



# Strategies

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Matthew D. Bird, Chris Chapman & Patricia C. Jackman

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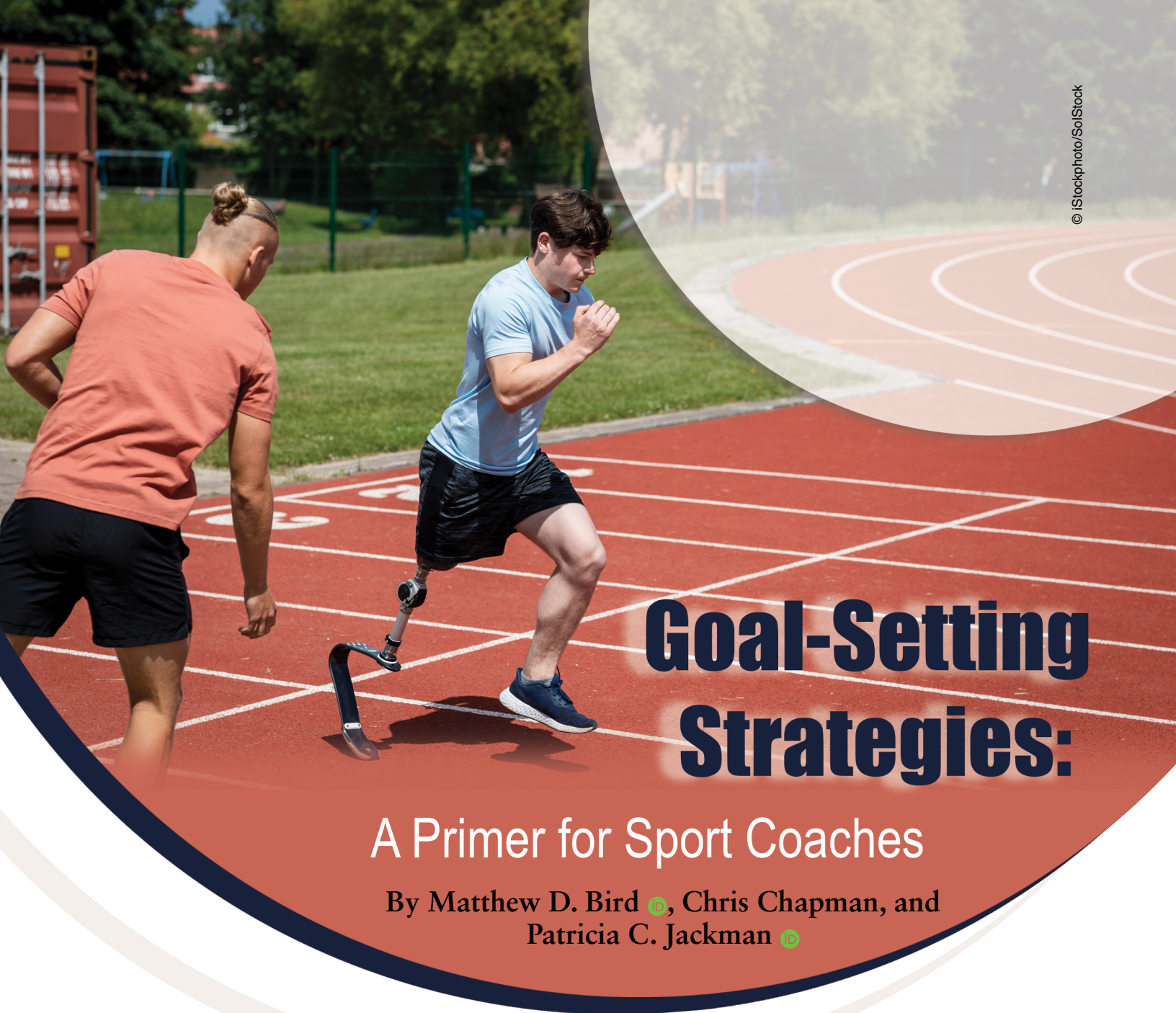
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# Goal-Setting Strategies:

## A Primer for Sport Coaches

By Matthew D. Bird , Chris Chapman, and Patricia C. Jackman 

**G**oal setting in sport is a topic of interest among applied researchers and coaches. Setting goals, or the process by which athletes establish personal aims or objectives, has been shown to be an effective way to enhance sport performance (see Kyllö & Landers, 1995 and Williamson, Swann et al., 2024 for reviews). Much of the existing literature used to guide coaches in goal setting has focused on principles to consider when setting goals. For example, guidance for coaches suggests setting goals that are specific and measurable, challenging but realistic (Weinberg, 2010). Additional goal-setting practices that coaches have been

advised to consider include setting different types of goals, such as process, performance, and outcome goals (North et al., 2021).

