Sport psychologists are often seen as the people who appear when a team or player is having a problem. However, psychological strategies, such as goal setting, have been shown to have a powerful effect on behaviour at all times. This summary looks at new research from a sport psychologist working with a young footballer in Denmark. Beyond showing the work of psychologists in sport, it also provides coaches with guidance in the art of goal setting.
A History of Goal Setting

Goal setting theory has its ultimate roots in the simplest type of introspection that can be performed by anyone. It assumes that having a goal will impact on your actions by directing attention, mobilising effort, enhancing persistence and leading to new strategies. Initially, goal setting proved itself in the business world, and it was not long before sports psychologists started to take an interest.

Although it proved less successful in a sporting context (mainly, it is argued, because athletes are more motivated in the first place and already operating close to their performance ceiling), there is still plenty of evidence of goal setting being applied successfully. For example, research with coaches back in the 1980s identified goal setting as one of the most important psychological skills for athlete success and, importantly, one of the easiest coaching skills to improve.

However, the world of coaching has always been identified as a complex social environment, and as this new research shows, goal setting should be considered an art rather than a science. In other words, there is no simple template to follow. Instead, coaches must be ready to be flexible and innovative in an ever-changing world.

The following summary of the research project highlights the dynamic nature of goal setting in sport.
Kenneth was a 19-year-old midfielder for a professional club in Denmark. Long term, his goals were to establish himself in the first team and play regularly for the national under-21 team. Previously, his experiences of goal setting had been poor. The process had been little more than an evaluation without any real associated action. Immediately, this shows one of the problems with goal setting: if it isn’t done correctly, it quickly develops a bad name with players. However, Kenneth was obviously someone who had a questioning personality, and he showed enthusiasm to try again. For the next year, he would take part in a research project on goal setting and meet regularly with a sport psychologist in the club’s canteen prior to training.

For the sport psychologist, the first part of the process was about establishing the relationship. This involved general discussions about how Kenneth first got involved in football and his early history in the game. As both parties started to feel comfortable in each other’s company, discussions moved on to look at strengths and weaknesses. Kenneth was strong at passing and playing in the role of defensive midfielder, but he wanted to get better at attacking. From this, more specific goals were developed around improving the use of his left foot, shooting and heading.

The importance of a good personal relationship soon came into focus when it became clear that while Kenneth was successful in some of his goals, he was neglecting others. During a session where Kenneth was explaining his successes, the psychologist was not afraid to intervene and challenge Kenneth in a friendly way, asking ‘When do you have in mind to start focusing on the other goals?’

Towards the second half of the research project, the psychologist noted a real step change in Kenneth. Now he was focusing on the small things, the specific parts of the goal that would lead to long-term change. One thing that seemed to play an important part in this change was when coaches and others started to comment on his performance and effort. However, it was not long before Kenneth had regressed again as he admitted himself:

*I haven’t been focusing directly on my goals… mostly, I have been concentrating on doing as well as I can… just my game as a whole instead of focusing on singular aspects.*

This shows the complex nature of goal setting in sport, which the researchers in this article refer to as dynamic and ever changing. In one conversation, the player seems to be concentrating on how to achieve their goals, but only a few weeks later; they have lost that specific focus. Again, the psychologist needed to question and challenge Kenneth to understand what had happened and how to return his focus to his goals.

In general, Kenneth developed well over the course of the study and achieved most of his goals. One final interesting story was around his goal to improve heading the ball, where little progress was being made. After several sessions to understand the problem, a new plan was identified to help achieve this goal using the power of imagery. Kenneth was given heading practice on his own so that he could develop positive images of the action. By practising in this way without pressure, he was able to create positive images that could be recalled later. The researchers believe that this positive ‘imagery of the movement’ was decisive in the development of heading skills, and he now looks forward to practice thanks to positive images of him heading and even scoring in the future.
The above is a shortened version of the full research programme between Kenneth and the psychologist. While not everyone is likely to have access to a professional sport psychologist, there are a few lessons that any coach can take from this research.

**Goal setting is dynamic and ever changing**

Kenneth’s journey was one of progress often quickly followed by setback. One minute, he was focused on the detail, but the next, he was concentrating on the general. It was also the case that some goals were easier to achieve than others. A coach needs to be flexible with the goal setting process, understand why some ideas don’t work and therefore be willing to think of new ideas to meet the goal.

**The relationship with the player is crucial**

The success of goal setting depends on the interaction between individuals setting the goals. A coach needs to be able to talk to a player to understand their needs and therefore what goals they should set. As Kenneth’s story also shows, when things are not going as planned, it requires a good relationship to be able to challenge the player and get a positive response in behaviour.

**Goal setting takes time**

One theme that emerged from this research was how much time the psychologist spent talking with the player. For example, when the heading goal was not being achieved, it took a series of conversations to understand the problem and come up with a solution. Don’t expect the goals, or the methods to achieve them, to reveal themselves immediately.

**Players need to be self-aware**

In both setting goals and evaluating progress, players need to be able to give an accurate assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. In this research, Kenneth’s ability to express himself and reflect on his abilities was critical to the goal setting process. Make sure your players have the correct self-reflection skills before you work with them to set appropriate goals.

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**Further Reading**

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, the core of this summary is based on the article below:


Goal setting research with coaches:


More general reading on this area: