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VOICES OF ELITE ATHLETES  
SWITCHING FOCUS: *A CRUCIAL SKILL*



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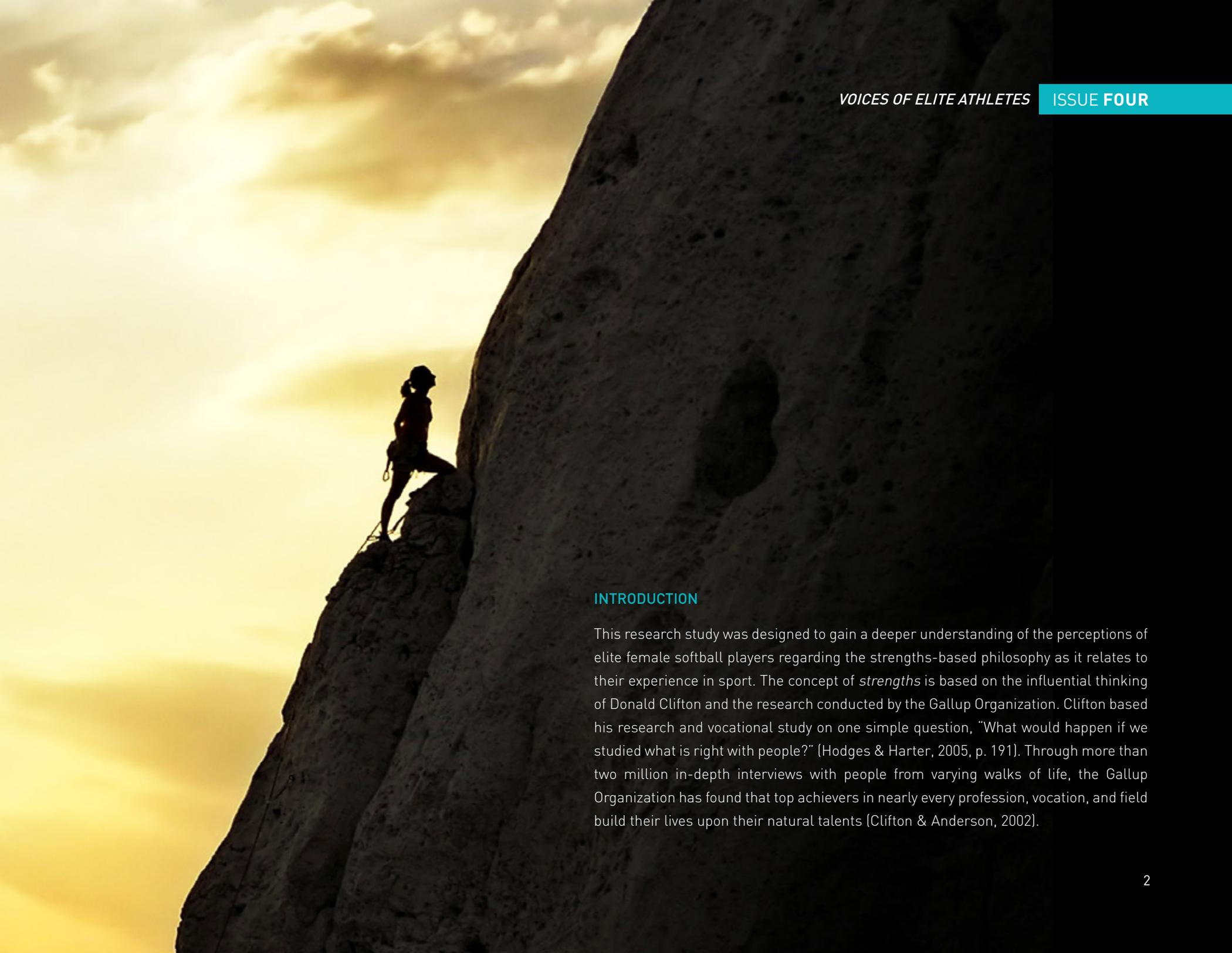
*VOICES OF ELITE ATHLETES: PERCEPTIONS THROUGH A STRENGTHS-BASED PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT*

*by Angela Robles  
Azusa Pacific University*



### ABSTRACT

A primary goal in coaching is helping athletes achieve optimal athletic performance; this goes beyond enhancing physical ability. The purpose of this article is to share the findings from a study of the perceptions *elite athletes* have of utilizing a strengths-based philosophy of sport. This study used a phenomenological qualitative research approach (Patton, 2002) and provided 17 elite female softball players an opportunity to share their reactions and perceptions of the strength-based philosophy (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) as it related to their athletic experiences. Each athlete took the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder Inventory (CSF) and shared their thoughts and reactions. The elite female softball players were recognized as Olympic gold medalists, professional players in the National Pro Fastpitch league (NPF), National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) All-Americans, and/or members of a NCAA Division I National Championship Team. This study is unique in being the first research study designed to explore the strengths philosophy with athletes. Five significant findings emerged: a) Athletes used achieving and relational strengths; b) Athletes recognized having a base strength; c) Athletes naturally capitalized on their strengths; d) Strengths were used to overcome obstacles; and e) Athletes perceived the strengths philosophy as having a positive team impact. This study has several practical implications for coaches, physical educators, and athletes who desire to capitalize on their natural talents and develop a strengths-based philosophy of sport.

A silhouette of a person climbing a large rock face against a bright, cloudy sky at sunset or sunrise. The person is positioned on the left side of the frame, facing right, and appears to be in the middle of a climb. The rock face is dark and textured, with a large, irregular hole or indentation on the right side. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and scattered clouds, creating a dramatic and inspiring atmosphere.

## INTRODUCTION

This research study was designed to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of elite female softball players regarding the strengths-based philosophy as it relates to their experience in sport. The concept of *strengths* is based on the influential thinking of Donald Clifton and the research conducted by the Gallup Organization. Clifton based his research and vocational study on one simple question, “What would happen if we studied what is right with people?” (Hodges & Harter, 2005, p. 191). Through more than two million in-depth interviews with people from varying walks of life, the Gallup Organization has found that top achievers in nearly every profession, vocation, and field build their lives upon their natural talents (Clifton & Anderson, 2002).



### THE CLIFTON STRENGTHSFINDER

In the 1990s the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder Inventory (CSF) was developed (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007). This instrument was initially designed to identify talent in the business and industry fields, as well as increase productivity and morale of employees (Schreiner, 2006). As of 2011, over seven million individuals have taken the CSF (Gallup Organization, 2012). In August 2011, the CSF had been used with more than one million college students (P. Wilhelm, personal communication, August 15, 2011).

The CSF is “a thirty-minute, Web-based assessment that measures the presence of thirty-four themes of talent” (Clifton & Anderson, 2001, p. 3). The assessment consists of 177 item-pairs (with five response options) presented to the user. Individuals receive a Signature Themes Report upon completion of the CSF. The Signature Themes Report is a printable document containing the top five most dominant themes of talent as indicated by the participants’ responses to the online assessment. The top five themes are presented in rank order, with the most dominant theme listed first. This report includes a description of the five themes, as well as suggestions for capitalizing on each. The overarching purpose of enabling an individual to identify areas of inherent talent is to empower him/her to deliberately develop those talents into personal strengths.

