way to help with athlete motivation (5). The second microcycle introduced a performance goal while still reinforcing the importance of proper lifting technique by giving the athlete an opportunity to further improve the process goal related to technique. The third, and final, microcycle included only performance goals in closer alignment to the overall goal for the complete macrocycle.

Despite the roadmap presented in Figure 2, the strength and conditioning staff still has a multitude of different options when it comes to goal setting for athletes. It is typically advised that athletes work towards 3 – 5 goals at all times (1). In applying Figure 2, an additional exercise (e.g., lunges, front barbell squats, or deadlifts) could be included and the goals could be process or performance goals. For example, the depth of the squat on the barbell back squat could be a potential concern, so that is an additional process goal option. Additionally, the macrocycle goal could be viewed as the individual version of a team goal, such as to barbell back squat a certain total weight. Finally, the strength and conditioning staff needs to target an appropriate amount of time that it should take for the macrocycle goal and microcycle goals to be accomplished. For example, simple technique goals may only take one week for upperclassmen, but two or three weeks may be more appropriate for freshmen. Similarly, an athlete may consistently achieve a goal after only two weeks. It may then be advisable to increase the resistance an additional 5%, which could put the athlete ahead of schedule and provide further opportunities for training progress.

CONCLUSION

It is a strength and conditioning coach’s responsibility to help the athletes and sport coaches they work with achieve their goals. One important consideration for achieving this is to implement a systematic goal setting approach to improve goal effectiveness. A strength and conditioning coach can use goals as a way to foster confidence and continually strive to improve performance in a safe and effective way.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Gillham owns and operates Ludus Consulting, LLC, which focuses on performance enhancement for athletes, coaches, and business executives. Of specific note is his work with coaches and athletic administrators on improving systematic coach evaluation and providing targeted coach development opportunities. Gillham is a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist® (CSCS®) through the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) and a Certified Consultant through the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (CC-AASP). He serves as a sport psychology consultant for collegiate teams and coaches as well as individual athletes competing at high school and college levels in the United States and Canada. Gillham is an Editorial Board member for two peer-reviewed journals, the International Journal of Sports Sciences and Coaching and the International Sport Coaching Journal. Gillham earned both his Bachelor of Science degree in Fitness and Master of Science degree in Human Performance from the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse. He received his PhD in Education with a Major of Sport and Exercise Psychology from the University of Idaho.
### Figure 1. Application Principles for Goal Setting

- **Specific, Measurable Goals**
  - Must be able to objectively check "yes" or "no" for goal completion

- **Goal Duration**
  - Use a mix of long-term (6+ weeks) and short-term goals

- **Moderate Difficulty**
  - 5 – 10% improvement over current performance

- **Written and Displayed**
  - Goals must be written down and should be easily viewable

- **Individual and Team Goals**
  - Create goals that combine both personal responsibility and accountability to the team

- **Goal Setting is a Journey**
  - Revisit goals frequently to monitor progress and make adjustments as needed

### Figure 2. Example of a 13-Week Back Squat Goal Progression

- **Microcycle 1 (Weeks 1 – 3):**
  - Process goals to improve technique/form
  - Back angle is correct for at least 90% of repetitions
  - Feet are flat on the floor for 100% of the repetitions

- **Microcycle 2 (Weeks 4 – 8):**
  - Reduced focus on form and add in performance goals
  - Back angle is correct 100% of repetitions
  - Increase weight by 5%
  - Increase repetitions by 2

- **Microcycle 3 (Weeks 9 – 13):**
  - Work towards the performance goals
  - Increase weight by 5%
  - Increase repetitions by 2

- **Macrocycle Goal:**
  - Increase 1RM on barbell back squat by 20% by the end of the semester
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