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Applying Positive Psychology in Sport: A Trainee's Case Study

Scott Alec Gunning^a  and Jenny Smith^b 

^aUniversity of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, United Kingdom; ^bUniversity of Chichester, Chichester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Positive psychology is an approach to psychology that focuses on the utilization of strengths, positive emotions, well-being, and personal growth to help individuals thrive, flourish, and achieve optimal functioning. The following case study highlights how positive psychology theories and techniques, specifically strengths-development and gratitude interventions, were implemented into a sport psychology intervention by a trainee sport and exercise psychologist. It is hoped that other practitioners may find the case study a useful insight into how they may be able to incorporate positive psychology into their practice.

KEYWORDS

Applied practice; case study; gratitude; positive psychology; strengths-development; trainee experiences

An overview of positive psychology

Positive psychology is an umbrella term used to represent a field of psychology that seeks to explore, discover, and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). To facilitate this, practitioners working from a positive psychology lens may focus on concepts such as well-being, happiness, motivation, flow, personal strengths, creativity, promoting personal growth and optimal functioning within individuals or groups (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Emotions play a key role in the positive psychology approach, with the building of positive emotions associated with a building of personal resources (e.g., resilience, optimism, motivation) and a continuing “upward spiral” of further positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001). As a result, the positive psychology approach moves away from the more traditional “medical model” of consultancy. Often associated with Clinical Psychology, the medical model focuses on “diagnosing and fixing” problems and is an approach that has been previously utilized within sport psychology (Poczwadowski et al., 2004).

CONTACT Scott Alec Gunning  s.gunning@herts.ac.uk  Institute of Sport, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, United Kingdom.

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The focus of positive psychology on optimal functioning in individuals draws similarities to work conducted within the field of sport and exercise psychology (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019). Just as positive psychology explores what allows certain individuals to thrive and flourish, sport and exercise psychologists may identify the strengths, strategies, and characteristics of high-performing athletes, and develop these into an intervention for their clients (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019). Despite this overlap, whilst interest in concepts related to positive psychology, such as Resilience (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) and Wellbeing (Giles et al., 2020) has grown in sport, there is still limited literature exploring the application of positive psychology interventions directly within a sport and exercise psychology context (e.g., with athletes, coaches, or teams).

Therefore, the following case study documents my experience as a trainee sport and exercise psychologist as I implemented positive psychology theory and interventions whilst working with a junior, international figure-skater. The aim of this case study is to provide practitioners with insight into the impacts of a positive psychology intervention on confidence and performance.

Case study context

Author context

I (the first author) am a trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist currently enrolled in the British Psychological Society (BPS) Qualification in Sport and Exercise Psychology (QSEP). At the time of writing, I am 2 years into the QSEP training route, with 1 year remaining until completion. The second author is a HCPC registered Sport and Exercise Psychologist and is my applied practice supervisor. At the time of writing, they have 17 years of experience, providing support through a cognitive-behavioral theoretical orientation. My interest in positive psychology stemmed from reading literature on Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), an athlete-led counseling approach that encourages individuals to utilize their strengths and resources (e.g., social support, previous experiences) to find solutions to the challenges that they may be facing (Høigaard & Johansen, 2004). From here, I explored the wider impacts of positive psychology and how it aims to increase positive emotions, wellbeing, confidence, and overall functioning (Beaumont et al., 2014; Seligman et al., 2005) which I found congruent with the values of growth, gratitude, resilience, and self-awareness that underpin my professional philosophy and practice. Within my practice I adopt a cognitive-behavioral theoretical orientation, aiming to help athletes understand how their thoughts, feelings and behaviors influence each other (Poczwardowski et al., 2004). I have found that positive psychology provides a unique approach to this by helping athletes acknowledge and

enhance the beneficial thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are facilitating their performance, rather than fixing the maladaptive thoughts, feelings and behaviors that may be hindering performance, as it common within Cognitive - Behavioral work (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Athlete context

The athlete discussed within this case study is “Sarah” (pseudonym), a junior, international, figure skater, who when we first met was striving to compete at the World Junior Championships. Figure skating involves performers completing two routines over two days. Routines are scored on various factors, including difficulty and execution, with the combined score from both routines determining the overall finishing position. I started working with Sarah within the first month of being enrolled on QSEP, with her mother seeking support to improve Sarah’s confidence following a poor performance at a competition as well as help to reduce her tendency to engage in “self-destructive” behaviors and become frustrated after making a mistake in training. Since then, we have been working together at various times in her career, often in the build-up to competitions or to provide support during training camps. The following intervention was conducted in our second period of work together in the build-up to a national championship.