A few examples of the 34 themes include: *Achiever*, *Belief*, *Competition*, *Empathy*, *Positivity*, and *Strategic*. Most of the strengths can be understood at a foundational level simply by their name. For example, individuals with the strength of *Achiever* may tend to have a great deal of resilience and work hard. They often take satisfaction from being busy and productive (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). Someone with the strength of *Belief*, often will find they have certain core values that are unchanging (Clifton & Anderson), and these values lead to a deep purpose in their life. Individuals with *Competition*, often



find they thrive in contests. These individuals tend to measure their progress against the performance of others (Clifton & Anderson). Individuals with the strength of Empathy are often able to sense the feelings of others by imagining themselves in other people's lives and situations (Clifton & Anderson). This tends to allow the individual to connect with another person at a profound level of understanding. People with the strength of Positivity are often considered the "cheerleaders" of the group. They have an enthusiasm that is contagious (Clifton & Anderson), and can often get others excited about what lies ahead. Lastly, the strength of Strategic enables an individual to create alternative ways to proceed (Clifton & Anderson). Individuals with this strength often can naturally find the quickest and most efficient way to advance in a situation.

### THE STRENGTHS-BASED PHILOSOPHY

The strengths-based philosophy is continuing to grow as more and more educators and academic institutions are incorporating the philosophy into their curriculum. Some of the many ways in which campus leaders are utilizing the strengths-based philosophy are as follows: a) freshman year experiences (Louis,

2008; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2010; Swanson, 2006); b) strengths-based advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005; Shushok & Hulme, 2006); c) strengths-based teaching (Cantwell, 2005); d) career counseling (Lopez & Louis, 2007); e) professional mentoring (Lopez & Louis, 2007); f) leadership development (Shushok & Hulme, 2006); and g) relationship-building (Clifton & Anderson, 2002).

Would Gallup's strengths-based philosophy hold true for the best of the best in sports? In training and competition, elite athletes utilize their physical bodies in order to succeed in the athletic domain. Smith (2003) has found two categories of athletes exist who perform at the highest level: "the genetically talented (the thoroughbred); and those with a highly developed work ethic (the workhorse)" (p. 1103). However, it is not the physical body alone that enables the elite athlete to succeed. "Optimal performance requires a healthy body and integration of not only the physiological elements but also the psychological, technical and tactical components" (Smith, p. 1104). If we consider elite athletes as the top achievers in their profession, would the elements of the strengths philosophy apply to them as well? Do they believe they use their naturally powerful talents to achieve and do so in individual roles and/or team roles that best utilize these talents? If so, how?

A photograph of a person rappelling down a narrow crack in a large rock formation. The person is silhouetted against a bright blue sky. The rock is dark and textured. The person is positioned in the center of the crack, with their body and rope visible. The background shows a clear blue sky with some light clouds.

At this point, no known institutions have implemented a comprehensive strengths-based philosophy with their athletes. Administrators, coaches, and campus leaders are continuing to look for ways in which they can better understand and serve athletes. The findings in this study have the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge available to those individuals working with athletes at all levels.

### ELITE FEMALE ATHLETES

This research has attempted to understand the perceptions elite female softball players have on the strengths-based philosophy of the best of the best. It is valuable to consider the impact a strengths revolution would have, specifically among female athletes and on female sport teams. The numbers of women participating in athletics are on the rise, and it is critical to consider the influence they are having in sports and in society. According to a 2010 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) report, women's teams represented 53.3% of the championship sport teams in the NCAA (NCAA, 2010). The number of women's teams has increased each year for the past 28 years. In NCAA Division I, 45.6% of participants are women, creating the closest percentage difference regarding gender since its inception (NCAA, 2010).

This research study pursued female fastpitch softball athletes because the United States is home to the most competitive and successful softball players in the world. Since its first meeting in 1952, the International Softball Federation (ISF) has existed to support and develop the game worldwide. Currently, the ISF consists of 127 member countries (ISF, 2011) and the United States has continued to be on the forefront of softball development. Elite female softball players in this study were carefully and intentionally identified as those who are among the "best of the best" in the world, and an extensive process was performed to confirm their participation.



## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore elite female softball athletes' perceptions of the strengths-based philosophy (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) and their individual CSF strengths. An additional purpose was to investigate elite softball athletes' perceptions of how the strengths-based philosophy (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) influences relational capacity, their team "roles", and team cohesion. The four central research questions this study examined were as follows: a) Do elite female softball players recognize their strengths

as identified by the CSF (Clifton & Anderson, 2002)? If so, how do they perceive their strengths impacting their athletic performance?; b) In what ways do elite female softball players find their strengths affecting the way they relate to their coaches and teammates?; c) How do elite female softball players find their strengths impacting the way they perform their "role" on the team?; and d) How do elite female softball players believe their team would be affected if all teammates knew their strengths and each others' strengths?

## METHODS

This study was designed using a phenomenological qualitative research approach (Patton, 2002) and provided opportunity for elite female softball players to share their perceptions and reactions of the strength-based philosophy (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) as it related to their athletic experiences. A semi-structured interview process was used, which allowed for better understanding and to capture the elite athletes' perceptions without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories.

This study gathered data from four main sources: a) CSF; b) semi-structured interviews; c) Ranking Activity; and d) Exploring My Signature Themes Worksheet. It was instrumental to utilize each of these sources in order to gain a better understanding of each elite athlete's thoughts and reactions.

## PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES

Since this study was focused on the best of the best in the sport of softball, it was necessary to identify the top achievers in the sport. One of the significant aspects of this study is the remarkable group of elite athletes who agreed to participate. They were women who were recognized as gold-medal winning Olympians, professional players in National Pro Fastpitch (NPF), or collegiate All-Americans/National Champions.

Participants included 16 elite softball players and one expert reader (Softball Olympian Michele Smith). In this study, the participants fit into one or more of the following categories: a) athletes who played on a NCAA Division I National Championship team, b) athletes who earned All-American status at the NCAA Division I level, c) athletes who were professional softball players in the NPF or who were playing professional internationally, and d) athletes who were Olympians (past and/or present).



### PROCEDURE

Potential elite female athletes who fit the criteria for this study were contacted and invited to participate in the study. The participants received an access code in the introductory letter which provided them an opportunity to take the CSF online through the StrengthsQuest website ([www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com), 2008). After completing the CSF online, individuals received a report called This document provided the participants with their Top Five Signature Strengths as reported by the CSF and include a detailed description of each theme.

### SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Five significant findings emerged from the analysis of the various data sources. The findings included: a) Athletes used achieving and relational strengths; b) Athletes recognized having a base strength; c) Athletes naturally capitalized on their strengths; d) Strengths were used to overcome obstacles; and e) Athletes perceived the strengths philosophy as having a positive team impact.



### ELITE ATHLETES USED ACHIEVING AND/OR RELATIONAL STRENGTHS

The first significant finding was that elite athletes tend to *use achieving and/or relational strengths* in order to become “the best.” For the purpose of this research, the terms “achieving” and “relational” strengths will be operationally defined. Achieving strengths include any of the 34 strengths that would significantly contribute to an individual’s ability to execute in a given situation. Rath and Conchie (2008) categorized the following nine strengths into an Executing leadership domain: Achiever, Arranger, Belief, Consistency, Deliberative, Discipline, Focus, Responsibility, and Restorative. In this research study, these strengths are considered “achieving strengths.” Another set of strengths is categorized (Rath & Conchie) in a Relationship Building leadership domain. In this study, the following nine strengths will be considered “relational strengths”: Adaptability, Developer, Connectedness, Empathy, Harmony, Includer, Individualization, Positivity, and Relator.

It is critical that athletic teams have a balance of both types of individuals on the team. Expert reader, Olympian Michele Smith, shared:

I believe most elite athletes for sure focus on the hard work of the game, the nuts and bolts if you will. They know it is hard to be successful at the elite level if you are not working hard or playing well. The second part of that is each team or elite team will have members that understand the chemistry of the team. The atmosphere of the team is just as important as the physical stuff on the field. Most elite athletes and teams play best when they are happy and in harmony.

