

KNOW YOUR GOALS

When an athlete does not have any goals, or when the goals are not believed in or valued, there will be little motivation for doing the activity. Without motivation there is little energy or impetus to seek challenge. The nervousness one feels before an important event is a clear signal of being motivated to do well. When lacking motivation, an athlete may feel too relaxed and find it difficult to harness the energy required for optimal performance. If the motivation is low, relaxation may turn into anxiety or worry - the realization that it is difficult to perform well without a certain amount of energy that nerves can provide before an event.

What is an athlete trying to achieve when he competes in a sport event? Preparing to compete, an athlete will likely have in mind a purpose he would like to accomplish. These achievement goals are often one of two types: task goals or outcome goals. An athlete with a task goal desires to improve his or her own performance in a certain way and is not concerned with how the performance may compare with other participants' achievements. Task-oriented athletes enjoy the process of competition and the challenge of extending personal limits.

An athlete with an outcome or ego goal, on the other hand, sets standards in comparison to other competitors, and is focused on how well he can do against others of similar ability. Final results are what matters to the ego-oriented athlete, and success is judged on outperforming competitors.

To illustrate, a skater lining up for a race may have an overall time goal she wants to meet, based on her times over previous races at this distance. These are task goals, for they relate to the skater's previous standards and the amount of personal improvement being targeted.

On the other hand, the skater may set a goal of getting a medal, an outcome goal. Of course, a skater may set both time and place goals, combining task and outcome goals.

It is what the athlete is focused on during the event that becomes critical to the achievement of flow. A task goal allows the skater to focus on their own race and not constantly compare themselves with the other competitors.

Furthermore, a task orientation is much more within the athlete's control. Placing in a certain position is much less within an individual's control, as it depends on how every other skater performs on this particular occasion. The challenge thus becomes much more fluid and apt to change, depending on the circumstances of the race.

Competition is an opportunity to test one's skills against others, and by definition competition involves comparison of performance to others. Outcome goals are not bad goals for athletes to have, and many competitive athletes will have both task and outcome goals. When an athlete strongly believes in her ability, outcome goals can be very motivating and challenging.

Task goals can always provide opportunities for challenge if they are set just above an athlete's present skill level, regardless of what that level is. When goals are targeted at constantly taking an individual's performance to the next level, challenge is always present. Athletes who have won Olympic gold medals and world championships continue to motivate themselves to perform to higher and higher levels by focusing on trying to take their performance up a notch or by creating new types of challenges within their sport. Thus, a highly successful athlete may change events or the change may even be to a completely different sport. Michael Jordan, who had achieved so much within the game of basketball, found himself looking to a new sport after three NBA championship rings. Not finding what he was looking for

in baseball, he decided to return to basketball and set himself new challenges, which kept his motivation alive, his skills improving, and success continuing to come his way.

Set Clear and Specific Goals

When motivation is lacking, preparation for an event is often compromised. Going into an event low in motivation or without any goals rarely leads to flow. This type of situation occurs when you see no challenge ahead or, conversely, when the challenges seem too high. In either case, motivation and goal setting in turn suffer. Either the situation is perceived as low in importance and not worth investing mental or physical effort in or the challenge is perceived so unlikely to be attained that, again, effort is withheld. A figure skater explains how problems with motivation prevent flow: "It's really hard to get into that state because you can talk to yourself, but if it's not believed 100 percent and thought of, needed, and desired, then you don't get it."

Having the necessary motivation is usually not a problem for dedicated athletes, although there will be times when even the most intense participants will experience lapses in motivation. Goals are the building blocks of motivation, and learning to set the right goal helps immensely in maintaining your intent at appropriate levels.

Setting goals seems on the surface to be a simple task. However, there is skill involved in making goals work for you. Poor goal setting can be just as bad as - or even worse than - having no goals at all. Suppose a swimmer, for example, sets a goal of swimming the 200-meter freestyle in under two minutes, but this goal is clearly beyond his present skill levels. During the race, the swimmer finds himself way back in the field and not on target with his splits. The negative mental state this leads to can take the swimmer further from the reaches of flow than if he had dived into the pool without any goals at all and just swum the race.

