

Fence to Win or Fence Not to Lose?

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Having goals is nothing new. Most people are familiar with the usual short-term, long-term goal plan. While there are many types of goals, the achievement-motivation theory explains goals are created according to our type of motivation. Some people work to improve themselves and compare their current performances with their previous ones. Other people compare themselves to others and work to be better than, or not as bad as, others. This affects how we make our goals.

Mastery goals entail that the individual is concerned with improving their skills, rather than their competitive results. A fencer may not be affected by a win or loss; they are concerned if their fencing is getting better. Individuals who follow mastery goals compare their performance with their own previous performance, not with the performance of others. Alternatively, performance goals are when a competitor is motivated to better their competitive results, rather than their skills (Elliot & McGregor, 2001). Competitors who have performance goals compare their results against their opponents, not against their own previous results. No matter how this type of competitor fenced, they are only happy if they won.

Mastery (Self)

Performance (Others)

Achievement

(Success)

Mastery-approach goal

Performance-approach goal

Avoidance

(Failure)

Mastery-avoidance goal

Performance-avoidance goal

These types of goals can be classified into either achievement or avoidance categories.

- Mastery-achievement goals are when a competitor works towards success by improving their own skills (i.e. "I have been working on my fleche in lessons and it has gotten me some additional touches in bouts.")

- Mastery-avoidance goals are when a competitor trains their skills so that they aren't worse than they were last time they used them (i.e. "I've got to have better distance than I did in the last tournament.")

- Performance-achievement goals reflect a competitor that works towards success by doing better than others (i.e. "I want to be the best sabre fencer in my club.")

- Performance-avoidance goals are made by competitors who work to avoid failure by not doing as bad as others (i.e. "I don't care how I do, as long as I do better than Sally.") (Conroy, Elliot, & Hofer, 2003).

Each of these goals may sound alike, but they all an important distinction on how an athlete approaches their training. Some competitors get bogged down about their failures. They may continually envision their losses as they run through their mind. Other competitors focus on winning. They feel that they deserve a win, view themselves as competition to their opponents, fence to win, and don't feel guilty when they do win. More importantly, they take credit for the win and don't "blame" it on an uncontrollable circumstance, like luck. Some fencers measure their progress according to how they are fencing, no matter how they placed in the final results. Other fencers just don't want to finish last.

Recent research using 2006 Summer National epee fencers found that those who have high fear of failure are more likely to make mastery-avoidance and performance-avoidance goals (Athanas, 2007). In other words, those fencers who were afraid to fail were more likely to make goals that avoided failing, rather than making goals that aimed at winning.

So which type of goal is best? Established research supports the adoption of both mastery-achievement and performance-achievement goals have a positive affect on self-motivation and better results (Elliot & Church, 1997). Furthermore, the researchers stressed that steering clear of avoidance goals is the way to go.

Take a look at your goals. What is driving you to make certain types of goals? Are you fencing to improve your game, fencing to not lose, fencing to beat others, or fencing to not do as bad as others? If you find that you are making avoidance goals, reword them to focus on doing your best, rather than not fencing poorly. If you have already made achievement goals, you're already on your way to realizing your potential.

References

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