When investigating coaching practice, researchers have found that coaches use short-term and long-term goals with athletes (Weinberg, Butt, Knight, & Perritt, 2001). Moreover, coaches set goals with athletes for practice and competition purposes and focus goals on areas such as performing a skill and physical conditioning (Weinberg, Butt, & Knight, 2001). Although much of the focus in the literature has guided coaches on what types of goals to set, there is more to

This article aims to share practical ideas that coaches can use when setting goals, in addition to providing best-practice considerations for goal setting

goal setting than just setting a goal. Within the coaching context, some authors have presented goal-setting processes for coaches to follow (e.g., Martens, 1991; Vealey, 2005; Weinberg & Gould, 2015), but many processes fail to capture the different stages and steps required before and after goals are set and best practices for coaches to consider when setting goals with athletes.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to present a process (i.e., a series of connected stages and steps) that can help coaches set goals with athletes. More specifically, this article aims to share practical ideas that coaches can use when setting goals, in addition to providing best-practice considerations for goal setting. The intention is not to present a one-size-fits-all approach to goal setting, but a resource that coaches at any level can utilize if they are interested in enhancing their ability to set goals with individual athletes.

### The Goal-Setting Process

Findings from a recent review in sport suggest several stages occur throughout the process of setting goals (Bird, Swann et al., 2024). These stages include: (1) preparation, (2) goal setting, (3) planning, and (4) follow-up (see Figure 1). Each stage in the goal-setting process contains numerous steps, but as goal setting in practice has been described as dynamic and complex (Larsen & Engell, 2013), the implementation of each step, and indeed each stage of the process, will vary greatly depending on the athlete (e.g., age, developmental level, and experience of goal setting), the coach (e.g., coaching style and training in goal setting), and the context/environment (e.g., training or competition and phases of the season) in which goal setting takes place (see Tables 1 and 2 for examples of the goal-setting process applied in coaching practice).

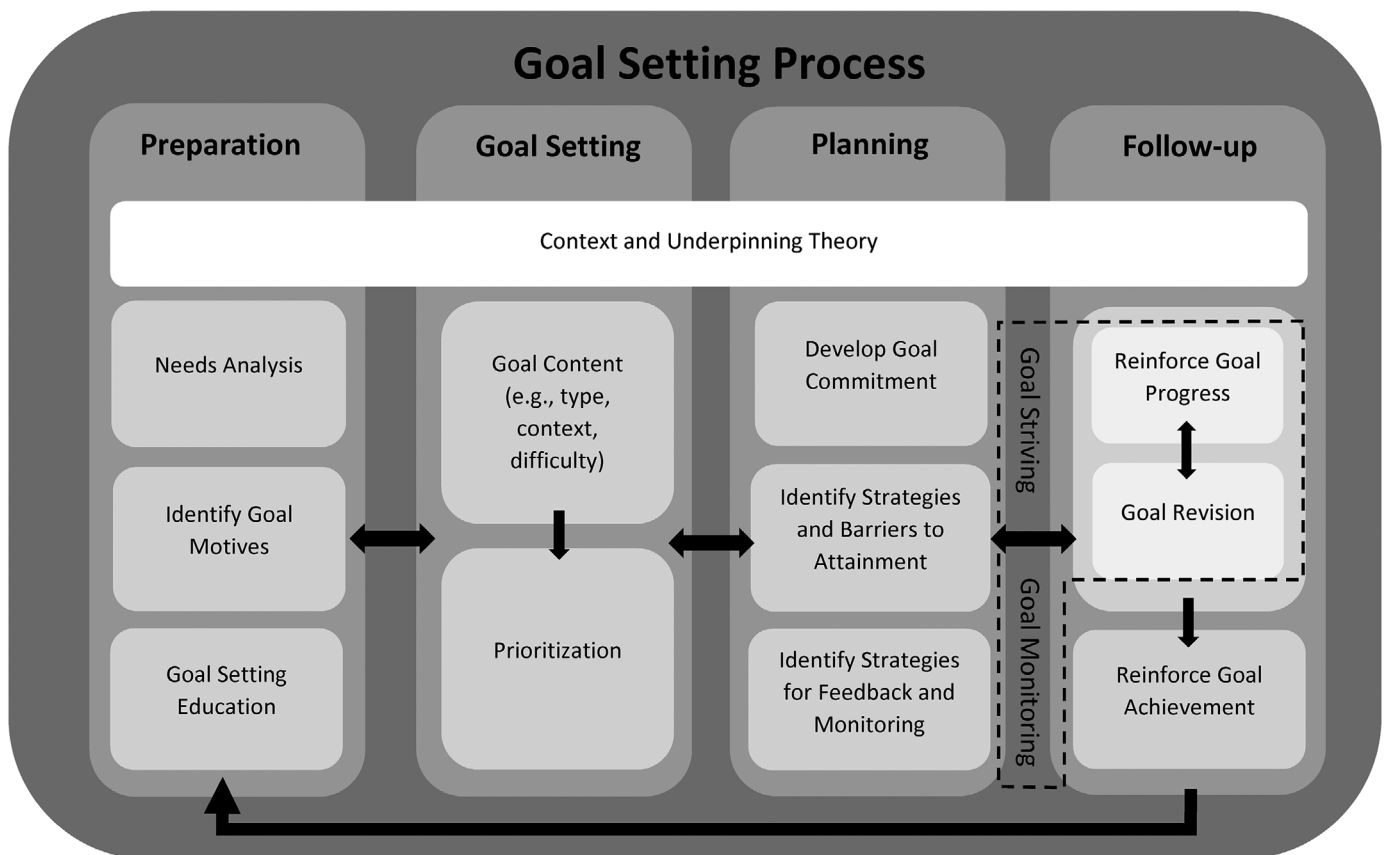


Figure 1. A synthesized goal-setting process for applied sport psychology practice (Bird et al., 2024). Republished with permission.

