



## Exploring the use of goal proximity by Olympic athletes: A preliminary study

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**Abstract:** An athlete's 4-year Olympic preparation cycle requires systematic planning involving the use of short- and long-term goals. These goals provide athletes with increased motivation, persistence, effort and direction in their goal pursuit. Short-term goals can be viewed as steppingstones towards the long-term goals. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the use of short- and long-term goals by Olympic athletes. A qualitative design was used, with semi-structured interviews as the major data source. Participants were purposefully sampled from a typically understudied sports population. Four male Olympians, representing swimming and athletics, shared their experiences about how and why they set and used short- and long-term goals. The athletes spent an average of 11.3 years training and competing at the elite level. Findings revealed that winning a national championship and competing at the Olympic Games were their major long-term goals. Furthermore, these goals did not change during their athletic career. Short-term goals were primarily set to learn, develop and improve their skills/techniques that would allow them to reach their ultimate goals. Major competitive events (e.g. national championships, Pan Am Games, Olympic Games) dictated how they planned these goals. The findings also support previous research suggesting the use of both short and long-term goals. Coaches and young athletes can use the information provided to plan their sports goals. Future research should investigate the goal setting practices of team versus individual sport Olympic athletes.

**Keywords:** Goal setting, Goal planning, Olympic Games, Olympian.



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include: the mental preparation of elite athletes in training and competition, the periodization of mental and physical training, and the use of goals and goal setting for peak performance.

### 1. Introduction

The Olympic Games can be viewed as the pinnacle of sports performances. However, occurring only once every four years requires athletes to have a plan that will allow them to remain motivated and persistent to achieve peak performances. Goal proximity (i.e. short-, intermediate-, long-term goals) could be described as goals that function as a unit and are related in time. Long-term, intermediate, and short-term goals are typically used by athletes at various times during their sports careers. Long-term goals can be used to guide, direct and focus athletes towards their dream, whereas short-term goals provide the necessary steps towards long-term achievement. Intermediate-term goals serves as a progression marker that bridges short and long-term goals [1]. Long-term goals provide a desired future state (e.g. competing in the Olympic Games) and are largely outcome- related. Short-term goals can be defined as

lasting for weeks or months, intermediate-term are annually, with a long-term goal enduring for years. Long-term goals may not provide the information and details necessary to improve performance, skills, knowledge and roadmap to achieve them. Whereas short-term goals can enhance athletic mastery for long-term goal attainment, thus developing a more efficacious individual, which can enhance commitment towards their long-term goals, because their short-term goals are more frequently evaluated and adjusted to increase self-efficacy and motivation [2].

Bandura [3] explained, "distal goals alone are too far removed in time to provide effective incentives and guides for present action" (p. 134). Furthermore, he stated that short-term goals can reduce procrastination, increase motivation, increase self-efficacy and provide goal progress feedback. Long-term goals may not only be distant, but perceived as very difficult, whereas the closer short-term goals may be viewed as less difficult and therefore more easily attained. These short-term goals can be seen as within reach; therefore they may increase an individual's effort and energy due to the closeness of those goals, while engaging with more goal-relevant action [4]. Direction and focus are provided with long-term goals, with short-term goals as the steppingstones to meet those long-term goals by enhanced skill development [5-6].

Sport research on goal proximity strongly suggests that using short-term goals to measure progress enhances long-term performance [2, 7]. However, studies on the use of short- and long-term goals have been equivocal. For example, a review by Burton and Weiss [5] found strong support in only six of 13 goal proximity studies, indicating the inconclusive nature concerning the use of both long- and short-term goals. The lack of a consensus on using a combination of short- and long-term goals prompted this study. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how Olympic athletes used short- and long-term goals in pursuit of excellence.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

After receiving approval to proceed with the study by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), semi-structured interviews were conducted. Participants were purposefully sampled by contacting them via their National Governing Body (NGB). These four male elite athletes represented swimming and athletics. The

mean age competing at their first Olympics was 23.5 years ( $SD = 2.5$ ). Participants spent an average of 11.3 years ( $SD = 3.9$ ,  $R = 8-16$ ) training and competing at the elite level. At the time of the interviews, all participants had competed in at least one Olympic Games. To protect confidentiality, participants are assigned pseudonyms.