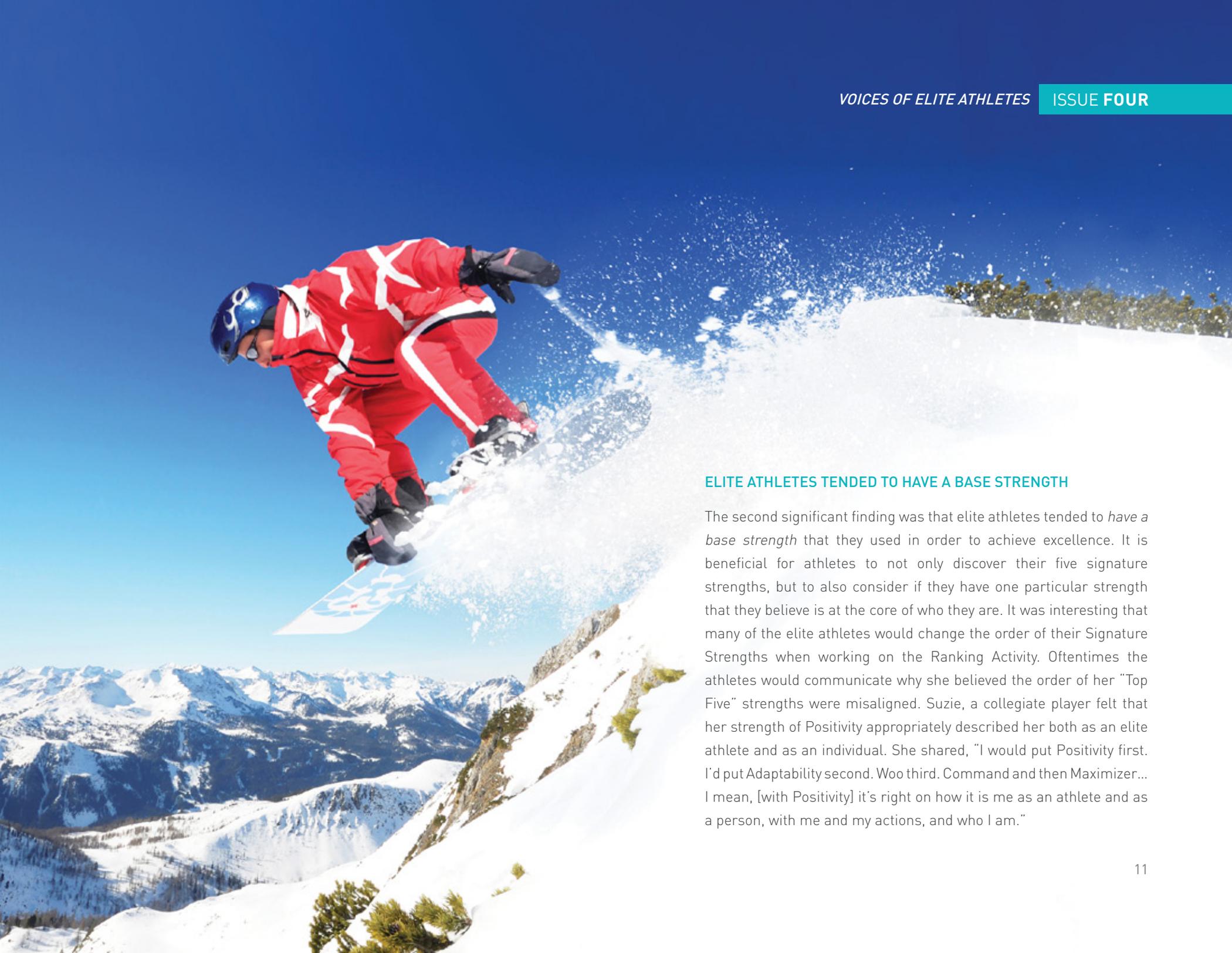


Elite athletes with achieving strengths such as Achiever, Activator, Command, Competition, Maximizer, and Futuristic used those strengths to achieve excellence. While some participants with achieving strengths shared how they used their strengths to excel, other participants shared how they used both achieving and relational strengths. However, a few participants used only relational strengths in their roles as elite athletes.

This is significant in that it is essential to recognize that an athlete may actually *not* possess achieving strengths, and yet still become elite or experience success at the level in which they play. This was evident in the example of Laura, an Olympian, who had more relational strengths. In the context of this study, she had the most Olympic gold medals (3), National Championships (3), and All-American awards (3), yet she did not have any typical achieving strengths. One might assume she garnered success due to

her strong sense of competition, aggression, or desire for achievement. However, she explained that her strengths of Adaptability, Belief, Harmony, Relator, and Connectedness were her motivating factors in achieving success. She was driven ultimately by relationships and her core strength of Belief. She shared how her relational strengths allowed her to experience personal as well as team success:

I would probably put Belief first (in terms of most significant). That to me, is just the core, that's where I start. Then I would probably say Relator and Connectedness. And then I would probably say Adaptability, and then Harmony. I think with the team, I liked playing for something bigger than myself. I definitely think I am a team-athlete. Physically, players can easily pass me by. But I think there is an intangible that I have that is natural. I think I'm an encourager.



#### ELITE ATHLETES TENDED TO HAVE A BASE STRENGTH

The second significant finding was that elite athletes tended to *have a base strength* that they used in order to achieve excellence. It is beneficial for athletes to not only discover their five signature strengths, but to also consider if they have one particular strength that they believe is at the core of who they are. It was interesting that many of the elite athletes would change the order of their Signature Strengths when working on the Ranking Activity. Oftentimes the athletes would communicate why she believed the order of her “Top Five” strengths were misaligned. Suzie, a collegiate player felt that her strength of Positivity appropriately described her both as an elite athlete and as an individual. She shared, “I would put Positivity first. I’d put Adaptability second. Woo third. Command and then Maximizer... I mean, [with Positivity] it’s right on how it is me as an athlete and as a person, with me and my actions, and who I am.”



The concept of a base strength could be used to provide confidence, stability, and consistency when an athlete faces various trials or adversity. According to expert reader, Olympian Michele Smith:

One of the things that I think is very important no matter what people's five different strengths would be, is which one of those themes do you use to really come through adversity or the things that can really derail you as an athlete? Not in a physical sense, but in a mental sense because I have seen so many great athletes [pause] I mean I have played with athletes that are 10 times the athlete that I am physically, but they mentally can't get beyond a certain level.

There are a lot of athletes out there that simply sabotage themselves. So be prepared when things aren't working right to have that base, that ground level, to come back to and then it's almost like stairs. If you get up, you climb up these stairs. You have these four or five different stairs [strengths] you have, and everything's working on all cylinders then yeah, you're really blessed, and lucky to be at that event when everything's just working right. If things aren't, then you have that core to go back to and within that core you have that stability of knowing that this is basically the heart and the gut of who I am and what I am.

#### ELITE ATHLETES NATURALLY CAPITALIZED ON THEIR STRENGTHS

The third significant finding was that elite athletes *naturally capitalized on their strengths* as they cultivated team/coach relationships, took various leadership roles, and set goals. Each participant used her personal strengths in order to create different types of relationships, took different leadership roles, and set individual goals. All sixteen participants, as well as the expert reader, had various sets of strengths. There was no resounding pattern of strengths that emerged among the participants in this study.



