

Goal-setting in youth football. Are coaches missing an opportunity?

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Background: Goal-setting is not always the simple motivational technique when used in an applied sport setting especially in relation to the meaning of achievement in competitive sport. Goal-setting needs to be examined in a broader context than goal-setting theory, such as provided by social cognitive theories of motivation. In football, the culture of the club and the role of the coach must be considered.

Purpose: The aim of the study was to (1) use naturalistic inquiry and Roberts' suggested framework of social cognitive theories of motivation to identify and describe the motivational choices that elite youth football players make as they go through the goal-setting process, (2) examine the influence of the coach on this process in the elite football environment, and (3) gain an understanding of the goal-setting process. The paper considers the implications of the study for coaching practice.

Participants and setting: Ten elite youth football players (five male, five female) at four British football clubs.

Design: The study used naturalistic enquiry to examine the goal-setting practices of the players at their club. The key social-cognitive motivation concepts of personal agency beliefs, personal goals, and evaluative standards and affect were used to frame the instrumentation, including the production of the interview questions.

Data collection: Each participant was asked to complete a weekly diary for four weeks to provide insights into the duration and frequency of goal-setting as well as the motivational processing by the players. At the end of the four weeks, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each player.

Data analysis: Inductive analysis of the pooled data from the diaries and the transcribed interviews, using grounded theory, was used to identify the themes and categories from the data, using the research questions generated during the conceptual and design phase of the study as an initial framework.

Findings: Real life goal-setting in elite youth football is more complex when compared to the goal-setting heuristic. The players' motivational choices as they set and evaluated their discrete goals could be examined in the context of the social cognitive motivational tenets of personal goals, personal agency beliefs and affective response. The coaches played a pivotal role and there was a mismatch between players' needs and coaches' responses throughout this process. Finally the process of goal-setting varied from the heuristic of goal-setting theory.

Conclusion: Coaches should engage in a two-way, interactive and ongoing dialogue with players, taking into account the players' and their own motivational needs and the environment within which they operate, in order to improve the effectiveness of goal-setting as a technique, and hence their effectiveness as a coach.

Keywords: coaching; youth soccer; goal-setting; motivation

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Introduction

Goal-setting

Coaches are taught that the process of goal-setting is something they must learn, in order to be successful in working with players and athletes (Sports Coach UK 2000). Textbooks, Sports Coach UK and sports psychologists all embrace the SMART acronym as a recipe to help coaches to remember the five important characteristics of well-stated goals – goals should be specific, measured, action-oriented, realistic and timely (Cox 2002). The process proposed for setting goals is also formulaic. Coaches are instructed to write goals down and regularly monitor progress, use short-range goals to achieve long-range goals and to make sure the goals are internalised by the player. In fact, goal-setting is cited as one of the most basic skills both athlete and coach should develop (Sellars 1996).

The practice of goal-setting grew out of the 1960s performance management systems as a tool to enhance productivity (Locke 1968), measure employee performance and hence reward; thus its roots are in industrial and occupational psychology (Locke et al. 1981). It has been customary to consider goal-setting as a motivational aid to sports performance, particularly since Locke and Latham (1985) promoted it as being generalisable to sport in the 1980's (Hall and Kerr 2001; Locke and Latham 1985). Yet whilst its efficacy is assumed, many have concluded that as a technique to enhance performance, it is less effective in sport than in an organisational (Burton 1992; Burton et al. 1998) or clinical setting (Siegert, McPherson, and Taylor 2004), where the high *prima facie* validity and relatively non-technical language of goal-setting is useful for engaging participants in a working alliance with managers or clinical practitioners.

The basis of goal-setting is grounded in Locke and Latham's (1990) goal-setting theory, which advocates that conscious goals and intentions govern an individual's actions, and thus how well they perform. In attempting to test the predictions of goal-setting theory, research has concentrated on the performance effects of the technique in sport (Fairall and Rodgers 1997; Kylo and Landers 1995; Swain and Jones 1995; Wanlin et al. 1997). This is not surprising given that improving performance is one of the top three reasons athletes (Weinberg, Burke, and Jackson 1997) and coaches (Weinberg, Butt, and Knight 2001; Weinberg et al. 2001) posit for using goal-setting. Whilst goal-setting theory provides a set of mechanistic rules for the moderators of the strength of goal-setting on performance, it also provides a hypothesis for *how* goals have a regulatory effect on performance. Locke and Latham (2000) state that goals have a direct and indirect influence on performance. One goal mechanism is thought to operate indirectly at a cognitive level to encourage the individual to adopt strategies to discover how they might attain the goal (Hall and Kerr 2001); the other three mechanisms are claimed to operate directly at a motivational level – by directing attention and action, mobilising energy spent on effort, and prolonging effort over time (Locke et al. 1981). That is, once the individual has a specific, difficult goal to which there is some degree of commitment, the direct mechanisms function almost automatically to energise action, as well as signalling the amount of effort required to attain the goal and encouraging persistence over time.

Social-cognitive theories of motivation

Unlike Locke and Latham's (1990) view that discrete goals directly regulate motivation, recent motivational theories in sport tend to be based on more sophisticated conceptions

(Roberts 2001), assuming that the human is an active participant in making decisions and planning achievement behaviour (e.g., Bandura 1989; Deci and Ryan 1985; Nicholls 1989). Goal-setting theory looks at *how* behaviour is initiated. Modern social-cognitive theories of motivation address the question of *why* behaviour is initiated and energised. These theories view motivation as a social cognitive process in which the individual becomes motivated or demotivated through assessments of his or her competencies within the achievement context, and the meaning of that context to the person. Action, cognitive, affective, and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of motivation. When these theories are applied to sport, there is an assumption that players become self-directional, autonomous, decision makers, taking personal responsibility for planning achievement behaviours, including setting their goals. As goal-setting theory does not explain why behaviour may be initiated towards a goal, we argue that the *practice* of setting goals in sport needs to be studied in a wider motivational framework, such as provided by social cognitive theories of motivation, that considers why athletes are most likely to feel efficacious and remain committed to goal achievement, and thus experience enhanced personal performance when striving to reach discrete goals (Hall and Kerr 2001).

