

**Strengths-Based Approaches to Performance Excellence**

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## **Introduction**

While historically, coaches and professionals alike have approached athletes and performers from a deficit-based approach, focusing predominantly on “fixing weaknesses” (Seligman, 2011), recent studies have alluded to the efficacy of adopting more of a strengths-based approach to support optimal performance (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). Strengths-based coaching is oriented on spotting and exploiting athletes’ strengths (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). Strengths are associated with delivering a high level of performance with higher levels of energy, vitality, engagement, happiness, self-esteem, more mental resilience, and less stress (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011; Biswas-Diener, 2010). Strengths-based coaching focuses on an athletes’ unique capacities and strengths, including exploiting them to help them to perform at their best where they feel the most confident, energized, and focused in their element, and can achieve an optimal state of mind, flow states, and peak performances (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). There are several advantages to focusing on building strengths.

### **The Advantages of a Strengths-Based Approach**

The first advantageous area of building strengths is maximizing growth, potential, and achieving our greatest successes (Biswas-Diener, 2010). According to Biswas-Diener (2010), “Strengths are where our greatest successes happen, where we experience enormous growth...” (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 19). An individual’s talents (i.e., strengths), defined as the naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied are their greatest opportunities for successes (Biswas-Diener, 2010). Further, when individuals identify their strengths, it is associated with higher levels of happiness and lower rates of depression (Biswas-Diener, 2010). When individuals apply their strengths, it also increases their energy

(Biswas-Diener, 2010). Increased energy and happiness are associated with a greater sense of fulfillment (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

Often contrasted to strengths are what are called learned behaviors, defined as activities that individuals are good at but drain them (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). The preceding is of relevance to elite athletes, because if they are engaging with activities that are not energizing, such as learned behaviors, it can lead to disengagement and poor performance (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). Weaknesses are things that individuals are not good at and drain them (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). Therefore, based on the preceding understandings it appears that to optimize an individuals' energy to support optimal performance, focusing on an individuals' strengths and that which energizes them will result in greater performance outcomes (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). Developing and applying an individual's greatest strengths, their pre-existing capacities that are authentic and energizing, results in their best performances (Biswas-Diener, 2010).

The best advice is to support *realized strengths*, by using them differently to best effect; *maximize unrealized strengths*, by finding opportunities to use them more; *moderate learned behaviors*, by not using them too much; and *minimize weaknesses*, by finding ways to stop having to focus on them at all (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). In the instance that individuals do need to address weaknesses to support performance, Gordon & Gucciardi, (2011) suggests the following: Reshaping the individuals role on the team so that they can mitigate the use of their weaknesses and play in their "element" more often, such as playing on defense if they are better at guarding their goal than on driving forward on offense to make a goal; using their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses, such as using their leadership qualities to collaborate with their teammates when they are not playing their best; finding complementary teammates, such as those that are stronger in their areas of weakness to support (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011).

In addition to supporting optimal performance in sport, identifying an individual's strengths helps them to recognize the different ways that they can apply their strengths to support themselves and other people in sport, performance, and life (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). When individuals apply their strengths in their lives, especially in the service of themselves and others, they experience more gratitude, better attachments, happiness, performance excellence, and hope for the future, each element interconnected, in a positive cyclical effect continuing the endless journey of meaning, mastery, and fulfilment (Biswas-Diener, 2010; Seligman, 2004). Using a strengths-based approach in combination with MI helps the athletes and teams to recognize their strengths and values, assists them in identifying the goals that align with their strengths and values, and, in turn, optimizes their motivations, performance, and goal achievement (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011; Rollnick, et al., 2020; Stoerkel, 2016). Aligning with their strengths will increase their self-esteem, motivations, capacities, and provide them with a mental resilience to persevere to achieve their goals (Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011; Rollnick, et al., 2020; Stoerkel, 2016; Linley, et al., 2010). The strengths-based approach will allow athletes to recognize the resources that they possess internally and externally, optimizing their goal achievement (Stoerkel, 2016).

An effective self-evaluation approach for coaches to learn and maximize their own coaching strengths, and then in turn their athletes' and performers, include taking an Individual Strengths Assessment highlighted in Biswas-Diener (2010). In addition, to taking an Individual Strengths Assessment, coaches can be informed of Biswas-Diener's idea that energy is a hallmark of strengths and with that awareness coaches can write a self-reflection based on the following questions. As mentioned in Biswas-Diener (2010), individuals can answer the following questions to help identify their strengths: "1) What are some of the things from your

past about which you are most proud of? 2) What energizes you in the present? 3) What are you looking forward to in the near future?” (Biswas-Diener, 2010, p. 27). By asking the self-reflective questions mentioned above, with the awareness of changes in their energy, coaches can have the opportunity to recognize their strength areas.

After coaches recognize their certain strengths, by following the steps highlighted in the preceding, coaches can then label these strength areas, as mentioned in Biswas-Diener (2010), in order to more effectively recognize when to apply them to best support them and their clients. In addition to the preceding strategies, coaches can use the following methods mentioned in Gordon (2012), “the VIA Inventory of Strengths (Petersen & Seligman, 2004), StrengthsFinder (Rath, 2007), and Realise2 Strengths (Linley, Willars & Biswas-Diener, 2010).” (Gordon, 2012, p. 212). The self-evaluation approaches mentioned will effectively support coaches in learning and maximizing their own coaching strengths.

## References

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