**Table 1. An Example of how to Apply the Goal-Setting Process through a Coach Conversation with a College Basketball Athlete During the Season**

Context	Goal-Setting Stage	Goal-Setting Step	Example of Each Stage in Practice
Conversation on the way to practice	Preparation stage	Needs analysis	The coach sees an opportunity to have a conversation about improvement with the athlete as they walk to practice. “Hey, how are things going?” asks the coach. After the athlete talks about how their day at school went, the coach asks, “What are you going to work on today?” “Hmmm...” The athlete pauses for a moment to think. “My 3-point percentage isn’t where I want it to be,” says the athlete. “This is something I want to work on.”
		Identify goal motives	Having watched the athlete for the first part of the season, the coach agrees but they want to understand how this aligns with the athlete’s longer-term goals. “That could be good,” replies the coach. “How will this link to the goals you set at the start of the season?” “Well...,” replies the athlete. “I wanted to become the best 3-point shooter on the team (long-term outcome goal). So, this will help me achieve that. And hopefully it will help the team keep their winning record.”
		Goal-setting education	The coach thinks. As the athlete is experienced and because the coach helped all players on the team to set goals at the start of the season, the coach decides no additional education on goal setting is needed.
	Goal-setting stage	Goal content	The conversation continues. The coach wants the athlete to come up with some goals to help them improve in this area. “Okay. I like this,” says the coach. “What would be something you could realistically do over the next few weeks to work on this?” The athlete pauses to think. “I’d like to improve my make percentage to at least 33% by the end of the season” (long-term process goal). “And how could you do this?” asks the coach. “I need to put in some time,” says the athlete. “Extra shooting drills after practice would help. Maybe sets of 15 shots where I try to make 5 or more?” (short-term process goal). The athlete continues to think. “I could make sure I did this at least three times before I leave the court.”
		Prioritization	The coach takes a moment to think and where to direct the conversation next. Because the athlete has only set two related goals, goal prioritization is not needed.
	Planning stage	Identify strategies and barriers to attainment	The coach believes this is a good idea from the athlete. Setting a short-term process goal has uncovered a strategy for goal attainment, but the coach wants to make sure this is something the athlete can do. “Nice idea,” says the coach. “What might be stopping you from doing this?” “Ugh...,” replies the athlete. “Time. Managing my time. I need to make sure I dedicate some minutes to this once everyone has finished.” “How might you do that?” asks the coach. “I can schedule better. Arrange any meetings before practice, and make sure I don’t have to rush off court when practice is officially over,” answers the athlete. “That’s great,” replies the coach. “And what if another team is coming onto the court to practice after us?” The athlete thinks. “I should probably check the gym schedule. Make sure it’s free or find a better time.”

**Continued**

**Table 1. Continued**

Context	Goal-Setting Stage	Goal-Setting Step	Example of Each Stage in Practice
		Develop goal commitment	<p>The coach nods their head in agreement but wonders if there is anything they can do to increase the athlete's likelihood of achieving this goal. The coach knows how sharing a goal with others could be a way to enhance the athlete's commitment to it. "What else might help you here?" asks the coach. "Do you think you could get a teammate to help you by staying back and feeding you passes?"</p> <p>"I can do that," says the athlete. "I've got someone I can ask."</p>
		Identify strategies for feedback and monitoring	<p>Before this conversation ends, the coach understands the importance of tracking progress toward a goal.</p> <p>"Now, how will you keep track of your progress?" asks the coach.</p> <p>After some thought, the athlete replies, "I need to record it, I guess; otherwise I'll forget. Maybe I can keep a log in the notes on my phone. It could be easy to do once I get back to the locker room."</p> <p>"Good deal. Let's do it," responds the coach.</p> <p>The conversation ends as they arrive on court.</p>
Conversation after practice	Follow-up stage	Reinforce goal progress	<p>After a few weeks pass, the coach sees the athlete staying behind and shooting after practice. Remembering the goal they set to improve their 3-point percentage, they see an opportunity to check in on their progress.</p> <p>"How's that shot going?" asks the coach.</p> <p>"It's going," replies the athlete. "I'm feeling a little more confident in it and I'm starting to see the results."</p> <p>The coach watches the athlete make three baskets from behind the 3-point line. They have noticed improvement and want to reinforce the progress the athlete is making.</p> <p>"I can see that!" says the coach. "Looks like you have been putting in the work."</p>
		Goal revision	<p>"So, do we think 33% from behind the line is still realistic?" asks the coach.</p> <p>"Of course," replies the athlete. "I'm starting to hit five out of 15 more regularly. Sometimes I'm making more than that!"</p> <p>The coach pauses. They understand the importance of setting a goal that is difficult enough to push the athlete, but not one that is so hard it will never be achieved.</p> <p>"So, do we need to change the goal? Make it more difficult?" asks the coach.</p> <p>"I think we are good with this," replies the athlete. "I'd like to start hitting those numbers more consistently in games. Maybe we can revisit this in a few weeks?"</p>
		Reinforce goal achievement	<p>Although the coach reinforced the progress toward the athlete's goals and encouraged the athlete to keep practicing, the goal has not yet been fully achieved; therefore, reinforcing the goal achievement is not yet warranted.</p> <p>"Great work," replies the coach as they go in for a high five.</p> <p>"Keep it up."</p> <p>The conversation ends and the coach walks off court.</p>