However, the dilemma then becomes which social cognitive theory should be adopted for such study (e.g., Bandura 1997; Nicholls 1989; Vallerand 1997)? As this is an exploratory paper, looking at the motivational implications of the *practice* of goal-setting, it would be constraining to select one motivational theory over another. We have therefore chosen to adopt Roberts' (2001) suggestion that, from a social cognitive point of view, motivation is the organised patterning of at least one of three psychological constructs that energise, direct and regulate achievement behaviour. These three constructs form the basis for our enquiry: personal goals, personal agency beliefs and the interrelationship of affective response and evaluations of achievement.

Firstly, personal goals may reside in the person, or be derived from contextual cues and through instructions given by significant others. Many goals are internalised from the surrounding culture. Each culture varies in the kinds of goals transmitted (Ryan et al. 1996). In the competitive culture of sport, personal goals are more likely to be performance outcome oriented compared with other contexts (Duda 2001; Roberts 2001; Vallerand 1997).

Secondly, personal agency beliefs direct and regulate the ongoing stream of achievement behaviour (Baumeister 1996). They may be based on the individual's belief in their own capability to achieve a goal, or their evaluation of the context supporting their own goal striving. Each social cognitive theory has its own term for these agency beliefs including self-efficacy, control, perceived ability and perceived competence (Roberts 2001). These conceptions of ability become the source of the criteria by which individuals assess success (Nicholls 1989).

Thirdly, there is the adjustment of personal standards in the light of one's attainment and affective response. The anticipated self-satisfaction gained from fulfilling valued standards provides incentive motivation. Self dissatisfaction with a substandard performance serves as another incentive motivator for enhanced effort, although both positive and negative affective responses may influence the expected value of goal attainment and hence motivation to continue to strive for a goal (Bandura 1997; Schwarz and Bohner 1996). In achievement goal research, for example, affect and emotion are considered consequences of achievement striving. Roberts (2001) claims that one of the most consistent findings in the literature is the link between task orientation and experienced enjoyment, satisfaction and interest during participation in physical activity.

Influence of the environment on goal-setting

In adopting a social-cognitive framework within which to examine players' behaviour, we also cannot ignore the environment in which they operate their goal-setting (Cervone et al. 2006; Eccles and Wigfield 2002). For example, Wilson, Hardy, and Harwood (2006), in examining the relationship between achievement goal orientations and process goals, reinforce the role of significant others (i.e., coaches, parents and team mates) and the importance of social approval within the competitive sporting environment. Recent research on coaching practice has detailed the complex reality that coaches and players construct, and within which they work and perform (Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2006; Gilbert and Trudel 1999; Poczwadowski, Barott, and Henschen 2002). As Little (2006) suggests, social-cognitive analysis of persons within contexts requires us to inquire about the social norms, resources, and constraints available in the sociocultural and community contexts of persons' lives.

This research uses the sociocultural context of elite youth football as the habitus within which to examine goal-setting. In football, the lived experience of coaches and athletes is not hermetically sealed, but an interactive workplace, racked with competing egos, hierarchies, constraints and opportunities (Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2006; Jones, Armour, and Potrac 2004). Each club, each manager and each team feature different opportunities for social interaction. The goals, which individuals will set and achieve, can be understood in part by understanding the local norms, power structures, resources and traditions of that sporting environment (Burke 2001). Despite the prominence of football as a major sport in Britain, there is a surprising lack of research detailing the achievement context of the elite game (Cushion and Jones 2006; Jones, Armour, and Potrac 2003; Smith and Cushion 2006). Cushion's (2001) work at a Premiership football club shows the youth academy structure to be rigidly hierarchical, with clear differentiation between the coaches and players and a strong organisational culture that impacts directly and indirectly upon the working practices of both the players and coaches. Potrac, Jones, and Cushion (2007) suggest there is a certain degree of mystique surrounding this environment. Much of our knowledge is limited to auto/biographical, journalistic and anecdotal accounts. Doors are closed; there is little access to players' personal experiences. Conducting research in the milieu of this opaque social system, may lead us to better understand football players' goal-setting practice in context, and hence in its entirety.

Research approach

Research examining goal-setting has typically adopted a conventional research paradigm, often using students to complete an unfamiliar task (see for example Elston and Martin Ginis 2004; Filby, Maynard, and Graydon 1999). It has centred on the mechanistic goal-setting performance relationship, and disengages research from the real-life competitive sport environment. The result is goal-setting research with human respondents that ignores their humanness (Lincoln and Guba 1985); in short, a falsely constructed reality. This has led to a neglect of the behavioural processes, cognitions and affective responses that underlie that performance in the competitive context of sport (Hall and Kerr 2001).

In contrast, this study follows Cushion, Armour, and Jones' (2006) approach to research in coaching. Their call is 'to wade in through the swamp' of real coaching practice, to better illustrate its nature and to broaden our understanding of the activity. The focus of this paper is on one element of coaching, the practice of setting goals, in elite youth football. It takes a new approach in this field, and looks at an aspect of goal-setting that has so far been ignored – the motivational impact of the goal-setting process. The aim of the study was to (1) use naturalistic inquiry and Roberts' (2001) suggested framework of social

cognitive theories of motivation to identify and describe the motivational choices that elite youth football players make as they go through the goal-setting process, (2) examine the impact of the coach on this process in the elite football environment, and (3) gain an understanding of the goal-setting process. The paper considers the implications of the study for coaching practice.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were elite football players. The five male players were from two football clubs participating in the top two divisions of the English football league. The five female players were from two clubs playing in the English women's premier league. Players ranged in age from 17 to 20 years (mean = 17.7), with three regularly playing for their U18 club youth side (known as an Academy in English elite youth football), five in the club's senior reserve squad and two actively involved with national youth squads. Seven of the players last gained formal qualifications at age 16, the remainder at age 18, although all bar one were currently engaged in further education study. Two of the male players had signed a professional contract with their club, the rest had a training contract with their Academy youth side; from the female players, one had a semi-professional arrangement, with the other players part of their Academy. Only football clubs whose coaches stated they practised structured goal-setting were chosen as participants. Cases were selected using purposive sampling, with its acknowledged limitations (Lincoln and Guba 1985), in order to build in the characteristics of age (youth) and elite participation in football, as well as to ensure a balance of male and female participants (Silverman 2000). The research design allowed for further theoretically informed sampling as the working hypothesis developed. The participants gave their informed consent to participate, including parental consent where players were under 18.