Participants were somewhat unique in the way they used their strengths in forming relationships with teammates and coaches, either authoritative or relational in the leadership roles they embraced, and diverse in the goals they established. Elite athletes did not emulate a “one size fits all” leadership role. Betsy, a collegiate player, took more of an authoritative leadership role. She shared,

I think, in the weight room, people can, you know, slack off. When people are slacking off, it's your responsibility to kind of kick 'em in the butt! And be like, “Okay, get it going! Right now! This is a team effort. This is something that we all need to be working for.”

Other athletes found their strengths led them to gravitate towards a more relational leadership role. Jamie, an Olympian described being a silent leader this way:

I was one of the main leaders on the team. And never by choice. They always called me “Quiet Thunder” because I wasn't the person out there rah-rahing everybody. I led more by example and people are just naturally drawn to that.

Another example of a participant taking a relational leader role is Nicole, a professional player. She explained how she used her strength of Includer to lead:

With Includer, I haven't had that many times in my life where I was the outsider. For some reason I feel so, so, bad when people aren't, you know, invited somewhere. Everyone on the team calls me the “social coordinator.” On my team, I have the whole entire team in a group text message. So I'm always like, “We're going to lunch” and then every single person knows, you know?

The elite athletes also did not set universal goals. They used a variety of strengths, became leaders in ways that best suited them, and set goals that were appropriate and attainable.



This finding is significant because it indicates that elite athletes embrace the various strengths they possess. It may also show non-elite athletes that they have the opportunity to use their strengths in striving to reach their maximum potential. There are no essential strengths one must have in order to become elite or play to one's highest potential.

#### **ELITE ATHLETES USED THEIR STRENGTHS IN OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

The fourth significant finding was that elite athletes intentionally *used their strengths in overcoming obstacles*. Fourteen of the 17 participants shared how they used their strengths in order to overcome obstacles. For some participants, they used their strengths to overcome physical injuries or emotional crises, while others used their strengths to overcome difficulty adjusting to their freshman year of college or performance failure.

#### **DEALING WITH PHYSICAL INJURY**

It was surprising to learn that elite athletes were able to use their various strengths to deal with a physical injury, remain optimistic, and adapt. In a sport culture where many athletes may typically give up when forced to deal with an injury (Bussmann, 1999), these women shared about how they used their strengths to not only deal with the injury, but also use the experience to make them stronger.



Victoria, a collegiate player, ended her catching career because of an injury, ended up losing her position, and was asked to play outfield instead. Rather than quitting or becoming disheartened, she used her strength of Adaptability to become one of the best outfielders in the country. Although this study was focused on the best in softball, one may wonder if this finding could also apply to non-elite players? Perhaps athletes who are not elite, could still use their strengths to deal with a physical injury and discover another way to contribute to a team's success.

### OVERCOMING AN EMOTIONAL CRISIS

Galli and Vealey (2007) found that elite athletes are often considered resilient as they “defy the odds” (p. S162) in performance and competition. In order to be successful, athletes must have the ability to prevent their emotions from overtaking

them. However, when one considers being resilient in facing emotional crisis or personal trauma, to do so becomes difficult, even at the elite level.

One of the most profound interviews was with Jennifer, a collegiate player. Her story was inspiring. Jennifer had lost her father to an illness during the fall semester. As she shared her story, it was evident that she used her strengths in order to overcome this tragedy. In a time where no one would have faulted her for quitting or taking the season off, Jennifer found the courage and ability to not only stay on the team, but also make a significant impact. This has strong implications for athletes facing extremely difficult situations or crises. Knowing their strengths and having the ability to use them could possibly provide a certain level of stability and foundation to athletes as they deal with emotional or personal trials.

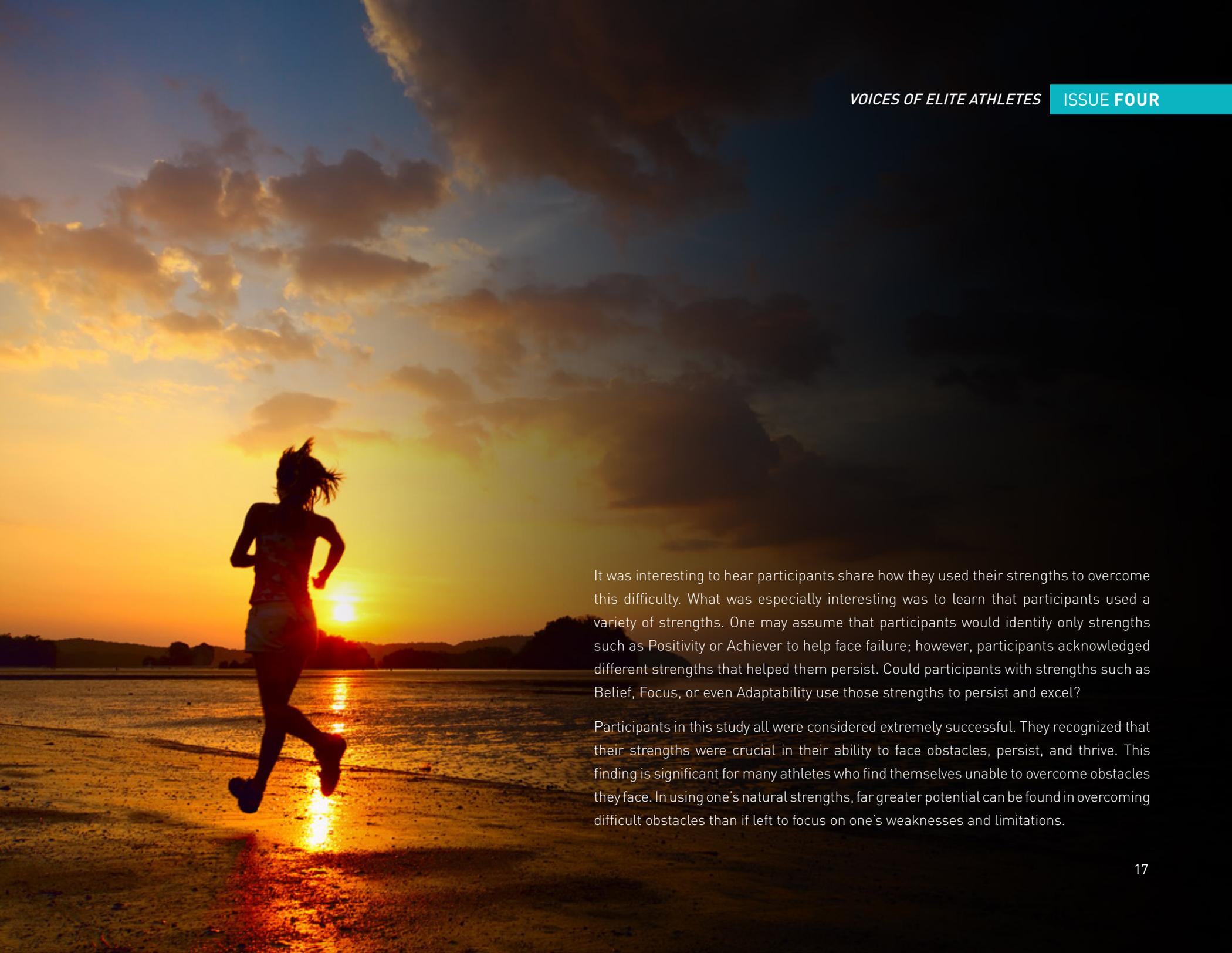


### DIFFICULTY IN ADJUSTING TO THE FRESHMAN YEAR OF COLLEGE

A number of participants vocalized having a struggle during their freshman year of college. Participants who went to college out-of-state shared how much difficulty they faced in their first year. One participant talked about how it took a few years for her coach to finally “get her” (i.e. understand her). Jaylynn, a collegiate player, described using her strength of Focus to overcome being away from home and playing out-of-state. She explained, “You have to be focused to achieve at a high level. Especially being away, you have all the odds against you.” This raises the question, would freshman athletes have a more smooth transition if they knew their role and place on the team earlier in the year? Could the strengths philosophy help address this dilemma?

