

GOAL SETTING: FROM SHORT STIRRUP TO GRAND PRIX

As riders and athletes, we want to achieve. Few of us are content to stay right where we are. And whether our aspirations are merely for our own personal satisfaction, or aimed at success in the show ring, we need to set goals to work towards.

Goal-setting is one of the simplest and most effective motivational techniques in the world of sport. It enhances a rider's will to achieve, by:

- rewarding small gains in skill or achievement
- developing a perspective on measures of achievement outside of winning ribbons
- reinforcing the reasons for practicing skills, making an effort, and developing a work ethic
- enhancing self-worth
- providing reinforcement to a rider who may be struggling to learn or master a skill
- giving riders a direction and a measure for the improvement of their performance.

How effective is goal-setting? Well, in a statistical analysis of a series of goal-setting experiments on various types of athletes published in 2001, goal-setting was shown to lead to performance enhancement in an impressive 78% of sport and exercise research studies, with moderate to strong effects.

We spoke to two prominent trainers about how they apply goal-setting to their programs for their students. Here are some of their thoughts.

COMPETITIVE KIDS

Kay Altheuser, who teaches at Elvenstar in Moorpark, California, sees goal-setting as a normal part of coaching. "It's mostly about keeping the lines of communication open," she says.

At the beginning of each show season, Altheuser, who specializes in teaching juniors, gets all of her students, and their parents, together for a group goal-setting meeting. "We talk about what we want to achieve, what divisions each kid should aim for, whether they'd like to do a certain show series or aim for a year-end award or qualifying for medal finals," she says. "Each child's goals are dependent on their abilities, their aspirations, what their horses are capable of, and to some extent the parents' budget and time constraints – for example, some kids are around all summer, while others can expect to be away on vacation for a while and so have to adjust their showing plans."

Riders at Elvenstar set both short-term and long-term goals. "We might say that the short-term goal for one student is to get comfortable riding a 2'6" course, while the long-term goal might be competing successfully at that level at three different shows," Altheuser says. "Sometimes we find we can change the goals as the season progresses. If one short-term goal is achieved then we set another, slightly more challenging one, as we go, for example."

"I emphasize to both the kids and the parents how important it is to be flexible and roll with the punches. That's how horses are!"

Helping her students stay focused on what's important – and what's not – is part of Altheuser's job. "Rather than fixating on a competitive goal that might not be feasible, I teach my kids to compete against themselves," she says. "It's not realistic to say that you're going to win X number of classes, for example, because judging is a subjective thing and you have no control over that."

"One of my strict policies," she adds, "is that you're not allowed to complain about the judging, unless you see something that's actually an infringement of the rules! With some of the really competitive kids (and parents), I have to remind them of that. It's much more constructive to focus on improving your personal scores and not compare them to anyone else's, or to concentrate on acquiring or improving a specific skill."

The process of competing helps keep riders focused on their goals, Altheuser says, "though with the younger kids, sometimes I have to remind them what they want to accomplish." And even when the end of the show season sometimes turns into a scramble to qualify for year-end awards or finals, "we don't encourage point-chasing if it means riding the horse into the ground," she emphasizes. "No goal should ever be accomplished at the expense of the animal."

ADULT EXPECTATIONS

For Philip Klipa, who operates Marlay Farms at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center in Burbank, California, goal-setting is a more relaxed process. His students are mostly adult amateurs, ranging from beginners to seasoned show-ring competitors, and he likes to keep it simple.

"When I was growing up," he explains, "there were a lot of life-or-death goals, and a whole lot of stress that went with that. I don't do that anymore. It's so easy to lose sight of the fact that this is supposed to be fun. So with my clients, I just like to see them work towards some basic goals, like putting into action the skills they're learning, or not repeating the same mistakes over and over again!

"We set mini-goals for a single lesson, such as getting two clean flying changes in a row, and we'll also start off each week with an objective to work towards. But we stay away from lofty, unrealistic targets like, 'I want to be the top adult amateur in the country'. We do ride to win and ride to qualify (for year-end finals and awards), but I never want it to be a matter of life and death for anyone, and I don't want to set anyone up for failure. It's so much more enjoyable when you keep it positive."

Some students, Klipa says, are naturally uber-competitive, and may have a problem seeing the forest for the trees. "Having a competitive edge is great, but sportsmanship is so important," he says. "I emphasize to my clients that you don't have to behave like a spoiled brat to be successful, that you don't talk about others behind their backs, and to find the good in whatever they've accomplished.

"That goes double for parents (of junior riders), who can have a tendency to lose perspective. I mean, in the past I have had some parents with very lofty goals. They want their child in the Olympics, and the kid is seven. I don't make promises I can't make happen."

Adult amateur riders may also have to adjust their lofty goals to fit their lifestyles. "These people have jobs and lives away from horses, and that has an impact," Klipa says. "Over the years I've

become far more realistic in my expectations, and I try to respect people's budgets as well. I've found horses for some clients, but others come to me with a horse already in tow ... and that horse might or might not be compatible with the rider's goals. I try my best to make it work, while making the rider aware of the limitations the horse may have. Sometimes, when the rider wants to keep the horse, we find we can go in a different direction – a horse who isn't quite fancy enough for the hunters may make a great little jumper, for example.”

Even when goals are realistic, however, there are bound to be moments when nothing goes as planned and none of the goals are met. When that happens, Klipa says, “I acknowledge the disappointment, but remind my client that there's always a next week and a next show. It helps that I can almost always share a story from my competitive past to put it all in perspective for them! With horses there will always be circumstances you can't control, but generally you get out of it what you put into it. If you don't meet your goal, just lower your expectations a bit to make them easier to reach.

“The lessons are what make the long-term goals reachable,” he adds. “You have to be able to get the lead change in the lesson before you can get it in the show ring. As the riders progress, we set more complicated goals lesson by lesson. Often, I find that consistency is the best long-term goal. Doing something right once is relatively easy ... doing it right TWICE is hard!”

GOALS SHOULD BE ..

- measurable and specific
- challenging, but not unrealistic
- tailored to the individual and his/her horse
- positive rather than negative (what to do, rather than what NOT to do)
- limited in number and prioritized according to how meaningful they are to the individual rider
- both short-term and long-term
- re-evaluated periodically and altered accordingly
- mutually agreed to by student, trainer, and parent (if the rider is a junior)
- not always based solely on competitive results
- viewed as stepping stones to success
- set with the health and well-being of the horse as first priority, always.

WHEN GOALS GO WRONG ...

Goal-setting is usually a productive process, but here are a few pitfalls to avoid:

- Don't set goals which are unrealistically high. That just sets you up for failure.
- Conversely, don't make your goals so easy to achieve that there's no challenge. You may get a little validation from them, but little sense of achievement and no new skills acquisition.
- Don't set goals that are beyond your control – such as winning every equitation class in the series. Remember judging is subjective. Instead, set goals based on your own performance, such as nailing every distance and getting clean changes in three classes

- in a row.
- Be careful not to set too many goals at once. You will just feel overloaded and pressured. Focus on one or two at a time.
 - In the face of chasing your goals, don't forget to give yourself time and permission to have fun and enjoy your horse!

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Karen Briggs is an award winning equestrian journalist who prepares a monthly informational or educational article for LAHSA members. The LAHSA Board of Directors and staff hope you find these articles informative. Reprints are available with permission from LAHSA.