

A WIN AT ALL 'VALUES' MENTALITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
INVESTIGATION OF LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE GYMNASTS AND  
VOLLEYBALL PLAYERS IN A COMPREHENSIVE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY  
INTERVENTION

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Doctor of Philosophy

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By  
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A WIN AT ALL 'VALUES' MENTALITY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
INVESTIGATION OF LIVED EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE GYMNASTS AND  
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INTERVENTION

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A candidate for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my wonderful family. I truly have the best support system in the world and none of my achievements would have been possible without their unconditional love and support. My mother has been with me in this process every step of the way, and she emulates all the remarkable qualities I hope to attain one day. She is always with me...in conscious thought as well as living through my words and daily actions. My recent success is just as much hers as it is mine. I feel very lucky to not only be her daughter, but her best friend.

My father is one tough son-of-a-gun, and I owe a significant amount of my grit and determination harnessed throughout my athletic and academic career to him. He is always in my corner fighting for his “blonde.” He has instilled and reinforced a foundation of independence and individuality in my character contributing to a confident woman who doesn’t back down from adversity or defeat.

My two brothers are still the “coolest” people I know. Since I was a little girl, I have been proudly walking in their shadows. They are incredibly hard working men and unbelievable fathers. Although annoying at times, they have always looked out for their little sister and provided guidance and loyal backing.

Lastly, I dedicate this project to my Grandpa Sid, Grandpa Chuck, Grandma Delores, and Grandma Kay. They are my biggest fans and truly make me feel like the most special girl in the world. I know if they were all here to celebrate my successful defense, they would be incredibly proud of the woman I am and the woman I will continue to become. I am honored to continue the legacy they created for their grandchildren.

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infectious positive energy and uplifting spirit “makes me want to be a BETTER WOMAN”!

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
TABLES OF TABLES.....	vii
ABSTRACT.....	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Positive Psychology and Well-Being.....	1
Positive Psychology Interventions.....	2
College Athletes, Stress, and Well-Being.....	4
Characteristics of Successful Athletes.....	6
Athletes and PPI's.....	6
Well-Being in Sport Psychology Literature.....	8
Holistic Sport Psychology Consulting.....	8
Purpose.....	10
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
Positive Psychology and Well-Being.....	12
Positive Psychology Interventions.....	16
Implementing PPI's.....	23
PPI Comprehensive Intervention.....	24
Future PPI Research.....	25
College Athletes, Stress, and Well-Being.....	27
Optimal Functioning in Athletes.....	29
Positive Emotions and Optimal Performances.....	30
Characteristics of Successful Athletes.....	30
Athletes and PPI's.....	33
Well-Being in Sport Psychology Literature.....	35
Holistic Sport Psychology Consulting.....	36
CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....	41
Research Design Methodological Approach.....	41
Researcher as Instrument.....	43
Participants.....	46
Intervention.....	47
Data Collection.....	52
Proposed Data Analysis.....	53
Trustworthiness.....	55

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	56
Preliminary Findings.....	56
Findings of Overall Essence .....	102
Final Structural Description.....	104
Quantitative Findings.....	159
Summary of Qualitative Findings.....	160
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	166
Relationships.....	168
Meaning and Purpose.....	170
Growth .....	171
Engagement in Exercises .....	174
Positive Emotions .....	175
Coach Involvement .....	176
Application.....	177
Limitations and Future Directions .....	180
REFERENCES .....	183
APPENDIX A: Positive Emotions Code Map - Happiness and Joy .....	193
APPENDIX B: Positive Emotions Code Map - Fun and Enjoyment .....	194
APPENDIX C: Informed Consent Form .....	195
APPENDIX D: Intervention Manual Written Reflections.....	199
APPENDIX E: Intervention Manual .....	206
Vita.....	227

## TABLE OF TABLES

TABLE 1: Description of athletes (n=21) participating in the study .....	47
TABLE 2: Number of Athletes Contributing to Sub-Themes .....	104
TABLE 3: Mean Ratings of Positive Exercises as a Function of Intervention Manual Questions .....	159

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and understand college athletes' perceptions of the influences of a comprehensive positive psychology intervention (PPI), delivered by their sport psychology consultant, aimed at improving well-being through maximizing PERMA elements.

