

Mental training

*Unless you're rich, or you manage to earn a living from your sport, the chances are you have to fit your training around the demands of work. But according to sports psychologist **Andy Lane** and business consultant **Richard Lane**, the demands of work and sport are far from incompatible; indeed, many of the skills required in each sphere are transferable to the other.*

At A Glance

- The benefits of achieving goals simultaneously across different domains such as work and sport are outlined;
- Methods of setting outcome and performance goals for sport and business, identifying barriers to success, and using psychological skills to work smarter, and not necessarily work harder are described;
- The importance of recognising potentially transferable skills and reflecting on successes and failures within the goal setting cycle is discussed.

Peak performance requires preparation and athletes undergo intense periods of preparation for competition, managing competing demands on their time. Not surprisingly, finding sufficient time to train is a concern raised by many athletes ^(1, 2). Academic demands can also place considerable stress on teenage athletes, while adult athletes often have to contend with work demands ^(1, 2).

Although it's common for athletes to prioritise the pursuit of athletic goals over the pursuit of other goals, the evidence suggests there are dangers in investing self-worth in a single domain and that it's better to spread the risk of failure ⁽³⁾.

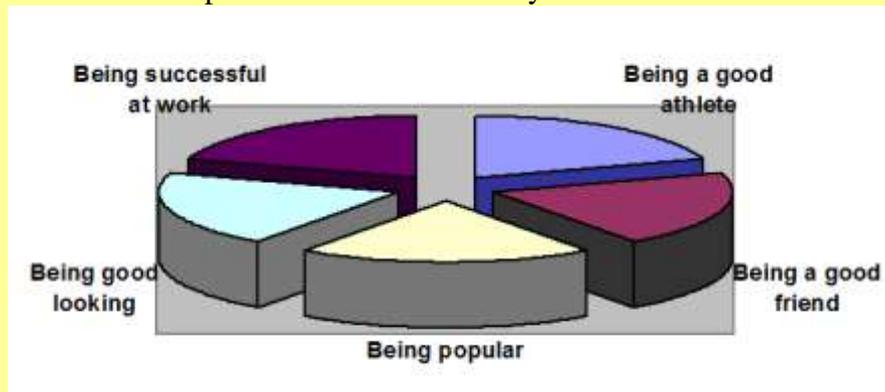
Studies indicate that individuals whose self-esteem is founded on achieving success in a range of different tasks (complex) show greater resilience in the face of setbacks ⁽³⁾ - *ie* an individual with a complex self-esteem can overcome setbacks much easier than those individuals whose self-esteem is dependent on success in one activity.

This article argues that setting goals for sport, family, work and social settings is not only desirable for developing psychological well-being, but can also aid performance in each domain. Research shows that high achieving individuals thrive in attaining challenging goals, and that having independent goals is a healthy position ⁽³⁾. It also challenges a commonly held *attitude* that running a successful career outside of sport, typically in an office-based occupation and sport are incompatible goals.

Our evidence is drawn principally from competitive sport and foreign exchange dealing, both occupations where a competitive mindset is beneficial. We accept the position that there are times when elite athletes need to prioritise sport over competing goals or other commitments. Equally, business people will need to prioritise work over sport. However, we suggest that elite athletes need interests outside of sport in which to direct their energy and that establishing high-level goals in different domains of life can be complimentary to performance, provided there is careful goal management.

By seeing both sport and occupation as performance environments, and by applying psychological skills to enhance performance in both domains, it is possible that the transfer of psychological skills across domains could not only enhance athletes cope with the pressure of competition but also could enhance career progression.

Figure 1: Individuals with a complex self-esteem cope with stress adaptively because there are multiple domains in which they value themselves



Work-training conflict?

Planning a training schedule around competing time constraints can be difficult, leading to feelings of frustration⁽²⁾. The starting point to overcoming this issue is to consider carefully how much time is actually available. It is important not to develop self-defeating thoughts regarding training and ultimately performance. Each athlete should think carefully about beliefs he/she holds on the amount of time available and challenge an *attitude* that there is insufficient time; athletes need to assess carefully whether there is truly insufficient time, or whether they are using this argument as a reason for not performing to expectations.