Goals that are not realistic can decrease motivation, because failure takes away from enthusiasm and self-confidence. It is both an art and a science to set goals at just the right level of difficulty. A basic principle is to set goals just above one's current level of performance. This should provide incentive and motivate the athlete to reach a bit further than the last time, while not overwhelming self-confidence by setting the goal too high.

"Do-your-best" goals are also usually unproductive, as they do not direct attention to the specific aspects of performance one needs to focus on. We hear examples of general goals all the time: "Just go out there and do your best," "I am going to do all I can," and "Give it 100 percent." Such slogans and advice might enhance motivation, but they do not provide goals. To direct action effectively, a goal has to be specific. These example statements do not address what specific actions are to be taken. Learning to set goals that work for you and not against you requires time and guidance. It is well worth the investment, however, as the right type of goal is one of the keys to flow.

Goals that are specific and task-focused give direction to action. Splits, points of focus, technique, and strategic plans can easily be converted into specific goals that provide a guideline for performance. Stating what you want to do in terms of specific actions turns general ideas into goals. Doing this for the major components of performance provides a road map to direct actions throughout the event. Writing goals down helps to make them clear and specific and provides a point for feedback and evaluation as performance is tested against the standards you set. Visualizing the event beforehand, focusing on key elements of the performance as if viewing them on a video screen, helps many athletes make their goals real and their performance more effortless.

Make Goals Automatic

Making goals concrete and rehearsing them well allows a individual to act on them

automatically. A well-learned routine that is designed to bring the athlete to her best focus and optimal arousal level as the time to compete draws near, one based on predetermined goals for focus and activation, sets the stage for optimal experience. The performance road map begins as a rough draft, and it requires constant attention to its details in the formative stages. Once clearly defined, the next step is to learn to internalize the directions.

Internalizing the directions is like driving a car to a new destination: you need a clear and detailed map, and during the first journey you may refer to the map many times to ensure finding the destination. Once you've made a few trips and defined the checkpoints, the map does not need to be referred to except if you lose the way. In the early stages of your sport or a particular event the "road map" will need to be followed closely and performance monitored according to the directions the map provided. Once you've learned the way, however, a mental picture is formed of what needs to be done, and you are free to immerse yourself in the athletic performance at an automatic level.

Making one's performance automatic does not mean turning into a preprogrammed robot. After the competition starts, many unanticipated conditions might arise, requiring changes in the prepared scenario. A gymnast, for example, might notice stiffness in some muscles, suggesting a slight alteration in the prepared routine; a runner might realize that the one competitor he had planned to pace behind is running too slowly, so he chooses a different target. Only by paying undivided attention to the performance can the athlete choose the best course of action, and sometimes that even means improvising a new goal. It is not easy to perfect an automatic performance and at the same time keep one's options open in case changes are called for. But it is just this combination that makes effortless flow possible.

Enhance Your Motivation

Just as motivation is aided by setting goals, the power of goals increases when there is high motivation to achieve them. Placing importance on the event energizes and focuses attention, as this hockey player comments: "The more important I perceive it, the higher the pressure, the better I perform. More in flow - you become so single-minded."

When you clearly know what you want and are determined to reach it, you are lifting both challenge and skill to flow levels. The goals harness psychic energy and direct it toward the desired outcome. High levels of motivation translate into determination to reach the goals. And this focus not only improves the quality of experience, but it often also leads to unexpected achievements. Many outstanding sporting performances have resulted when determination drove the athlete to previously unattainable heights. The breaking of the four-minute mile, the ascents of the world's highest peaks, claiming of titles by so-called underdogs have come about from the combination of outstanding athletic talent with unshakable determination to achieve the set goal.