**Table 2. An Example of How to Apply the Goal-Setting Process through Coach Meetings with a Developing Middle-Distance Runner at the Start of the Season**

Context	Goal-Setting Stage	Goal-Setting Step	Example of Each Stage in Practice
Conversation during pre-season in the coach's office	Preparation stage	Goal-setting education	The coach invites individual athletes with whom they are working to attend meetings before the season to help plan and prepare for the year. “Thanks for meeting with me today,” says the coach. “I’d like to use this time to see if we can come up with some goals for the season together. This will give you something to work toward and hopefully create a clear path to what you want to achieve this year.” The coach uses this time to outline the benefits of the athlete having goals. “Sounds good,” replies the athlete. “Ideally, today we will identify a season-long goal for you, but also some smaller goals that you will be able to tick off along the way,” states the coach.
		Identify goal motives	“If I were to ask you what you wanted to achieve by the end of your athletic career, what would you say?” asks the coach, to understand the career objective of this athlete. There is a slight pause and silence as the athlete thinks. “Well, I’ve probably got a good 8 to 10 years left at my top physical condition, so by the end of my career, I would like to have made it to a national championship final. And if I could podium in that final, it would be even better” says the athlete. Together, the coach and the athlete discuss the times that typically make national championship finals. “That’s a great long-term ambition,” says the coach. “Something you can achieve. Let’s see if we can break this down now into some smaller steps.”
		Needs analysis	The coach introduces the athlete to a performance profile and explains to the athlete that this will help them uncover key qualities that are needed to be successful in their event. Working through the performance profile together, the athlete believes their top-rated qualities are their dedication, hard work, and stamina. Qualities that were rated lowest by the athlete include their speed, strength, and ability to control their nerves.
	Goal-setting stage	Prioritization	“Looks like you have some real strengths,” says the coach, “but I wonder if we should prioritize any of those lower-rated qualities for us to work on?” The athlete replies, “I think that would be good. I feel like controlling my nerves before a race would help, but I would get the most benefit from some extra strength, and this may give me some extra finishing speed in the last 200 meters.”

**Continued**

**Table 2. Continued**

Context	Goal-Setting Stage	Goal-Setting Step	Example of Each Stage in Practice
		Goal content	<p>The conversation continues toward setting some goals. The coach agrees and thinks the athlete improving their strength would help them achieve a faster time. “So how could you do this?” asks the coach.</p> <p>After taking a moment to think, the athlete asks, “I could probably add some gym sessions to my training?”</p> <p>The coach nods their head. “I could put together a strength training plan, and your goal could be to complete this each week. We might try to schedule at least a couple of sessions that you could do in your own time. How does that sound?”</p> <p>“That sounds fine,” says the athlete. “I haven’t been strength training as frequently as I would have liked, but a more structured plan would probably be useful.”</p> <p>The coach talks again. “We are getting to the start of the season, so we don’t want to go too heavy. But what if your goal was to complete two strength sessions per week (short-term process goal) and we can see how this increases your speed toward the end of the race (short-term performance goal). How does that sound?”</p> <p>The athlete nods their head in agreement.</p>
	Planning stage	Identify strategies and barriers to attainment	<p>“Nice,” the coach says. “This sounds like we have some strategies in place for you to improve your speed. I wonder what might make this difficult to achieve?”</p> <p>The athlete hesitates. “I haven’t always liked going to the gym. I’ve always felt a little out of place. Mostly because I have never been quite sure if I am using the machines or lifting the weights correctly. And I’ve always feared getting injured.”</p> <p>The coach sees this as a barrier that could stop the athlete from achieving their goal of completing two strength training sessions per week. “I can see how this would be a concern for you,” says the coach. “How about once I create a plan for you, we use the facility here, and I can show you what to do. This way I can tweak the plan to fit your needs and check your form, so it is safe.”</p> <p>“That would be great,” replies the athlete.</p>
		Identify strategies for feedback and monitoring	<p>The coach understands how important tracking progress toward the goal will be and provides the athlete with a way to do this. “Once I have the plan specified for you, I can share it on a spreadsheet. This way you can input your weights and track your progress.”</p> <p>“Thank you. That would be great,” replies the athlete.</p>
		Develop goal commitment	<p>The conversation comes to an end. Because the coach used the performance profile to uncover areas for the athlete to work on, and as the athlete identified their own short-term process goal, it was determined that commitment toward the goal was sufficient.</p>

