

6 Simple Reasons Why Athletes Fail to Meet Their Goals

If your young athlete tends to lose focus partway through a season or fails to achieve their goals by the end of the season, they aren't alone. Setting and achieving suitable goals isn't an easy task, especially for kids who are also dealing with the expectations of the adults around them.

Here, Daniel Gould, PhD, director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, explains why your athlete is struggling with their goals and what they can do differently to find success.

1. They Don't Have Ownership

"With kids, it's easy for them not to *own* their goal," says Gould. "In other words, a coach or a parent often tells them what their goal is, and because they didn't come up with it, the athlete really doesn't have the drive to commit to it."

You can help an athlete overcome this roadblock by letting them make a list of goals for the season without any input from you. You can discuss the goals after they are written out, but until then, refrain from giving advice. Make sure it's really the athlete's goals, not them echoing what they've heard or been told.

2. They Don't Have a Plan

"Every adult has experience making a New Year's Resolution that we didn't follow up on," Gould says. "That's because we spend so much time identifying what the goal is, but then we spend a lot less time developing the plan for achieving it." Without a plan for getting to the finish line, a young athlete is dreaming, not goal-setting.

Gould explains, "A child might say, 'I want to make the starting lineup.' But to make the starting lineup, do they know what do they need to do? Most kids will say, 'I don't know.' But you can help your athlete figure it out. Depending on the sport, it may be 'I need to improve certain types of shots.' Or more simply, 'I need to be on time to every practice.'" Help your child create a road map, either written out or drawn as a timeline, of how to achieve each goal.

3. They Don't Revisit the Goal

"This is a really common problem," Gould says. "Everybody sets goals at the beginning of the year, but rarely do they revisit them on a regular basis to evaluate progress. Goal-setting only works if people get feedback relative to their goal." Both coaches and parents can figure out a way to create ongoing feedback for an athlete and incorporate some kind of metric or evaluation.

Research has also showed that motivation tends to wane between the time of goal-setting and the point of achieving the goal, but setting related mini-goals that are actionable can keep motivation high.

4. The Goals Are Too Vague or Too Big

"We know that goals that are specific and measurable are much more effective than 'do your best' general goals," Gould says. "For example, if I tell my kid that I want him to have a better attitude, that's extremely general. That means so many things to different people. Instead, really break down what behaviors you want to see, such as demonstrating good sportsmanship, not making any snide remarks to officials, hustling between all drills, and saying thank you to your coach. Really clarify what success means."

And goals don't have to be massive championship-winning goals to be satisfying. Research has shown that smaller goals that are more easily achieved can be incredibly satisfying, so make sure that your athlete isn't just setting huge goals.

5. They Expect Perfection

Basketball legend Michael Jordan famously said that he missed more than 9,000 shots in his career. There are baseball players in the Hall of Fame who failed seven out of 10 times at the plate. "The whole idea that you have to be perfect is just unrealistic, yet kids believe that it's possible," says Gould.

"But sports are a great way to teach a young person that one failure doesn't mean that a goal is now unachievable or out of reach. If they fail at a goal, just help them reboot: Set new, realistic goals based on new information." Later in life, we rarely have the opportunity to learn from failures with minimal repercussions, so use youth sport as a way for kids to build those skills and resilience that will serve them outside of sport and later in life.

6. Their Goals Aren't Your Goals

Sometimes, an athlete's failure to meet a goal is simply a case of mismatched expectations between them and an adult. For instance, a parent might have been the star defensive soccer player in high school and therefore expect the same from their child - even though that young athlete would rather be playing tennis. Make sure athletes actually want to achieve the goals that they set!

Takeaway

It's not surprising that many young athletes lose interest in goals or fail to achieve their goals during a season. Keep these barriers to success in mind as you help your young athletes set and work towards their goals.



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