An important prerequisite of skill learning is **goal setting**. Considerable research in the field of motor behavior has shown that people who systematically set goals develop their skills more rapidly and perform them more consistently than individuals who don’t. There are two useful ways to conceptualize goals: as targets and as roadmaps. Goals are like targets because they provide athletes with a specific focus, and they are like roadmaps because they represent the paths athletes need to follow in order to achieve their ultimate destination—performance success.

When assisting your athletes with goal setting, keep the following four principles in mind. Effective goals are always:

- **Challenging**, 
- **Attainable**, 
- **Realistic**, and 
- **Specific**.

Notice that the first letter of each of those words forms the acronym **CARS**. As long as you remember this acronym, you will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of your athletes’ goal setting.
Goals should be challenging. Athletes are always more stimulated by goals that are challenging than by ones that are not. A challenging goal requires a consistent and concerted effort. Moreover, when athletes achieve a challenging goal, they are more motivated to set and strive for higher goals. Challenging goals are designed to encourage athletes to achieve something they have not achieved before or have not achieved as consistently as they would like to. For example, a challenging goal for many individual sport athletes is to set a personal best in an event (e.g., a cross country runner breaking her previous best time on her home course) or a particular activity (e.g., a tennis player increasing his first serve percentage from 50 to 55 percent).

Goals should be attainable. To achieve their goals, athletes must have the necessary time, opportunity for practice, equipment, and environmental conditions. A soccer player in her first year on the team may have the potential to score 10 goals in a season, but because she is probably going to get
Help your athletes state their goals in specific terms.

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less playing time than her more experienced teammates, she may not have the opportunity to do so. Similarly, a distance runner may be capable of setting a record in his event during a cross country meet, but extremely cold and windy conditions would make it unlikely for him to do so. Goals that are attainable allow athletes to experience success under any conditions, which in turn will motivate them to continue their efforts. For example, the goal of keeping the feet moving after initial contact with a defender is attainable for any running back in football, regardless of the number of opportunities the player has to carry the ball. Goals that are unattainable prevent athletes from receiving the kind of reinforcement they need to keep striving for goal achievement. A running back who sets a goal of rushing for more than 100 yards against an opponent that has the best rushing defense in the league is setting himself up for failure. Athletes who set attainable goals are more likely to keep striving for improvement, while those who set unattainable goals are more likely to be demotivated by repeated failure and want to quit.

**Goals should be realistic.** Effective goals are also realistic, although you need to remember that the word *realistic* is a relative term. What might be realistic for one athlete may not be realistic for another. To determine whether or not a particular athlete’s goals are realistic, you need a sense of that athlete’s past performance or present capabilities. For a basketball player who has never attempted a hook shot, the goal of making 8 out of 10 hook shots during the first practice session would be unrealistic. However, for an experienced player, 8 successful shots out of 10 attempts in a practice session and a 70 percent shooting percentage for the season might be very realistic.

**Goals should be specific.** Vague wording is a frequent problem for athletes when attempting to set goals. A volleyball player might say, “My goal is to be the best hitter on the team,” or a swimmer might say, “My goal is to win the race.” In each of these examples, the athlete sets a goal that is difficult to evaluate because it isn’t clear what behaviors are required for goal achievement. Examples of more specifically worded goals include to “increase my kill percentage from 60 to 70 percent and decrease my number of unforced errors from 10 to 7 in a three-set match” and to “lower my time in the 100-meter freestyle by 0.3 seconds.” Helping your athletes state their goals in specific terms lets them evaluate their progress more accurately. When they do this, athletes are more likely to see the value of their goals and less likely to abandon them.
Outcome Goals

The most common types of goals athletes set for themselves are **outcome goals**. Outcome goals represent the results an athlete hopes to achieve for a particular performance or over a period of time. Examples of outcome goals include winning a batting title in baseball, finishing no lower than third place in the high jump competition at a conference track meet, achieving a free throw percentage of 70 percent over the course of a basketball season, and swimming 100 meters in a time of 1:15 during a training session.

Outcome goals allow athletes to easily assess their skill improvements, and the goals can be quickly evaluated by using available statistics (e.g., batting average, free throw percentage, race times, and so on). However, the downside to many of these statistics is that they indicate little about the athlete’s actual performance. A baseball player’s batting average reveals nothing about how frequently the player made solid contact with the ball during a given number of at-bats. Similarly, a high jumper may not place among the top three competitors at a track meet, although her score may be a personal best. Thus, in addition to setting outcome goals, your athletes need to set goals that represent a more accurate assessment of their actual performance. As you might guess, these types of goals are called performance goals.

Performance Goals

**Performance goals** enable athletes to evaluate improvements in their own performance, irrespective of the outcomes they achieved or how they did relative to other athletes or opponents. A punter might set a performance goal of increasing his punting average from 38 to 43 yards over the course of a season. Or an 800-meter runner might set a performance goal of improving her previous best time by two seconds in the next meet.

Athletes can also use performance goals to evaluate improvements in the behaviors necessary for goal achievement. A basketball player might set a performance goal of visually focusing on the middle of the rim before each shot. In this case, the performance goal reflects the athlete’s desire to improve the mental skill of attention focusing. A high jumper might set performance goals of driving the lead leg across the body at takeoff and looking down the bar when attempting to clear it. In this example, the jumper’s first goal concerns a particular element under the athlete’s control. The downside of performance goals is that these behaviors are sometimes difficult to evaluate. How, for example, does the basketball player measure the quality of his visual focus on the rim or the high jumper measure the quality of the movement of her lead leg across her body? One way is to assign a subjective rating to the behavior itself.
For example, the basketball player might rate the quality of his visual focus on a scale from 1 to 3, with 1 being “unacceptable,” 2 being “acceptable,” and 3 being “outstanding.” The high jumper could do the same thing, except she might rate her form by watching a video of each of her attempts during a high jump competition.

In addition to encouraging your athletes to rate their own behaviors, you should rate their behaviors as well. You can then share your ratings with each athlete to see which aspects of performance you both believe are in need of particular attention. If you have access to portable video equipment, you could tape the athlete’s performance and then review it together to determine how well the athlete appears to be achieving the desired behavior (e.g., visual focus on the rim, lead leg crossing). If you don’t have access to video equipment, you will need to evaluate the athlete’s behavior during actual performance. In either case, you should position yourself (or the video camera) in a location that provides the best viewing perspective for evaluating the behavior.

Since goals are an individual matter, it is important to individualize the goal-setting process as much as possible. That way all your athletes will be more motivated to work on the things they need to improve in order to achieve success. Remember to use the CARS criteria when helping athletes set their goals, and encourage them to set performance goals as well as outcome goals. A baseball player, for example, might set an outcome goal of achieving a .300 batting average for the season and a performance goal of hitting the ball with the “fat” part of the bat. To achieve his performance goal, the player might also set mental goals of relaxing his body and focusing his attention on the seams of the approaching ball on every pitch. By setting goals that pertain to the process of performing, athletes become more aware of the keys to their success. Moreover, they are more likely to remain motivated when they don’t achieve their outcome goals. If the aforementioned player doesn’t get any hits during a practice or in a game but stays relaxed at the plate, maintains a sharp focus on the seams of the ball, and makes solid contact with the ball, he knows he is achieving the performance goals that will eventually help him achieve his outcome goal.

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