### 2.2 Data Collection

After consent was provided by participants, a time and date were determined that best suited the athletes' schedules. Permission was received prior to digitally recording the semi-structured interviews, which was the primary source of data collection. The interviews were conducted using topics or questions to be explored. During the interviews, occasional follow-up questions to clarify a response or to gather additional information were used. Following the formal interview, participants were given an opportunity to share any additional information, elaborate on, or address anything that they felt would contribute to the study's purpose. The interviews averaged 64 minutes ( $SD = 2.3$ ,  $R = 58-68$ ).

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a critical evaluative process in qualitative research and is described by Ravitch and Carl [8] as, "summarizing the mass of data collected and presenting the results in a way that communicates the most important features (p. 217). Analysis began early in the study in a cyclical process, by alternating between data collection (i.e. interviews, notes, documents) and data analysis such as, creating meaning from data [9]. The interviews played a critical role in informing the significant statements and themes that were generated.

### 2.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is integral to ensure credibility in qualitative research and two procedures were used: triangulation and, thick and rich descriptions [10].

### 2.5 Triangulation

Triangulation is a validity procedure that uses multiple sources in data collection [10]. Rather than rely on a single data source, using multiple forms of evidence is designed to corroborate and provide additional insight. Documents analysis pertaining to these participants were used to provide a more comprehensive overview of their experiences.

## 2.6 Thick and rich descriptions

Detailed descriptions of the participants responses and themes provided another procedure for trustworthiness. These descriptions, for example, can offer different perspectives and give readers a deeper understanding about the topic [10].

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Setting Long-term Goals

An “end-first” design in goal planning is when long-term goals are set several years ahead, then short-term goals are established to meet those long-term requirements. As Ted explains, “So I say, ‘what is my long-term goal, what do I have to do to achieve it?’ and those become my short-term goals.” Luke shared how far away he set his long-term goal saying, “My long-term goal a year and a half ago was to make the Olympic team...” Whereas Matt stated, “My biggest long-term goal was always to set world record in my event. I didn’t really use goals, except for one major big goal that covered a whole career.”

### 3.2 Setting Short-term Goals

The long-term goals were the driving force for subsequently setting their short-term goals as Ted describes, “I also set those type of [short-term] goals to achieve my long-term goals. ... I use my short-term goals to help me achieve my long-term goals.” Furthermore, Derek also shared why he set short-term goals by saying, “The short-term goals are the way to the long-term goals. Instead of trying to take one huge step, you take a lot of little leaps.” Matt concurred with Derek and Ted by stating, “[short-term goals] were steps forward to reach the world record.”

### 3.3 Time Intervals

A question often debated is, what are the optimal goal time intervals for short- and long-term goals? Ted provided some insight on how he viewed that time interval by saying, “Short-term, my main goal is as simple as doing every workout as the time comes. And maintain proper technique and try and stay relaxed. Those are my short-term goals.” He further elaborated on what those short-term goals might be in stating, “Some of my short-term goals for this year are to eat more vegetables ... those are honestly some of the short-term goals I have this year.” Luke explained that he had set his long-term goal one and a half years

prior to the Games and described his short-term goal as, “my goal [short-term goal] was to make the World Championship Team ...”

Matt however, had a different perspective on short-term vs long-term goals. His ultimate long-term goal was a world record, so it was interesting on what he considered short-term goal when he said, “Usually the short-term goal is always national championships or Olympics ...” Furthermore, Derek discussed how he determined his short-term goals by describing it as,

There are certain dates that are given to you that you kind of abide by, especially if it’s a qualifying date or something like that. ... There are certain dates that are set ... we’ve got to be jumping this high this day. To get there we need to do this, etc. Actually it takes into account diet, flexibility, nutrition.

