

The Art of Goal Setting: A Tale of Doing Sport Psychology in Professional Football

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The presence of sport psychologists in football is still a recent occurrence and has come about thanks to the improved education received by the coaching staff. However, sport psychology in football is still viewed upon with skepticism, as problem solving. One of the most common psychological strategies is goal setting. Nowadays it is hard to imagine clubs or players who do not use such strategies. In general, the correct application of goal setting principles provides a strong foundation for designing a goal-setting program. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the “science” of setting goals, and the ability of the sport psychologist practicing the “art” and process of setting goals. This case study involved four professional football players, from a team in the highest league in Denmark. We collected data through questionnaires, interviews and observations during a year. The results shows, that the “art” of goal setting is a dynamic, ever changing, complex phenomenon, the method itself has to be flexible, in order to search for new knowledge in a goal setting process in sport psychology consulting underlining that the individual sessions and success is socially constructed and created between sport psychologist and player.

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The presence of sport psychologists in football is still a recent occurrence and has come about thanks to the improved education received by the coaching staff. Nevertheless, similar to what happened years ago with physical trainers (Coaches were originally responsible for the physical aspects of training), many coaches remain reluctant and skeptic to accept and include the sport psychology in football (Johnson et al., 2011; Nesti, 2010). Nowadays, physical trainers are regarded as an essential part of football teams and no other professional would be considered for this specialized task. Likewise, psychology finds itself in a similar situation, only that while physical trainers work on a tangible and valued aspect of training (physical dimensions – hard science), psychologists prepare a less objective and more abstract area of their development (psychological dimensions – soft science) (Dosil, 2006). A plausible explanation for this barrier might also be the fact that football is such a widespread phenomenon, well known by many people, who in turn, consider themselves capable of analyzing all that occurs within its realms. These circumstances have a negative influence on the incorporation of sport psychologists in football, with the common phrase being: “Just another pocket philosophy”. The concept of a sport in which structural changes are hard to establish has meant an absence of the sport psychology and, in the majority of cases, both coaches and players have been ignorant of its existence, there remains unclear descriptions of services in sport psychology, SPCs (sport psychology consultants) are viewed as problem fixers and problems integrating SPCs with the team (Dosil, 2006; Larsen et al., 2012; Nesti, 2010; Johnson et al., 2011).

One of the most common psychological strategies is goal setting. Nowadays it is hard to imagine clubs or players who do not use such strategies. Nevertheless, research so far has concluded, that the use of psychological strategies is difficult for clubs and players to integrate (Johnson et al., 2011; Larsen et al., 2012). In a case study made in a professional football club, the results showed that the players had difficulty in making their individual goal setting effective, which could indicate a lack of organization, knowledge or proficiency in the area (Larsen, Alfermann, Henriksen & Christensen, 2013). We are familiar with the fact that a thorough integration of goal setting strategy has a beneficial effect on performance. Several meta-analyses showed that roughly 90% of the studies with goal setting had a powerful and continuous effect on behavior (Carron & Hausenblas, 2005; Weinberg, Butt & Knight, 2001; Weinberg & Gould, 2007). In the light of this knowledge, and the fact that other sports seem more interested in using qualified psychological methods and find them useful (Henriksen et al., 2011, Abbott & Collins, 2004), the detainment of these barriers between professional football and sport psychology seems to be an obstacle for further improvement. Knowing that goal setting is a well-known and widespread

phenomenon, we believe that, putting the subject back on the agenda, with a scientific program, might be one way of reducing this gap.

Therefore the aim of this study is twofold. First, the aim is to unfold the effects and benefits of a goal-setting program on the development and learning of a professional football player in training and competition. Second, how can in-depth insight into doing sport psychology aid practitioners in bridging the gap between the science and the art of setting goals?

Review of literature

Goal setting theory had its ultimate roots in the simplest type of introspection, the kind that can be performed by anyone. Furthermore, also based on introspective evidence, it unapologetically assumes that goals (ideas of future, desired end states) play a causal role in action. The term goal is defined as the generic concept that encompasses the essential meaning of terms such as intention, task, deadline, purpose, aim, end and objective. All of these terms have the same element in common, that there is something that the person wants to achieve. Goals are a cardinal attribute of the behavior of living organisms (Locke & Latham, 1990). In psychology, it is proposed that actions have a cognitive structure, which can be divided in three phases: anticipation, realization and interpretation. These phases attend to each function and are separated in cognitive processes, which are determinant to each phase. Goal setting is situated in the anticipation phase. In this phase, the ideas are developed and topics, intentions, expectations and goals, which constitute if an action is carried out and how the course of action is evaluated (Stelter, 1999). Goals affect choice by leading people to direct attention to, and take action with, goal-relevant activities while ignoring non-goal relevant activities (Locke & Latham, 1985; Locke & Latham 1990). Carron and Hausenblas (2005) use four relevant mechanisms of motivation in which goals: 1) directs attention and action, 2) mobilize energy, 3) affects practice duration and 4) develop strategies of action. Ever since goal-setting theory was proposed, hundreds of studies have confirmed its main hypotheses and the effectiveness of goal setting. In particular, it has been shown that specific and sufficiently challenging goals are the key to increased performance. Explanations for why goal setting is effective include that it directs attention, mobilizes effort, and enhances persistence and leads to new strategies. One aspect of goal setting, that the original theory excluded, which later has been argued to be of relevance, is goal proximity. This refers to the closeness of the goal over time, and in particular, the distinction between short- and long-term goals. Research has suggested that the addition of short-term goals as opposed to long-term goals alone, improves the effectiveness of goal setting.