Design

Taking the naturalistic inquiry approach, which requires the researcher not to influence or manipulate the antecedent conditions of the behaviour studied (Lincoln and Guba 1985), the study used a combination of participant diaries, followed by a semi-structured interview, to elicit information from each player about the process of goal-setting and its motivational impact. Each participant completed a weekly diary for four weeks, to a timetable prescribed by the player. At the end of the four weeks, the interviewer reviewed the diaries and completed a semi-structured interview with each player.

However, given that one of the aims of the study was use a social cognitive framework to better understand the motivational implications of goal-setting, a schedule of topics was used to frame the questioning (Côté, Salmela, and Russell 1995) and to improve the external reliability of the data (Palmer et al. 1999; Patton 2002). The schedule of topics was developed taking a deductivist approach, using the methodology suggested by Wengraf (2001). The key social-cognitive motivation concepts of personal agency beliefs, personal goals, and evaluative standards and affective response (Roberts 2001) provided the basis for the theory questions; the theory questions governed the production of the interview questions. For example, the theory element of personal agency beliefs was broken into a number of theory questions, such as 'How does the individual's belief in their own capacity to achieve the goal and its outcome affect the goal-setting process?' This was translated into several interview questions. For example, 'Think of one goal which you feel you have the

most skills to achieve. Tell me how you set this goal? What makes you sure you can achieve it? How does that make you feel?' Each question was further probed by the interviewer, based on the player's response, to ensure player understanding and to gain as much insight as possible on each theoretical issue. The questions were sequenced and phrased to enhance rapport and to elicit open-ended responses (Palmer et al. 1999). The interviews provided the main data stream and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The questions in the diaries were similarly framed using these key theory questions e.g., 'What factors did you take into account when setting this week's goals? What recognition did you get as a result of working towards your goals? How did that make you feel?' The diary content was intended to be easy and clear to enable the players to complete the single sheet of A4 paper. The purpose of the diary was to provide concrete practical evidence of players' goal-setting practices over a period of time, their affective responses, to provide insights into the duration and frequency of goal-setting and to see how their behaviour changed as a result of their goal-setting.

Contact was made with a player when handing out the four diaries and at the subsequent interview. For each contact, the researcher made a reflective written record of the contact, using questions suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984). This served to guide planning for the next contact, as a basis for the inductive analysis and acted as a reminder of the contact at a later stage (Silverman 2000). A focus group, comprising two experienced coaches, was used to identify any issues, possibilities and priorities with the proposed instrumentation, prior to use (Fontana and Frey 1998). Both the focus group and the interviews were conducted by the researcher at the football training ground or in a setting convenient to the participants.

Data analysis

After each contact with the players, initial analytical insights and reflections were recorded; these were used to begin the qualitative analysis. The data from the written diaries (80 pages) and the transcribed interviews (110 pages) were pooled and analysed. The combined data were divided into text segments, or meaning units, such that each segment of text was comprehensible by itself and contained one idea, episode or piece of information (Côté et al. 1993). Inductive analysis was used to identify the patterns, themes and categories from the data, using the research questions generated during the design phase of the study as an initial framework. Using the procedures and techniques of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1996) recurring regularities in the data were sought in order to identify categories of similar text segments, which either had internal homogeneity or external heterogeneity (Patton 2002). A minimum of three meaning units from a total of at least three players was used to determine the inclusion of a sub-category in the findings. As the data analysis proceeded, a further level of interpretation emerged that refined the sub-categories, such as 'friends', and linked them to larger more inclusive themes, such as 'factors impacting goals set' (Smith and Cushion 2006).

To assist in the analysis, computer software, Nvivo 7, was used to code and retrieve data segments, support conceptual networks linking emergent ideas in order to test or build theory, and, coupled with a sole researcher transcribing the interviews, to improve the internal reliability of the data and its analysis.

Findings

The analysis reveals the complex web that is the lived experience of the process of goal-setting in the world of elite youth football. It also reveals the motivational impact

of goal-setting in this environment. Tables 1, 2 and 3 summarise the emergent themes and sub-categories from the data. While a player could give more than one response for a sub-category, the total number of meaning units provides a general indication of the frequency of that response from players, although it should not be used to denote any relative importance.

Three core findings emerged: (1) there was evidence that players' motivational choices as they set and evaluated their discrete goals could be examined in the context of the social cognitive motivational tenets of personal goals, personal agency beliefs and affective response; (2) the pivotal role of the coach and the mismatch between players' needs and coaches' responses throughout this process; and (3) the process of goal-setting varied from the heuristic of goal-setting theory. Each of these findings is discussed below.

Players' motivational choices

Roberts' (2001) suggested framework of social-cognitive theories of motivation has not been used previously in the context of goal-setting. This study demonstrates the ecology of the framework of personal goals, personal agency beliefs and evaluative standards and associated self reactions in describing the practical motivational choices that players make as they select their goals, evaluate those goals and use them to select the next goals to strive for. Table 1 summarises the emerging sub-categories within each of the three themes in this framework. These themes and sub-categories are discussed in detail below. Firstly, the players set one or more weekly goals such as improving a skill or working on a mental attribute e.g., 'finish my assignments', 'start in the match against Team Y', 'lift 70kg', 'touch a football everyday'. In deciding what goals to set, players were influenced by their personal goals. Table 1 details the broad sub-categories emerging from the theme of personal goals. These sub-categories included 'an aspiration' such as playing football for their national side or being in the first team squad, 'the next game', to 'improve performance' such as being fit, and 'a career' including having children or getting a job outside of football. As one player said: 'Um, right, to play for England, everyone wants to, don't they if they're playing football' (Player 2 (P 2)).

