

Goal Setting for the A+ Physique

Kevin Vost, Psy.D.

As the oak is to the acorn, so is the sturdy HIT trainee to the once willowy high volume seedling. - attributed to Aristotle (authenticity questionable)

In the 300's B.C., Aristotle, the Father of Logic, formulated the Law of Identity, A is A, a thing is what it is, with its own nature and attributes, and nothing else. Twenty-three hundred years later, in the mid-20th century, Ayn Rand grasped Aristotle's idea deep down and applied it to all the branches of philosophy, writing some incredible novels along the way, for example, Atlas Shrugged. (Sorry, no tips about how the Titan built his trapezius.) It was not until the late 1990s that Mike Mentzer and Brian Johnston started spelling out the Law of Identity's implications for our special sector of the universe, that of physical culture.

This last application raises a few questions: 1) in attempting to alter our natural size and strength, might we be railing against our natures and the very Law of Identity, in trying to become what we are not, and 2) if not, how can we best train ourselves to apply a rational system of strength training, knowing the imperfections and weaknesses that abide in our identities as human beings?

In answering these questions, I will attempt to incorporate the best of human reason, (ideas of Aristotle and Ayn Rand), and of psychological science. I will show that our pursuits are exquisitely well-aligned with Aristotelian logic, and I will offer practical suggestions on how we can motivate ourselves to apply the rational training principles derived from High Intensity Training (HIT), guided by the goal setting theory and research of psychologist Dr. Edwin Locke.

If A is A, is A+ an Irrational Goal?

Aristotle's Law of Identity should be considered in light of his Law of Non-Contradiction, that a thing cannot be both A and non-A; specifically, a thing cannot be both what is and what it is not, in the same way, at the same time. Note here the important qualifiers of aspect and time. To say that one is a man who can deadlift 400 lbs x 10, in no way implies that he could not move a greater weight with better technique, or at a later date.

Aristotle was clearly aware of the fundamental truth of change, especially regarding living organisms. Herman Randall (1960) tells us that to Aristotle *metabole* (becoming), and *kinesis* (movement), were fundamental facts of the world we see. Aristotle himself joked that "only a vegetable would try to deny it." Come to think of it, aren't the processes of metabolism, (nutrition) and *kinesis* (movement, in our case as lifters, against resistance) the keys to the changes we seek in body building? (Only a vegetable would deny it.)

Now, here's a brief digression that should interest modern muscleheads. In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, (Aristotle, trans. 1943) when presenting the principle of the Golden Mean, Aristotle's considers the issue of finding the exact amount of meat needed in the diet of the mighty Milo of Croton, the father of progressive resistance training. (He was the guy who got huge by regularly lifting a young calf. As it got bigger and bigger, so did Milo.) Aristotle noted that six pounds of meat per day might not be enough!

This raises some questions: 1) was Aristotle an early master of prescribed nutrition, and 2) did The Philosopher understand the power of creatine 2,500 years ago? Since there are about 2 grams of creatine in a pound of meat, some of the hugest ancient Greeks were downing 12 or more grams of creatine per day. Can you imagine Hercules' intake? Could painful muscle cramps have led to his violent outbursts? In any event, our pursuit clearly violates no laws of logic, so now to the practical issue of how we can motivate ourselves to change our physiques from As to A+s (though some of us might settle for a solid C.)

From Values to Goals to Results A yn Rand said man is a being of "self-made soul." As resistance trainers, we are also men (& women) of self-made bodies. Though our knowledge is ever-expanding, I believe that what we already know about nutrition and high intensity training is enough to dramatically change the physique of any beginner. The real trick is to translate that knowledge into action, and this is where motivational psychology comes in. In the rest of the article I will apply industrial psychologist Dr. Edwin Locke's findings on goal setting to our place of business - the gym.

Dr. Locke's theory and research began in the 1960s. He has specifically addressed goal setting in sports (e.g., 1991), and his most comprehensive summary is contained in the book *A Theory of Goal Setting and Task Performance* (Locke & Latham, 1990). I'll present just a few key points from the huge body of goal setting research (well over 500 studies), with the specific guidelines adapted from Dr. Locke's audiotaped lectures *Goal Setting to Improve Your Life and Happiness* (1985).

In brief, values are things that we desire, having judged them good for us, like large, strong muscles and a trim waistline, while goals are the specific means by which we act to attain or actualize the values, like goals of regularly progressing in HIT workouts and eating a sensible diet. Goal setting is as a volitional process, something we do willfully and purposely to help us achieve our values. In clarifying the connection between our identities and the inescapable need for goal-directed activity goals, Dr. Locke notes,

"Our identity as living organisms requires that our lives be goal directed (else we die); in humans, goal directed activity (outside the realm of automatic internal actions like the heartbeat) is volitional; thus we have to decide what we want to achieve and how and work deliberately to attain it." (01/23/2000, personal e-mail communication)

Goal setting is also initially a conscious process which calls for focused logical thinking, as the guidelines below will make clear. Fortunately for us, our adaptive minds have evolved so that consciously chosen goals also serve to program us subconsciously, below the threshold of awareness. According to Dr. Locke,

"usually a goal, once accepted and understood, will remain in the background or periphery of consciousness, as a reference point for guiding and giving meaning to subsequent mental and physical actions leading to the goal." (1990, p.5.)

In other words, goals can lead to habitual, almost automatic behaviors consistent with their attainment. If I may be forgiven for citing Arnold Schwarzenegger in a HIT journal, readers might recall his statement that by simply choosing a specific goal of getting larger or smaller, his body seem to obey and immediately start to follow suit. Now, to specific suggestions for fine-tuning your goals to turn your dreams (if reasonable) into reality.