The first stage in developing a schedule that caters for achieving goals in different areas is to identify goals and propose ways in which those goals can be attained. When planning the timetable for goal achievement it helps to mark out time that is under *your* control from time when you have to respond to requests from others. The time that is yours is a precious resource and you should seek to maximise usage of this time. Once you have identified time that you can use, you then need to consider how best to use this time⁽²⁾:

- Identify outcome goals for each domain (sport, business, family etc.) that you wish to achieve in. Write these down as measurable outcomes;
- Identify process goals for each domain - *ie* what skills you wish to achieve and describe these in detail. These will be more difficult to identify and they might not be observable behaviours. An example of this type of goal in sport could be to engage in imagery sessions to rehearse managing competitive anxiety. In occupational settings, if you need to make rapid decisions under pressure, you could engage in imagery sessions to re-enact such scenarios, considering how you could have used the information available differently;
- Identify key training dates/phases as well as rest times;
- Identify important work dates.

At first sight, achieving multiple goals may appear incompatible and a potential source of conflict. For most people, an objective evaluation reveals they have more time than they think – it just takes better management and planning. ‘Creating’ this time may still be not enough, and a strategy to optimise the use of this relatively scarce resource, focusing on quality and high performance training may be necessary.

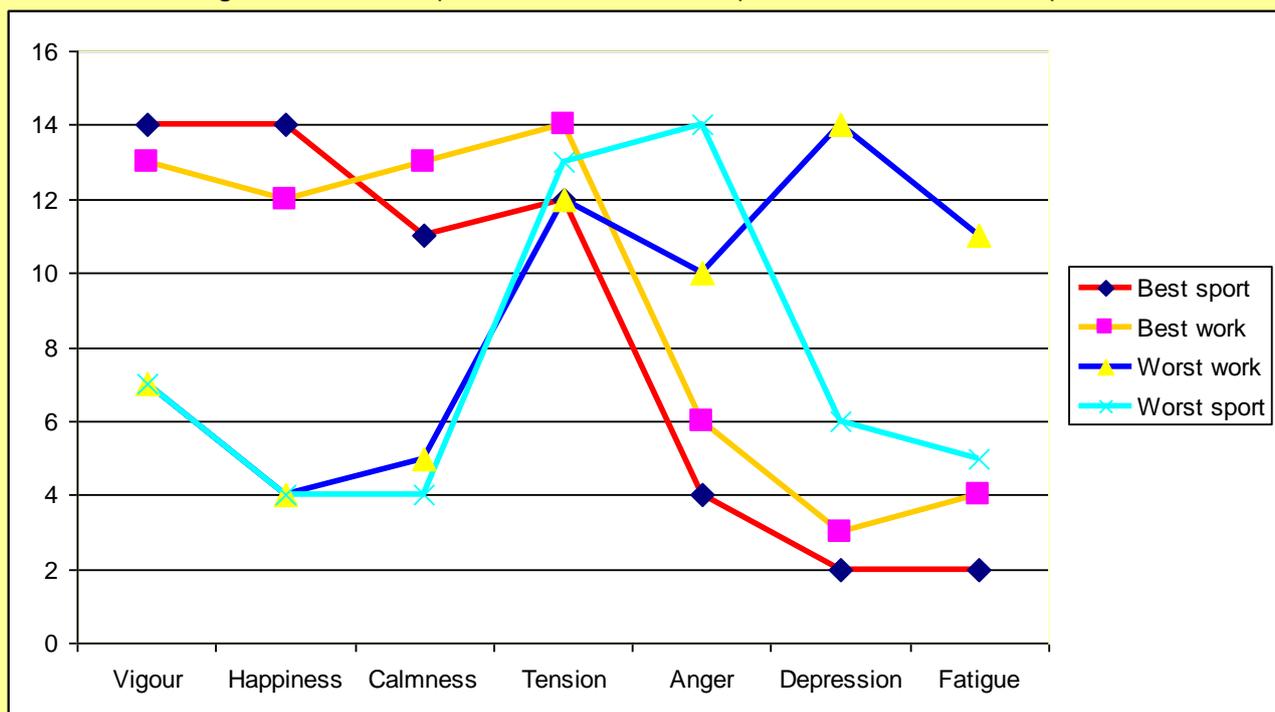
The following case study illustrates the challenge of trying to balance goals in different domains ⁽⁴⁾. The participant is a foreign exchange dealer and competes as a national level 10-mile time trial cyclist. He expressed that “*On the face of it, working as a foreign exchange dealer in the City, my job appeared gruelling – a pressured, hectic, results-driven day starting at 7.00 am (5.30 am alarm) and getting home at 6.30pm*”. He also felt that there were considerable time constraints but within this framework, time could be devoted to training. He indicated that:

