

Sport Psychology: Train Your Mind – Part 2

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Goal-setting is a common weakness for struggling athletes and a common strength for successful athletes. Do it wrong – or avoid it altogether – and watch your chances for success plummet. Do it right, and watch your motivation and self-confidence improve. For many athletes, it's *the* key to enhancing performance.

Last month, I introduced **the five core skills of mentally fit athletes**: Goal-Setting, Self-Talk, Arousal Management, Concentration, and People Skills. This month, I explore Goal-Setting in more depth.

Let's start with a research-proven fact: if you believe in yourself, you're more likely to be successful. I know that's not rocket science. But ask yourself: what affects your belief in yourself as an athlete?

Many years ago, psychologist **Albert Bandura** defined, studied, and expanded the concept of **self-efficacy**: the belief that you have the power to produce a desired effect. If, for a particular task, your self-efficacy is high, you're more likely to engage in that task. You're also more likely to work harder and be more persistent. And, you're more likely to attribute failure to external factors ("My training wasn't tuned well for this race") rather than low ability ("I suck"). How can you increase self-efficacy and keep it high in your cycling? Effectively set, commit to, plan for, manage to, evaluate, and re-set your goals. (Or, just win every race you enter.) If you set and manage your goals well, you create the conditions to maintain a strong belief in yourself.

Get SMART

In my former career as a corporate guy, the concept of Management By Objectives was repeatedly drummed into my brain. Surprisingly, it helped. Coined by management guru **Peter Drucker**, MBO stressed that all goals be **SMART**:

Specific. Rather than defining vague goals ("Get stronger", "Do well in races"), strive for precision ("Climb Mount Diablo in under 60 minutes", "Finish in the top third of the field in every race"). This will increase the likelihood that your plan to meet your goals will itself be specific enough. It will also make it easier for you to identify the resources you need to meet your goals.

Measurable. For each goal, ask yourself: How will I know I've achieved this? Once you've answered that question, make sure the answer is part of the goal.

Achievable. Be careful here. It's important to have "stretch" goals – goals that truly challenge you – but don't stretch too far; you may tear something. A leading cause of overtraining and burnout is maniacal pursuit of goals that are truly not achievable. (And don't forget the converse: your motivation may take a hit from too many easy goals.) If you're having difficulty honing in on the right level of challenge, use the "Three Bears" approach: pick a goal that you think is just too hard to achieve ("too hot"). Then pick one that you're 99% sure you'll achieve ("too cold"). Now pick a goal that's hard to do, but in between. Evaluate it, and if it's still too hard or too easy, go in between again. Eventually, you'll find one that works ("just right").

Relevant. Drucker actually used "realistic," but I learned it this way, and I find it more, well, relevant. You could have a very specific, measurable, achievable goal ("Increase peak sprinting power 40% by August 1"), but if you're training for Paris-Brest-Paris, that goal might be irrelevant or even counter-productive. One way of maximizing relevance is to have a small number of long-term objectives, and to ensure your short-term goals support those objectives. For example, "Set a new personal record in the 200K brevet" might support the larger goal of completing Paris-Brest-Paris in under 80 hours.

Timebound. The most common goal-setting error I see is not having the question "When?" addressed in the goal. Perhaps the goal-setter has not fully considered what needs to happen *first* in order for the goal to be achieved. Or perhaps the goal-setter hasn't thought about whether the point in the training or racing season has an effect on the goal. "Climb Mount Diablo in under an hour" is much different from "Climb Mount Diablo in under an hour at the race on October 7," which is different from "Climb Mount Diablo in under an hour *by* October 7." Note that you may often have goals for a specific workout, and it may serve you to have goals even in the middle of a difficult climb ("I'm going to get to that '17% Grade' sign at this pace," "Now I'm going to get to that 'Share the Road' sign at this pace.").

Once you've drafted your goals, check them over. For each goal, ask yourself: Can I do it? If you are too nervous about a goal, judge whether your anxiety means that you should change the goal, or whether you're anxious for reasons – eg. fear of failure, lack of sufficient support or resources -- other than the content of the goal. If the latter, there is likely a way to manage your anxiety without changing the goal. (I'll be exploring anxiety management in an upcoming article).

Goal Management

Another common mistake, made even by good goal-setters, is to take your eye off the ball. Once you've set goals, it's important to manage to them. As such, it's wise to evaluate your progress against your goals regularly, acknowledge your successes, analyze times where you came up short, and re-set goals when appropriate. Effective goal-setting also involves these management techniques:

Make goal-setting a habit. Some athletes only focus on goals when things are going poorly.

Pay attention to process goals, not just outcome goals. Goals such as “Be relaxed at the starting line of all races,” and “Maintain good technique whenever I’m dropped on a climb” may not be sexy, but they could be critically important process-oriented goals that support a larger outcome goal (“Place in the top 10 at the Mount Tamalpais Hillclimb”). If you emphasize individual improvement or mastery goals – not just competitive goals -- you give yourself broader opportunities for success, increased self-efficacy, and increased motivation.

Evaluate and potentially reset your goals if you get sick, injured, or change your schedule significantly. There’s no shame in retooling as a result of forces beyond your control. (Actually, there’s no shame in retooling as a result of forces *within* your control, either.)

Beware of goal-creep. Say you had a goal of finishing in the top third of a race field. You get to the finish, and you decide you haven’t “left it all out there”; you could have made the Top 10. So, you start to feel disappointed, and you start berating yourself for missing the break, or not going harder on the final climb. Although there may be truth to your analysis, don’t let this distract you from the fact that you did achieve your goal. Avoid lapsing into a way of relating to yourself where nothing is ever good enough.

Be a good coach for yourself. Experiment with your “coaching style”: when to push yourself, when to back off, when to reward yourself, perhaps even when to make yourself run laps. Notice how you talk to yourself about your performance. (I’ll explore self-talk in an upcoming article.) Use a training log to record not only your progress against your goals, but what you learn about coaching yourself. And if you have a coach, share everything you learn.

The right goals are rocket fuel. They can fire you up when you feel psyched about shooting for them and when you achieve them. They can keep you going with the direction and feedback they provide. And, they can give you a gentle (or hard) kick in the chamois when you might otherwise give up.



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