In my initial work with Sarah, I had adopted a “problem-solver” approach, attempting to act as an expert to provide her with answers to her problems. After reflecting on this period of work I felt as though I was working in a manner that was incongruent with my professional philosophy as a practitioner.

Therefore, when Sarah’s mother contacted me again to arrange further sessions, I wanted to explore the use of positive psychology techniques to assess their impact on my consultancy practice whilst hopefully still providing Sarah with useful and novel tools that could help her increase her confidence and performance. The aim of the intervention was centered around fostering feelings of “robust sport confidence” within Sarah. Robust sport confidence can be defined as a multidimensional and stable construct that facilitates an athlete’s ability to deal with setbacks and the psychological and environmental challenges that occur in sport (Beaumont et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2011). To facilitate this, a combination of positive psychology informed interventions was used, including Strength-Identification and Development (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011) and Gratitude interventions (Gabana, 2019).

The former moves beyond simply identifying an athlete’s strengths, to exploring how the athlete can use said strengths to promote excellence (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). Athletes are encouraged to develop these

strengths, through enhanced awareness and utilization in a variety of contexts (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). There is also an emphasis on encouraging athletes to combine their strengths, rather than only viewing them as single, isolated characteristics (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). For example, having a strength of determination may also increase a strength of being able to move on from mistakes.

Meanwhile, the latter refers to any intervention that is aimed at increasing feelings of gratitude within an individual, with benefits including enhanced resilience, well-being, and optimism (Gabana, 2019). Traditionally, gratitude interventions have been implemented as single-session interventions, such as writing gratitude lists or “three good things” reflections (Gabana, 2019; Seligman et al., 2005). Within this case study, I attempted to develop a multi-session gratitude programme, which has previously been suggested as more likely to lead to longer lasting effects (Gabana, 2019).

Delivery of the intervention

In total the intervention period lasted six weeks. To start the intervention period, Sarah and I worked together to create her strengths profile. To do so we used the Strengths-Based Performance Profile (SBPP) method developed by Castillo and Bird (2021). Built on the foundations of performance profiling (Butler & Hardy, 1992), the SBPP offers an athlete-led method of strengths identification that incorporates principles from positive psychology (e.g., Character Strengths; Park et al., 2004) and SFBT (Castillo & Bird, 2021).

To complete the profile (Figure 1), I asked Sarah to identify the qualities that she feels are possessed by the best figure skaters in the world. She identified a range of psychological, physical, and technical qualities, and provided definitions of these. Following this, Sarah then identified what she perceived as her top six strengths that enhance her performance. To facilitate this process, Sarah's perceived ability for each of these six strengths was identified using scaling, a common SFBT technique (MacDonald, 2011), that I regularly use within my practice. Sarah was asked to identify the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that she associated with a 10/10 rating for each strength. She was then asked to rate her ability on a scale from 0 (not using that strength at all) to 10 (using that strength to maximum efficiency) for each of the six strengths. Lastly, I asked Sarah to justify why she had given herself that score, firstly by asking her why not a lower value out of 10, and secondly by asking what would be different if it was one score higher. For example, for her strength of determination, I asked Sarah to justify her choice of 8 rather than something lower like a 4 or 5, and what would be different if it moved toward a 9. Her responses can be seen in Figure 1.