However, they found it hard to link their discrete weekly goals to these generally large, long term personal goals. Little (2006) termed such long-term goals magnificent obsessions, and found that they could also be independent of the more mundane, everyday goals, such as getting fit and playing well in the next game. For achievement goal theorists these personal goals will be influenced by the dispositional goal orientation of the individual, as well as the situation (Roberts 2001). Whilst there should be some correspondence between goal perspectives and goal-setting, they are not the same (Duda 2001). Indeed, although some players could relate their everyday activities to their longer term goals, describing them as 'stepping stones to the final bit' (P 2), others did find it hard to relate these magnificent obsessions to 'just thinking what things I was going to do that week' (P 3). They may also be part of the reason why the impact of goal-setting on performance is not as strong in sport as in an organisational setting. In a business environment, where many employees do not find work intrinsically motivating (Hall and Kerr 2001) such superordinate goals are not a fundamental characteristic of that context. Hence, one can see how implementation of goal-setting may directly impact motivation and performance in the work environment. In football, we cannot ignore the context impacting motivation, the competitive drive to become an elite player, when considering setting goals.

Secondly, Table 1 details sub-categories emerging from the theme of personal agency beliefs. This shows that these agency beliefs were influenced by a range of sources including their own opinion, the view of a coach or fitness coach and the view of family members

Table 1. Players' motivational choices, described using Roberts' (2001) suggested framework.

Themes	Sub-categories	Data examples
Personal goals for behaviour	An aspiration (17)	'Playing the final rounds of the European championship' (P 3) 'Getting in the reserve team' (P 7) 'At the beginning of the season my main goals were I want to be starting for the A teams' (P 10) 'Um, right, to play for England, everyone wants to, don't they if they're playing football' (P 2)
	Career (3)	'A long term goal, get a job, get kids' (P 3) 'My main goal every day is to be a better footballer. Be a better person, because at the end of the day, everything isn't about football. . .but yeah, it's all to be a good footballer and to have a nice career in this sport, because it's what we love.' (P 1)
	Next game (8)	'I take into account the next game and my coach' (P 1) 'The game on Wednesday' (P 5)
	Improve performance (14)	'I've got to achieve more each week. I've got to work harder in the game each week. The goals is to feel better at the end of the game' (P 2) 'Like when it comes to fitness I'm quite lazy and everything. It holds me back a bit and so it was just one of the major goals I wanted to improve' (P 5) 'Perform well in the fitness test' (P 4)
Personal agency beliefs	Own opinion (29)	'I just did it pretty much for myself. . . I just like to do my own thing really' (P 1) 'I think only my own opinion' (P 3) 'I feel confident because I proved to myself last week I can complete my goals and make them reality' (P 1) 'I think I have the ability to do it. That's why I put scoring a goal down, as I tend to succeed in that. And that helps my self confidence' (P 2)
	View of coach (40)	'I dunno like all the coaches want you to succeed, so for me a goal is to succeed and y'know prove to them that they were right all along' (P 2) '(My coach) believed in me, he thought I was a good player. And um, you obviously want to do well for the people who believe in you.' (P 6) 'We used to have one to ones where you talked to him, he'd show you what you'd done wrong in a game and from that I could go there, there and there, pull goals off them, and put them into matches and training. We don't do that much anymore' (P 7)
	View of fitness coach (14)	'The sports scientist in terms of physical goals, in terms of set goals, gain level 12 on a bleep test or something' (P 6) 'The physio made it quite clear that if we would not do the training programme, we would lose our fitness levels. That's why I put that on the top of my list in my goals-setting' (P 3)

(Continued.)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Themes	Sub-categories	Data examples
Evaluative standards and associated self-reactions	View of family (14)	“Cos I’ve three older brothers and they’ve all been in football. . . so I knew when I was growing up what I wanted to be, how I want it to go, and I’ve kind of built my life around what I want it to pan out like’ (P 7) ‘My mum is someone who gives an opinion of my goals. . .she almost becomes me when she is thinking about, thinking about setting goals’ (P 6)
	View of other significant parties (6)	‘Well other fellow players gave each other the same task, so if I succeeded it would make me feel like I achieved something’ (P 2) ‘No I didn’t really look at other people’s (goals)’ (P 3)
	Time available (5)	‘I took my schedule into account because there are days when I have other commitments’ (P 1) ‘(my goals are affected by) how much time I have’ (P 8)
	Feedback from coach (6)	‘Cos if you’re losing at half-time, and he may speak to some people, like he can give you a signal without talking or looking at you, ‘cos if he doesn’t look at you, you can think, why is he not talking to me. So you try and do something special to try and catch his attention’ (P 7) ‘I think it’s quite hard, again, to know that you’ve achieved a goal, unless you’ve been told that you’ve achieved something’ (P 5)
	Own internal referencing (9)	‘She’s the coach and her opinion is really important. And it motivates me.’ (P 3) ‘Like on a Friday, I’ll look back at the week and think “Have I done better than last week?”’ (P 7)
	Feedback from friends and players (8)	‘I haven’t talked to other people about whether I did my goals or not’ (P 3) ‘I have one of my friends. So we both evaluate each other’s performances, ‘cos I trust her a lot’ (P 2)
	Feedback from a parent (3)	‘He just says how well I’ve been doing and how much I’ve like improved since the beginning of the season.’ (P 10)
	Comparisons with other players (12)	‘If it were my mum, she’d see my interests at heart because there’s no ulterior motive for her so . . . um. . . coaches are important for me, but I think my mum is the one who is most for me’ (P 6) ‘I’m not a striker, but if I was a striker, you’d always want to score more goals than the other striker. . . And you might be thinking I can get further than him if I score more goals. So you are always trying to put yourself against someone I reckon, even if it’s the left mid-fielder or the right mid fielder’ (P 7)
	Self-reactions (69)	‘If Joe Bloggs has done three tackles and you have only done two, y’know that starts bringing me down. But yeah, I do compare. But not during a game, never.’ (P 10) ‘If I see the First Team play I want to become as good as they are, that is what motivates me.’ (P 3)
		‘(I feel) good as I feel stronger in myself and think I can take anything realistic in my stride’ (P 4) ‘Excellent, and felt quite proud of myself as I did something I set myself out to do’ (P 2) ‘I’m positive, knowing that I did it. Knowing that I can do it. I try to keep that locked in so I can always do it’ (P 10)

Note: The numbers in parentheses denote the number of meaning units ascribed to a sub-category.

