

A Coach's Practical Guide to Goal-Setting

JOHN MURTOUGH AND ANDY GRANT

Goal setting has been identified by sport psychologists as an effective means of helping coaches and players prepare for the demands of competition. It involves the establishment of specific targets which reflect what a player or coach is striving to achieve.

The first two editions of *Insight* have highlighted goal-setting as a method for enhancing both the motivation and self confidence of football players. Goal-setting should be seen as a technique that helps players to develop areas of weakness and maintain their strengths. This paper aims to introduce the practical processes associated with goal-setting and outlines how coaches can integrate this procedure into their daily practice. The paper focuses specifically on the development of the individual player.

Types of Goals

Training goals

An effective goal-setting programme can direct both training and competition through the administration of short and long-term goals. Training goals are thought to influence sports performance by directing attention towards specific aspects of personal development as well as generating the effort needed to make progress.

Goals tend to be organised through a framework that features long and short term targets. Long term goals identify what a coach or player wants to achieve. They are usually stated in general terms and reflect a player's aspirations and ambitions. For example, long-term goals for a player may include gaining a regular first team place, attaining international recognition, or successfully recovering from injury.

Short-term goals are more precise and associated with daily 'action steps'. In combination, short-term goals and action steps determine exactly what takes place in training or competition. These may typically include specific details on the location and duration of the session, number of repetitions to be followed, and may also specify what equipment is needed. For a player to execute his or her action steps successfully, they may need the assistance of others. For example,

a coach, parent, or fellow player might assist with shooting or passing drills.

When beginning a goal-setting programme a coach may wish to talk to a player about his/her game and from this meeting longterm goals are usually established. The next stage is critical as it focuses on **what has to be done to reach the goals**. In this sense, the short-term goals establish how practical action can lead towards the attainment of longer-term ambitions. Once a coach and player have decided what needs to be 'worked on' then the content of the goal-programme will begin to emerge.

It can be beneficial to think of short-term and long-term goals being linked as a staircase (see Figure 1). Located at the top is the longer-term goals with progression of stairs in-between, with each step representing short-term goals. The attainment of short term goals improves the likelihood that longterm targets will be achieved. It is important, however, that coaches and players are realistic about their capacity to commit time and effort to the programme. If the action steps are fully committed to, the short-term goals will be achieved and the long-term goals realised.

Competition goals

Goals can also be used to influence the way players approach games. 'Process' goals can be set to focus the players attention on specific tasks before a match such as 'closing down quickly' or 'being more aware of movement off-the-ball'.

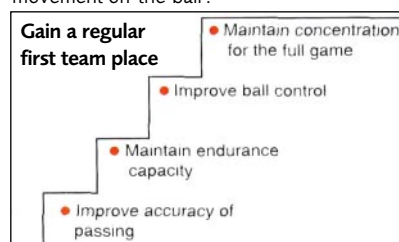


Figure 1. An example of a goal-setting staircase

Process goals are very different from 'outcome' goals which relate to issues such as 'winning the match' or 'having a good game'. Outcome goals are difficult to control. For example, a team may set a goal to win, play exceptionally well and lose. The opposition may outperform them, they may be victims of curious refereeing decisions, or lose a key player through injury. Generally, players have no control over these factors.

Focusing a player's attention on the process rather than the outcome of the game will highlight what an individual player **can control** and what (s)he should aim to do during the match. Process goals need to be realistic and challenging. If a player believes (s)he is capable of meeting these goals, it can serve to clarify the performance agenda and therefore increase self confidence.

How to Implement a Goal-Setting Programme

Coaches have a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of any goalsetting programme. They act as 'facilitators' who work closely with players organising and overseeing their goal programme. Coaches have the expertise to ensure that a player is working at realistic yet challenging targets. The coach also provides the player with the necessary support and guidance as a goal-programme is adjusted and developed over time.

Stage 1: Establishing a way forward

- The coach and player meet and discuss what they are trying to achieve and establish some common ground. Through a free exchange of views this initial meeting should consider the player's strengths and weaknesses. It is important that the coach becomes familiar with the player's perceptions of his/her own ability, as well as concerns, hopes and personal targets.