Yet there is little evidence on this, but it seems reasonable to assume that it is worth including both, given that there is little cost in doing so (Shaw, Gorely & Corban, 2005).

Having proved its worth in the organizational context, sport researchers began to investigate the effectiveness of goal setting in sport and exercise settings. Here the evidence has been less compelling. Goal setting does appear to work and is widely applied to athletic performance. However, research shows its effects to be less evident than in the organizational context. Meta-analyses have shown it to have modest effect sizes of around .34, compared with the effect sizes from .42 to .80 for industrial studies. One argument is that athletes and exercise participants are more likely than workers to be operating at, or close to, their performance ceiling, leaving less scope for goal setting to have effect. Another related claim is that people in sport and exercise contexts are more highly motivated to excel than industrial staff. It could also be that there are methodological difficulties in the experimental research. For example, it has been suggested that athletes in the “do your best” condition inadvertently subvert the experimental process by spontaneously setting their own goals. Another methodological problem is that sample sizes are smaller in sport-related research. This could be part of the reason why there have been more failures to demonstrate significant differences between goal setting theoretical applications and “do your best” groups (Locke & Latham, 1985; Locke & Latham, 1990; Weinberg & Gould, 2007; Shaw et al., 2005). Furthermore when looking closer at the effects of goal setting in sport, Kylo and Landers, (1995) found some empirically inconsistencies through a meta-analysis of 36 studies in sport and exercise settings. Among those, they found that neither improbable nor difficult goals have an effect on performance. Only moderate goals - in which the possibility of attainment is in the range of 10 to 50 percent – are effective in a sport setting.

The ‘art’ of goal setting

Although the empirical goal setting research in sport and exercise, has given us a better understanding of what makes goals more effective, we really have not found out much about the process of goal setting, including how people set goals, which goals are more important to people, what barriers impede goal attainment, and how different types of individuals differ in their goal setting (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). Goals direct performers’ attention to important elements of skills that the performer may not normally attend to. For example, when Weinberg and Gould (2007) mention that football players set specific goals to improve their games, research concentrates on the isolated skills that need improving such as penalty shots, corner kicks, movement of the ball, and winning 50/50 balls (Locke & Latham, 1985; Locke & Latham, 1990; Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

These examples do not include influences from the outside world and thereby neglects the interaction with others. Early studies found in 395 cases that goal setting is effective and has a positive effect on performance when it involves isolated skills (Locke & Latham, 1990), but do not reveal how goal setting affect complex skills, which involve interactions in a complex game as football. In a football context, total isolation is very rare and therefore isolated skills and goal setting are not directly useful in invasion games as football. Invasion games are games, wherein the teams have a common space in which the players at any time have to relate to a diversity of information and at the same time solve tasks, which rarely are the same as former solved tasks. It is characteristically in invasion games that the person playing the ball at any time can be attacked – therefore these games are termed inter-active. Examples of invasion games are: Basketball, football, hockey/floorball, handball and rugby (Halling, Andersen, Agergaard & Worm, 2005). Applying goal setting in football, demands integration of complex skills that implies both interactions as well as isolated skills. Thus, by generally focusing on these isolated forms of skills, the goal setting process does not include strategies or competences themselves, which are only seen as an added bonus. In general, the correct application of goal setting principles provides a strong foundation for designing a goal-setting program. Nevertheless, as Weinberg and Gould (2007) also note, research may provide the “science” of setting goals, but only the individual performer or sport psychologist can practice the “art” of setting goals. In essence, they believe the effectiveness of any goal-setting program is dependent on the interaction between individuals, systems and the situation in which the individuals are placed (Luhmann, 2000; Weinberg & Gould, 2007). We believe that the main problem with the current goal setting theory is, that the “art” and the process of goal setting, is not viewed upon as “science” itself and thereby as something that cannot be subject for research. Therefore the objective of study is to unfold and provide insight into a long-term program aimed at showing the process and how to apply goal setting in applied sport psychology.

Method

Participants

This case study involved four professional football players, from a team in the highest league in Denmark. In all, we contacted eight players and four agreed to participate in the program. The players had an average age of 21 years when we initiated contact in 2004. Jonathan: 22 years – attacker/midfielder. David: 23 years - defender. Brian: 20 years - midfielder and Kenneth: 19 years – midfielder (all names are fictional). All of the players had played for the National Team of Denmark at different levels (U21, U19, and U18). Previous to the program one

of the players had joined the team from another European country. The three other players had played the main part of their youth in the present club.

Procedure

Before we initiated the program, we spent about one month to collecting information about the club and the individual players. At the first meeting with each player, written information about the content of the study was presented and each of the players volunteered to participate in the study. The players were informed that this was a case study and that the obtained information would be used in this study. They were also given verbal information stating, that the collected data were for research purposes only, so that procedures to secure anonymity and confidentiality were employed. In simple terms, we presented the main purpose of the study. It was important to secure that the players had a positive attitude towards the study. Therefore, we asked for each player's opinion and purpose about the participation in the goal setting study.