“My work-training conflict led me to look at my training plan in a more resourceful and purposeful manner. Given the duration of the target event (20-25 minutes), I needed relatively short sessions of fast-paced training rather than long hours in the saddle. I therefore constructed a training plan that was goal focused and structured, consisting of shorter ‘high’ quality lunchtime sessions. My lunchtime training re-energised me mentally ahead of the New York foreign exchange session and I had built an effective training schedule integral to my day that helped achieve my sporting goals and complemented my business performance”.

Transferring skills from sport to business and vice-versa

Sporting competition shares many desirable traits for success in business because athletes need to manage their emotions, be goal focused, engage in activities to prepare for high-level performance, and be able to manage immediate and sometimes unpleasant feedback. Figure 2 shows how emotional profiles of good and poor work and sport performance are closely associated.

Figure 2: Emotional profiles of best and worst performance at work and sport



Sport performance differs to business performance in a number of ways ⁽⁵⁾. Sport performance is discrete in that there are boundaries regarding when the competition starts and ends, whereas in business, performance is far more open and not always clear who is the opposition, when the game starts, and how performance is evaluated.

However, the analogy between business and sport performance crystallises at a micro level, for example, giving a presentation to the board, making a sales pitch, or trading in financial markets. When business people see performance as analogous to sport performance, providing a framework

in which there is a start and end of each 'competition', and deciding how success is to be defined, then skills learned playing sport begins to have direct relevance to skills in business.

If we accept that there are areas in which sport prepares people for business, these areas are worth unpacking in greater detail. The ability to manage emotions has been cited as a key aspect to both sport performance and business performance ⁽⁵⁾. Recent research has found that emotionally intelligent athletes can get themselves into a psychological state linked to optimum performance in different domains of their life.

A recent study investigated differences in mood states between optimal and poor performance in sport and academic performance, and showed that emotionally intelligent athletes were able to regulate their mood states to optimal levels regardless of the situation ⁽⁶⁾. Competition generates intense emotions and if individuals can learn strategies to manage intense emotions, then such strategies could be used equally successfully in sport and business.

For individuals to be able to maximise the transfer of this regulation of emotion from sport to business, they need to be conscious of their ability to achieve this process. Emotionally intelligent people seem to make this connection naturally. For less emotionally intelligent people, it is argued that individuals need to be aware of the emotional state linked with success across different domains, identifying the preparation strategy for getting into the right psychological state for each performance and make the link between the usage of such strategies across different situations. It's common for individuals to be able to manage their emotions in the sporting domain, but be poor at managing their emotions when giving presentations ⁽⁶⁾. Therefore, it is equally important that the individual learns to recognise that they are developing transferable skills.

Foreign exchange

In the case study described above, we focused on balancing athletic performance with foreign exchange trading performance. Foreign exchange trading has strong parallels with performance in sport – goal orientated, competitive, clear outcomes (win or lose) against clear opposition – the market. It is punctuated by a series of events or games of varying intensity and duration - an emotional rollercoaster especially as the reasoning behind short-term moves in the market are often difficult to pinpoint.

The ability to control emotions, remain calm and focus on the task in hand is as important in sport as it is in foreign exchange dealing. To illustrate this point, consider a trader who loses focus whilst quoting prices to clients. He/she may end up with an unprofitable foreign exchange exposure by missing a move in the market. In such conditions, when a trader is losing money, it is all too common to 'overtrade' in an attempt to recover losses quickly. The subsequent trading decisions are made under duress, with higher risk and often with less rationale than normal.

This is a situation that can easily snowball into a vicious circle of poor risk/reward resulting in losses that initiate further futile attempts to scramble money back. A strong parallel is the football team, who with only five minutes to go throw everything into their opponents' half – a 'do or die' attitude.