### DEALING WITH PERFORMANCE FAILURE

It was fascinating to hear participants refer to the game of softball as a “game of failure.” During the interview process, many participants used the phrase, “playing in a game of failure.” It was critical to learn that even at the elite level, these participants lived with the reality they would not experience success a majority of the time (at bat). The literature review showed that being able to perform well immediately following a mistake or error could be a difficult task (Martin, 2007). Athletes on all levels of play will eventually face obstacles. It is impossible to experience success every time one enters competition. Even the greatest players face failure, injury, and difficult situations. Two participants shared how they used their strength of Positivity to overcome obstacles in the sport. Nicole, a professional player, explained, “It’s so up and down in our sport. Our sport is based on failure, you know? You get out seven out of ten times and you are really, *really* good!”



It was interesting to hear participants share how they used their strengths to overcome this difficulty. What was especially interesting was to learn that participants used a variety of strengths. One may assume that participants would identify only strengths such as Positivity or Achiever to help face failure; however, participants acknowledged different strengths that helped them persist. Could participants with strengths such as Belief, Focus, or even Adaptability use those strengths to persist and excel?

Participants in this study all were considered extremely successful. They recognized that their strengths were crucial in their ability to face obstacles, persist, and thrive. This finding is significant for many athletes who find themselves unable to overcome obstacles they face. In using one's natural strengths, far greater potential can be found in overcoming difficult obstacles than if left to focus on one's weaknesses and limitations.



### ELITE ATHLETES PERCEIVED THE STRENGTHS PHILOSOPHY AS HAVING A POSITIVE TEAM IMPACT

The fifth significant finding was that elite athletes *perceived the strengths philosophy as having a positive team impact* on women's athletic teams. The perceived impact on teams included: increasing team cohesion, developing greater understanding of individuals, and establishing respect among teammates and coaches.

Barbara and Jill, both professional players, strongly believed the strengths philosophy would help players celebrate differences among one another and thereby establish greater respect. Barbara shared:

I think we, as women, tend to seek out people who are just like us. I think that is just a natural thing, maybe it's just instinct. I don't know what it is, but I think we are more likely to do that. I think that if you teach people to learn their strengths as well as everybody else's, then they learn how to respect them, and how to deal with them. I think things like this are very, very, important.

Jill said something similar:

I think teams could benefit from a program where they kind of understand and celebrate differences... (Athletes) are hand picked, too, from different parts of the country. Everyone has different beliefs, different spiritualities, different lifestyles, social backgrounds and all that. So, you know, or just different morals. It's still kind of important for people in a team environment to realize that differences can be celebrated. But respect is very important, and respecting people's strengths that are unique to each other.



Jamie, an Olympian, believed knowing players' strengths would help a coach know how to best motivate them. "I can see it being a benefit to know how other people think and what makes them tick... because it would allow them to know how to push different players."

### COACHING IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, the coaching implications for practice could be best summarized in three steps: *Discover*, *Develop*, and *Apply*. Expert reader, Olympian Michele Smith explained the potential value of implementing a strengths-based philosophy:

I think it [the strengths philosophy] would allow coaches to look at their athletes who are mentally complacent. When you really find out what an athlete is made of internally, as a coach you have a better ability to coach that athlete and to be able to pull out their strengths or motivate them in a different way.

### DISCOVER AN ATHLETE'S STRENGTHS

An essential aspect for coaches to recognize is that each athlete possesses unique talents and strengths. It is crucial for coaches to take time to assess their athletes individually and find out their signature strengths. The CSF could be an asset to coaches as they learn to modify goals and facilitate conversations with their athletes accordingly. If coaches have mediocre athletes with achieving type strengths, they could use this information to motivate their athletes to reach higher levels of achievement. Athletes with achieving strengths can be great leaders on teams in terms of goal setting and casting a vision for what the team wants to accomplish during the season. However, it would be even more beneficial for a coach to know if there were certain athletes who do *not* have any relational type strengths in order to determine how to coach them in ways that perhaps do not require more intimate interaction. With these athletes, coaches



could focus on more of the “nuts and bolts” of technique and strategy. It would be valuable also for a coach to understand which athletes have relational strengths in order to take advantage of teachable moments in practice and games. The athletes who are more relational can be clearly identified, and coaches can become more intentional with cultivating a personal relationship based on trust and openness.

It is beneficial for athletes to not only discover their five signature strengths, but to also consider if they have a strength that they believe is at the core of who they are. This base strength could be used to provide confidence, stability, and consistency when an athlete faces various trials or adversity.

#### **DEVELOP AN ATHLETE'S STRENGTHS**

If athletes had the opportunity to discover their strengths, coaches could utilize this philosophy in partnering with them to develop their strengths for maximum potential. The benefit in utilizing the language of strengths, and creating ways in which individual athlete's can capitalize on their potential, is limitless. For example, a coach who has an athlete with the strength of Futuristic can begin helping that athlete set long-term goals and create benchmarks to track success. Using the platform of strengths, coaches can find new and creative ways to equip their athletes to deepen their understanding of how they best work.

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) found that the coach-athlete relationship is one of the most important influences on athletes' motivation and subsequent performance. If coaches can identify athletes' strengths, understand them better, and help them develop, they may be more likely to enhance their athletes' performance. If coaches are struggling with understanding their players, or players are confused as to why their coach does things a certain way, the strengths-based philosophy may be an effective tool in providing greater insight into each individual's strengths, motivation, and core traits.



### APPLY AN ATHLETE'S STRENGTHS

Once a coach is aware of an athlete's strengths, and has worked with the athlete in developing them, application can begin. Communicating team roles, and placing athletes in appropriate positions of leadership, is a vital component. Knowing an athlete's individual strengths can enable coaches to identify team roles that would allow them to flourish. If coaches knew they had athletes with strengths of Relator, Harmony, Woo, Includer, and Empathy, they could seek their help in creating a more cohesive team. Would it not be an asset for a coach to partner with an athlete who has the Includer strength to brainstorm team-bonding ideas? Coaches who feel they have a dysfunctional team could provide opportunities for their players who have more relational strengths to develop stronger team unity. In the same way, coaches can empower athletes to use achievement strengths in order to help their team "step up" in competition, or become more aggressive in practice.