Design

Preparation phase. The study involved national coaches (U21 & U19) and used their opinion about the individual player's strength and weaknesses. Despite a background in sport science, the opinion of the national coach had a great deal of value for the player due to their different (from our profession) and professional point of view. The observations and interviews with the national coaches constituted the basis of the first conversation with each player, in which we established the actual status and wishes for development. The preparation phase lasted two months; one month before the program phase (observations, interviews with national coaches, first meeting) and one month in the beginning of the program phase (first conversation).

In many ways, the first conversation constituted the foundation of the goal setting process. Through predetermined questions, the procedure secured that the players mentioned their social background, experiences of strengths and weaknesses and furthermore how these could be developed into process and outcome goals.

Observation phase. We observed the players in practice and selected matches during approximately three months. To establish a general view of each player and his life context we watched the players closely for three months. The observations consisted of selected matches and practice sessions. In our observations, we observed if he worked with his goals in order to learn and

improve performance. These observations were used to create a general knowledge of each player's strengths and weaknesses and give feedback in conversations.

Intervention phase. Data were collected through individual conversations, which lasted, between 45 and 90 minutes. In total 72 conversations were collected from the players during a period of approximately 12 months from 29 October 2004 – 13 December 2005. We conducted 21 conversations with Jonathan, 12 conversations with David, 18 conversations with Brian and 21 conversations with Kenneth. The first conversations were semi-structured (Kvale, 2000) which allowed the players some freedom to discuss issues that were personally important to them and their career development. Within the semi-structured format open-ended questions were used to yield in-depth responses about the player's experiences, perceptions and knowledge. Using the semi-structured approach, we had a set of questions on a schedule, but the interviewer is guided by the schedule rather than dictated by it (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the aim of the semi-structured conversation is to: "Try to enter, as far as possible, the psychological and social world of the respondent... the respondent shares more closely in the direction the interview takes, and the respondent can introduce an issue the investigator has not thought of" (Smith & Osborn, 2003 p. 57). These steps helped ensure that the responses were player-generated and represented their sense of psychological reality (Smith, 1995). The interview guide was based on the main themes arising from Locke and Latham's (1990) goal setting theory.

In addition, the questions worked as a psychological contract, which formed the foundation of what the player could expect from the conversation. These questions were used during each conversation but not in predestined situations. The questions were discussed and related to the players' own experiences compared and related to each question. In the beginning, our main focus in the conversations was to create a feeling of ownership from the players towards the development and goal settings. To create an ownership we considered it as vital for the player that he decided in which direction he wanted to move. This particular notion is not in every term consistent with traditional goal setting theory. But it was in our best interest that it could and would work better this way. In the second conversation, we gave them a visual goal setting model and hereafter we discussed the appearance and application of the model. We wished for a visual effect by studying the goals each day, for example placing the model on the fridge or desk.

Evaluation phase. The final evaluation of the study was conducted 10 February 2006. The frame of evaluation was conducted as an outsider witness evaluation (White, 2006) to make sure that we did not guide the player in a certain

direction. Outsider witness structures are usually constituted of multi-layered tellings and retellings of the stories of people's lives (Encl. 6). When the outsider witnesses are in the audience position, they are strictly in that position. When the people whose lives are at the center of attention are in the audience position, they are strictly in that position. Through these telling's and retellings, many of the alternative themes or counter-plots of people's lives are thickened, and the stories of people's lives become linked through these themes, and through the values, purposes, and commitments expressed in them (White, 2006).

Presentation of data

The goal of this paper is to give the reader a sense of one of the player's story of development including choices and reflections. Furthermore, we want to give the reader an idea of the sport psychology consultants (SPC) influence in each process and thus the tale presented in the results are used to describe the thoughts and observations of the conversations. Our goal was to write our selves into this study, by putting the "I" back in the writing and the role of the SPC and the process of doing sport psychology. Sparkes (2002) suggests the "confessional tale" as an alternative to other positivistic tales, in which the author is more visible. Being confessional means writing about the problems and challenges we have met during the study and thereby practical research knowledge is not forgotten because the author has no interest in covering up problems and flaws, which occurred during the process (Sparkes, 2002). A similar study by Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) support these notions and describe that writing from a first person perspective seeks to illuminate aspects of practice that might be 'hidden' from the spotlight of (scientific) evaluation.

Results

In the following we will present one of the four programs and goal setting processes we conducted with the professional players. We are not able to unfold all tales. However in the following we will describe one of the programs during one year. In this description we are able to go in-depth and provide insight into one of the goal-setting processes with one of the players revealing the art of applying and working goal setting in applied sport psychology. Moreover the considerations being made by the authors and SPCs are being told when working with professional athletes. The quote of the player's are marked by *italic* and we adopt a first person writing style through the result section.

A story of making the transition to professional level

I am sitting in a conference room talking to Kenneth. He is 19 years old and has already established himself in the U21 national team. During a preceding conversation with the youth national trainer he mentioned Kenneth as an up coming young player from the same club as Jonathan, David and Brian. In the first place I arranged a meeting with the coach to gain knowledge about the other players' strength and weaknesses but as the trainer mentioned Kenneth, I perceived it as a chance to involve one more player in the study and asked if it was okay to have a chat with him? Now I sat listening to Kenneth. Shortly after I informed him about the study and asked of his willingness to participate, he started talking,

“Yes, interesting, because when you say that we have to talk about many things and goal setting... then you start thinking about what it is that I am good and bad at... and normally you are probably not used to think about such during the week”.

