

Setting Higher Goals May Make Athletes Feel Worse: The Goal Setting Paradox and Potential Solutions

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Goal setting has evolved over many decades to become a dominant feature in many different rehabilitation areas, including sport.¹ Goal setting is widely used and has several purported benefits, such as increasing motivation, improving athletic performance, and enhancing function¹; therefore, it is no surprise that goal setting practices are viewed as essential and indispensable components of rehabilitation.² In addition, for some professions involved in sport, such as athletic trainers and physiotherapists, goal setting is a professional requirement set by their regulatory body. For example, the Health and Care Professions Council states that “physiotherapists need to set and understand the need to agree on goals.”³ Despite this, a lack of consensus on the best goal setting approach remains a prominent concern in current empirical literature.⁴

Several goal setting strategies are used in sport. The most commonly used are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals and process-, performance-, and outcome-based goals.⁵ From a sporting perspective, scientific literature suggests that

goals are likely to be more successful if they are difficult to achieve.⁵ Controversially, research conducted predominately in sport has reported that the athlete feels less satisfied when a difficult or higher level goal is achieved than when an easier goal is achieved.⁶ This phenomenon, which appears to defy logic, is known as the “goal setting paradox.” One potential explanation for this is that once the higher goal has been attained, changes in the autonomic system may cause a feeling of deflation.⁷ Autonomic changes such as a reduction in brain signaling activity, decreased systolic and diastolic pressure, and a reduced heart rate are associated with an increased negative mood state in athletes.⁶

The goal setting paradox is not a new phenomenon. In fact, empirical evidence suggests that this paradox is and has been a dominant facet of many areas of work, including sport, especially where negotiation between the athlete and therapist is involved.⁸ Therefore, the goal setting paradox should encourage professionals who work in sport to question their goal setting approaches when setting higher goals with their athletes. Should the athletes and their therapists/coaches set higher goals but face the possibil-

ity of the athlete feeling worse? Or should they set lower, more achievable goals that could result in the athlete feeling better? Alternatively, should they set goals at all? Unquestionably, professionals working with athletes have a duty of care to preserve and optimize the athlete's sense of well-being. What would professionals do if difficult goals that are set are not achieved at all? The literature exploring the goal setting paradox only appears to describe these negative feelings immediately after a difficult goal has been achieved, whereas the longer term psychological effects of achieving a higher goal have not been investigated. Future research exploring this area may provide valuable insight into whether the goal setting paradox only causes a short-term negative effect on the athlete's mood state.

One approach that has been used to prevent athletes from feeling subjectively worse following goal attainment is mindfulness. Mindfulness may have dual benefits for both the athlete and therapist/coach. Mindfulness may enable the therapist/coach to become mindful of the

emotions of athletes who achieve high goals and therefore may make those emotions less noticeable or pass quickly.⁹ In addition, mindfulness can provide feedback about what may work for athletes to help improve their well-being.⁹ Athletes who engage in mindfulness are more likely to detach from stressors, subsequently giving them a greater task focus.¹⁰ Ensuring that the athlete is always at the forefront of any goal setting or negotiation strategies should minimize any conflict or dilemmas because the athlete is in a position of control over his or her treatment or training choices.²

We have highlighted that the goal setting paradox still appears to be evident within the sporting environment. A growing body of research suggests that incorporating mindfulness is one potential way of minimizing the negative psychological impact of setting high goals. Future research should explore the goal setting paradox among the long-term psychological implications of setting high goals or whether its effects are only transitory or long-lasting.

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