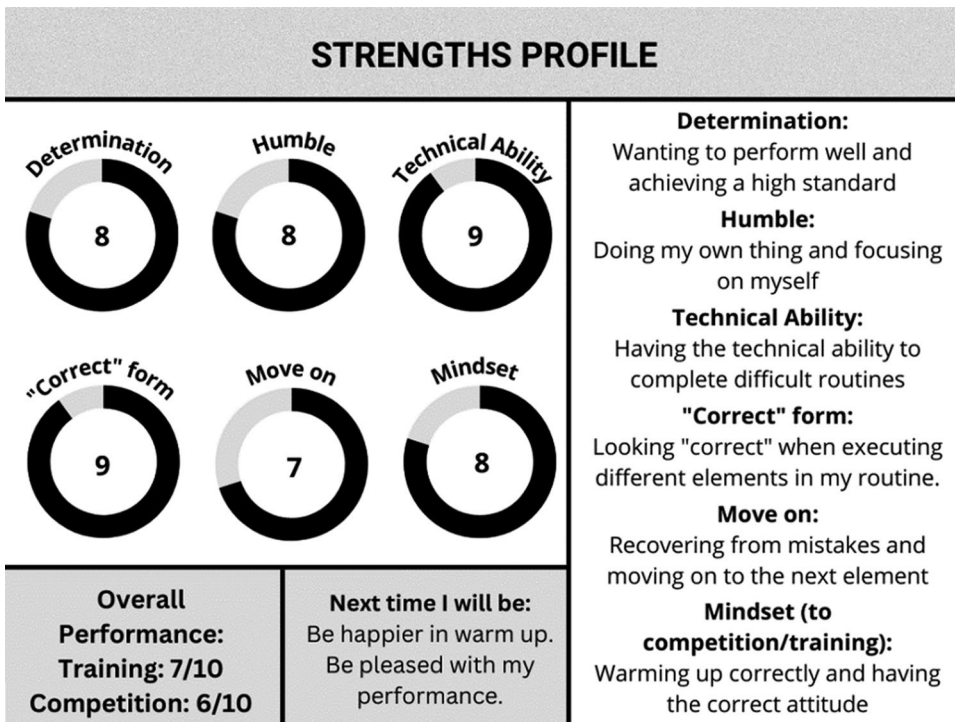


Figure 1. Strength-based performance profile for Sarah.

Following this strengths-identification session, the remainder of the six weeks was focused on strengths-development (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). The intervention aimed to help Sarah develop an enhanced awareness of her six top strengths, allowing her to consider both how and when she had used those strengths in training and competition, as well as why they may be beneficial in improving her performance. Furthermore, the identification of athlete strengths has been found to be a contributing factor to feelings of robust sport confidence within athletes (Beaumont et al., 2014).

The following sessions took place weekly and lasted between 40-60 min. They were conversational in nature and centered around Sarah identifying the strengths that she had used in training, and the impact of this. The purpose was to remind Sarah of these strengths and help build up feelings of confidence and that she had the necessary resources to cope with challenging situations should they arise. We also explored what may have happened if she had (subjectively) used her strengths too much (e.g., being too humble and not accepting praise from others) or too little (e.g., not having the right mindset for training and competition). This reflection was also combined with a "3 good things" task, a form of gratitude intervention (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019; Gabana, 2019). In this task, Sarah was asked to identify three things that she felt went well in the previous week in training, and more importantly identify what she did (e.g., through her

thoughts or actions) that facilitated the good things happening. Examples of these included “completing clean run throughs of programmes because I made sure that I warmed up correctly before the session” or “not fixating on previous negative performances because I am being more present”.

During the build-up to the national championships, Sarah competed in another international competition, in which she achieved a personal best score and the qualifying standard for the World Junior Championships. This competition provided a useful resource to help her identify when she had used her strengths during the performance and formed the basis of future tasks. In the session following the competition, we worked together to complete an updated version of her Strengths profile to highlight any possible changes. Table 1 shows the updated ratings following this performance and the self-reported reasons for these scores. Finally, I used this performance along with her other previously successful competitions from early in our work together to complete an adapted version of King’s (2001) “best possible self” intervention.

Traditionally, this intervention asks individuals to write a description of their ideal future, with the process leading to increased optimism and positive affect (King, 2001). With Sarah, I asked her to create her “best possible routine” using individual elements from previous routines where she had performed them at her best. I asked her to justify why she chose those specific elements from each routine and what she had done prior to the performance to allow it to be successful. I also asked Sarah to follow this up by finding videos of these performances so that she had visual reminders of this performance. For example, Sarah was able to develop a “perfect” routine using 3 previous competitions and noted that her best competitions happen when she is feeling confident from past experiences, focusing on her technique, does not doubt her performance, and places fewer expectations on herself.

Finally, toward the end of the six-week intervention period, Sarah reported being in a “good place” both mentally and physically, where she felt calmer and happier about the upcoming championships. As a final component to the intervention, I asked Sarah to reflect on what this “good

Table 1. Updated performance profile scores following competition.