He continued talking about previous considerations about using a sport psychologist to develop further in this area. Besides this he had some experience with goal setting from the national team, but according to Kenneth, the integration had been poor and it was similar to an evaluation instead of an action demanding initiative, which made this study even more interesting to him. My first impression of the player was positive and he showed a genuine interest from the beginning of the study and I was surprised of his ability to reflect upon his own actions. Five minutes later when Kenneth left the conversation in favor of a massage, I had the feeling that a relation between him and me was positive and easy to establish further. I was very happy that he wanted to participate in the study and exited whether this genuine interest would result in an even more open relation regarding new initiatives. Despite these early sensations, I had no idea, that they would be so greatly confirmed during the entire study. Two weeks later I once again sat in front of Kenneth and listened. This time it was in the canteen of the clubs practice facilities, which should become our regular place to meet. Before this meeting, I had been anxious and actually expected that I should stick to the plan and stick to the questions I had prepared. But once again he carefree started to talk and it made me more relaxed. We started out talking about his earlier years in football. Kenneth told me that he was eight years old when he started playing football. One of his friends dragged him along and in the first year he was the top scorer, which amazed both friends and parents. During his elaboration I especially noticed three aspects. First and foremost he emphasized that the present club was the only one he had ever played for. As he said,

“I am a true life member of this club. And there are not many of them.”

I thought that the pride in this remark was probably due to the fact that the club was the wealthiest in the country and often brought senior national team players into the team and this made it even more difficult to break through from the youth teams. Secondly it is very rare that a talent like him, since the age 15, besides representing different youth national teams, and being on contract with the club; had been to lower secondary boarding school, commercial secondary school including a three months stay in Australia. He had no doubt, that it was very positive for him as a person and player, that his parents had pushed for other interests than football,

“I am glad that I have other interests... in that way it is not all about football and what can you do besides it? I think it has been very rewarding in many ways, amongst these the stay at the boarding school gave me a lot of confidence.”

Finally I noticed his ability to reflect upon different elements of the football culture, and as he tells,

“Before I joined the team I asked the assistant coach, “what do the other players do”... then he looked at me and said, I don’t know.”

He continues and to his own surprise mentions that those players who have children and a family keep to themselves, while the rest watches TV, DVD, PlayStation and spend a lot of money on shopping and such. I listened curiously, as it in my opinion was interesting knowledge regarding Kenneth as a person and the systems he was a part of. I choose to appreciate him for his original way of perceiving the life of football. After this we switched to more serious matters, his perception of football and future goals.

A shared goal setting process. I had a good feeling during the conversation in the light of my given situation; a new and exiting experience with a gifted talent. Maybe the good feeling was due to the fact that I liked him as a person. He seemed sympathetic, intelligent and curious, characteristics that made me believe in him and us. This sensation gives me courage to challenge him in the conversation as we approach his strengths and weaknesses in relation to goal setting. Referring to his first strength – his passing game – he emphasizes,

“I lose very few balls passing. I think that almost all of my passing’s are well played to my teammates.”

He quickly emphasize that his favorite position because of this is central midfielder. He perceives himself as strongest in this position, for now and in the future. He sees himself as a sort of “garbage man” good at keeping the ball and making safe passes, being more defensive than offensive. I challenge him by asking him about the picture he uses about himself, a garbage man. He compares some different styles of playing and concludes that he would like to be more offensive in the future. I do think, that he is protecting himself as he says,

“It suits me well to lie in the middle running in different free positions and playing the ball... well I am not the type of player who is supposed to make mistakes, or do crazy dribbles and so on.”

I continue to challenge this viewpoint and ask, starting from my own conviction about the importance to work with and improve strengths, in this case passing, how he could improve even more? He answers that recently he had noticed, due to some practice on his own initiative, that he had improved a lot, but also refers to the fact that it is probably due to the high skill level of his teammates and thereby practice. However, I ask if it might be possible that it has something to do with repetition of a certain element? Yes, he answers, but he adds, that he has not thought that much about it and furthermore, does not believe that passing is a skill that you can improve like shooting with the left foot. It is interesting that I am able to challenge his strategies and competences with questions in my first conversation. Not surprisingly he has not made any specific considerations besides this, but nevertheless he is able to reflect upon this and he has noticed his own progress in passing, which I think is a positive sign. Besides this I notice some other things in his statements. First and foremost it does not surprise me that Kenneth does not think that his ability to pass can be improved. Passing is not just a technical skill but also based on relational skills. A fine example of how competences in the world of football are not subject for revision. Secondly, I ponder upon his description of himself as a garbage man, as a controversy between not wanting to fail and wanting to be more offensive. Nevertheless I change the subject and ask about the physical dimensions of the game. He mentions that he earlier on was too nice and not aggressive enough, but he has experienced that he plays better when he plays with power,

“Maybe I have found out for myself that after five to ten minutes in a game I have to tackle someone hard or just go in there and get beaten up”.

We discuss the subject further and it seems difficult for both of us to narrow the understanding down through linguistics. I use the term arousal and ask if it sometimes is too low in this situation? He likes the word and acknowledges that it sometimes is the case. It is obvious that it is something that we cannot solve

in this conversation and he finishes of the subject by stating that it is something that he gradually is becoming better at. The conversation has apparently made a path to talk about the psychological area, as he continues and talks about weaknesses in his game with his heading being a problem. As he says,

“It is just psychological, I think... in the period of late I simply have been afraid to go into duels which involve heading and maybe hit me, I do not know how I can resolve it”.