Table 2. Areas of the goal-setting process influenced by the coach.

Theme	Sub-categories	Data examples
The influence of the coach	Goals set (40) e.g., personal goals, team goals, individual goals	‘Working on letting failure go in training. That’s something we talk about’ (P 8) ‘I haven’t personally told (the coach) it’s one of my goals, but I’m sure he knows’ (P 4) ‘I just haven’t sat down with anybody or Sara and like said what are my goals for this season’ (P 5) ‘Alice told us at the beginning of the week we had fitness testing, we have them every month to see how we have improved.. and I just wanted to do my best and see how I had improved’ (P 3)
	Future career of players (10) e.g., own selection decisions, feedback to other individuals who have influence over selection such as senior team coach, national selectors	‘And I’ve been, um, selected for most of the games in the Academy. And that’s just, that’s given me a boost as well as a player’ (P 5) ‘So you try and do something special to try and catch his attention. . .because only five or six people got kept on from last year out of eleven or twelve.’ (P 7) ‘I think the coaches are more important than other players, ‘cos it’s their opinion that counts’ (P 5) ‘Because (the coach) is the one who picks the team and everything like that. He has a lot of say in my career at the moment’ (P 1) ‘It makes you feel more good about yourself that the main manger ahead of you thinks you’re doing well, and then he might talk to people. Like it’s the A team manager, he might say to the reserves manager “So and so’s doing well” and then he might give you the chance to go up some more levels’ (P 7)
	Feedback (14)	‘At the end of the week, he like always acknowledges it, because he sees you improve. At the beginning of the week we don’t converse that much because we’re just starting out’ (P 1) ‘That means a lot to me what the coach thinks’ (P 3) ‘I’d prefer more feedback like that really. Like talking to me, like if I’ve done well or done something bad; like I’ve had a really bad game, or need to improve something, then that’s when they speak to me’ (P 5) ‘(The coach) hasn’t really seen (my goals)’ (P 8)

(Continued.)

Table 2. (Continued.)

Theme	Sub-categories	Data examples
	Evaluation (6)	‘We got like a Christmas pack thing and it said it in there. And it just said like what we’d done’ (P 8) ‘I like to be told where I stand in the team and where I stand and what they think about me and what chances I have. And to become the footballer that I want to be I: and do you get that kind of feedback? Um, not really, only if I ask for it. I haven’t asked for it’ (P 5)
	Recognition and reward (18)	‘The coach sometimes, er, does a scale of the colour green, the colour blue and the colour red. Red if you’ve done badly in the game, blue if you’ve done OK, and green if you’ve done well. It’s always nice to see green next to your name, but at the same time if you see a red and a blue and you think you’ve done well, then you are kind of scratching your head a bit thinking “What have I done?”’ (P 7)
	Source of conflict (5) e.g., with views of other coaches, parents and players	‘My mum. . .she speaks the truth so I know I can trust her’ (P 9) ‘I’m the kind of player who’ll be extremely honest and say “I can’t play today” or “There’s no point playing if I can’t be 100%”, whereas a coach would say “Beckie, oh, you’ll be fine”, because they want to reach the goals of winning the game. Whereas if it were my mum, she’d see my interests at heart because there’s no ulterior motive for her’ (P 6)
	Lack of alignment coach and player goals (9)	‘Achieving my training goals is more from the people who set it – so the sports scientist or the coach. The coach of my club team doesn’t really set my personal goals. He’ll set collective goals’ (P 6) I: ‘What does Pat (coach) think about those goals? P 8: She hasn’t really seen them I: Why not? P 8: I don’t know, she just hasn’t’ (P 8)

Note: The numbers in parentheses denote the number of meaning units ascribed to a sub-category.

Table 3. Sources of recognition and reward players preferred as a result of achieving their goals.

Theme	Sub-categories	Data examples
Preferred sources of recognition and reward	Being able to play more games (5)	‘Being able to play more reserve games’ (P 7)
	Own feedback and recognition (11)	‘My own recognition is a reward enough for me’ (P 1) ‘You get the pleasure of self-achievement’ (P 4)
	Recognition from coach (18)	‘Obviously getting praise from Sam is a good thing because obviously she’s with the first team, and then it’ll get through to Fred and if Fred says something, who’s the first team manager, that’s even better really’ (P 2) ‘Coach, anyone, I dunno. It’s encouragement isn’t it!’ (P 8) ‘Comments from the coach are always a boost’ (P 7)
	Recognition from family (6)	‘I’d prefer honest feedback, to be honest, so from my mum, my dad, my brother, my coaches’ (P 6) ‘I sometimes think my family, like my dad and my mum, go like “you really did well”, but sometimes you’re just saying that because I’m your kid’ (P 2) ‘My dad kept talking to me about what I did well and what I didn’t do well. We always discussed after a game. I do miss that’ (P 3)
	Recognition from others (8)	‘A lot of the time I like getting recognition from my players, my friends and stuff like that. ‘Cos it means a lot to me that they recognise that I’m playing well. It makes me feel really good about myself’ (P 2) ‘I mean when someone says to you, “Oh, well done, you’ve reached your goal” It’s lovely, it’s really nice to hear that kind of recognition, that kind of admiration for what you’ve done, although you already know what you’ve kind of done’ (P 6)

Note. The numbers in parentheses denote the number of meaning units ascribed to a sub-category.

of other significant individuals in their life. Players' personal agency beliefs were dominated by a strong reliance on their own opinion in deciding which goals to choose (see Table 1). When asked whose opinion they considered in setting their goals, often the response was simply 'my own' or 'no-one's'. For example, when probed further on who had influenced his goals, one player replied: 'No one really. I am one of the few who are quite hard on myself. I am always trying to achieve bigger and better things' (P 4). However, once set, to evaluate their success, they sought feedback from a variety of sources such as their coach, friends and parents, made comparisons between themselves and other players, and used this information to adjust their perception of performance and future goal attainment.