Specific Guidelines for Effective Goal-Setting

1. Specificity - Make your goals specific. Research suggests that vague, general goals like striving to "do one's best" are much less likely to get the job done than striving do something specific like "eight reps with 225 at a 4-2-4 seconds positive-hold-negative cadence." As lifters we have easy access to specific forms of goal setting, such as increases in weight, repetitions, and time under tension.

2. Time-limited - Set deadlines. I don't know whether we can, (or would want to) completely actualize our genetic potential in 12 months, as Mr. Mentzer has indicated. Still, we will profit by setting small, short-term, goals, that slowly, but surely, coax our genes into revealing the potentialities hidden in our muscle bellies. In each workout lies the potential for achievement of some kind of subgoal in some exercise, even if it be through the addition of a fractional plate or a refinement of form.

3. Difficulty - Challenge yourself! That is the title of Clarence Bass' (1999) most recent book. (Indeed, Mr. Bass also cites Dr. Locke's research.) Difficult, challenging goals inspire us to greater heights than those easily attained. This harks back to the maxim that man's reach should exceed his grasp. Dr. Locke notes that difficult goals are called "stretch goals." (We should be careful not to get too carried away with rapid gains though, else our stretch goals lead to stretch marks.)

4. Planned - Create a coordinated game plan of goals. Make your goals part of a coherent strategy. In physical culture, goals include gains in strength, and size, as well as leanness and cardiorespiratory fitness. Having an integrated game plan will help us spot contradictory goals. Does your goal to add 50 lbs. to your bench press ASAP mesh well with your goal to trim 2 inches off your waist? (If it was only that easy.)

5. Objectivity - Make your goals realistic. In choosing stretch goals to challenge yourself, remember to challenge yourself, not Casey Viator's or Sergio Oliva's selves! With increasing time in the iron game, and through reading IART case studies, you can get a better sense of what kinds of goals are realistic for you. Many young lifters tend to overestimate capabilities and even champions may err on the side of underestimation. Remember the Golden Mean.

Psychologist Michael Mahoney (1995) found that among a group of 24 nationally-ranked Olympic lifters most lifted more weight on the snatch when they were not aware of the weight on the bar than when they knew the weight they were lifting. In fact, five of them set new personal records during the experiment when unsure of the weight they were snatching. One's PR increased by a full 15 kgs. (33 lbs.). Granted, few HIT trainers perform the explosive and potentially injurious snatch, but similar findings were obtained with incline presses decades before (Ness & Patton, 1979). A moral from those scientific stories is to be wary of selling yourself short when assessing your potential and choosing your goals.

6. Monitoring - Track your goals. Resistance training is ideal for monitoring feedback. Gravity clearly tells us how we are doing. Goals can be monitored in training journals of various formats. One form rarely depicted in the lifting literature is the use of graphs, and in this day of spreadsheet formulas and high-tech computer graphics, with Lotus 123, Microsoft Excel, or other such programs, you can chart your progress in living color, but that could be a whole separate article.

7. Context - Don't lose track of the big picture. One of the blessings of the training as espoused by the IART is that brief, intense, infrequent exercise provides you with the time to have a life outside the gym! Don't focus so much on your training goals that you forget to set goals for your education, career, romantic relationships, friendships, etc. Remember the Greeks, and their goal of arete, (overall excellence). I believe it was Aristotle who wrote that everyone should be able to play the flute...but not too well! Don't become a one-sided bombing/blitzing gym rat hiding from the light of day outside the gym's front doors.

8. Commitment - Persist, Persist, Persist. If the goals you set meet the guidelines above, they should yield good results and provide for an enjoyable trip on your way to new levels of fitness. Still, there will be days when effort and strength of will are required. Remind yourself of your goal, look at your feedback charts, pull out an old issue of Exercise Protocol; to borrow a phrase from Mr. Zarqa, (1999), remind yourself, "I can."

Summing Up: Psyche, Soma, & Goals

We are integrated beings of psyche (mind) and soma (body). Our identities as humans include great potential for change through willful effort. Psychological science can help us put the lessons of exercise science into practice to achieve the changes we seek. Specific, time-limited, planned, challenging, and realistic goals, monitored carefully, placed in the context of a well-balanced life style, and pursued with commitment, can help us transform our mental images of size and strength into big, strong flesh. What are your goals for your next workout?

References

- Aristotle (trans. 1943). *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Aristotle: On the Nature of the Universe*, L.R. Loomis (ed.) New York: Walter Black, Inc.
- Bass, C. (1999). *Challenge yourself: Leanness, fitness, & health at any age*. Albuquerque, N.M.: Ripped Enterprises.
- Locke, E (1991). Problems with goal-setting research in sports - and their solutions. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 8, 311-316.
- Locke, E. (1985). *Setting goals to improve your life and happiness*. (Audiocassette). Second Renaissance Books.
- Locke, E., & Latham, (1990). *A theory of goal setting & task performance*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall..
- Mahoney, M. (1995). Ambiguity and peak performance: An experimental study with Olympic weightlifters. *International Journal of Sports Psychology*, 26, 327-336.
- Ness, R.G., & Patton, R.W. (1979). The effect of beliefs on maximum weight-lifting performance. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 3, 205-211.
- Rand, A. (1957) *Atlas Shrugged*. New York: Random House.
- Randall, H. (1960). *Aristotle*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Zarqa, A. (1999). I can. *Exercise Protocol*, Winter 1999, 24-25.