I pay attention to his psychological cause and explanation and repeat this, “you say it is psychological?” He confirms this questions and I ask about whether he knows when it occurred? I have a sense about being in dire straits and do not know how to solve such a problem. Instead I choose to indicate the problem as interesting mostly in the sense of covering up the challenge ahead of us. I turn the conversation towards his arousal as a possible solution and the subject subsides in favor of discussing performance in general. I give some examples on how he could work with it on a more conscious level. He is very positive regarding these initiatives and with curiosity in his voice mentions how he sometimes feels ready to perform and sometimes not, and furthermore how it affects his game and aggression in very different ways. We start focusing on physical and technical aspects. In this relation he accentuates his flexibility and speed, which are physical areas he should work with and secondly a more technical aspect, his ability to score. In continuation of the conversation of the garbage man I challenge him regarding scoring. He starts laughing when I mention his possibility to score more often. In the situation I think that it might be the fact that he perceives the challenge as too big. At first it also seems that there is a big challenge behind this goal, as he says,

“Maybe it is a good idea to be more offensive on the pitch at some moments... it is nice to be able to have a good shot, right”.

I sense some insecurity and challenge his expression, “To be able to be offensive and score goals you have to seek it and try it during practice and in the matches when it is possible.” Exactly he says. I notice his next statement regarding his perception whether he has improved after getting used to the tone and culture and that the other players has accepted him more and do not criticize him when taking shots at goal. I suddenly think about a positive example observed from the previous practice and emphasize the coach’s positive words. And I add the statement,

“He might want to see that you are more willing to take risks”.

Kenneth answers,

“Yeah, when you get to that end of the pitch”.

Besides my experience that my observations make a positive impact and maybe appreciate the player, he appears as a young, open and very talented player. But also a person with some insecurity. We finish this long and interesting goal setting process by discussing the long-term goals. Interestingly and honestly he talks about his dreams in this way,

“Everybody else would say a foreign league but so far it is too far away for me ... I do not know if I dare, I do not dare, I am too realistic to say that I have to be in a foreign league in four years. Instead it would be great if I could be a profile on the team”.

I acknowledge his way of dealing with such issues and use the word realistic. Thereby I do not pursue his description of not daring but try to make the current goal more specific. In his own words he describes it as a characteristic for him to do things in small steps,

“Nice and easy, focusing on the next goal”.

I have a good feeling with the next long term goals which we set, regarding his process, towards becoming a profile in the club and on the U-21 national team.

Short term changes?

“It is funny to make it visual like this and see the result of what we discussed in the last conversation... it gives a good general view”

says Kenneth, right after I introduce him his short term and long term goals I have watched one of his matches and ask how it went? Besides the fact that he is surprised that I saw the match, he was satisfied with his effort, but also mentions,

“Maybe I would like to dare some more in my turns, to turn in some other and more challenging ways. Turning towards the opposition’s goal”.

I ask something more about it and we add attacking first touch to his goal scheme. Once again I experience it as a mutual and positive process and we end it, with shared words and goals, we both understand the meaning of. I underline some observations regarding attacking first touches from the match in which he passed his direct opponent, “It seems like you got them in you!” Kenneth points out,

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“Yes I do.” But adds, “It is breaking your usual psychological boundaries in some sort... it is something I learned on the national team”. What, I ask curiously. “On the national team you cannot make mistakes... they almost solely look for mistakes”.

Once again, this confirms my recent beliefs, that being brave and risking challenges is not natural for him. We do not discuss it further that day. For the first time Kenneth is filling out the scale questions regarding his work with the goals, concentration, motivation, development and so on. His amount of work is only medium but he feels that he has progressed regarding being more offensive and scoring. I ask whether he has been more focused?

“Yes I think so... in some way or another I have felt a change, when you mentioned it then I have in some way progressed a bit and has been more focused”.

Regarding the other goals, he has not been motivated but his level of arousal has been rising. I notice his defeated attitude when he says,

“I have to admit... my heading game I have not worked on.”

I have not found an appropriate solution or approach and therefore choose to say,

“Yes, but one thing at a time”.

He quickly grasps my acknowledgement and says,

“Exactly, I was thinking and wondering that there have not been many duels in the air... and then there is not any possibility of improving”. He finishes by admitting, “At one time I thought, I could have been in that duel... maybe you do not seek the duels and you walk away”.

Once again I choose to say that you cannot focus on all of the things at once and thereby neglect to focus on his heading game.

He mentions that he has started to shout more on the pitch and he is generally experiencing that his courage has increased. Kenneth is rating his motivation high and attributes his ability to be more offensive and score goals has increased, and he really enjoys to get out there and say,

“Hey, you can do it a bit better than that...”

and in this way he experiences motivation to work with it more during practice. He finishes our conversation by pondering why he is not in the starting team for Royal League. He is disappointed by not being in the squad consisting of 18 players and I sense some impatience when he says that the coach is not using young players in such matches. He underlines the same disappointment a few weeks later. He has been on a trip with the U21 national team. He has performed well and has established some self-confidence. He has neglected to focus on specific goals but has felt great progress (speed and aggression), which he rates highly. I challenge him and ask, "When do you have in mind to start focusing on the other goals?" He mentions some physical dimensions that he wants to work with during the winter break. I continue and ask, "Can you compare the way that you work and practice now and transfer this feeling to negative periods?" He finds it difficult to answer this question and indicates that it is a good feeling, which is hard to express verbally. I underline my interest in this discussion by stating,

"It will be interesting to know if you can express some of these feelings later on".