The criterion sample for this study consisted of twenty-one female collegiate gymnasts and volleyball players working with the lead researcher in a large public university located in Midwestern United States. Athletes participated in an intervention involving seven weeks of empirically-based positive psychology exercises: *identifying signature strengths, three good things, best possible selves, counting one's blessings, the gratitude visit, and practicing acts of kindness*. In-depth interviews ranging from 20-60 minutes were conducted with each participant 2-3 months post intervention.

A rich and thick description of participants' experiences in the positive psychology intervention revealed *mindfulness/ awareness* and *self-reflection/introspection* provided a means to (a) strengthen *relationships*, (b) discover *meaning and purpose* in and out of sport, (c) achieve personal and collective *growth*, (d) increase *engagement in the exercises*, and (e) reap *positive emotions*.

The results of this study revealed similar attributes related to well-being with studies measuring the characteristics of highly accomplished athletes. PPIs may provide the means to develop, cultivate, and promote positive traits and attributes in athletes. Sport psychology consultants are encouraged to adopt a holistic approach to their sport psychology practice, emphasizing the primary importance to develop the person before

the athlete. Further research is recommended to explore intervention implementation through other influential gatekeepers from athlete support personnel.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1 Nov. 23, 2013

MUTigers.com Staff Writer Andrew Melroe

Columbia, MO- There weren't a lot of people that thought that a team that went 19-12 and 10-10 in SEC play a year ago would win the league the next year. In fact, when senior setter Molly Kreklow told her team in August that they would win an SEC Championship this season, it would not have been surprising if even some of her own teammates doubted her. But after Friday night, no one is doubting Kreklow and the Tigers, who claimed the school's first ever SEC Championship and the program's first-ever conference title. It was Kreklow's never-wavering belief in her team that led the Tigers to what happened at the Hearn Center Friday night (Melroe, 2013).

*“We can still take it a lot farther and probably farther than people even think we can. We don't even really know yet, because we have a lot more growth. I don't know if every team can say that, but every single day I think we get a little better. When you do that, the sky's the limit.”*

### **Positive Psychology & Well-Being**

Positive psychology is the study of positive emotions, positive character, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The field focuses on improving happiness and well-being through the discovery and building of strengths as opposed to solely fixing weaknesses and treating mental disorders (Seligman, Steen, & Peterson, 2005). Increasing human flourishing through the construct of well-being is the main goal of positive psychology. Fredrickson and Losada (2005) describe flourishing as living within an optimal range for human functioning that implies goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience. Well-being theory, developed by Martin Seligman, in the positive psychology movement is assessed through the five measurable traits of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011).

Seligman's well-being theory contains both subjective and objective measures. Positive emotions and engagement are described from a hedonic perspective, or subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2011). From this approach to well-being, people choose activities that increase happiness and life satisfaction through maximizing pleasurable moments and positive affect (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2011). Engagement is described as a heightened state of awareness where one becomes totally absorbed in the activity and experiences a loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi & Jackson, 1999). Relationships, meaning, and achievement are described from an eudaimonic perspective, separate from solely subjective pleasure and happiness, and involve the activities people engage in for positive relationships with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance and autonomy, and mastery and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). Although there may be some overlap between the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to well-being, Seligman (2011) explains all PERMA elements can be pursued for their own sake and are measured independently of each other.

### **Positive Psychology Interventions**

A significant amount of attention has been given to evidence-based positive psychology interventions (PPI's) that have been discovered to boost the well-being elements of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Successful PPI's have been reported to increase happiness and improve well-being for depressed patients, soldiers in the military, trauma victims, people suffering from chronic illnesses, children in the public school system, college students, and people looking to improve well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Giannopoulos and Vella-Broderick,



2010; Huffman, Mastromauro, Boehm, Seabrook, Friccione, & Denniger, 2011; Lyubomirsky, King, Diener, 2005; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Seligman, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Intentional activity has received support in the ‘Architecture of Sustainable Change’ theory proposed by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005). The researchers suggest 50% of the variance in happiness is due to genetics, 10% is related to life circumstances, and 40% is attributed to intentional activity. PPI’s are directed at capturing this controllable 40% where people have the ability to seek out positive exercises to increase well-being and nurture positive feelings, behaviors, and cognitions (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Collectively, positive psychology intervention research verifies the effectiveness of performing the PPI exercises of *three good things*, *the gratitude visit*, *identifying signature strengths*, *counting one’s blessings*, *practicing acts of kindness*, and *best possible selves* to improve happiness and well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). These activities are particularly beneficial for those who identify with, show greater interest in, enjoy, and commit and adhere to the exercises (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Schueller, 2010; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Lastly, an intervention that packages a variety of exercises together, encourages individuals to choose exercises for themselves, accomplishes exercises once a week, engages social support, and is implemented over a longer duration of time will be most influential in increasing positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and