- Improve accuracy of passing
- The coach also needs to convey his/her views on how the player could improve

Stage 2: Setting goals

- The outline of the goal-setting programme should emerge from the baseline meeting. This will allow the coach and player to decide upon the specific nature of the long and short-term goals.

The coach and player should ensure that the goals are:

- **challenging:** This means the goals are not too easy but are something of a test
- **realistic:** This ensures there is a reasonable chance that the goals can be attained
- **stated in positive terms:** Whenever possible set the goals in positive language. It is better to use terms like 'will' rather than 'try' and 'do' as opposed to 'don't'
- **written down:** By writing down goals for a training session the players are encouraged to think about what it is they want to achieve
- **varied:** Design action-steps and tasks which stress variety and individual challenge

- **collective:** As players become older and more experienced the coach should involve them in the process of establishing goals and action-steps
- **acknowledged:** Whenever possible the coach should recognise improvements and progress. A quiet word after training or following a game can have a positive effect. An example of a typical goal-setting programme for a young football player is illustrated in Figure 2.

Stage 3: Monitor, maintain and evaluate

It is important to reflect on how the goal-programme is progressing and goal evaluations should, whenever possible, be recorded in writing. As well as reviewing goals on a daily basis, it is of value for the coach and player to have 'formal' meetings to reflect on progress and consider any changes to the goal structure. There is no definitive time frame in which a review should take place; the regularity and nature of any meeting will be dictated by the nature of the goal-programme and the needs of the player.

When the goal programme is progressing well and certain goals have been met, review meetings allow an opportunity for new challenges to be established. In contrast, when a goal-programme is in difficulty (i.e. goals are not being attained) the review meeting between the coach and player will need to consider why progress has not taken place. For example, it is possible that goals have been set at too difficult a level; therefore, reducing goal-difficulty may help to rectify the situation.

Summary

Goal-setting can help football players organise their training schedules and ensure that important areas of development are prioritised. Guidelines for successful goalsetting suggest that it is important to establish long and short-term goals for training and to use process type goals as part of preparation for competition and match play. Also, committing to the process of writing goals down and reviewing progress is helpful. Finally, it should be stressed that the success of any goal programme is heavily influenced by the degree of effort and commitment demonstrated by the coach and by the player.

Further Reading

Gilbourne, D. (1996). Goal-setting during injury rehabilitation. In Science and Soccer (edited by T. Reilly), pp. 185-200. London: E & F.N. Spon.

We acknowledge the assistance of David Gilbourne in writing this paper.

John Murtough is employed as a Sports Science Officer in the Youth Development Programme at Everton Football Club. He is a graduate of Liverpool John Moores University in Coaching Science and possesses a Master's Degree in Sports Science. His current work includes the provision of match analysis and sport psychology support for the club's youth players.

Weekly Goal-Setting Diary	
Short-term goal for the week ahead: Feel more confident with my short passing skills.	
Action-steps	Thoughts on the session
MONDAY 4.00-4.30 p.m. Equipment: one football. Work with coach on controlling and passing. Play with both feet, two-touch only.	My right foot passing is good, but I am still weak on the left foot. Organise extra left foot only session.
TUESDAY No extra training.	
WEDNESDAY 4.00-5.00 p.m. 5-a-side match with my team-mates. Process goals: play two-touch when in possession.	Accuracy of passes had improved. I still need to make passing decision more quickly.
THURSDAY 4.00-5.30 p.m. Team training session. Coach will organise technical short passing drills. Process goals: in possession drills I will play one-touch.	Training went well. My passing was accurate and sharp.
FRIDAY 4.00 p.m. School Match. Competition goals: Accurate passing, quick decisions on the ball.	Team performed below standard. Short passing was better, but coach suggested I still need to make quicker decisions.
Evaluation on the week's training Training was well organised and the coach helped in structuring the sessions. I now feel more confident in my short passing, especially with my right foot. Coach said he would help organise extra practises next week. Overall, week of training went well.	

Figure 2. An example of weekly goals and action steps for a youth player