

Pivoting for the Goal: How to Help Athletes Through Mid-Season Adjustments

A recent study found that children today are under significantly more pressure to be 'perfect' than past generations. If you're halfway through the season and it's not going the way you hoped, it's also easy for you and your team to fall into a slump. When the goals you set at the beginning of the season are suddenly unattainable, how can you and your athletes find motivation to keep going?

As a coach in this tough environment, you can show athletes that not reaching a goal isn't the end of the world. Rather, it's a chance to re-focus and pivot towards a new, more attainable goal.

Frank L. Smoll, PhD, a sport psychologist and professor at the University of Washington, explains how you can help your athletes learn to pivot from their original roadmap and make mid-season adjustments that will help them realize their new goals.

Explain that progress is success too

Many of us have been taught that once a goal is set, anything short of that goal is a failure. But that simply isn't true. Smoll suggests coaches advise young athletes not to "set goals in stone, as they're meant to be revised."

Sometimes the original goal an athlete makes isn't attainable within the given timeframe or due to changing circumstances, especially if the goal wasn't SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely). At this point, let your athletes know that it's time to re-evaluate and adjust the goal, even if that means focusing more on progress.

Smoll adds, "Often, kids can think about goals in black-and-white, in success or fail terms. But we want to teach them about the process. It's a matter of being able to see where progress is being made and to evaluate and consider why an athlete is making progress, or why they aren't. And, it's not always about working harder, it may be a problem with the goal that was set."

Talk about goals early and often

Smoll wants to remind coaches that student-athletes often aren't taught about goal-setting, so you can't expect them to naturally gravitate towards process-driven goals: many young athletes see victory and success in simplistic terms.

"We have to remember that these athletes are kids," he says. "It's easy for us to say these are the principles of good goal-setting because we're adults and this information is readily available to us." But that's not always the case for young athletes.

Make sure you encourage goal-setting at the beginning of the year, and regularly revisit goals throughout the season to evaluate progress and make changes as you both see fit.

Set different types of goals for one season

“I often talk about the idea of the game within the game. The overall objective is to win a game, but if you’re playing against a really superior team, set other goals within the game. You’re not bailing out, you’re being realistic,” says Smoll.

For instance, he challenges coaches to re-frame the team’s thought process and think, ‘Maybe the final score isn’t going to be in your favor, but what can you be in control of? Of course, you’ll try to win the game, but along the way, you’ll have some other achievements as well.’

Coaches can encourage athletes to think of new objectives to achieve during the games, such as staying positive and focusing on teamwork, or other intangibles that are frequently overlooked in favor of scores and yardage.

Ask ‘What if results didn’t matter?’

Smoll shares, “A sports psychologist I know went to his son’s swim meet, and his son was still swimming when the other kids already finished the race and were out of the pool. He started to feel bad for his son. But his son touched the wall to finish, jumped out of the water, and was absolutely thrilled.”

Smoll continues, “The athlete was elated because he had just beat his previous best time. My friend felt so stupid – his kid had made tremendous progress, but my friend failed to recognize the individuality of that. He didn’t win the race, but he did meet his goals.”

Why is it important to emphasize that success isn’t based on results alone for young athletes? Because every athlete’s goals are different. Remember there’s a way to pivot from obvious goals to focus less on results and more on personal development.

Provide constant feedback

Often, we wait until the end of the season or until it’s well past time to ‘turn the ship around’ on an overarching goal. But if you’re constantly evaluating and giving feedback to players throughout the season, you’re more likely to stay the course and meet those goals – or revise them along the way as needed.

“Athletes should know where they stand throughout the season and not find out that they’re being benched right before championships,” says Smoll. He adds that athletes should set up their own evaluations too, as this teaches personal responsibility.

Smoll concludes, “It’s great to have an overarching goal for the season, but even legendary football coach Don James once explained that he would have a season goal for the team, backed up by a massive binder of smaller, broken-down goals for each player for the season.”

It might seem a bit extreme to keep a full binder for a high school sports team, but make sure that each person on the team has individual goals that aren’t related to the team’s overall performance. That way, even if the season’s primary goal isn’t being met, you’re able to pivot to focus on individual goals so athletes recognize how their hard work and dedication led to meaningful achievements.



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