Goal Setting and Competition:
A Reaction to Hall and Byrne

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Goal setting in industrial, organizational, and academic environments has consistently indicated that specific hard goals produce significantly better performance than easy goals, "do your best" goals, or no goals (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Tubbs, 1986). However, results of the effectiveness of goal setting in sport and exercise have produced equivocal findings, with some studies reporting positive effects (e.g., Barnett & Stanicek, 1979; Burton, 1989; Hall, Weinberg, & Jackson, 1987; Weinberg, Bruya, Longino, & Jackson, 1988) and others finding no differences (Barnett, 1977; Hollingsworth, 1975; Weinberg, Bruya, & Jackson, 1985; Weinberg, Bruya, Jackson, & Garland, 1987).

In a recent paper, Hall and Byrne (1988) argue that one of the variables confounding the results of goal setting and sport performance (particularly in field settings) is social comparison (i.e., competition). They note that in Weinberg et al.'s (1985) study, 83% of the do-your-best subjects spontaneously set their own goals. This of course reduces experimental control, thus possibly concealing the effects of goal setting on performance. Hall and Byrne argue that the setting of goals by the do-your-best group might be due to how these individuals interpreted the performance situation. That is, if these subjects perceived that the situation was high in evaluation potential and social comparison, they may have begun to compete with other subjects who were setting goals by setting some goals of their own. Consequently, Hall and Byrne (1988) suggested that to more accurately assess the motivational effects of goals on performance, the potential for social comparison and competition needs to be reduced.

Along these lines, Hall and Byrne conducted a field study that attempted to exercise more rigorous control over the social comparison aspect of goal setting by minimizing between-group and within-group competition. To accomplish
this goal, subjects enrolled in weight training classes were assigned to one of three specific goal-setting conditions along with a control do-your-best condition. Thus classes, rather than subjects, were randomly assigned to experimental conditions that Hall and Byrne (1988) note are a potential weakness in the design. However, it was selected in order to reduce the social comparison and competition by the control group with subjects in other conditions. This would presumably reduce the likelihood of subjects in experimental treatment groups encouraging subjects in the control group to set goals. Results indicated that two of the groups assigned specific, difficult goals recorded significantly higher levels of performance than did the control do-your-best group, with the third experimental group assigned difficult goals approaching significance.

As a result of the above findings, Hall and Byrne (1988) conclude that by controlling social comparison, their study offered partial support for the hypothesis that individuals with specific difficult goals will outperform those given do-best instructions. However, they also note that despite the fact that stringent efforts were made to adequately control for competition between subjects, only limited success was achieved. Specifically, questionnaire results revealed that over 55% of the control group spontaneously set goals and 56% of all subjects indicated that they had engaged in competition at some point during the task.

In taking a closer look at the methodology of Hall and Byrne (1988), another potential limitation in their design surfaces. That is, when randomly assigning each class to a different goal-setting condition, there was also a confound in that there were different instructors for the goal-setting and control conditions. Thus differences between the specific goal-setting conditions and the do-best condition might be explained by differences in teaching style, motivation of the teacher, personality of the teacher, and so forth. The purpose of the present investigation was to replicate Hall and Byrne’s attempt to control for competition effects by randomly assigning classes to goal-setting conditions but keeping the teacher constant for all groups. This will allow for a cleaner test of the effects of specific goals on performance while attempting to control for competition (i.e., social comparison) effects.

### Method

**Subjects and Design**

Subjects were 44 males and 41 females enrolled in three fitness courses at a 4-year university. However, due to missing data, 9 subjects were dropped from the study, leaving a final sample of 41 males and 35 females. Classes met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday each week. Each class (which was taught by the same teacher) was randomly assigned to one of three goal setting conditions: (a) moderately hard goals—improve by 30 sit-ups (N=31), (b) very hard goals—improve by 45 sit-ups (N=23), and do-your-best goals (N=22). All goal-setting treatment conditions were similar to those described by Weinberg et al. (1988), with the exception that each class rather than each subject was randomly assigned to experimental conditions. This was done to keep all aspects of the two studies similar except for attempting to control for social comparison effects in the present investigation. The task (3-minute sit-up) and procedures, including postexperimental questionnaires, were similar to those of Hall and Byrne (1988).