She's like a brilliant player and I'd like to be where she is now. So at her age I compare myself sometimes and want to be like her. If she's done something really good, I'll want to learn to do that in my game. (P 5)

This is in line with Nicholls' (1989) view that people approach a task with certain goals of action, reflecting their personal perceptions and beliefs about the particular activity they are engaged in, and may include the requirement to compare ability relative to others or to have a self-referenced conception of ability. Bandura (1989) contends that efficacy beliefs are the product of self-persuasion. These efficacy beliefs rely on cognitive processing of diverse sources of efficacy information, including performance mastery experiences, vicarious experiences for judging performances in comparison with others, and verbal persuasion, as well as social influences that indicate one possesses certain capabilities.

More interestingly, the players purposively balanced feedback from their coach, who could not be relied on to give positive feedback, with other significant influencers whom they trusted to maintain their perceived competence, such as a friend or parent. When asked who she preferred to receive feedback from, one player said:

I should really say my manager, but then I don't really know about managers, 'cos even if they said you played really well, they don't necessarily, it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to get picked for the first team or whatever. (P 2)

This supports the need to maintain a positive view of oneself as a powerful source of self-regulatory goals (Baumeister 1996). Threatening negative performance evaluations from others, such as a coach, may be processed in a cursory manner and supplemented with complementary information, from a parent, which carries positive implications. In addition, the players may also self-regulate not just their information processing, but their actions. To ward off threats to self-esteem, the players do not always actively seek the coach's input into their goals. However, if such a dialogue between coach/player does not take place, there is a danger that perceived signals, for example non-selection for a particular team, further damage the player's performance evaluation. As one player explained, 'So when I wasn't getting picked it made me feel a bit, like, negative; why was I not getting picked? Should I really be there?' (P 9).

Thirdly, not only did players set personal goals, but they also maintained a corresponding personal standard based on their perceived competence and their evaluation of their personal standards in the light of their attainment. From the sub-categories for the theme of evaluative standards in Table 1, the players' evaluation was influenced by the time available, feedback from the coach, family, friends and players, and referencing of their own and others' behaviour. These standards may be internally or externally referenced, such as a comparison with another player. According to Schwarz and Bohner (1996), in

general, events that satisfy the individual's goals and standards, or promise to do so, yield positive emotions; events that harm or threaten the individual's concerns lead to negative emotions. For example one player commented, 'You feel like a million bucks. What's better than achieving the goals that you set?' (P 1). The evaluation may have two effects. On the one hand the simple anticipation of self satisfaction gained from fulfilling their goals provides incentive motivation. It is a spur to action. This was explained by a player, 'Self achievement. You get that feeling that makes you happy. It's always a good feeling. . . that you can go on and achieve more'. Similarly self dissatisfaction with a sub-standard performance can also serve as another incentive motivator for enhanced effort. Such evaluations are tempered by the nature and degree of any affective response resulting from the evaluation of performance versus goals and the value to the player of any goal attainment (Roberts 2001).

Thus, in line with social-cognitive theories of motivation, the players' goal-setting practices were influenced by their agency beliefs, personal goals for behaviour, and evaluative standards and associated self reactions. However, whilst 'self' played a large part in the players' motivational decision making, they identified that their goals and their resulting behaviours were inextricably linked to the fact that the fulcrum of their life was elite football. As one player said 'It's the thing I want to do. I love football. I want to be a professional footballer' (P 9). The social cognitive processes which drove their goal-directed behaviour, were ones which were motivated or de-motivated through the assessment of competencies within the achievement context of their club, life as an elite player, and the meaning of that context to themselves (Roberts 2001). The heuristic of goal-setting practice is too simplistic to help the coach to understand the dynamics of goal-setting in the achievement context of youth football.

Influence of the coach

The results also demonstrate the complex influence of the coach on the players' motives and aspirations, and hence on their goal-setting. These influences are described by the sub-categories in Table 2. The players perceived that the coach influenced which goals were set and the future career of the players. They were also a source of conflict for players as they evaluated advice from other sources such as a parent. Players sometimes found that the coach's goals and their own were not aligned. However, the coach was a preferred source of feedback on goal performance. They were sought by the players to evaluate their goal attainment and to provide them with extrinsic recognition and reward structures.

Two interesting observations emerged from the player interviews and diaries. Firstly there was a lack of engagement by the coach in the whole goal-setting process. They made little effort to understand either the content of the players' goals or the rationale behind why the players chose those goals. The coaches themselves were not interviewed; the players' cited that their coach had not asked what their personal goals were nor sought to align them with the goals they set for the individual player or their teams. When asked whether his coach knew of his personal goals, one player replied: 'Most probably, because he is always encouraging me to do better. . . yeah, I haven't told him it's one of my goals, but I'm sure he knows', but when probed on whether his coach had asked about his personal goals, the reply was, 'Not really' (P 4). Not only that, but the players were also wary of the coaches' motives in setting goals for them:

When I was at Club X, my coach set a lot of goals for me because he believed in my. . . he thought I was a very good player. . . But er I do feel that sometimes the coaches, they do

have their own interests at heart. . . They just can't concentrate on what I do and my goals, they have to concentrate on other people. (P 6)

The focus of the scant research into the process of setting goals has mainly taken the coach's view point and provides support for the lack of engagement in the players' goals by coaches in other sports. For example, Weinberg, Butt, and Knight's (2001) study of coaches who used goal-setting, found that at the beginning of the season, when most practice goals were formulated, players and coaches either worked together in setting team/individual goals, or goals were dictated by the coaching staff. For competition, team and individual goals tended to be dictated by coaches. A further study revealed a significant variation in the sophistication of each coach in using goal-setting (Weinberg et al. 2001). This study, in examining the practices of players themselves, confirms Burton et al.'s (1998) findings that players and coaches often under use goal-setting, and their rationale that under-use is a function of both parties having trouble making goals work effectively.

