

Goal Setting Part I: The Road to Results

Well, it's mid-winter, the first race of the season is just around the corner and I'm thinking about how much better I can be this season. But what do I really mean by "better"? And what should I actually be doing between now and then to get "better"? This is the perfect time to set some goals.

If you're going to engage in goal setting, you should first know what constitutes an appropriate goal. The right kind of goal is one that provides direction and enhances motivation. It is very important to set attainable, yet challenging goals, and you want to stretch yourself to reach your goal. Easy goals do not require enough discipline to be meaningful and thus promote low motivation and result in minimal satisfaction. While small, specific goals can yield big results. All of this, however, presupposes that you know where you are and where you are headed: or, in the words of my great grandmother: "If you don't know where you're going, every road's the same."

At the end of each racing season I look back at my results and determine where I ranked against the field in each discipline (swim/bike/run). Triathlon/duathlon race results provide easy feedback for this calculation; and if, as an example, I find that my bike split is consistently slower against the field than my swim and run, then I will target that area for specific attention in my training for the upcoming season. It is important to note here that this biking goal needs to be set in terms of my personal training focus (to build more strength on hills), not in terms of how I finish versus my competition (to make the top ten at nationals). Last year, for example, I actually did focus on improving my bike split, reasoning that this would propel me into the upper echelons of my age group. The good news was that I realized significant gains in my personal times. The tougher news was that some of my competition was apparently also looking to improve their bike splits and did so with (in some cases) better results than I. As a result my overall standing in my age group did not improve as significantly as I had hoped. The lesson here is: You can only control yourself! The reality is my goal setting resulted in appreciable improvements in my personal performance, which will bear even more fruit in the years to come.

Just as races are won or lost somewhere on the hills or windy flats in the middle of the competition, so seasons are made or broken in the specific daily workouts leading up to them. Because we don't all have endless hours to focus on training, it is key that we set goals to keep us focused so that we use our limited time more productively. Any time that you can spend now looking back and analyzing this past season will prove invaluable as you plan forward into 2003. So the first key in effective goal setting is to determine where you are.

In Goal Setting, Part II, I will discuss different types of goals and strategies for setting them.

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