

Going for the Goal

The interplay of goals and athletic performance is more complicated than many of us are led to believe. Actually settling on the goals is the easy part.

By Tom Slear

Battle plans rarely survive the first action. The same can be said for setting goals. You mull over your hopes and desires. You take a realistic look at your abilities. You gauge the strength of your adversaries. You think about what you can accomplish. You write down specific milestones and order them by priority.

You feel you are ready to take on the world, only to have this thing called reality laugh at your efforts – coming down with the flu three days before a major competition, or a faster swimmer moving into the area the year it was your turn to win a state title. Life, after all, is like water. It seeks its own level regardless of what we plan.

Three years ago, just as she completed her sophomore year in high school, Caroline Bruce set her mind on making her first National Team. There were rich pickings that summer, including the World Championships and the Pan Pacific Championships.

But Bruce hurt her knee doing gymnastics (yes, she was still competing in gymnastics at that point, in addition to tennis and swimming) and spent the entire summer recovering. She learned a powerful lesson about how badly things can go wrong and then proceeded to teach the same lesson to six other swimmers last summer when she competed in the 200m breaststroke final at the Olympic trials.

Bruce was in Lane 1. It was her first Olympic Trials. To her left at the start were seasoned veterans who had been under this kind of pressure many times before. Though Bruce was having a good meet overall – career best times in the 200 IM and the 100 breaststroke – her semifinal swim in the 200 breaststroke, an event that offered her the best shot at making the team, was disappointing, to say the least.

“She looked awful, felt awful and did a 2:30.1 (2.3 seconds off her best time),” recalls Eric Nelson, her coach at the Wichita Swim Club.

In the finals, however, Bruce poured it on in the final lap to finish second, beating out three Olympic veterans who had won a combined total of three gold medals and a silver in 2000.

“When I looked at the scoreboard the first time, I thought, ‘That’s pretty cool. I did my best time,’” Bruce says. “I looked again, and saw that I finished second and said, ‘No way.’ The third time I looked, I saw the Olympic rings next to my name, and I started bawling. Even when I woke up the next morning, I asked my roommate if it had all been a dream.”

THE VAGARIES OF LIFE

While Bruce was pinching herself, several other breaststrokes were left to wonder about the vagaries of life. Goals have a way of inverting themselves. For Kristen Caverly, who swam next to Bruce in Lane 2, the 200 breaststroke represented her third attempt at the Trials. She had accumulated a third and two fourth places. Her goal of Olympic status was all but extinguished in no small part because of swimmers such as Bruce, who would have gladly bet against herself.

“Anyone who asked me two minutes before the race about making the team,” says Bruce, “I would have said, ‘Are you kidding?’”

But the irony didn’t end there. Caverly subsequently out-Bruced Bruce by dropping her best time by three seconds and finishing second in the 200 backstroke, an event she thought offered her the least chance for making the Olympic team.

It would seem that Bruce and Caverly’s experiences make a strong case for dismissing goal setting altogether and taking what comes. Perhaps it’s better to plan for nothing and be prepared for everything.

Well, not quite.

Bruce and Caverly got what they were after, just not in the manner they envisioned. If their goals had not included the Olympics, they probably never would have been in a position to take advantage of the opportunities that came their way. Experienced swimmers and close observers of athletics are adamant about the importance of goals, particularly as competitive careers mature.

“Sports might have a lot of weaknesses, but one of its strengths is that they introduce you to the process of goal setting,” says Dan Doyle, executive director of the Institute for International Sport. “We have surveyed a lot of successful people – CEOs, governors, college presidents – most of whom played sports. One thing that came through loud and clear was that sports taught them how to set goals. They might not have been very good athletes, but they learned the importance of setting goals.”

However, the interplay of goals and athletic performance is more complicated than many of us are led to believe. Actually settling on the goal is the easy part. What goes on before and after is what requires most of the effort.

DEFYING THE LAWS OF STATISTICS

One staple of human nature is that we tend to overrate our abilities and characteristics. We view ourselves as better looking, more talented, smarter and more accomplished than we really are. Ask any group, whether it consists of athletes or business executives, of their stature among their peers, and nearly all defy the laws of statistics and rate themselves well above average.

Setting goals demands that we fight this urge and make a brutally honest assessment instead, particularly as it relates to our level of commitment. To paraphrase Nietzsche, when the why is right, just about any how can be overcome. Swimmers need to ask themselves just how committed they are. More important, are they swimming for the correct reasons?

A while back, California sports psychologist Darrell Burnett talked to a 14-year-old swimmer whom her mother had referred because she hadn't shown any noticeable improvement over the previous four years. When Burnett asked the daughter about what went through her mind when she fell behind in a race, she replied, "Oh my God, my mom will be so disappointed."

Burnett sees this reaction frequently, particularly among younger athletes. Instead of focusing on how they are doing, they worry about how they are perceived by their parents and coaches. This brand of motivation leads to goals that have all the substance of a puff of smoke.