### CONCLUSION

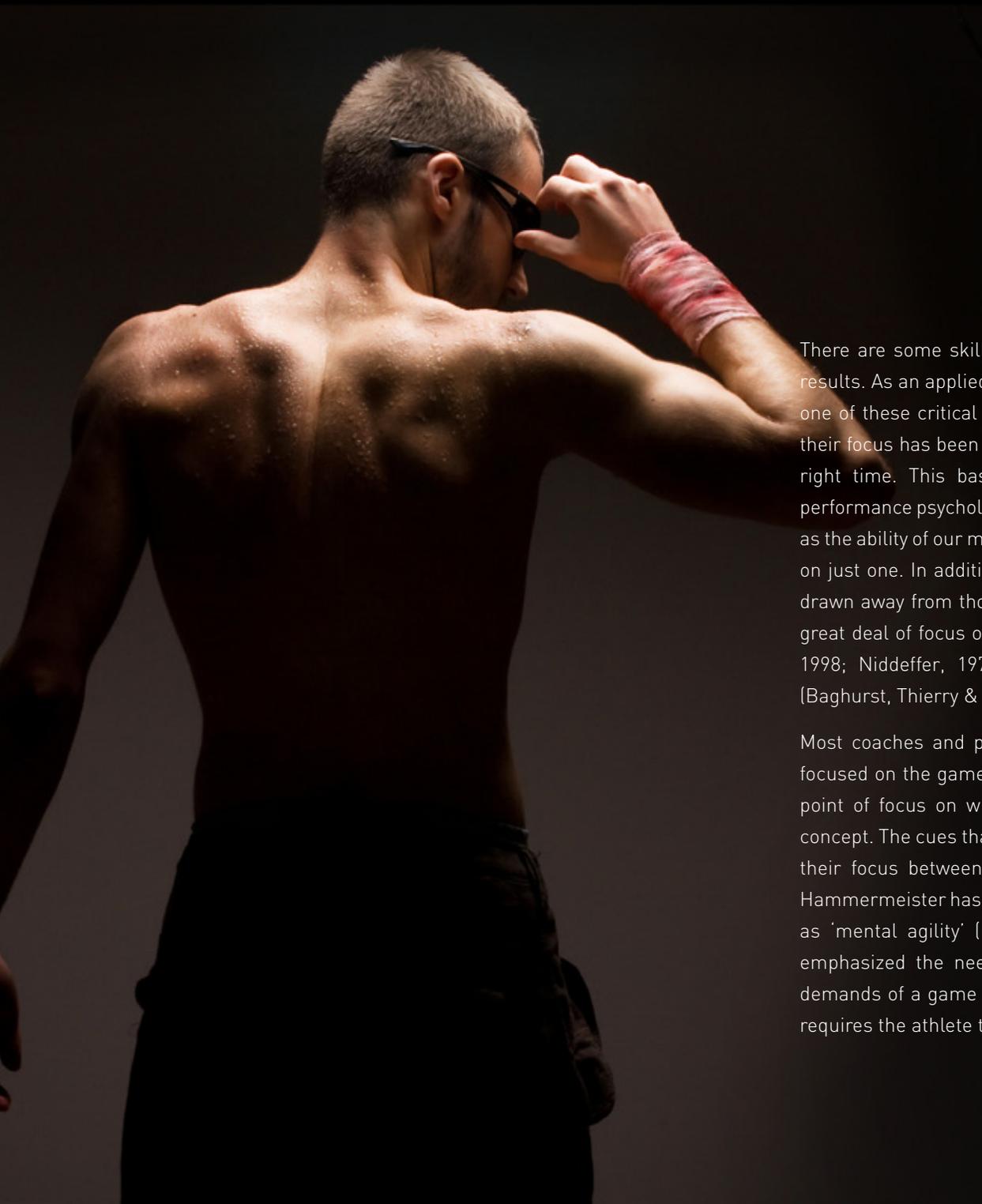
Elite athletes in this study had a base strength that they relied on for confidence, stability, and identity. Participants were also diverse in their approach as they capitalized on their individual strengths. They used their strengths to cultivate different types of team relationships, took various leadership roles, and set individual goals. These elite athletes depended on their strengths in times of trial and used them to overcome a wide range of obstacles. It is noteworthy that the elite athletes recognized the strengths philosophy as a beneficial tool to increase team cohesion. One of the most interesting ways in which they believe this could happen, is by celebrating individual differences in terms of strengths. Coaches and athletes who strive for excellence and to maximize their potential can apply the strengths-based philosophy to their team and individual professional development.

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**ISSUE FOUR**

SWITCHING FOCUS: A *CRUCIAL SKILL*  
by Simon Hartley



There are some skills in sport that have an enormous impact on performance and results. As an applied sport psychologist, I consider that an athlete's ability to focus is one of these critical skills. When I see players making mistakes, it is often because their focus has been drawn. Simply put, they are not focused on the right thing at the right time. This basic understanding has been central to our understanding of performance psychology for many years. William James (1890) first described attention as the ability of our mind, amongst all the various possible objects or thoughts, to focus on just one. In addition, he proposed that performance decreased when our focus is drawn away from those things that are critical to it. More recently, there has been a great deal of focus on attentional styles (Moran, 1990; Abernathy, Sommers, & Ford, 1998; Niddeffer, 1976, 1980) and their application to various sporting demands (Baghurst, Thierry & Holder, 2004).

Most coaches and performance psychologists appreciate that athletes need to be focused on the game. But what exactly does this mean? Very rarely is there a single point of focus on which to concentrate. In reality, focus is an incredibly dynamic concept. The cues that we need to focus on are in constant flux. Players have to switch their focus between a multitude of different stimuli at the click of a finger. Jon Hammermeister has referred to the need for rapid and appropriate shifting of attention as 'mental agility' (Hammermeister, Pickering & Lennox, 2011) and Ravizza has emphasized the need for athletes to be adaptable and respond to the changing demands of a game on a moment-by-moment basis (Ravizza & Hanson, 1998). This requires the athlete to be entirely immersed and absorbed in each moment.



What does this look like in practice? Here is an account of a motor racing driver that I work with, describing how his focus changes during a period of just a few seconds, as he drives a corner.

When I am coming into the corner, I will be watching for the braking point. Once I've got the braking point, I'll switch focus to the apex of the corner as I turn. When I start coming out of the turn, I'll listen to the revs picking up as I exit the corner. Then I start to feel the steering as I transition from the corner to the straight. Around this time I will feel for the G-forces so that I can hold my body position to counteract them.

Although the attentional demands of motor racing can be pretty complex, they are potentially more predictable than those of a game sports player. Many game sports coaches may refer to the PDA (Perception, Decision, Action) cycle to describe the way in which a player's attention shifts during the game (Vickers, 2007; Hartley & Walker, 2011). Let's walk through the basic process, using the example of a squash player.

Firstly they perceive. They read what is going on around them. If their opponent has just played a shot, they will assess the weight and height of the shot, the opponent's position and their movement. All of this information (and more) will then inform their decision. What does the player do based on their perception? Where will they move? What shot will they look to play? Once they have made their decision, they will execute their action. They will make their move and play their shot.



Obviously, as a player moves through this cycle, their point of focus must change. When they are in the 'perception phase', their focus needs to be wide and primarily external. They need to pull in information from the world around them. They must focus on what they see, hear and feel from their environment. As they enter the 'decision phase,' that focus must switch and become internal. When we make decisions, our focus is inevitably directed at our own thoughts. Once a player has decided upon the most effective action they need to be able to execute it. To execute our skills and play high quality shots, we need to have a very specific and narrow point of focus. In some cases that might need to be predominantly external (i.e. focusing on an external cue, such as looking at the ball) and in some cases it's primarily internal (i.e. focusing on the feeling cues from our body which helps us to regulate the power that we use and therefore the weight of the shot). Interestingly, many high level coaches, talk about 'shot responsibility' (Hartley, 2012). They explain that in the moment when a player takes a shot, they should be entirely immersed in the shot. That moment should be their 'quiet time' when everything else except the shot disappears into the background; it is a moment devoid of anything else.

