



Building A Mental Toolbox

1: GOAL SETTING

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GOAL SETTING

Your Road Map to Success



“Excuse me, Sir,” Alice inquires. “Could you tell me which road to take?” Wisely, the caterpillar asks, “Where are you going?” Somewhat dismayed, Alice responds, “Oh, I don’t know where I am going, Sir.” “Well,” replied the caterpillar, “if you don’t know where you are going, it really doesn’t matter which road you take.”

(Alice in Wonderland – Lewis Carrol)

Let’s Take a Road Trip.

Goal setting CAN help in the pursuit for the final destination.

Before we go anywhere, a little planning needs to be done. Where do we want to go? Let’s drive from Colorado Springs to Myrtle Beach, SC. How are we going to get there? Let’s drive! What supplies are we going to need? Sunglasses, some money, snacks for the trip, CD’s.....

But, don’t forget the map. The easiest way to plan for a trip is with a road map. When using a road map you are in essence setting goals for the trip. The road map can:

- locate specifically where it is you’re going (long term goal),
- determine how many planned stops to take along the way (short-term goal),
- tell you how many miles to the next destination (daily goal)
- tell you the alternate routes along the way, and
- help locate tourist stops en route (you should always enjoy the journey ☺).

Now, let’s apply this to swimming. Similar questions should be asked of swimmers before they take off on an athletic journey. Where will they want to be at the end of the season? What are they going to do physically and mentally in order to get there? What skills and tools do they need in order to reach their destination?

This installment of the Mental Toolbox will help swimmers plan their athletic journey with consistent use of goals. The chapter contains a brief introduction, tips on the presentation of goal setting to swim teams and some exercises to help build the swimming season road map.

How Exactly Does Goal Setting Help?

Good goal setting gives an athlete an edge in three areas:

1. Goals provide **direction**.
2. Goals provide **feedback**.
3. Goals **motivate**; provide a daily purpose.

Basic Tips for Effective Goal Setting

- ✓ *Identify both Short-term and Long-term goals.*
- ✓ *Identify task goals in addition to outcome goals.*
- ✓ *Take action.*
- ✓ *Evaluate your goals.*
- ✓ *Set both team and individual goals.*

Let's look at each of these in more detail . . .

How Far Ahead Should an Athlete Look?

Effective goal setting entails setting long-term and short-term goals; these goals will identify where the athlete is going and how they are going to get there.

When planning a vacation, you often think about dream destinations. Where would you go if you had unlimited funds and abilities...Egypt, the Caribbean, Europe? As with traveling and many other aspects of life it is fun to dream. In sport, it is also fun and important to dream. **Dream goals** allow you to project years into the future without any limits. For example, for many athletes making the Olympic Team is a dream goal.

Athletes need to progress from a dream goal to a long-term goal. **Long-term goals** are typically one season to numerous seasons down the road; as in the road trip analogy, this goal is the destination. One way to determine a good long-term goal would be to have swimmers ask themselves the question "where do I want to be at the end of the season or the end of high school or college?" Examples of the answer to this question can be in terms of having an improved streamline by the end of the season, a goal time, making a specific time standard, or earning a spot on a junior or senior national team.

In order to make the long-term goal seem less daunting, **short-term goals** are set. **Short-term goals** are set for shorter lengths of time than long-term goals, usually between two weeks and a month. Short-term goals serve as stepping-stones for the long-term goals. Setting short-term goals allow one to monitor success towards the long-term goals. A good question to have swimmers ask themselves is "Where do I want to be at the end of this month?"

Finally, short-term goals can also often feel far off therefore something more within reach is needed to maintain focus and motivation. For these reasons it is also important to set **daily goals**. **Daily goals** are to be set every day in practice and in competition. Setting effective daily goals will help motivate and bring higher intensity to training. Daily goals can be set for both physical training and psychological skill development. A good question for swimmers to ask themselves is "why am I getting in the water today?" (See exercises 1, 4 and 5)

Identify Outcome Goals and Task Goals

Effective goal setting necessitates that athletes set both outcome and task goals.