With foreign exchange markets ever more competitive and with technology (for example mathematically programmed trading machines) reducing emotion in many aspects, it is increasingly more vital that traditional trading teams are able to harness their emotions to their advantage. Companies are increasingly using the skills of sport psychologists to develop winning attitudes of high-performing employees and employers need to inculcate a philosophy of being able to develop winning minds and so get individuals and teams into that virtuous circle of high performance breeding high performance ^(2,3).

Business also provides opportunities for athletes to learn emotional control techniques transferable to sport. Individuals involved in selling typically experience a range of emotions around each sales pitch. For example, anxiety inhibits the control of attention, leading to poor decision-making. Since good sales performance requires low anxiety, an athlete could compare the effects of using self-talk versus progressive muscular relaxation as a strategy to regulate anxiety. The key point is that psychological preparation for sport performance can be practised in work-related tasks (see table 1).

Table 1: Psychological skill usage in business and sport

Psychological skills	Where it can be applied	Evaluation
Imagery to cope with unpleasant emotions	<i>“dealing with a difficult colleague”</i>	<i>“I found that I could chose the best action for the situation rather get caught up in the emotion of the situation”</i>
Communication	<i>“negotiating my goals with employer”</i>	<i>“I found my employer was willing to be flexible with work hours as well as tasks to be completed”</i>
Emotional control	<i>“preparing to start the race”</i>	<i>“I realised that there were many things I could prepare the day before and developing a set routine was an excellent strategy for reducing anxiety before the race”</i>
Control of attention and concentration	<i>“managing the sensation of fatigue in the last mile”</i>	<i>“I found that using positive self-talk that was very personal to me, made me feel invincible and enabled me to focus on running faster and not on the fatigue in my legs”</i>

Goal attainment: Reflective processes

Whilst goal setting theory encourages setting realistic goals, most athletes aspire to achieve standards that are extremely difficult to obtain (see table 1). Striking the right balance between setting a goal that is motivating, and one that is too difficult, and subsequently de-motivating is hard.

Athletes typically cause their own pre-competition anxiety by setting difficult goals. Individuals typically set goals without full knowledge of the requirements needed for goal attainment and can only estimate their emotional state before and during attempts at goal attainment. In short, we often set goals against a backdrop of imperfect knowledge. It follows therefore when considering whether your goals have been achieved, that you also need to reflect on the efforts made and the difficulties of the task.

‘Parking errors in an emotional car park’

There will be setbacks and periods when progress is slow or stagnant, or when an individual feels that performance is deteriorating. Poor performance is associated with unpleasant emotions⁽⁷⁾ accompanying an analysis of the reasons for defeat. A key skill is to learn to ‘park’ this response for review at an appropriate time.

Poor performance can reduce self-confidence and lead to further decrements in performance. In the case of the athlete-businessperson, poor performance in one domain of life can affect performance in the other; a bad day at the office can lead to poor performance in the game, and vice versa.

To prevent such occurrences, it is worth anticipating the thoughts and emotions that are typically experienced. Most athletes know the feelings of success and failure and recreating these feelings is

attainable through the use of imagery. Each scenario should be labelled as an 'event' that has a start and an end. Once the person has labelled the event, he/she should develop strategies to prevent the likelihood of repeating poor a performance. The aim is to develop a plan on how to improve performance and strategies to manage associated emotions. The plan can be rehearsed by imagery in order to recreate how that individual will cope with the period following a poor performance. Imagery in this exercise is aimed at improving confidence to cope with adversity.

Summary and recommendations

If you have to fit in your training around your job, here are some key pointers to maximising performance in both spheres:

- Set realistic goal setting and develop an action plan to achieve these goals. Ensure that goals are established across different aspects of life.
- Use psychological skills such as imagery and positive self-talk to prepare for coping with pressure (both in terms of competition and work). Think of specific situations where you will need to be in control of your thoughts and emotions and mentally rehearse performing these situations.
- Establish outcome (i.e., finishing times, winning contests, sales figures, performance targets) and process goals (i.e., running technique, swimming techniques, being relaxed under pressure) which are relevant and will bring about success
- Be aware that performance occurs in a social context; discuss your goals with employers and coach. This means discussing issues related to achieving your goal, and explain that you are committed to achieve these goals.

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