Kenneth and I close our conversation, going for the winter break, with some irony and humor and with this comment from Kenneth,

"I think it is very exiting to talk about this, it is like it make you more conscious about these issues... what is it that I work with... and what issues do I want to work with... I think it has been very helpful... a very exiting study... and if it helps my heading it would be very good."

I am very happy because I feel that we are in a very beneficial process but at the same time I sense a great challenge working with Kenneth's heading.

Being task-oriented during practice. At this time in the program, there is no doubt in my mind, that Kenneth and I have established some sort of confidence between us. I started the conversation by asking how everything is working out. For the first time I sense a change in his fundamental attitude towards his practice and he says,

"I have been working well, I have started working with my left foot."

Delighted by a possible change I am interested in knowing how and when? Kenneth has started on spending some time before the actual practice sessions to work on his goals, especially his left leg and he feels that it is improving gradually. Furthermore he adds,

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“I have become more motivated to develop, actually I think it has been great”.

Just to underline the shift in attitude I say,

“That is a different attitude since our last meeting in which you perceived the whole... right now you are developing specific parts, the small things.”

Kenneth says,

”Well okay... yes it is just what you go around and pay attention to and grab a hold on”.

As an explanation to this change Kenneth says,

“I do not quite know... I always make some shots before practice, nice and easy... I thought I just as well could practice my left leg.”

I acknowledge his increase in focus and his task orientation and the fact that he is working with the aspects that motivate and make him happy. He interrupt me and add,

“Yes to do something extra during practice in general and the fact that the others give me some positive response... the assistant coach approached me and said, nice practice Kenneth... this is what you need once in a while, just the small things... it saves the rest of the week... that is nice”.

Suddenly it occurs to me how important it is that the coach and others comment on Kenneth's performance and effort. Once again I point out the importance of being better at judging his own performance, giving him self some credit and the benefits of this ability. He furthermore supports his argument by stating that after the last match he had some difficulties judging his own performance, but he makes it a matter of defending himself and says,

“That belongs to the fact that I am a young player.”

In general I experience a positive change in Kenneth's attitude and his effort to make the goals work. They are integrated, he is working with them despite that some of the goals are very hard. Improvement on the left foot and the ability to evaluate himself Kenneth is drafted for the coming match and afterwards drafted for the U21 team. Once again he has not thought that much

about his goals since the last conversation, but still feels that he has developed a lot. Curious about it I ask about his thoughts?

“Well, where have my thoughts been? ... I haven’t been focusing directly on my goals... mostly I have been concentrating on doing as well as I can... just my game, as a whole instead of focusing on singular aspects”.

He seems to know where I am going with the question and he starts a long rambling story, almost as an excuse. I move away from the subject and instead choose to focus on his drafts for the teams and the appreciation he has received from different persons. I ask what it means to him. He thinks that it is very important and it makes him happy and he gains some confidence, especially when the coach – as well as friends and family – makes some positive statements. He does not think that he is the type that needs to be whipped to perform, but feels more like someone who needs security to perform at his best. I am interested in knowing about his ability to acknowledge and evaluate his performances in the matches. Surprisingly he tells,

“I have a hard time evaluating myself in the matches, compared to talking to other people about it... sometimes I think that I have performed well, and others then say that it was merely okay... I have a difficult time evaluating my own performance.

I point out that I think that it is important that he works on this ability to evaluate himself and hold on to his own perception of his performance – as to not build all of his sense of performance on others perceptions of performance. Some of the things and goals that we afterwards integrated in the conversations were: left foot, heading and the ability to evaluate himself. One-day, Kenneth arrives smiling at the conversation and says, “*Hey*”. With great satisfaction in his voice, he sits down and makes his marks at the scale questions. I conclude that his ratings are high. He answers,

“Yes, I have been very good. Actually, it is only with my work on the left foot. After each practice I have been practicing fifteen minutes on my own with my left foot”.

I nod and say that it is positive and ask whether he has been using it during practice? Quickly he responds,

“Yes, yes, the other day I dribbled and made a move and shoot on the target. That is something I never have done before. A really hard shoot

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and it almost hit the target. Especially I have noticed that I dare to kick with my left foot”.

He admits that it is something that he needs to continue to work at. Besides that, I ask what else has happened, but he interrupts me, and starts to talk about the game they played and says,

“I think that I performed according to my expectations and performed well”.

I sense a shift in the ability to evaluate him self and ask about the criteria's and the expectations he had. Without hesitating, he mentions a lot. I sense that the work with peak performance and preparing for the matches has paid off on his ability to evaluate and judge his performances. He also mentions that he is still annoyed that he is not getting the credit that he thinks he deserves, and point out that he actually does not have any confidence in the coaches. Interestingly he continues,

“When you are praised on your performance, what is it good for... The confidence I generally have in coaches... is undermined... in some sense... the coach praises me... but it is not objectively... he does not say... that is good... no instead the praise depends on which player it is... which status... actually it is of no good”.

I see this as an essential shift in focus and acknowledge his way of thinking and says, “It is interesting, that you have realized that it does not matter... but you need a replacement for those thoughts... and that replacement has to be your own abilities to praise and acknowledge”, and he adds and underline,

“Exactly, that is what I have realized. I cannot use their praises to anything at all”.