Luke concurred with Derek by also using competitions to determine short-term goals by simply stating, “Those [short-term goals] are dictated by when the meets are.”

### 3.4 Benefits of Short-term Goals

Participants described a number of reasons for having short-term goals and how they felt that these goals were beneficial for them. Research has suggested that short-term goals can be motivational, and this was Ted’s experience as he explained, “I set them [short-term goals] to add positive reinforcement to my workouts.” In Derek’s case his long-term goal was to compete in his 2nd Olympics, however he was returning from an injury and was using his short-term goals as motivation to get back to 100% as he explained,

I had knee surgery 10 weeks ago. So that’s my main goal, to get back into a competitive level ... to be able to compete at the [Olympic] trials. That’s my primary goal for this year. ... it’s always nice to say in two weeks or four weeks, I want to be jumping this high. Whatever the meet that year if it’s the national championships or this year the Olympic trials...

Short-term goals have been shown to increase competence and self-efficacy. For example, Ted’s long-term goal was to compete at the Games, however, he could not do so unless he had attained the Olympic “A” qualification standard as he shared, “I guess right now my long-term goal is to make the Olympic team. In

doing that, I sort of have a side [short-term] goal that would be - the Olympic Game's standard is 124, to break 124." Matt shared a similar experience by using short-term goals to measure progress to determine improvements by saying,

During the season I always try to better my "unshaved" times, as we call them. If you're really far off your best unshaved time ... Like if you go 2 minutes unshaved and your best time was 2.02, then you know you have a way to go to 1.56 or whatever. ... Basically my short-term goals were over the season if I improve a second a season or even half a second then I'm really happy. Because in swimming that's a dramatic drop.

Luke used his goals to keep focused and direct his attention to achievement when he said,

When you set long/short term goals you have to start in practice. You always have to keep that in mind, keep focused, so like I know when leading up to the Olympic trials in March I had set goals ... and all season I had been really focused.

### 3.5 Goal Revision

These athletes seemed reluctant to revise or change their goals, especially the long-term ones. For example, Ted discussed how he might revise his short-term goals in the following example:

I know in years past, as the season goes on I may not be happy or feeling well and because I'm not feeling well with my workouts I might modify my goals. This year I'm trying to focus on maintaining the same goals throughout the year.

Whereas Luke describes a specific situation during the Olympic year by saying,

I remember my coach and I were talking about what's more important, the Olympic trials or the Olympics? And so we both agreed that the Olympics was more important and so I wasn't going to be fully rested for Olympic trials. I kind of knew deep down inside that I would make the Olympic team ... so that's kind of an example of how I changed my short-term goal for the season.

Matt explained how he would reevaluate and perhaps modify his short-term goals by saying, "I'd talk to the coach and try and find out what was the matter with me, maybe physical or mental. I'd always try to work around it and find

what was wrong with my workout." These participants also seemed reluctant to revise their long-term goals as illustrated by Matt's quote, "I wouldn't change the long-term goal." Ted echoed this statement with one of his own, "When I say modify my goals, that may not be modify my long-term goals, but modify my short-term goals."

### 3.6 Goal Proximity Continuum

Long- and short-term goals lie along a continuum because long-term goals will eventually become short-term. For example, Luke describes this by saying, "For instance, the Olympics are coming up. So my long-term goal would be different a year ago, say had there been no Olympics. I think my goals would be different."

### 3.7 Goal Effectiveness

Setting both short- and long-term goals, even with careful planning, does not guarantee success. This point is illustrated by Derek as he describes how he once failed to achieve any of his goals by saying,

I wrote them all down and put them in a place where I could find them next year. I came across them a couple of times, so basically they were your normal high jump type goals - making the team, jumping a certain height, being in Japan for the world championships. I just crashed and burned on all of those.

However, he did learn from that experience when he shared the following,

I think that your goal setting is an ongoing process. You're always reaching little goals and resetting them and saying, "okay I got that one or that one is going to be too easy." You're always thinking about them and making slight adjustments.