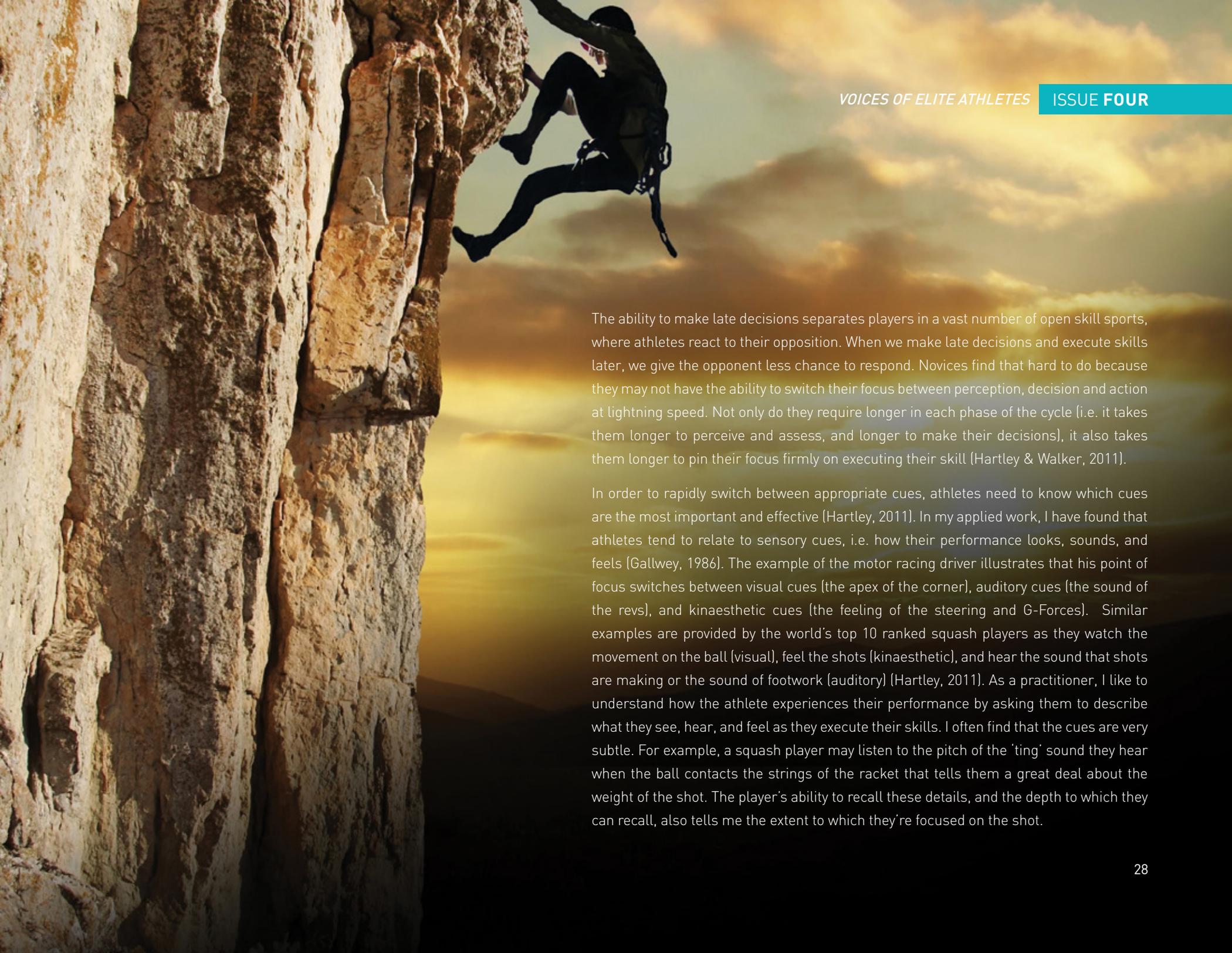
The ability to control our focus throughout that cycle is an aspect that separates players. Controlling focus and changing focus very quickly is a skill. Therefore, it requires practice. Let's take this a stage further. High level coaches are also aware that the PDA cycle actually has more phases in expert performance. It is not simply a case of perceiving, then deciding and then executing. As players become more experienced they often have a secondary perception and decision phase before they execute their action (Hartley & Walker, 2011; Neumann & Sanders, 1996). Through experience, players are able to process information and make decisions more quickly. More experienced players tend to narrow the number of potential shots they consider, which simplifies the decision making process. With additional time, players have the ability to re-assess before executing their action. Is it still the right shot? Is the opponent in the position that I expected them to be in? If they are, I may simply confirm my initial decision and go with it. If not, I may need to change tack and play a different shot.



This understanding illustrates that the relationship between perception, decisions, and actions is bidirectional. Research suggests that the flow between perceptions, decisions, and actions within expert open-skilled performance is non-consecutive, bidirectional, dynamic, and influenced by multiple constraints (de Oliveira, Damisch, Hossner, Oudejans, Raab, Volz and Williams, 2009). In essence, athletes constantly switch between perceiving, deciding, and executing, many times per second, using multiple cues. That's some demand!

In a match situation, we are not given more time to cater for the extra perception phase, the re-assessment and another decision. The ball doesn't slow down to allow us to fit these extra processes in. Therefore, we have to be able to run the processes more quickly and to change our focus more quickly. If we fail to focus back onto the shot quickly enough, we deny ourselves that important 'quiet time' in which to execute the shot. Tactically of course we can help ourselves by starting the whole process as early as possible. Physically we can ensure that we can move quickly and therefore give ourselves more time at 'the sharp end'; the final approach into the shot and shot execution. However, we also need to ensure that we can switch focus quickly and effectively.

In a recent conversation with England Squash Head Coach, Chris Robertson, he described the way that truly world class players actually have a third perception and decision making phase before executing their shot (Hartley & Walker, 2011; Hartley, 2012). At the very last moment before playing the shot, they will make a final re-assessment. Perhaps they were planning to play a drop shot. Has their opponent come up behind them quickly? Is the drop shot still on? Should they opt for a flick to the back of the court instead of the drop?



The ability to make late decisions separates players in a vast number of open skill sports, where athletes react to their opposition. When we make late decisions and execute skills later, we give the opponent less chance to respond. Novices find that hard to do because they may not have the ability to switch their focus between perception, decision and action at lightning speed. Not only do they require longer in each phase of the cycle (i.e. it takes them longer to perceive and assess, and longer to make their decisions), it also takes them longer to pin their focus firmly on executing their skill (Hartley & Walker, 2011).

In order to rapidly switch between appropriate cues, athletes need to know which cues are the most important and effective (Hartley, 2011). In my applied work, I have found that athletes tend to relate to sensory cues, i.e. how their performance looks, sounds, and feels (Gallwey, 1986). The example of the motor racing driver illustrates that his point of focus switches between visual cues (the apex of the corner), auditory cues (the sound of the revs), and kinaesthetic cues (the feeling of the steering and G-Forces). Similar examples are provided by the world's top 10 ranked squash players as they watch the movement on the ball (visual), feel the shots (kinaesthetic), and hear the sound that shots are making or the sound of footwork (auditory) (Hartley, 2011). As a practitioner, I like to understand how the athlete experiences their performance by asking them to describe what they see, hear, and feel as they execute their skills. I often find that the cues are very subtle. For example, a squash player may listen to the pitch of the 'ting' sound they hear when the ball contacts the strings of the racket that tells them a great deal about the weight of the shot. The player's ability to recall these details, and the depth to which they can recall, also tells me the extent to which they're focused on the shot.



As Ravizza suggested, in order to successfully switch focus, we need to be immersed and absorbed in the performance. Ironically, over-thinking is the barrier that prevents many athletes from doing this effectively. When I work with athletes, I often describe focus as a spotlight (Taylor, 2010; Taylor & Wilson, 2005). In reality, our focus is similar to a narrow beam. We are really only able to focus on one thing at a time. Often we will think that we are focusing on a hundred different things, because our mind seems to be full to bursting point. However, we actually only focus on one cue at a time and dart between the various things that are in our minds, spending very little time actually dedicated to any one. Our focus hops between those thoughts that are competing for our attention, and only settles on any one of them for a moment before dashing off to the next (Hamilton, 2008; Weissman, Roberts, Visscher, & Woldorff, 2006).