In the following conversations I ask more about the area, whether he feels that he has improved in judging his performances? He thinks that he has improved in situations when he does not get any feedback, and is able to praise himself for good performances. I accentuate that in the future in such situations it is important to handle pressure and he adds that it is exactly what he feels that he is getting better at, at the moment. In the next couple of conversations, I observe that his ability is getting better and better. I ask about how it feels and he answers,

“It is great, definitely”.

In general I am satisfied with Kenneth's development during the study but the latest area of development – heading - is causing us some problems. He thinks that it is inhibiting his game and self-confidence. He is afraid of his head. As I have mentioned earlier there does seem to be a clear approach to the goal and therefore I choose to deal with it in a problem solving way (experiential). The general idea is to investigate and determine the problem and after that try out different solutions. We talk amongst other of different situations in which he can help himself. In the following conversations, we try to make the goal more specific and realistic. We end up with the following goals: dealing with opportunities instead of problems, looking forward to heading and not being nervous. He adds,

“Often, while heading, I jump in some sort of alibi jump, meaning that I do not go for the ball, because I am afraid that the opponent hits me with his elbow”.

Using different questions, we examine the area as a theme lasting a couple of conversations and get nearer at solving his problem but nothing practical on the pitch happens. He admits that he never has been good at heading even that it was something that he said in the beginning of the study. We analyze the factors that affect heading. The psychological, technical, physical and social aspects and I realize how many different areas that affects heading. People shouting, avoiding corner kicks, confidence and so on. We create an action plan where he can practice his heading isolated. This approach seems to be beneficial as Kenneth one day notices,

“My heading is completely different... today my heading was good, I really got a hold of it, a completely different feeling compared to what I felt earlier, it was great today”.

During one of the following conversations he continues,

“I can head now, it is so clear now, when you have a lot of useful situations in heading, then I am able to imagine the good situations... now I feel like... give me the ball... and at one time I jumped and I thought I was like floating”.

This statement tells me something about the coupling between imagery and testing. At the beginning he was not able to imagine any situations involving heading. But by practicing his heading isolated he has become able to recall images of it, which gives him a good feeling about it. I think about how it is connected to the context of learning. How is imagery of movement decisive to

development and how can fear at the same time block it. Kenneth's situation is changed, and he looks forward at practicing his heading. He sees positive images of him scoring with his head and not the image of someone who gets injured during heading. The problem still occurs when a lots of people gets close around him. Therefore I experience that though we are getting nearer to the goal, such a complex problem at the same time that takes some time at solving.

Kenneth's experiences of goal setting and conversations. The first 6 months was like the others said, the next 6 months I have started to think things through...all the small aspects that occur during the day, become aware of why it happened and what influence it has on me and what the different aspects have on me. In general it is just to know yourself better and know what is the cause of the different things... especially after the summer break I could feel that I benefited a lot... in the last 6 months I have felt that I have been able to use it very much on many different levels. If you look at the match I played against XXX the whole next week was all about survival and being able to maintain your place in the starting eleven. I temporarily lost the ability to learn and develop during that week. However, the conversations with you helped shift focus in such periods. I have become better at remembering to be task oriented in various situations. Then I have become better to judge myself, which I found hard in the beginning. In the beginning I started to say, well the coach said this and this, and my uncle said this and this, and the television said this and this. Now I am very good at judging myself, then the others give me some input and that is ok. Hey this I am good at and that has helped me a lot. In different matches I found out who I am playing particularly well with and why. In addition, in training, I have started to reflect upon why this combination was successful, and the other one was not? I have become more aware of the things happening around me. In the beginning of the project, it was a bit difficult but slowly I found the potential of these methods. It was a cool felt experience the first time it made results. When working on complex tasks I also felt an improvement, "I think I have become a lot better at heading. I have not practiced that much on my heading game lately. Even though I experiences that on the last training camp I could compete in heading duels that I would normally be afraid of jumping into. I used to be very frightened about heading. Something has totally blocked me. There is still some work to do o nit, but I have come far already. I do not know what I did wrong. We searched for different answers and solutions and there seemed to be more than one cause.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to unfold the effects and benefits of a goal-setting program on the development and learning of a professional football

player in training and competition and how in-depth insight into doing sport psychology can aid practitioners in bridging the gap between the science and the art of setting goals.

As the results shows, the “art” of goal setting is a dynamic, ever changing, complex process, and the method itself has to be flexible, in order to search for new knowledge in a goal setting process in sport psychology consulting. Players have different problems and personalities, which should be handled in appropriate and sometimes different ways, thus underlining that the individual sessions and success is socially constructed and created between SPC and player. Moreover, where other goal setting theories as Locke and Latham’s (1990) use variables such as winning or loosing matches or how many shots or goals were made during them, the variable in this study is not if the players were winning or loosing. Instead, the variable is how much they learned and what skills and knowledge that were accomplished and used in matches and training. As unfolded in the results the “art” of goal setting and its results on complex skills acquisition is complex. We make these assumptions because that learning and knowledge as a result, is more dependent on the player’s internal or individual resources, than the result of the player’s actions in the match, which is more influenced by the environment, such as opponents, teammates, surroundings, also supported by research in decision making in sport (Araujo et al., 2009).