**Continued**

**Table 2. Continued**

Context	Goal-Setting Stage	Goal-Setting Step	Example of Each Stage in Practice
Mid-season conversation in the coach's office	Follow-up stage	Reinforce goal progress	<p>“Thanks for coming in today. I wanted to use these meetings to check in and see how things were going,” says the coach. “Pretty good!” replies the athlete. “I can really see my progress and I have already run a personal best time this year.”</p> <p>“That’s great! I know your times have been getting quicker because I can see you during training. You also look faster in the home straight. All those strength sessions must be paying off. You’ve been doing really well.” The coach uses this time to reinforce the progress the athlete has made toward their short-term performance goal.</p>
		Goal revision	<p>The coach asks the athlete to re-rate the same key qualities they identified in their initial performance profile. Increases in self-ratings from the athlete show they believe they are improving their speed and strength. The coach continues. “So, it looks like things are going well and you are hitting the goals we set at the start of the season. Since we are in the middle of the year, it wouldn’t be a great idea if we got you working out more. How about we keep the goal of you completing your two strength sessions per week, but we can change the plan to align with the progress you are making, but to also give you the optimum rest and recovery?” The coach understands that they do not want to overload the athlete with physical training at this point in the season, so they encourage the athlete to work toward the same short-term process goal.</p> <p>“That’s all good with me coach. I’ve started to enjoy working out and I can see the help it’s giving me.”</p> <p>“We can also look at some additional areas of your performance profile that you may want to work on,” says the coach. The coach uses this conversation as an opportunity to move to an earlier stage in the process and set some additional goals in areas on which the athlete believes they need to work.</p>
		Reinforce goal achievement	<p>The conversation continues and the coach and athlete determine a new process goal on which to work. To end the meeting, the coach says, “Now we have a new goal for you to focus on. Great work hitting the weights. Keep this up and focus on the next thing.” The coach uses this time to reinforce the achieved goal.</p>

***The preparation stage***

The first stage in the goal-setting process is the preparation stage. The preparation stage aims to help an athlete identify areas for development and support them in getting ready to set goals. Steps in the preparation stage will help identify the needs of the athlete and their goal motives, and educate them on the process of setting goals. Conducting a needs analysis to highlight strengths, areas to develop, and areas to set goals can help to ensure that the goals set are relevant for the athlete. In general, identifying the needs of an athlete can be achieved

through understanding the task, including what skills or abilities are needed to perform successfully, and can be achieved in many ways. For example, the needs of an athlete can be established through observations, informal conversations, or in a structured manner with the use of a tool like the performance profile. Although there are multiple versions of the performance profile, this technique would typically include several common steps that a coach and athlete work through collaboratively. First, a coach will ask an athlete to identify and define any key qualities (technical, tactical, physical, and psychological) that

are needed for the athlete to be successful in their sport. Identified qualities will likely be influenced by the sport environment and context (e.g., expectations within the athlete's phase of development or pathway criteria). Second, the athlete would then be invited to rate where they believe they currently rank their own ability for each identified quality on a scale from 0 (*lowest possible ability*) to 10 (*highest level of performance*; see Bird et al., 2021 for an overview of performance profiling).

Understanding the reasons why an athlete might pursue a goal (i.e., their motives) can also occur in the preparation stage. One way to understand an athlete's "why" is to help them identify their values. To help an athlete identify their values, a coach can ask an athlete what values are important to them in their sport. Describing the values in a sport context can be helpful (e.g., an athlete stating they want to "work hard during training" exemplifies the value of hard work). A coach may then ask an athlete how closely they believe they are living this value. Using a scale of 0 (*not living this value at all*) to 10 (*completely living this value*) may be helpful. If the athlete provides a rating below 10 for a value, then a coach may help the athlete to identify behaviors (or behavioral goals), which, if displayed, can help them to act more frequently in line with their values (see Lundgren et al., 2012 for a values identification procedure). Goals can then be set that align with the selected values of an athlete (i.e., committing to practicing five times a week for an athlete who values hard work). Other ways to help athletes identify reasons for setting goals include having them reflect on reasons for pursuing a goal and any long-term visions that they may have, such as career goals.

Education on the goal-setting process may also occur during this stage. Teaching an athlete about different steps in the process (e.g., how to conduct a needs analysis, why it is important to revise goals) to enhance their goal-setting skills can help the athlete set goals for themselves in the future. Additional education might focus on helping the athlete learn the benefits of setting goals, such as enhanced confidence, motivation, and commitment.

