To meet my standard of being my best in everything I try, I set goals all the time. The most important lesson I’ve learned is that, while I need the far-reaching vision of long-term goals, it’s the short-term goals that propel me to the next plateau while long-term goals are most subject to change.

Some of my criteria for short-term goals:

They need to be a challenge – a real challenge – not running 28 miles when I already know I can do 26 – more like 40 miles when I know I can do 26.

They need a reasonable timeline – it’s what makes them short-term. But this can vary. For example, I might decide I need to master the perfect aioli sauce in time for Sunday’s family reunion. But it may also mean that I need to practice squats so I can run ten miles in snow shoes next winter. And that plan must be specific: I need to do 50 squats three times a week for three weeks; then 75 squats three times a week, and so on, as I map out the five months I have until I need to be ready to trudge through a foot of powder at speed.

Long-term goals, on the other hand, are a moving target. What I start out thinking is an impossibly ambitious goal starts to feel possible after I’ve taken enough baby steps. As I meet more and more of my short-term goals, I often realize that I can reach much further than I originally imagined or that something else has changed, making the “impossible” suddenly attainable.

My criteria for long-term goals is a little looser:

They need to be a challenge – preferably, something that seems impossible right now.

My timeline is much more fluid.

Much like Derek Jeter dreaming of becoming short stop for the New York Yankees, I dreamed of providing care to the Columbia University Athletics and the Soccer team that I played for in the late 1980’s.  Athletes who see their careers ending often try to stay in the game via coaching, commentating or some other business angle in the sport. For me, it was to become a sports medicine specialist to help players maintain goals that are too often cut short with injury.  This was indeed a dream and not a goal because the path of 4 years of college, 4 years of medical school, 1 year of research, 5 years of orthopedic training, and then 1 year of sports medicine fellowship accumulates to a 15 year uphill climb with advancement filtering every step of the way.

When I was 18 years old playing at Columbia, I took many shots on goal with some landing in the parking lot adjacent to our stadium. That parking lot where I retrieved balls, interestingly, was for one of the hospitals where I spent 5 years during surgical training. I tried to schedule my rotations at that hospital during fall soccer season. This allowed me to be on the sidelines in scrubs during games while I was on duty at the hospital with my pager on. I supported my alma mater and team with injury care and prevention advice. The dream, now turning goal, was coming alive.

After 15 years of education and surgical training, my dreams became reality when I was asked to join the Columbia University Department of Orthopaedic Surgery sports medicine staff. My goals were exceeded when I was appointed The Chief of Sports Medicine at Columbia.   Now, in this past year, I was thrilled to be appointed Team Physician for the New York City Football Club (NYCFC).

Recent media indicates that NYCFC may actually make Columbia University their home field (they currently play at Yankee Stadium). A dream of taking care of collegiate soccer players on the field I once played on has evolved over 30 years to taking care of some of the world’s best MLS professional players on the field I once played on.

So it’s happened, that I discover there is an impossible end goal that becomes possible – or, at least seriously worthy of consideration – as technology develops, my skills develop, or my interests shift. I’ve learned to be flexible about these goals because I start to realize that, while I thought what I wanted to achieve was X, once I got close, Y promises to be a much more challenging, and more satisfying, destination.

When I start out, I can’t always identify accurately an appropriate endpoint. But I do decide on one since I want to know where I’m heading. The real challenge is realizing that there is, in fact, no endpoint, only another challenge and I need to remain open-minded and flexible enough to adjust. Once I realized this, I started to focus much more on very carefully defining my short-term goals while being even more ambitious – some might say crazy – on the longer-range plans.