The challenge for many athletes is actually to take control of the beam and decide where the beam will shine. What is it that you need to focus on? Can we direct the spotlight quickly and then hold it on that cue long enough to execute the skill? The challenge tends to be exacerbated if we're scared; our attention fails to narrow and focus (Easterbrook, 1959; Horn, 2008). Imagine walking along a path in the dark with a narrow flashlight. If you are scared, you react differently. If you hear something go bump behind you, the likelihood is that you'll spin round and shine your light on it to see what made the noise. This draws your beam from the path you are supposed to be following. If you were comfortable walking the path, or you could see pretty clearly, you would be much less likely to take your beam off the path.



In sport, if we're not feeling confident we tend to start over-thinking (Rotella, 2005). This draws our focus internally (Blanke, 2007). A tennis player should arguably be 100 per cent focused on the ball as she prepares to execute the shot. If she's not focused on the ball, the chances of playing a decent shot are pretty remote. If the player is thinking about the mistake she made in her last shot (instead of shining their spotlight on the ball), her focus will be shining on her own thoughts. When we over-think, we experience what Mack and Rock (1998) have called inattentional blindness, or what I call 'thought blindness'. Imagine a professional tennis player facing an opponent who delivers a serve at 130-140mph (Elliott, 2006). The player has to select a shot and execute it in a split second. Thinking takes a relatively long time. If the receiving player thinks, he will not see the opposing player, their racket or the ball clearly. His brain will be tied up with his thoughts and will not be registering those things his eyes are seeing. The only way for the tennis player to play a good shot, is to simply watch the opponent, the racket and the ball as closely as possible and then allow his unconscious mind to play the shot. The moment during the PDA cycle where a player is fully immersed in the shot is a state that is also referred to as a 'mindless' state (Rotella, 2005). When we look at the demand in this detail, it is possible to see the extent of the mental challenge. Athletes, and game players in particular, not only need to switch their focus from one cue to another, they also need to switch between thinking and 'non-thinking.'



The need to switch focus effectively is not limited to the field of sport and athletic performance. Jon Hammermeister and colleagues (2011) referred to the importance of 'mental agility' for a soldier's performance. However, the ability to switch focus even extends into disciplines such as management. Many people require the ability to switch their focus between strategy, tactics and execution, in order to perform at their best. Frank Bond refers to our ability to focus on the present moment, whilst pursuing our end goal, as 'psychological flexibility.' His research suggests that these abilities are crucial to both mental health and performance (Bond & Flaxman, 2006). This concept is closely aligned with the findings from management research, which suggests that highly successful business leaders have the ability to zoom out (in order to see the strategic picture and take strategic decisions) and then zoom back in, in order to execute their strategy (Collins & Hansen, 2011). This enables successful operators to deliver their game plan, whilst being able to respond to unforeseen events. I have found that the ability to focus on the right things at the right times, is common in world class operators from a wide range of disciplines (Hartley, 2012).

Human performance in many domains is underpinned by our ability to rapidly switch our focus to the most appropriate and effective cues. Knowing this, it would seem sensible to devote a significant amount of attention and practice to its development. Many elements of athletic training programmes are based on the simple principle that we develop skills by exposing athletes to growing challenges; they are challenged to lift more weights, refine physical skills, become more flexible, or move more quickly. However, often the same rigours are not employed to developing vital mental skills such as switching focus. Perhaps this is an imbalance we should look to redress.

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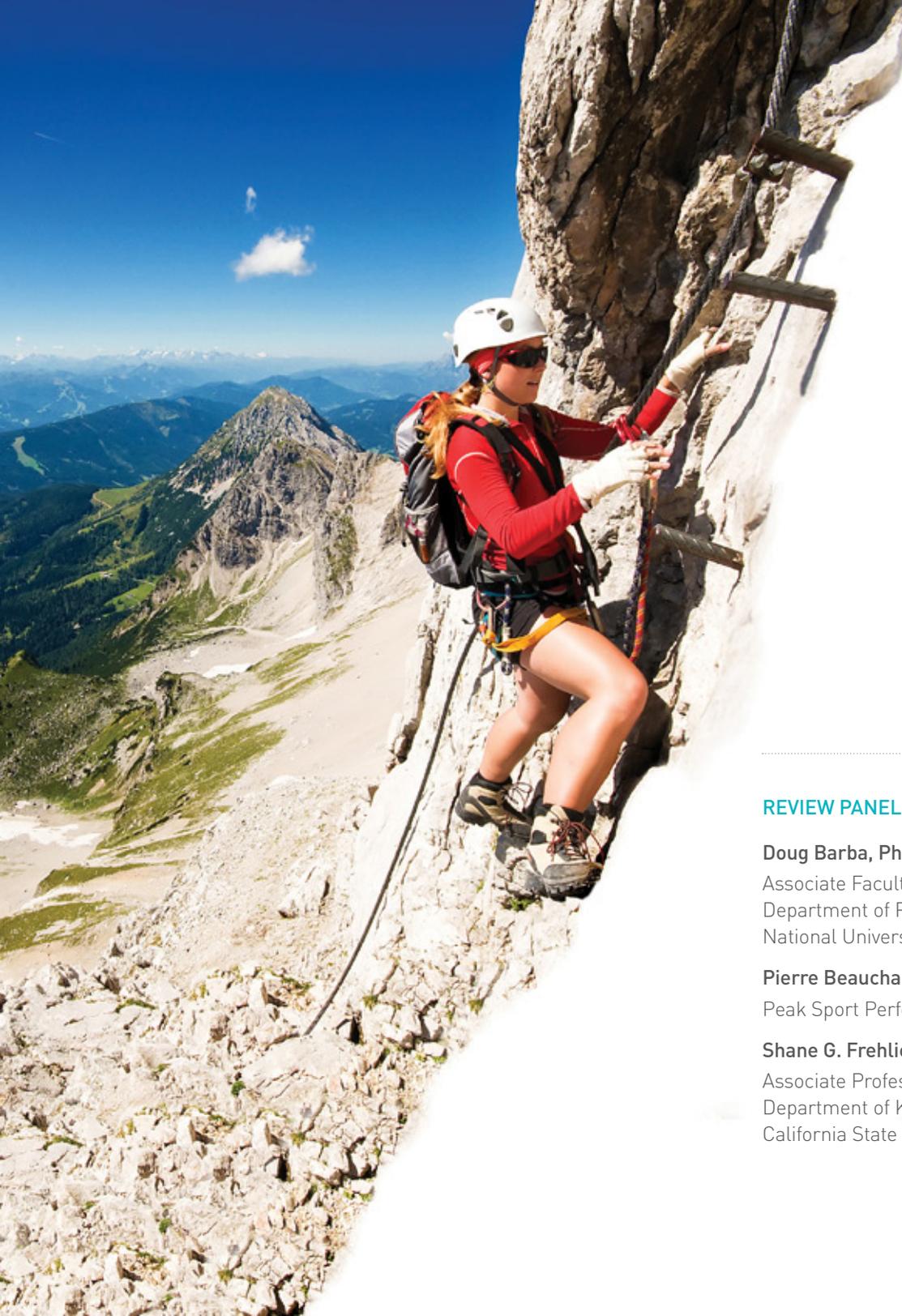
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