Goal Setting in Sport and Exercise: A Reaction to Locke

Robert Weinberg
Miami University

Daniel Weigand
University of North Texas

Over the past 25 years, goal setting as a motivational technique to enhance performance and productivity has received consistent, reliable, and robust support from the industrial/organizational literature with over 400 studies indicating that specific, challenging goals lead to higher levels of task performance than easy goals, no goals, or do-best goals (Locke & Latham, 1990a). Although sport and exercise professionals (coaches, teachers, exercise leaders) have long been using goal setting to enhance performance, little empirical research had been conducted prior to 1985 to test the effectiveness of goals for enhancing sport performance. However, in their seminal article, Locke and Latham (1985) state that “tasks performed in organizational settings and in the laboratory have much in common with sport activities in that both involve mental and physical actions directed toward some end” (p. 206). Thus, they argue that goal setting should work equally as well in sport settings. In fact, they feel that goal setting could work even better in sport settings since the measurement of an individual’s performance is typically easier in sports than it is in organizational settings. With this in mind, they proposed 10 different hypotheses based on the findings in the organizational/industrial literature which they felt would be applicable to sport environments.

At the time of Locke and Latham’s (1985) paper, there was a dearth of goal-setting research in sport and exercise settings with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Barnett, 1977; Barnett & Stanicek, 1979; Hollingsworth, 1975). Their paper helped spur a great deal of research in the late 1980s and into the 1990s that investigated the effects of goal setting in sport and exercise. However, unlike the consistent and replicable results found in organizational settings (see Locke & Latham, 1990b, for a review), the findings concerning the effectiveness of goals in sport and exercise settings have been equivocal and inconsistent (see Weinberg, 1992, for a review). Specifically, some studies have supported the effectiveness of goals in enhancing performance (e.g., Hall, Weinberg, & Jackson, 1987; Tenenbaum, Weinberg, Pinchas, Elbaz, & Bar-Eli, 1991; Weinberg, Bruya, Longino, & Jackson, 1988) whereas others have found no differences between specific-goal groups and control/do-your-best groups (e.g., Weinberg, Bruya, Jackson, & Garland, 1987; Weinberg, Bruya, Garland, & Jackson, 1990; Weinberg, Bruya, & Jackson, 1985, 1990).

Robert Weinberg is with the Department Physical Education, Health, and Sport Studies at Miami University, Oxford, OH 45056. Daniel Weigand is with the Department of Psychology at the University of North Texas, Denton, TX 75203.
Recently, Locke (1991) argued that the inconsistent findings in the goal-setting research conducted in sport and exercise settings (especially the studies obtaining null results) are due to methodological flaws rather than the goal-performance relationship might be somewhat different in these settings than in the organizational/industrial environment. Although Locke specifies seven different problems that have plagued the goal-setting research in sport and exercise, he notes three specific areas in which the major flaws occurred: (a) manipulation failure of "do-best" condition, (b) measurement of personal goals, and (c) making specific goals difficult. Locke goes on to highlight the methodological shortcomings in each area, providing examples from the empirical goal-setting literature in sport and exercise to substantiate his points.

Locke (1991) makes a number of valid points that future goal-setting researchers should heed to improve our methodology. We agree with Locke that there have definitely been methodological concerns plaguing the goal-setting research in sport and exercise. However, we would like to take issue with Locke's view that all null findings can be simply explained away as due to methodological shortcomings.

After conducting 22 experiments using over 1,200 subjects, we believe that it is overly simplistic to argue that inconsistent and equivocal findings can all be attributed to methodological and procedural issues. It would appear more likely that methodological problems are only in part responsible for the differences in findings between the organizational and sport settings. Specifically, we believe that the motivation of the participants as well as the type of tasks in sport and exercise settings are different from those in industrial/organizational settings. For example, subjects in many of the goal-setting studies in sport and exercise voluntarily chose to be in specific physical-activity classes or activities; thus, their motivation to perform physical fitness tasks (e.g., sit-ups) would be expected to be higher than subjects performing ordinary tasks in the industrial area (e.g., typing, card sorting, letter cancellation).

In addition, sport and physical activity tasks typically have very salient feedback that cannot be manipulated as it can in industrial settings. Because feedback is an important mediating factor in goal-setting effectiveness, this distinction between the industrial and sport literatures is important. It is these differences, along with some methodological shortcomings, that have produced the equivocal goal-setting findings in sport and exercise settings. We would now like to address some of the specific comments and criticisms of the sport psychology goal-setting literature, focusing on the three areas which Locke feels have been most problematic.

1. **Manipulation failure of "do-best" condition.** Locke correctly notes that many goal-setting studies conducted in sport and exercise settings have had difficulty preventing subjects in control, or "do-best," conditions from spontaneously setting goals on their own. In those studies that have actually assessed spontaneous goal setting, anywhere from 16.7% (Boyce, 1990b) to 88% (Weinberg, Fowler, Jackson, Bagnall, & Bruya, 1991, Experiment 2) of subjects in control conditions reported setting specific goals on their own. Locke also aptly noted that in several studies in which control subjects set spontaneous goals, no significant differences between specific-goal conditions and control conditions were found (e.g., Barnett, 1977; Weinberg, Bruya, Garland, & Jackson, 1990; Weinberg Bruya, & Jackson, 1985, 1990).