

Goals are for Practice NOT competition!

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One of the more difficult juggling acts that you have to learn to pull off as an athlete if you want to most consistently be a peak performer is how to effectively use and balance your goals and expectations. Before I explain, let's start with some simple definitions: Goals & Expectations: What are they? Even though these have slightly different meanings, I'm going to be using them interchangeably for this article.

Goals and expectations are related to the OUTCOME. They are always FUTURE oriented. They reflect what you WANT out of your sport, from a particular season or from this immediate performance. Goals and expectations reflect what you hope to accomplish and what would make you feel successful as an athlete.

Having goals or expectations for yourself is absolutely critical if you want to go anywhere in your sport. Your goals/expectations serve as a TARGET to aim for. They give all your training efforts a MEANING and a DIRECTION. They also provide the FUEL and ENERGY that you'll need to consistently move forward towards success and turning your athletic dream into a present day reality. Without well-defined goals, your overall training will be haphazard, misdirected and disorganized. Without clearly defined goals your efforts will be inconsistent at best. Some days you'll train hard, others you'll just go through the motions. Goals serve as a source of motivation to keep you keeping on, especially when the going gets rough and discouragement sets in.

When you have goals and expectations for yourself, you are setting a higher standard of performance. You are internally demanding more of yourself. You are challenging yourself. Such high standards and challenges are necessary for you to take your training to the next level. It's these inner demands that you place on yourself that will ultimately propel you forward towards your dream. In the end, the hope is that the demands that you place on yourself will make you a much better person and athlete as they move you towards personal excellence. In this way, your goals and expectations help you "push your envelope" and step outside of your comfort zone.

Your goals and expectations tend to function in your brain much like a guided missile system does in a rocket. The system programs the rocket engine towards the target and keeps it on track. If the missile gets blown a few degrees off its' course by strong winds, the inner tracking system automatically corrects and reorients the missile so it gets back on target. Without this inner guidance system, the missile would just fly aimlessly around and around until it crashes, runs out of fuel or the engines break down. Your goals and expectations function in much the same way. They will organize and direct your training efforts. They will keep you moving in the targeted direction. If you get knocked off track, distracted or temporarily sidelined, your goals and expectations will help you find the strength and discipline to get back onto the proper path.

But more than this, as I mentioned, your goals and expectations also serve as an all important fuel for that guided missile system. It's your goals and expectations that keep you motivated to train. Your goals provide you with an important answer to the often-asked questions: "Why bother?" "What's the point of all this hard work?" "Why am I making all these sacrifices for anyway?" "The coach isn't looking now, why should I keep going hard?" "After such a devastating failure, why should I continue to try?" Having goals and expectations for yourself helps you get through the sometimes very rough patches of your athletic career and the oftentimes tough, daily grind of training. They are your answer to all of these "why" questions. Simply put, your goals and expectations, if they truly belong to YOU and are genuinely important to YOU, will provide you with a compelling enough reason to sacrifice, work hard and discipline yourself. If your goals don't really belong to you, if your parents or coaches force them on you, if you're just doing this to make others happy, then when the going gets rough, your reaction will be to want to pack it up, hit the road and bail out.

One of the key points that I want to make here is that taking your goals and expectations with you when you go to practice is critical to your ultimate success as an athlete. In practice they represent an extremely valuable piece of training equipment. If you can ask yourself, "How is what I'm doing today

going to help me get to my goals?" whenever you train, then the quality and intensity of your training will always be high. As a result you will be more focused, your practices will have more meaning to you and therefore, you'll accomplish far more than those who don't have a clear purpose in mind whenever they



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train. Asking yourself this one simple question in practice, over and over again on a daily basis, throughout the course of the season can easily make the difference between success and failure, winning and losing, successfully reaching your goals or not. But this is only one part of the championship formula when using goals and expectations.

The other just as critical part is to know when it's time to mentally set your goals and expectations aside. Perhaps one of the more common and costly mental mistakes made by athletes at every level is to take their goals and expectations with them into the competitive playing arena. It's this mental mistake that leads to choking, tight, tentative performances and bitter disappointment. Walk on the basketball court, as an example, for a big game with your expectations under your arm ("I've got to score at least 12 points!") and you'll be sure to leave an unhappy and frustrated underachiever. This is one of the cardinal rules in sports psychology and peak performance. Take your goals with you whenever you practice and train, but NEVER, EVER when you compete and it counts. Let me repeat this because it is so important. DO NOT BRING YOUR GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS WITH YOU WHEN YOU COMPETE. Why?

While your goals and expectations may motivate and focus you in practice, they rarely work that kind of positive way in competition. Concentrating on your goals when you compete, focusing on how important this game, match or race may be, thinking about the outcome of the contest and how you really need to beat this opponent or that one will distract you from what you need to focus on in order to perform to your potential and make you nervous at the same time. At competition time, your goals and expectations will weigh you down and sink you. They will tighten your muscles, kill your nerve and fill your heart with dread. It's this outcome focus on goals and expectations that is so poisonous to the athlete's performance.

An emphasis on outcome, (goals & expectations), right before you compete will always crank up the level of seriousness of the performance and what's at stake, while simultaneously killing your fun and enjoyment. This is a deadly one-two combination that will KO your performance! If you're not having fun going into and during a performance, then you will be physically and mentally tight and it will be IMPOSSIBLE for you to play to your potential. Regular readers of this newsletter know that THE secret to playing your best is being loose and relaxed while you're performing.

So take your goals with you when you train. Think about why you're training and what's at stake. Try to connect what you're doing right now in practice with your ultimate goal. However, understand that when you go to compete you must leave your goals back home. Do not bring your goals and expectations into the competition. Forget about what's at stake, who your opponent is, how important this competition may be or who's in the stands watching you. If you get it into your head that you "have to," "got to," "need to," "must," in relation to your performance in this game or match, then you are overly focused on outcome and, as a result, will be much more likely to choke your guts out.

Keep in mind that the way to get that all-important victory is a paradox. If you really want to win then winning must be the farthest thing from your mind at game time. If you really want to kick your rival's butt, then you must banish thoughts of him/her from your mind and instead concentrate on yourself. If you desperately want to impress the coaches or a scout watching, then your focus must be on YOU and NOT on THEM! You will get what you WANT when you DON'T focus on it during competition. Similarly, you will get exactly what you DON'T want during competition when you focus on what you WANT too much.

When I work with athletes and teams I will frequently suggest to them the following simple exercise a few days before a big competition: "Write down everything that you want to have happen, all your outcome goals and expectations. Put them all down on paper and take one last good look at them. When you're done examining them, take all those outcome goals and lock them in a drawer, out of sight. Do NOT take them out and look at them until AFTER the competition is over!" This is the best way to insure that you have the best chance to perform at your best. Goals and expectations are part of your practice "equipment." Like Sammy Sosa's corked bat, they are only to be used in practice and NEVER when it really counts!