Secondly, all the players were aware of the powerful role of the coach in determining their future playing career. The coaches did not pro-actively engage in trying to understand the players' goals; in contrast, once goals were set by the players, they themselves actively sought the coaches' input and approbation at each stage of the cyclical goal review process. This included aligning their goals to those of the coach. As one player said, 'But I want to stay on what he does. . . like if we're practising short passes, I don't wanna be hitting 50 yard balls. I want to be doing what he's doing' (P 1). This highlights the tension for players, for even if they set their own goals, they recognised the need to reflect the goals of the coach in order to be successful at their club. Players wanted the feedback on progress and evaluation of their goals from the coach, as reassurance that their performance would continue to keep them on track to deliver their football career aspirations.

(Getting feedback from the coach) it's almost as good as self-satisfaction, because he's the one who picks the team and everything like that. He has a lot of say in my career at the moment, and if the reserves want me to play for them, or if the first team needs me at training, like they'll always ask him how I'm doing. (P 1)

Similarly, players had a preference for the source of any recognition and reward. The sub-categories in Table 3 categorise the players' preferred sources of recognition and reward. These sources were being able to play more games, their own feedback and recognition, and recognition from the coach, family and others. The recognition of achievement of those goals predominantly came from two sources: their own appraisal of performance and action, and from a need to seek the approval of the coach. As the coach had not engaged in the initial goal-setting, it was no surprise that they were not forthcoming with recognition of goal achievement. The lack of coaches' knowledge of players' personal goals meant that players often had to proactively seek feedback on their goal achievement. Depending on the player, their relationship with the coach, and the coaching environment, some players did not take accountability for getting this feedback. One player stated:

P 5: I like to be told where I stand in the team and what they think about me and what chances I have. And to become the footballer I want to be. Really that's it.

I: And do you get that kind of feedback?

P 5: Um not really, only if I ask for it. I haven't asked for it.

There is little research in sport examining players' motivational preferences for reward and recognition; the majority of the research is in industrial psychology looking at financial

rewards, which are claimed to increase goal-commitment, the level at which goals are set and to increase spontaneous goal-setting (Locke et al. 1981). Ryan et al. (1996) believe the key to understand these motivational preferences lies in the question 'why do people pursue particular goals?' The answer relates to whether goal pursuit is experienced as initiated or endorsed by one's core self, or by forces felt to be external to the self. Goal pursuit that is initially controlled for external reasons may become increasingly internalised and integrated, depending on the socialisation context. In this research, the context of elite football provides a paradoxical stimulus – on the one hand, players' goal-setting is highly autonomous, but on the other, there is low interpersonal involvement from the person they most crave input from – the coach. The implicit assumption of the coach is that the coach-set goals are also those of the player. As a result, coaches may be missing out on a vital performance factor for their players. Ryan et al. present empirical evidence that links greater creativity, more cognitive flexibility, a more positive emotional tone and better physical and emotional well-being, with goal pursuits that are controlled by internal reasons rather than external reasons. This reminds us that 'all goals are not created equal' (Ryan et al. 1996).

There is clearly, therefore, a web of influence between player and coach, between goal and outcome, between motivation and action. This supports Poczwadowski, Barott, and Henschen's (2002) findings that the whole of the coaching process comprises a set of interactions between the player, coach and context. They identified that the coach-athlete relationship was a dynamic, multi-faceted interpersonal phenomenon. However, this web of influence exists in all coaching environments; it does not explain the disengagement felt by the elite footballers in this study towards the goal-setting process. Why should this exist? The culture of football provides an insight.

British football has for many years kept its doors closed to the sports scientists who want to understand the achievement context of the elite game (Potrac, Jones, and Cushion 2007). The few studies that have accessed this environment have found a rigid hierarchy, competing egos, and limited interaction between players and coaches, resulting in players presenting themselves as submissive and compliant workers (Cushion 2001; Cushion and Jones, 2006). Their submissive behaviour mirrors that of the players in this study. Cushion and Jones surmise that the authoritarian disengaged culture is an assumed prerequisite to prepare young players for the rigors of the game. An alternative view, is that such a culture keeps the power firmly with the coach in their relationship with the player, and hence their goal-setting. As Cushion and Jones (2006) cite a manager, 'The relationship between manager and players isn't what you get in industry. It's not sort of management and staff, it's management and quite school boyish, "do as you are told stuff"' (149) – not an environment in which to have a cosy chat with the coach about goals. When players do not feel able to discuss their goals in an open and honest way, the coach's goals subsume those of the player, and at this point goal-setting may lose its impact as a motivational tool.

Even on the training ground, when the coach has an opportunity to engage with their players, silence is often used as a coaching tool (Potrac, Jones, and Cushion 2007). Smith and Cushion (2006) find use of the notion of silently monitoring as a coaching strategy, where the coach reflects on appropriate interventions. They argue that this reveals the coaches' conceptual approach to teaching and learning. Coaches are engaging in, and facilitating for their players a process of reflective thinking (Gilbert and Trudel 1999). Conversely, it may demonstrate coaches' effort to maintain the aura of a culture based on domination and fear, and hence their power. As this study shows, the use of silence and lack of questioning by a coach may be misread by players, at best, as a lack of interest,

when taken off the training ground and into those individual encounters that frame the personal nature of goal-setting; at worst, by not seeking to understand and engage in the players' goals, when placed in an environment where empathy is considered a sign of weakness, both player and coach are distanced from the moral obligations to care and to support those around them (Burke 2001).

However, Cushion (2001) is at pains to emphasise that it is the interdependent constructed relationship between the coach, the player and the club environment that is important, as neither element has the capacity to unilaterally determine action. Through their day-to-day dealings, players and coaches are actively creating and recreating meanings about their relationships in an ongoing process of social interaction (Poczwardowski, Barott, and Henschen 2002). Both have the ability to change how they operate and hence the effectiveness and outcome of any goal-setting.

