

# the athlete's edge

SHARPENING YOUR PERFORMANCE



## Goal Setting: More than just about Performance

BY DAVID GLOVER

If you ask athletes, and especially triathletes, what their goals for an upcoming event are, typical responses will be:

"Set a PR."

"Finish in a time of X:XX."

"Finish in the top XXX of XXXX."

"Beat [insert name here]!"

These are all examples of performance goals, which describe an accomplishment observable and measurable by the outside world.

Unfortunately, for any number of reasons, many of which are outside your control – weather conditions, the depth of your age group, or your friend's fitness – you can't always race faster, finish in the top three, or beat your nemesis every time you compete. By focusing only on performance goals for an event, you may be setting yourself up for disappointment, frustration,

and ultimately loss of enjoyment. This is why setting learning goals in addition to specifically-tailored performance goals guarantees a positive personal race review of the overall event.

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### Learning Goals

Enjoyment, writes Flow author Mihály Csikszentmihályi, is characterized by "...forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment." Without a sense of accomplishment, which may come from achieving a performance goal, triathlon or any other activity may become unenjoyable.

However, even if a performance goal is not met, enjoyment can still be found by setting learning goals. Unlike performance goals, which are external, observable, and measurable, such as a specific finish time or place, learning goals are internal, non-observable events that result in a change in capability or growth; i.e., something learned through the course of the experience.

A personal example from earlier this year serves as a great illustration. When I raced in the Ocala Marathon, my performance goal was to beat my PR marathon time set last year at the Disney World Marathon. On paper, my goal seemed perfectly achievable: my training leading up to Ocala had been more consistent than my training leading up to Disney and I would not be running a half marathon the day before, like I did at Disney. My goal was "in the bag," so I believed.

Not so! I fell short of my performance goal by 22 minutes, resulting in a tremendous sense of disappointment over my finish time. However, I did achieve self-development and, ultimately, enjoyment through my learning goals. My learning goals for Ocala were to: (1) experiment with pacing in order to learn my limits and (2) improve my ability to maintain focus during my race and regain focus if lost. I met both learning goals, which gave me a positive race review

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when I evaluated the event, and based my experience on elements other than just my finish time.

First, I learned that I started the race at a pace too fast for my fitness level. This was a painful lesson (literally), but one I needed to learn. Second, I also learned that I could maintain my focus for relatively long periods of time in the face of declining performance with increasing discomfort. When my focus drifted, I recognized the drift, and discovered I could quickly regain focus by fixating on something simple like the flashing blue light of the police motorcycle in front of me.

## Performance Goals

By all accounts, performance goals are still important, as they can provide a source of motivation and purposeful direction in both training and racing. In order to make the most out of this motivation while minimizing disappointment, set your performance goals at varying levels – from your stretch or “pie in the sky” goals to more achievable goals.

For example, after a coaching client set a new personal best time in a 10-mile race of 1:27 to best his previous best time by more than seven minutes, he contacted me and asked, “I want to finish my next race under 1:20; is this realistic or should I target 1:23 instead?”

“It’s possible but it will be a stretch,” I replied. “As you go faster, those extra minutes become tougher and

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tougher to find. By all means, you should set 1:20 as a stretch goal; your secondary goal should be to improve by four minutes with a time of 1:23, which would still be a significant accomplishment.” He now has two performance goals for his next race: (1) a “pie in the sky” finish under 1:20 and (2) a more attainable finish time under 1:24.

I wanted him to set the stretch goal because if he did not have 1:20 as a goal, he might never achieve it. Timothy Ferriss, author of *The 4-Hour Workweek*, presents his thought about large, unrealistic goals:

*“Having an unusually large goal is an adrenaline infusion that provides the endurance to overcome the inevitable trials and tribulations that go along with any goal. Realistic goals, goals restricted to the average ambition level, are uninspiring and will only fuel you through the first or second problem, at which point you throw in the towel. If the potential payoff is mediocre or average, so is your effort.”*

Aim high and who knows? You might surprise yourself.

## Summary

Goal setting is important and necessary for success. Aim high to achieve lofty performance goals, while aspiring to reach internal goals as well. This will enable you to learn from and be happy with the experience along with way. Triathlon should be fun and challenging – so enjoy!

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