## 4. Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the use of short- and long-term goals by Olympic athletes. Equivocal research findings on goal proximity has thwarted efforts to confirm that setting both short- and long-term goals are most effective for performance enhancement [5]. The present findings indicate that these athletes set both kinds of goals, starting with a "end-first" design. This "end-first" involved setting the long-term goals first, followed by the short-term steps to achieve the long-term goal.



Furthermore, Weldon and Yun [11] postulated that the greatest performance is dictated by long-term goals, with short-term goals functioning as the steppingstones. In this sample, the long-term goal provided the impetus to determine the necessary steps to achieve that goal. Participants used short-term goals to improve skills to meet those long-term requirements, supporting research that has advocated for the use of short-term goals, because they are more controllable, flexible and serve as markers of progression [12]. These athletes indicated that they were more likely to revise or adjust their short-term goals, however, they were unwilling to change their long-term goal. These long-term goals may function as a motivational tool to remind them why they are training and competing, by "keeping an eye on the prize."

A short-term goal was defined as being less than six weeks, with long-term goals greater than six weeks [5]. However, according to these athletes, short- and long-term goal time intervals may be event dependent. For example, early in an Olympic cycle, the long-term goal can be four years away, whereas to compete in a World Championships, the long-term goal will be one year away. Therefore, according to the experiences noted by these Olympic athletes a long-term goal can be defined as four years (e.g. Olympic Games), an intermediate goal would be annually (e.g. World Championships) and short-term goals can be weekly or monthly (e.g. training phases). Furthermore, findings in this current study provided some support for previous research suggesting that athletes set both short- and long-term goals for enhanced performances versus using them individually [4,7,13]. Unfortunately, many athletes have a difficult time understanding how their short-term goals are related to their long-term achievement. Coaches should therefore be diligent about clarifying and defining, how and why short-term goals are a necessary link towards their future goals [14].

These findings also suggest that short-, intermediate- and long-term goals lie on a continuum. As athletes move along that continuum, the long-term goals will eventually become short-term goals, with intermediate-term goals bridging the both of them. The participants in this study provided some preliminary evidence on how they went about setting and using short- and long-term goals. However, caution must be taken in interpreting the results due to the following limitations. First, this small sample size cannot be generalized to all elite or Olympic athletes. Second, the

participants were all male, perhaps female Olympians may have provided contrasting views. Third, this sample all competed in the Olympics, therefore their views expressed here, may be different from athletes that trained for, but did not qualify for the Games. However, this elite sample provided valuable insight into the use of short- and long-term goals, by a sometimes-inaccessible group like Olympic athletes.

This study primarily focused on short- and long-term goals, however, goal setting is a more complex process that includes factors such as goal difficulty, goal specificity and goal types. Future research should investigate the optimal timeframes for using short- and long-term goals, the effectiveness of having both kinds of goals, and their relationship to other goal setting factors. The current findings align with suggestions by researchers for athletes to have both short- and long-term goals. Short-term goals are used as progressive markers with the long-term goals providing a rationale to persist, sometimes over many decades. Therefore, the present (short-term goals) is connected by the intermediate, towards the future (long-term goals). In summary, preliminary evidence is provided that these Olympic athletes (a) set both short- and long-term goals, (b) short-term goals were used to improve skills, (c) short-term goals were viewed as incremental steps toward long-term goal achievement, (d) short-term goals could be revised, and (e) they were reluctant to change their long-term goals.

## 5. Conclusions

This study offers valuable information for coaches, developing athletes and sports personnel for goal setting and planning. Many athletes begin sport at an early age which should be taken into consideration by those involved with sports programming, design, planning and talent identification. Athletes should be educated about how these goals (short, intermediate, long) work in synchrony. They (i.e. sports personnel) can use the "end-first" design to determine an appropriate long-term goal, followed by short- and intermediate-term goals while considering the necessary skills, techniques and event dates to meet those goals. Finally, the goal planning and development process should be individualized according to the athletes age, sport, ability and maturity.

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## Informed consent

All participants gave written informed consent to participate in this study.

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