Of course, a coach's job is to stretch a swimmer's expectations, to get him thinking he can accomplish more than he thought possible. Caverly's favorite quote from Richard Quick, who until recently was her coach at Stanford University, is "Believe in belief."

A laudable goal, but practical only if that belief is internalized by the swimmer, leaving open the possibility of formulating goals free of other people's hopes and desires. As Burnett says, you have to "look at your tasks and your personal best. You have to get away from what mom and dad think."

You also must accurately assess the depth of your motivation. Do you have the willpower it takes to put in all of the work required to make an Olympic team? To earn a college scholarship? To surpass a sectional standard?

"Let's face it," says Burnett, "It won't happen if you don't love what you are doing."

This doesn't mean an all-or-nothing approach to commitment, however, just that goals spring from motivation and not the other way around.

"Sport teaches us to respect our limits," says Doyle. "We learn the distinction between goals and dreams. Goals are attainable. Dreams oftentimes evaporate with reality. We might dream of a college scholarship in a certain sport, but you might come to realize that we don't want to put in that amount of effort because all of that work will take too much time from academics, or it will put our lives out of balance. But this is one of the great things about goal setting and sports. It allows for a lot of creativity. There are a lot of different levels we can shoot for depending on our level of commitment."

THE HARD LESSONS OF SETTING GOALS

In 2001, Jeff Rouse decided to return to competitive swimming with the ultimate goal of making the 2004 Olympic team. He knew he would have to fight a strong tide. He was 31, and he hadn't trained at the international level since he won two gold medals at the 1996 Olympics.

As if on autopilot, Rouse's goal-setting skills kicked into gear. The prize would be a spot on the Olympic team in the 100m backstroke. The intermediate goal would be qualifying for the Olympic Trials. Beyond that, he wanted to get as close as possible to his best time of 53.86, which set the world record in 1992. More realistically, he hoped to break 55.00.

Rouse learned a few hard lessons about goal setting during his tenure as the world's best backstroker. He was a lock to win an Olympic gold medal in 1992, only to have Canadian Mark Tewksbury improve his best 100m backstroke time by more than a second and out-touch Rouse. Lesson No. 1: Never set a goal that is so specific that you either succeed or fail.

"You want to set goals so that you can measure some level of success in everything you do," Rouse says. "Success should never be an absolute. If you are determined to hit a specific time, and you are a hundredth of a second off, you have essentially accomplished what you set out to do but you will be disappointed.

"Yes, I wanted to make the Olympic team last summer. I knew I set a very difficult standard, but there was no way I was going to walk away disappointed. My other goals were to find out how fast I could go and what it would be like to train at this level at my age. With that, I was pleased. I walked away very pleased."

Rouse finished sixth in the Trials with a time of 55.01. Along the way, he relearned a second valuable lesson about setting goals: The process is as fluid as water. No sooner are goals set than the natural ebb and flow of swimming performances demand adjustments. Goal setting isn't a discrete event, but a continuum of revisions.

SUCCESS THROUGH FAILURE

According to Burnett, the athletes who endure have the common trait of handling setbacks as a part of the developmental process. Whether success or failure, it's all data to be analyzed and regurgitated as new goals. Failure doesn't evoke emotional responses so much as dispassionate calculations.

"Setting the initial goal is important," Burnett says, "but more important is what you do when you don't reach that goal at a specific time. Even when in a slump, the really good athletes don't visualize what can go wrong. They visualize what they want to happen."

A coach once told Burnett that he shouted slower pre-race times to swimmers than they had actually recorded. The responses divided neatly into two categories. The better swimmers in the group, while surprised by times that were slower than anticipated, immediately slipped into an analysis mode, asking the coach what could be wrong and how they could correct it. The others either sulked or panicked.

This supports the old saw that success is determined more by how one handles failure.

"One of the biggest issues with goals relates to failure," says Doyle. "Things will go wrong. You can count on it. The question is, can you adapt? Will you adjust your goals? This is one of the major values of sports. It teaches you how to deal with disappointment."

After capturing a silver medal in the 400m free at the 2000 Olympics, Diana Munz set her mind on winning a gold medal in 2004. Going into the Trials last summer, she felt she was in the best shape of her life. Yet she struggled mightily at the meet. Seeded third in the 200 free, she didn't qualify for the semifinals. In the 400, she finished third in a time that was three seconds off of her best.

Munz's hopes for a gold medal rested with the 800 free, which she won at the Trials, though her time was off. She had some of her best training sessions ever just before the Olympics, yet she could do no better than third in the final. The winning time – 8:24.54 by Japan's Ai Shibata – was a half second off Munz's best.

Within a few months, Munz had to adjust her goals from swimming three events in Athens and winning multiple gold medals to waiting four years for the next Olympics.

"What can you do other than put on a smile and get back and try again?" she says. "I'm trying to use last summer as a motivator."

And the analysis has begun already.

"I think it was a matter of my taper being off," she says. "I trained to the best of my ability. I feel that will pay off at some point."