### ***The goal-setting stage***

Once the athlete has prepared to set goals, they enter the goal-setting stage, where their goals are specified. In this stage, coaches should take into account the content of the goal and how to prioritize any goals that are set. When determining the content of a goal, there are many principles of goal setting that can be considered, such as goal types, goal proximity, goal difficulty, and goal specificity (see Table 3).

Generally, a mixture of outcome, performance, and process goals, as well as short-term and long-term goals, are often advocated for (Tod & McGuigan, 2001). Moderately difficult or challenging goals are suggested to be most beneficial (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Wanlin et al., 1997). Although specific goals have often been set in performance contexts, there is evidence to suggest that athletes use nonspecific goals in certain situations within the sporting environment, and perceive that these can enhance enjoyment, satisfaction, and reduce the perception of pressure (Williamson, Bird et al., 2024). Both specific and nonspecific goals should therefore be considered when setting goals with athletes.

After an athlete has set goals, they should prioritize ones to be worked on first. One way to prioritize goals is by evaluating which goals provide the greatest development opportunities. Following the framework for goal prioritization proposed by Symonds and Tapps (2016) can help athletes prioritize their goals (see Figure 2). Goals that provide the greatest performance benefit, regardless of their difficulty to implement, can be prioritized to work toward first. These types of goals could be considered "green light" goals. Goals that are easy to implement, but provide little performance benefit, might not need to take priority, and fall into a category that could be considered "yellow light" goals. Last, goals that have low performance benefit and are difficult to implement should be reconsidered or reset. They can be considered "red light" goals and may not be best to pursue.

### ***The planning stage***

After goals have been set and prioritized, an athlete can start planning to work toward them. In the planning stage of the goal-setting process, coaches should focus on identifying strategies and barriers to goal attainment, outlining strategies to monitor and provide feedback on goal progress, and increasing commitment to the goals. Identifying strategies and barriers to goal attainment can serve as a check-in on the appropriateness of any set goals. For example, if a goal may seem unachievable because there is a lack of time in the competitive season, the goal should be revised. In many cases, barriers to goal attainment can be uncovered through a period of reflection or asking the athlete direct questions on what they think could stop them from achieving the goal. Finding strategies to goal attainment can help an athlete work toward a goal. Putting in place behavioral plans (e.g., spending 15 minutes after practice developing mobility to achieve the goal of increased flexibility) can serve as a strategy to facilitate goal attainment. Furthermore, embedding goal-related behaviors into existing routines can be helpful (e.g., an athlete incorporating deep breathing into their preperformance routine if their goal is to stay calm). Ways to monitor and provide feedback on progress could also be determined at this stage, as feedback has proven benefits for goal attainment (Neubert, 1998). A post-event reflection tool could be introduced to an athlete during this step of the process. The post-event reflection presents a structure that could help facilitate athlete reflection on their technical, tactical, and psychological qualities after a performance, including what they executed well and areas that require further development (see Chow and Luzzi, 2019, for an overview of the post-event reflection tool). Coaches and athletes might also determine how frequently they wish to track the progress and provide feedback on any work toward a goal. Increasing commitment to a goal can also happen before an athlete starts working toward it. Having the athlete lead and take ownership of the goal-setting process by providing them with the opportunity to determine their individual goals is a way to build commitment. Sharing goals with others once they have been set has also been suggested as a way to improve commitment (Gregg et al., 2004). In the case of sharing goals, the coach may encourage the athlete to share their goals with others, such as teammates, friends, and family.

**Table 3. Goal-Setting Principles, Descriptions, and Example Goal Areas**

Principle	Description	Example Goal Area
<b>Goal Type</b>		
Outcome goals	A focus on the result, like a place or a rank	A high jumper having a podium finish at a national competition
Performance goals	A focus on an individual's performance, such as time, distance, or score	A high jumper achieving a personal best height
Process goals	A focus on how an athlete may perform a skill or part of a technique	A high jumper developing their take-off strength during training
<b>Goal Proximity</b>		
Short-term goals	Daily or weekly goals	A goal to achieve in the next game for a football player
Long-term goals	Monthly or yearly goals	A goal to achieve by the end of the season for a football player
<b>Goal Difficulty</b>		
Easy goals	A goal that takes little effort to achieve and can be easy to attain	A basketballer trying to increase their free-throw percentage by 5%
Moderately difficult or challenging goals	A goal that takes consistent effort to achieve and can be moderately difficult or challenging to attain	A basketballer trying to increase their free-throw percentage by 10%
Very difficult or unrealistic goals	A goal that takes a great deal of effort to achieve and may be unrealistic to attain	A basketballer trying to increase their free-throw percentage by 15%
<b>Goal Specificity</b>		
Specific goals	Goals with specific endpoints	A golfer trying to shoot a score of 75
Nonspecific goals	Do-your-best goals	A golfer trying to do their best in the final round
	As-well-as-possible goals	A golfer trying to shoot the lowest score they possibly can
	Open goals	A golfer trying to see how well they can do in a tournament
	Range goals	A golfer trying to complete the round between 72 and 75 shots