Most swimmers are good at setting outcome goals; an **outcome goal** is any type of goal directed at the end result. Swimming outcome goals are set when an individual focuses on attaining a specific place at a meet, achieving a time standard or a personal best, or beating a teammate in practice. Outcome goals are hard to control because they depend on both the ability and skill of the swimmer and his opponents.

However, the swimmer has more control over **task goals** because they depend on their skill and ability only. **Task goals** are what the swimmer has to DO (physically and mentally) in order to accomplish their outcome goals. Examples of task goals include being aggressive in and out of each turn, holding a specific stroke count and maintaining splits through an event. (See exercise 2)

Last year, Jason placed second at Regionals in both the 100 and 200m fly. Regionals will start in 2 days and all Jason is talking about is winning both the events. He says, “Nothing but first will be good enough.” Because such a goal is out of his control, it would be more effective to get him focused on what he needs to do to win the events. He needs to focus on a powerful start, control through 75, then working his kick. If he can do this, the outcome will take care of itself.

Taking Action

Effective goal setting must involve not just a road map but a strategy to keep the goals “real” on a consistent basis.

Without much, if any, prodding from coaches, swimmers are already setting goals (especially outcome goals). When asked, athletes talk about goals such as wanting to swim a certain time, making cuts, improving a specific aspect or their stroke, and staying streamlined off the walls. However, coaches need to help swimmers progress from setting long-term and short-term goals to actually acting on these goals.

For example, when Grace, a 10-year-old swimmer, gets in the water every afternoon for practice, one wonders if any of her goals are salient? Does she focus on her stroke during warm-up? Is she conscious of her body position as she pushes off the wall? Or, is she “just swimming”, merely in the water doing the workout that her coaches instructed her to do?

Once a goal setting “map” had been established, the next critical piece is to keep the athlete accountable to these goals. Doing this is largely a matter of creativity and finding a means of accountability that will work for athletes. Some examples of ways to keep goals at the forefront so they are acted upon include:

- Complete weekly goal setting forms
- Developing a goal chart
- Write goals on visible items such as water bottles or caps
- Verbalize goals to teammates, friends, family (See exercise 6)

Evaluate your Goals

Effective goal setting requires athletes to regularly evaluate progress towards their goals, note successes along the way, and modify goals if necessary.

Let's go back to the road map analogy, where the goal is to drive from Colorado Springs to Myrtle Beach. Suppose you take off bright and early in the morning with your trusty roadmap in hand. On day one, your goal is to make it to St. Louis by sundown. However, outside of Kansas City there was an accident and you end up sitting on the interstate for 2 hours. At what point, if ever, will you stop to assess your progress and re-evaluate your goals?

Back in the pool, Robert, the star distance freestyler on the team, developed a shoulder problem and only kicked for the month of September. At what point should he reassess his goal of improving his stroke rate? Robert will only be disappointed and frustrated if he only evaluates his training based on his original goal of improving his stroke rate.

Goals are meant to provide direction, give feedback on progress and motivate. To ensure they serve this purpose, goals must also be flexible. It is necessary to evaluate goals at several points during the swim season. Set up specific dates for your athletes to monitor their success and to make changes if needed.

Team Goal Setting

Effective team goal setting includes both the coaches and the athletes. Team goal setting allows the swimmers to be supported by the group and the group goals in their individual athletic pursuits.

The goal setting terms thus far have all been in reference to individual goals. Individual goals are very important, but as a swim team, it is also important to set team goals. Team goals define a desirable state for the group at the end of a certain length of time. Team goals can guide how individual goals are set. Both swimmers and coaches can be included in the team goal setting process. If the coach sets the overall team goals, it is important to include the swimmers in setting group goals for their specific training group. After the group goals are set the swimmers can then set their individual goals as a reflection of the group and team goals. (See exercise 7)