Impact on learning processes of footballers

One could question how we can measure our impact on the players learning and maybe jump to general conclusions. Although this in no way can be neither directly related to our impact nor controlled, we still believe it is an important estimate to include. In the world of the footballer, it is an all-important matter, about whether you are in the team or not, or whether your teammates are exceeding your standards or not. Of course in this case, an uncontrollable factor is the coach’s perception and comparison of the players, in picking the team and so forth. Secondly when working with complex skills and knowledge the case is, that there will never be only one single factor included in the process. Therefore, we are not searching for one-sided and linear answers. On the other hand, we want to predicate narrower conditions for possible solutions and search for circular answers to; why and in what way the goal setting program has influenced player development and performance. These notions are in general supported by ecological dynamics approach and transcending a cognitive approach, underlining different views of the structure and physics of the environment, the biomechanics of each individual’s body, perceptual information about informational variables, and specific task demands all serve to constrain behavior as it is expressed (Araujo et al., 2009; Warren, 2006).

The art of goal setting

Following these notions, goal setting in fact, should be viewed as a complex and knowledge dependent tool or “technology” that needs create solutions on a complex level that is adequate for the complexity that the SPC or player need to solve. These notions is supported by research in applied sport psychology supporting that: “When solving practical problems, a technology needs to be developed that creates solution systems adequate for the given problem” (Kellmann and Beckmann, 2003, p. 14). Weinberg and Gould (2007) proscribe, that being able to set realistic and specific goals is important. To set appropriate goals is a competence – a “know how” based on “know that”. However, based on the theory of Luhmann (2000) goal setting will never be an “exact science”, because, one can never describe either the future or them selves perfectly. We are bound to a blurred view and an “estimated science”, that nevertheless can be estimated better or worse. This overall perspective on goal setting influences the way each of Weinberg and Gould’s (2007) principles can be accomplished and thereby gives way to new ways of understanding and proscribing the “science” of the “art” of setting goals. Summarizing the above, this discussion is therefore a case of looking closely at each player’s individual process to discover the benefits and effects of our goal setting program has had on player development and performance. Moreover the tale provides in-depth insight into goal setting processes and how applied sport psychology is practiced. Additionally the section underlines once again that sport psychology delivery is social constructed and thus the SPC and the player are key to success as well as considering that the program is interrelated and affected by the talent development environment (Henriksen et al., 2011; Larsen et al., 2013). Gilbourne and Richardson (2006) paper on tales from the field in professional football similarly describes the provision of sport psychology from a personal perspective thus supporting the need for first person perspectives in order to describe the process of doing sport psychology. Additionally, they argue that surviving and thriving as a SPC in football is associated with something more than an understanding of psychological skills training (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006).

The experiences of Kenneth

In the first couple of conversations and observations of Kenneth, it was clear to us that he was very interested in the project and in his learning and development in general. The ability and competence to reflect upon own thinking and action with the prospect of maybe changing routines, is maybe his major talent and something he already possessed when we met him. Moreover he seemed to have a realistic picture of the future and thereby the ability to focus on small steps that could be accomplished and make him satisfied. This

coupled with his impressive ability to express himself in words and good work ethics made him easy to talk with. Interestingly, as a person he had confidence in him self, however on the other hand, he lacked confidence in his game of football. We guess that self-confidence can be considered, as a reflexive know how, meaning that you in a given situation know your strength and weaknesses and know how to act appropriately according to them. When setting goals, Kenneth was interested in working with complex skills and reflexive know how. In fact all the goals that were set, were all based on his know how about what he did not know. It could be argued that he already had the ability and the competence to use goal setting as a tool. Kenneth wanted to know more about himself, gain self-confidence and be able to use it to develop and improve performance. This result is supported by a study of self-reported reflection of 52 young elite athletes. Jonker and colleagues (2012) found that athletes who made the transition from junior national to senior international level had higher reflection scores than their peers who did not reach international status and had similar scores to those who were internationals as juniors.

Closing thoughts

We would argue that the tale of and process with Kenneth is an example of how consulting focused on goal setting can aid improvement on complex skills in football. This provides important knowledge to the art of setting goals, as how to work on complex goals in a sport psychological program. An aspect that could be interesting to study further, is if different stimulation forms can difference in ways of asking questions when having conversations (e.g., what kind of question or way of approaching the player leads to what level of knowledge and learning?) When we in the case of Kenneth seems pretty confident that he had an impact on his improvements it is because he took huge steps in performance level compared to his closest competitors. In fact, he reached his long-term goal in getting his debut and playing for the U-21 national team. An important aspect worth considering for the future is when you as a SPC are dealing with goals of complex matter you might not know solutions to the problem. Again, considering the art of goal setting, we believe it is a case of accepting that complex goals and problems needs complex solutions and not simple ones, meaning more than one cause or way to dealing with it. In the case with Kenneth's heading problems, we clearly lacked this know how, wanting to deal with a complex problem in a linear way.

Conclusion

The current study demonstrates the difference between the "science" and "art" of goal setting in football, and thus underlines that individual sessions and

success is socially constructed and created between sport psychology consultant and player. The results demonstrate and may inspire practitioners to go beyond goal setting variables such as winning or losing matches and instead, the variable of how much they learned and what skills and knowledge that were accomplished and used in matches and training. The study demonstrates that working with complex skills and goals in a long-term program develops reflexive know how in athletes and thus supports and extends previous literature in talent development and sport psychology.

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