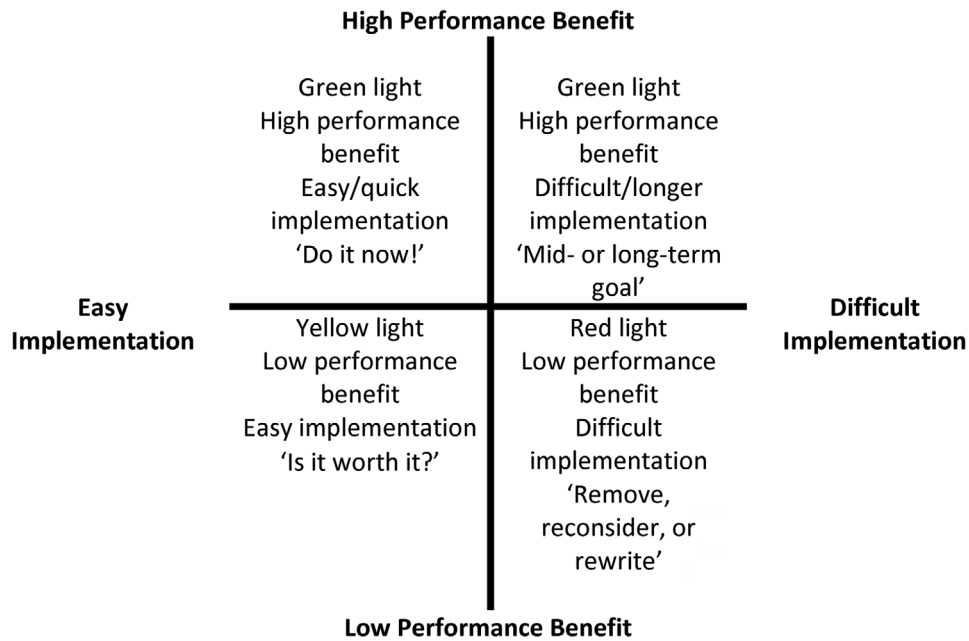
***The follow-up stage***

The follow-up stage in the goal-setting process typically occurs after a period of goal striving and goal monitoring, and once the athlete has had the opportunity to work toward their goals. Reinforcing goal achievement/goal progress and revising a goal are steps in this stage of the process. To reinforce goal achievement and goal progress, the principles of reinforcement can be used. For example, adding a pleasant stimulus to increase a desired behavior serves as positive reinforcement. For instance, a coach using positive reinforcement may praise an athlete who has persisted through adversity during a performance. Conversely, removing an unpleasant stimulus can also enhance the likelihood of a desired behavior. For example, an athlete not having to run two laps at the end of training because they have put in a great effort can be considered negative reinforcement (see Leeder, 2022, for examples of

reinforcement in coaching practice). Goals should also be revised during this stage of the process depending on if they have been achieved or if they are ongoing. If a goal has not been achieved, it may be beneficial to revert to an earlier step in the process (e.g., goal content) to adjust the difficulty of the goal. Similarly, it might be beneficial to explore barriers that have impeded the goal from being achieved to determine if they can be removed. If the goal has been achieved, then a new needs analysis might help determine what new goals can be set.

**Best Practices when Setting Goals**

In addition to being guided by steps in the goal-setting process, researchers have identified a number of best practices that can be considered when setting goals with an athlete (see



**Figure 2. A framework for goal prioritization (adapted from Symonds and Tapps, 2016).**

Bird, McEwan et al., 2024). Generally, best practices include knowing when to set goals, working with an athlete to set goals, setting appropriate goals, and monitoring and following up on any set goals.

***Knowing when to set goals***

Although goal setting has been identified as a strategy to enhance performance (Kyllo & Landers, 1995; Williamson, Swann et al., 2024), knowing when a good time is to set goals with an athlete is an important consideration. Recently, researchers have shown that the views/attitude an athlete has toward goals and goal setting can have an influence on its success (Bird, McEwan et al., 2024). For example, if an athlete is excited about the process of goal setting, has bought into it, and leads the process, the process will likely be more successful. Creating a relationship and getting to know athletes individually can also help a coach to understand if an athlete is ready to set goals. Furthermore, helping athletes to understand the benefits of goal setting (see the goal-setting education step in the preparation stage) could be valuable if an athlete does not understand the usefulness of goals. Moreover, the decision about whether to set goals could also be impacted by information yielded during the needs analysis stage. Although goal setting has been shown to be an effective strategy for enhancing performance, it has been reported that setting goals can be detrimental if it was not what the athlete needed at that time (Bird, McEwan et al., 2024). Coaches should therefore carefully consider when they are setting goals with athletes and reflect on the purpose of using goals in the sport context.