Process of goal-setting

Finally, examining the process of setting goals exposed the fact that many of the players expressed a desire to retain their goals in their head, rather than commit them to paper; similarly the processing of feedback and the subsequent evaluation of their performance against the goals were most often intuitive and ad hoc. Players instinctively used goals to direct their behaviour and translate them into action, evidenced in this comment from a player:

The only reason I want to set more goals is when my football is a little off, and then you have to break it down and then you have to stop and go 'right you need to work on this more or work on that more. (P 2)

None of the players used all the formal methods, espoused by coaches and psychologists, of setting written goals, checking that the goal meets the SMART criteria, setting defined dates, producing action plans, and monitoring progress against the goal (Cox 2002). They were more typical of a player who said: 'If I complete it in my head, I know I've done it. I don't need to tell anyone else I've done it, I just know in my head that I've done what I set out to do' (P 7). Nonetheless, by keeping goals in their head, the players disabled the coach in their ability to engage in supporting their goal striving. Similarly, evaluation of performance was completed 'as and when'; they supplemented their own evaluations of their own and others comparable performances with mostly unsolicited feedback from coaches, friends, team mates and close family (see Table 1 theme 'Evaluative standards and associated self-reactions').

This supports Burton et al.'s (1998) findings, that athletes use goal-setting only moderately frequently and with moderate effectiveness. They concluded that coaches and athletes are under-utilising goal-setting and may need further education about the value of this strategy and how to use it more effectively. On the other hand, the results of this study may point to more complex reasons for this under-utilisation in football.

Implications for coaching

This study, in identifying the impact of players' motivational choices and the role of the football coach on the goal-setting process, demonstrates that goal-setting is not always the simple motivational technique that it is supposed to be (Burton 1992). By examining the practices of players themselves, it confirms Burton et al.'s (1998) findings that players and coaches often under-use goal-setting. Indeed, the design of the research, in

giving a diary to players, may have in itself stimulated goal-setting activity that otherwise may not have taken place, and thus overstated the use of this technique. Given the limited number of players and coaching environments investigated, it is hard to generalise the findings of this study across the breadth of coaching. However, the empirical research presented is evidence of goal-setting in elite youth football in all its messy practice (Cushion, Armour, and Jones 2006) and provides several pointers to coaches.

Firstly, we suggest that a source of ineffectiveness emanates from coaches' reliance on the goal-setting heuristic alone to inform their practice. The evidence found of the social motivational choices made by players as they go about setting goals, indicates that 'SMART' paints an overly simplistic picture for coaches. Instead, coaches need to understand the reasons why players choose and action certain goals and fulfil the key role they have as coach, in bringing that together in the goal-setting process. To do this involves finding time at the training ground to engage deeply in the goal-setting processes of their players, understanding those grand obsessions, knowing when to give some much sought after feedback, and simply asking the questions and listening to the answers.

Secondly, coaches should be mindful that they operate in the hierarchy of a football club, an environment racked with competing egos and power bases. The motivational choices made by players, as they set and action their goals, result from their interactions with that environment, varying idiosyncratically from one person to the next (Cervone et al. 2006). At each club, coaches need to question whether it is 'safe' and accepted for players to share their personal goals or to engage in a dialogue with the coach.

Thirdly, whilst this is a clarion call to coaches to engage with their players, coaches also need to understand their own goals and priorities and how they rationalise their lives. We must recognise that the culture of the football workplace socialises coaches, as well as players, to fulfil expected roles. Such influences can be both constraining and liberating. It would be simple to lay the responsibility for this culture and its impact at the feet of the governing body. In reality, for change to happen, coaches themselves need to become more aware of the socialisation process working on them, on their beliefs and behaviours which construct them as a coach, and of the value-laden nature of their practice (Jones, Armour, and Potrac 2003).

Coaches might then adopt a more salient framework, such as provided by personal projects – extended sets of personally salient action in context – in place of goal-setting. This would allow them to connect their own goals with those of their players (Little 2006) and to adopt a holistic approach to setting goals. In addition, coaches should recognise that in striving to achieve any goals, the cultural and social climates within which a person lives need to be balanced against the personal propensities and aspirations of the individual. Thus in football, in defining that cultural sphere, the coach plays a pivotal role; they may help to identify what a given project might be; they may provide the space to plan a project and obtain the resource to complete it and, during action, to facilitate or frustrate the pursuit. More subtly, they may precipitate closure of a project, including ending the lifetime dreams, aspirations and goals of that player. Figure 1 lays out this theoretical model of goal-setting, where both coach and player motivation need to be considered in the context of the playing environment. The data from this research demonstrates the social-cognitive motivational needs of the player; and whilst it is implicit that the coach has similarly mirrored motivational needs in the goal-setting process, further research is needed to provide evidence of this and to test the model as a whole. Further, Figure 1 proposes, based on player data, that the goal-setting recipe is missing a vital ingredient to enable coaches to use setting discrete goals as a performance tool – a two-way, interactive and ongoing dialogue. The dialogue must take account of both the players' and the

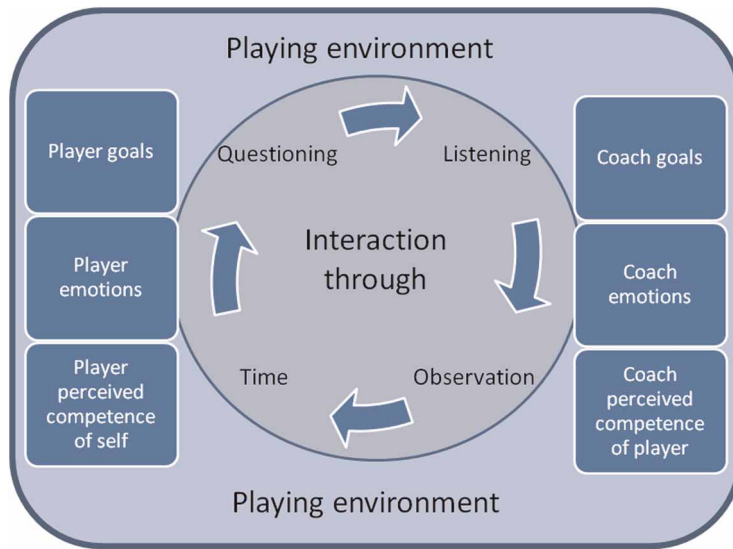


Figure 1. Suggested model of goal-setting, where both coach and player motivation need to be considered in the context of the playing environment and there is a two-way interaction between both parties. Note that dotted lines indicate an implicit assumption and solid lines indicate explicit evidence from the research data.

coach's own motivation and the environment in which they both operate; still such an anathema in elite youth football?

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