



# Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

*"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook*

Inside the Zone®

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## Players Don't Plan to Fail but They Do Fail to Plan The Importance of Goal Setting

By ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

Goal setting is a key part of the mental game in tennis. Rafael Nadal who was once referred to as the greatest #2 player in the history of the game, said this about goals: "Every morning I wake up with clear goals in my head, on how I need to improve my game. I want to become a better tennis player." By following precisely this strategy and reaching for his goals Nadal is now a six time grand slam winner and currently the #1 player in the world.

Think about it. If you were driving from New York to California, would you do it with out a map or global positioning system? The answer is no! Without proper direction you would get lost and never reach your destination. Similarly, if you wanted to reach a ranked position in tennis, setting goals and strategies to reach them would certainly make your trip a lot less bumpy! Goals provide motivation, focus and a clear direction for reaching the ultimate destination. Creating goals is worthwhile because it helps the player commit to one thing and not get driven off track by having many undecided alternatives.

Of equal importance to goals is a strategy. A strategy lays the ground work needed to strive for the goals. Without strategy goals will lay dormant because there is no plan to reach them. For instance, if a player's goal is to play #1 singles for their school team they must ask themselves, "What do I need to do to reach this goal? What are the steps I need to take?" In addition to setting goals and laying out strategy the secret that all successful athletes have is their own "Big Why." Just like a goal, the athlete must have a "Big Why." This is their own personal, intrinsic, and meaningful reason driving the person through the process despite setbacks, obstacles and failure and continually keeps them motivated for success and beyond.

For a goal to be important it must be personal and meaningful to the player trying to reach it. It is important that goals be created by the player and the coach. Additionally, parents should also sign off on the goals so they can best support the process. Goals should be flexible, adjustable and revisited after an agreed upon timetable. Often a player will exceed a goal, thus warranting another more challenging goal to be set. Or conversely, when a goal is not reached, a new goal should be made to replace the goal not met.

Goals should be challenging and realistic. This will provide an additional focus and sense of competition in chasing them. Goals must be message specific so the person knows what they are chasing and time specific which will provide a sense of urgency. Goals should be written down and can even be shared with teammates; this allows your team to help in their achievement. Lastly, goals are most meaningful when they are established for both the short and long term. Of course, they need to be continually monitored and adjusted based on the course of events.

Much like the "Big Why," an important aspect of goal setting is to determining where the player currently is at this point in time. This realistic and objective view will help the player become more aware of their situation and understand the distance to achieve their goals. Only through awareness can lasting change happen. This awareness will provide valuable feedback in terms of what needs to be accomplished to realistically reach the goal.

Years ago, many people only heard of outcome or results oriented goals. These goals were black and white and fell short in key areas. This is because the player does not have complete control over winning and losing.

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## ***Players Don't Plan to Fail but They Do Fail to Plan: The Importance of Goal Setting***

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Often times a player may play a great match only to lose. Conversely, a player could play a poor match and win. Outcome or results oriented goals also serve to split a player's attention, as they demand that a player be focused on the result while also playing the match. Consequently, a player's full attention is not on the game. The great Pete Sampras is a perfect example of someone that decided not to get caught up in outcome goals. As a junior he gave up his two handed backhand in favor of a one handed backhand. Because of this switch his junior ranking dropped while he got up to speed but in the long run it paid off. If he was only concerned with outcome goals he might never have persevered through the process of the switch.

A more common type of goal that is increasingly being used with today's players and, in conjunction with outcome goals, is process driven goals. These goals focus in on the steps that an athlete must take in order to reach the outcome goals. While an outcome goal may be to win the match, the process goal would ask: "What do I need to do to win? What steps must I take? And, how and when must I take them?" Process goals are in the athlete's control. Steffi Graf certainly shows an understanding of

the process as she states, "You can't measure success if you have never failed. My father taught me that if you really want to reach your goals, you can't spend any time worrying about whether you're going to win or lose. Focus only on getting better." When an athlete focuses in on the process driven goals the result will take care of itself.

It's clear that both outcome and process driven goals are important. I recommend that an athlete establish their outcome goals and then determine what the process goals will be to reach them. It is important to prioritize your goals as this will help you focus in on what's most important. Outcome goals are great when used to motivate athletes on the end goal. However, as noted Sport Psychologist Dr. Alan Goldberg says, "Once the competition starts, the outcome goal should be parked at the door and the athlete should only focus on the moment and the process of what they need to accomplish." Another way to look at this is to let go of any result expectations just play. Interestingly, research has validated that reaching process goals not only enhances performance but also reduces anxiety and builds a sense of confidence.



Rob Polishook, MA, CPC is the founder and director of Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group. As a Mental Training Coach he works with athletes and teams at the middle school, high school, national, college and professional levels. His work focuses on helping athletes and teams gain the mental edge, often the difference between winning and losing. Rob has spoken to athletes, coaches, parents both nationally at USTA, USPTA, ITA conferences and internationally conducted workshops and worked with top ranked juniors in India, Israel, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. He was awarded the 2008 USPTA - Eastern Division High School Coach of the Year award. Additionally he has published articles in national publications including USTA and USPTA publications. Rob can be contacted about his private or team consultation at 973-723-0314, [rob@insidethezone.com](mailto:rob@insidethezone.com), [www.insidethezone.com](http://www.insidethezone.com).