***Working with an athlete to set goals***

When setting goals with an athlete, it is important to promote athlete autonomy throughout the process. In this

sense, the coach may play the role as the facilitator/collaborator and help support the athlete through each stage and step (depending on which steps are needed). For example, a coach can facilitate the needs analysis by asking the athlete questions regarding areas of their performance they think need to improve. Providing autonomy and encouraging an athlete to decide on their own goals may have benefits that can help the athlete achieve their goals. For instance, an athlete could be more committed to working toward a goal if it is one they have chosen, or that is personally meaningful to them and relevant to their long-term objective, rather than working toward a coach-prescribed goal. Personally relevant goals have also been associated with higher goal persistence and enhanced future task engagement (Ntoumanis et al., 2014). Providing the athlete with autonomy in the goal-setting process can also help increase their commitment. Commitment to a goal is important and a key moderator in the relationship between setting a goal and performance according to goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990). When implementing the goal-setting process with an individual athlete, coaches should therefore help facilitate the stages and steps to support the process but provide the athlete with autonomy to present their own ideas and set their own goals.

***Setting appropriate goals***

The types of goals coaches set with athletes have received attention from researchers and practitioners (Weinberg, 2010). There are numerous other principles to account for when setting goals with an athlete, such as goal proximity, goal difficulty, and goal specificity. Considering the different principles of goal setting should help coaches set goals with athletes, but making sure the goals are appropriate for each athlete has been linked to successful goal-setting experiences (Bird, McEwan et al., 2024). A goal may be appropriate if it is based on the needs of



the athlete (e.g., a tennis player hitting 50 serves after practice because their first serve percentage is low), if it is a goal they prefer (e.g., an outcome goal for an athlete who is outcome oriented), and if it is considered challenging (e.g., a goal that an athlete has to work hard for but one they can achieve). There are some common misconceptions surrounding the types of goals athletes set, with many advocating for specific goals (Latham & Locke, 1991). Researchers, however, have shown that nonspecific goals (e.g., do-your-best goals such as a golfer trying to shoot the lowest score they can) may also be effective at enhancing performance (Williamson, Swann et al., 2024), and that athletes use nonspecific goals during practice and competition (Williamson, Bird et al., 2024). Coaches should therefore help athletes set goals that are appropriate for each individual by conducting a needs analysis and carefully considering the different goal-setting principles.

### ***Monitoring and following up on any set goals***

Making sure that goal monitoring and the follow-up stage of the goal-setting process occur is an important best practice when setting goals. Goal monitoring is important, as it helps present the opportunity for a coach to provide an athlete with feedback on their progress toward a goal. Feedback is another important moderator in the goal setting–performance relationship (Locke & Latham, 2006). That is, when feedback is present, an athlete might be more likely to achieve their goals. To maintain athlete autonomy within the goal-setting process, coaches may consider utilizing athlete-centered feedback (De Souza & Oslin, 2008). Asking the athlete to provide feedback and outline next steps toward goal achievement can facilitate the athlete having an active role in this step of the process. Receiving feedback on progress can help to highlight goal–performance discrepancies (Donovan & Williams, 2003). A goal–performance discrepancy may occur when a goal has yet to be reached. When any discrepancy is identified, coaches and athletes can then identify what may be causing the discrepancy (e.g., barriers toward goal achievement) and if any goals should be adjusted. For example, if a runner set a goal of running a marathon in 3 hours, but weather conditions on race day make this impossible, it might be beneficial to adjust the goal

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(Jackman et al., 2024). In some cases, for instance if a goal is unachievable, it might be beneficial to completely disengage from that goal, rather than continuing to strive toward it, and to reengage with an alternative goal that is more achievable in that situation (Brandstätter & Bernecker, 2022). Coaches should therefore be mindful of the stage and steps that occur after goals have been set and after a period where the athlete works toward their goals. Monitoring progress and providing feedback to the athlete are important, as this can lead to a goal being adjusted.



## **Conclusion**

Goal setting is a popular strategy used by coaches due to its positive influence on performance. There is more to goal setting, however, than just setting a goal. Several stages and steps in the goal-setting process can occur before, during, and after goals are set. Coaches can use many techniques to facilitate the implementation of the goal-setting process and there are several best practices to consider that may help goal setting to be more effective. The coach, athlete, and environment/context will influence goal setting, so there are many ways in which goals can be set in practice. Tailoring the goal-setting process to the needs of the athlete should be considered, and a one-size-fits-all approach to goal setting should be avoided.

## **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## **ORCID**

Matthew D. Bird  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5098-179X>  
 Patricia C. Jackman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5756-4494>

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Matthew Bird ([mbird@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:mbird@lincoln.ac.uk)) is a senior lecturer in the School of Psychology, Sport Science, and Wellbeing at the University of Lincoln in Lincoln, United Kingdom.

Chris Chapman is a learning experience manager at UK Coaching in Leeds, United Kingdom.

Patricia Jackman is an associate professor in the School of Psychology, Sport Science, and Wellbeing at the University of Lincoln in Lincoln, United Kingdom.