



The Darker Side of Goal Setting

Why it's important to envision the challenges and obstacles, not just the desired result

Author: Lucia Perfetti Clark

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Every official should be familiar with the importance of setting goals. Certainly if you've read this column, attended a US Lacrosse Officials Education Program clinic or listened to a local trainer, that's the message you've received.

This is the time of year when officials refine their craft for a new season. If you are looking at that preparation with dread or with a plan to rest on your laurels, then it might be time to retire and consider a succession plan, as NFHL director of officiating and US Lacrosse National Convention officials keynote speaker Terry Gregson suggests ("The Last Game," October 2013).

But if you're getting excited, circling game days and buying your favorite pair of black sneakers for the seventh time, then you've likely already thought about some of your goals for the upcoming season. I try to limit myself to three goals or areas of focus that I will work on in the upcoming season. Last year, the convention really helped me set a clear direction for what I wanted to accomplish.

Then I read "[Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing](#)," by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, a compelling book with lessons that go beyond sports in life. The book challenges conventional wisdom about goal setting.

Whereas every self-help book imaginable emphasizes positive thinking and envisioning the best possible outcomes, the authors of "Top Dog" offer a different approach: Think of the obstacles that could trip you up. Envision the things that will keep you from achieving your goals.

If you do this, Bronson and Merryman content, you will get better at short-term goal setting and more realistically plot your path to success.

As a lacrosse official, I have tried and failed at every rating that I have ever attempted before successfully achieving that rating. With each failure, I learned something.

But what if I had imagined failing in the first place? What if I had outlined the obstacles and challenges that lay between me and the rating I coveted? Perhaps I could have anticipated these bumps in the road and prepared measures to circumvent them.



Instead, I set goals, laid out a path, went down the path and had to live with the results. Had I looked at the path and asked if something was missing, or how it could be improved, would I have been better prepared for the journey?

It's only an exercise. Not all obstacles can be foreseen. If you're an official trying to improve your on-field evaluation or rating in the upcoming season, certain unanticipated obstacles – a sudden job change, a death in the family or a season-ending injury, for example – could derail you altogether. Recognize when it's time to reassess your goals and regroup.

But keep in mind those obstacles you can anticipate – an uncooperative officiating partner, inclement weather or unruly fans, for example – as you plot out your goals for next season. I'm not suggesting you sit down with your pen in hand and concoct worst-case scenarios until the pen runs out of ink. But try to imagine what could get in your way and how you can work around or through it. It's about being prepared when the plan changes so that the goals are not sacrificed.

As Jeffery Donovan (played by Michael Westen) of "Burn Notice" says, "There's no way to anticipate every danger; you need a backup plan for when things go wrong."