Strengths	Rating	How the strengths helped
Determination	9/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Didn’t put too much pressure on myself.• Used positive self-talk and wanted to do well.
Humble	9/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Grateful for the advice of others.• Gained confidence from the feedback of others.
Technical ability	8/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Was able to do most things correct within the routine.
Correct form	9/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Had more stamina during the performance.• Felt relaxed knowing I could complete the routine
Move on	9/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Didn’t focus on mistakes and was able to move on with my routine.
Mindset	9/10	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Felt confident and relaxed.

place” means to her in the hope that it would help her to realize how much she had developed over the last few weeks and provide reminders of the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors she can experience to feel confident whilst performing at the national championships. Table 2 highlights the key thoughts, feelings and behaviors that allowed her to identify that she was in this good place.

Performance at the national championships

On the week of the competition, we completed a final update to her strengths profile. All scores were rated as a 9/10, apart from “Humble” which had returned to its original baseline score of 8/10. I left this final session feeling confident that Sarah was well prepared and had come a long way in this short period. I was pleased with my service delivery and Sarah had reported changes in several of her strengths, suggesting that she was more confident in her ability to perform and was ready to compete at her best. Unfortunately, Sarah contracted Covid-19 during the week of the National Championships leading to a worse than expected performance, and subsequently was not selected for the Junior World Championships. However, she was chosen to represent her country at an alternative competition, and we have since started working together again.

Reflections

This case study documents my experience of working with a junior, international figure skater during my supervised practice as a sport and exercise psychologist. It demonstrates the implementation of a six-week positive psychology intervention, aimed at developing an athlete’s “robust” sport confidence, through both strengths-identification and development and gratitude interventions. Despite Sarah not performing as well as she would have liked at the national championships, potentially due to Covid-19, self-reported measures indicated an improvement in confidence and other key strengths in the build up to her performance. In the future practitioners and researchers may wish to consider empirically testing the impact of these interventions.

Through exploring the positive psychology literature to prepare this intervention, I found an approach that was compatible with my values as

Table 2. Sarah’s “good place” identifiers.

Sarah’s “good place” identifiers	
• Consistency in training	• Eating healthily
• Feeling confident	• Having a good routine
• Having self-belief	• Spending time relaxing
• Having a plan for the next few weeks	• Feeling determined

a practitioner, allowing for greater congruence with my professional philosophy. Upon first hearing the term “positive psychology,” I initially assumed, as many do, that it is simply a focus on “positive thinking” (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019). However, it soon became clear that the scope of positive psychology is much broader, and many of the interventions, including those implemented within this case study, are highly applicable to sport and exercise contexts.

As a result of the success of this intervention with Sarah, I have continued to use similar interventions within my applied practice and have found them to be effective in both individual and group contexts. I have also found that it is possible to integrate the principles of positive psychology with other approaches to working, such as Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, by working with athletes to achieve optimal wellbeing and performance (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019).

There are potential limitations that practitioners should be aware of in implementing this approach. Firstly, the lack of empirical research supporting the use of these interventions within a sport and exercise context may present an issue for practitioners who value objective data when assessing intervention effectiveness. Secondly, the lack of literature applying these techniques to sport and exercise populations may mean that practitioners need to be creative in how they adapt these interventions for their clients. Finally, a practitioner implementing such an approach would need to have the requisite counseling skills to ensure that the conversation remains “solution focused” in nature, rather than resorting back to a discussion around deficiencies. A practitioner should also be flexible enough within their practice to acknowledge that this approach may not be suitable for all clients, for example those with clear deficiencies in a performance area or who overestimate their strengths. Practitioners adopting this approach are encouraged to reflect throughout the intervention to monitor the appropriateness and effectiveness of this intervention with their client (Keegan, 2016).

Conclusion

Positive psychology is an umbrella term that refers to an approach to psychology that focuses on explore the qualities that make individuals achieve optimal functioning and wellbeing. Despite some overlap between the aims of positive psychology and that of sport and exercise psychology, there remains limited literature exploring the implementation of positive psychology intervention within sport contexts. This case study provides an overview of the experience of a trainee sport and exercise psychologist as they implemented positive psychology interventions in their practice to provide insight for other practitioners who may be interested in the

field. For readers interested in exploring this approach further, the works of Biswas-Diener et al. (2011), Boniwell and Tunariu (2019), Castillo and Bird (2021), Gabana (2019), and Seligman et al. (2005) may be useful.

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Data availability statement

Data available from the first author on request.

ORCID

Scott Alec Gunning  <http://orcid.org/0009-0000-4464-2636>

Jenny Smith  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0405-0251>

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