achievement (Della Porta, 2012; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Parks et al., 2012; Schueller & Parks, 2012; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) states researchers now understand the “how” of pursuing happiness through positive psychology interventions, but future research should be directed to describing “why” experiences performing PPI’s increase well-being. Research on PPI’s is lacking qualitative inquiry aimed at understanding participants lived experiences with the interventions and depicting the ways PERMA elements contribute to their personal well-being. Cohn and Fredrickson (2010) suggests this “why” can be partly explained by Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. According to this theory, positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires and consequently create long lasting emotions. As participants learn new and beneficial thoughts and behaviors while participating in PPI’s, they will be likely to carry these enhanced personal resources over to other aspects of their lives and enhance their well-being. In one of the most profound discoveries thus far in positive psychology research, Cohn and Fredrickson (2010) found that in over a course of the year, adults were still using and enjoying the beneficial skills (evoking feelings of love, compassion, and other positive emotions) taught in a loving-kindness meditation PPI.

### **College Athletes, Stress, & Poor Well-Being**

Despite the growing literature stressing the importance of PPI’s in various populations, one group lacking attention in this positive psychology approach is college athletics. Although researchers have shown that exercise can act as a buffer to stress for normal college students and sport participation can promote positive experiences and

health (Hudd, Dumlao, Erdmann-Sager, Murray, Phan, Soukas, & Yokozuka, 2000; Tracey & Elcombe, 2004), the complexities of intercollegiate athletics act as additional stressors for student-athletes (Papanikolaou, Nikolaidis, Patsiaouras, & Alexopoulos, 2003; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). College athletes live in a world where sport dominates their daily decisions and routines. Although many athletes have satisfying and rewarding sport experiences, others struggle with competing athletic, academic, and social demands (Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005; Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

With a sport culture that emphasizes winning and achievement, college athletes are challenged by pressures to perform and succeed in highly stressful environments (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thorgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Lundqvist, 2011; Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Because of these external and internal pressures, some athletes fail to find identities outside their athletic roles, attribute failure to their overall self-worth, struggle to form interpersonal relationships, find difficulty with transitions out of sport, experience reduced enjoyment and satisfaction in competition, use ineffective coping strategies to deal with acute and chronic injuries, experience high levels of anxiety, and are subjected to overtraining and burnout (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Tracey & Elcombe, 2004; Watson, 2005; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Compared to 8-9% of the regular college student population, 10-15% of athletes reported psychological issues that could merit professional counseling (Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

## **Characteristics of Successful Athletes**

Positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement all conceptually play an integral role in the optimal performances of successful athletes. In studies measuring the characteristics of highly accomplished athletes with long successful sport careers, researchers found many attributes related to well-being including (a) positive interpersonal relationships with teammates, coaches, parents, and support staff, (b) high self-esteem and confidence, (c) autonomous and intrinsic motivation, (d) effective coping strategies to deal with pressure and adversity, (e) positive mindsets and a healthy perspective toward sport, (f) life balance, (g) creativity and innovation, (h) use of self-reflection, visualization, and evaluation, (i) resiliency, (j) hope and optimism, (k) the ability to achieve goals, and (l) high levels of mental and physical health (Blanchard, Amiot, Perreault, Vallerand, & Provencher, 2009; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gagne, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2010; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002; Williams & Krane, 2001).

## **Athletes & PPI's**

Research is lacking in the study of empirically-based positive psychology interventions aimed at improving well-being in athletes. However, some attention has been given to the main goals grounded in PPI's within this sport context, namely in strengths, "possible best selves," hope, and gratitude (Chen, 2012; Chen & Kee, 2008; Ghaye, Lee, & Chesterfield, 2013; Rolo & Gould, 2007). Ghaye et al. (2009) suggests that narrative reflective writing of "best-selves" and "possible best-selves" encourages not only a healthy perspective of sport, such as winning with integrity and care, but also promotes a positive portrayal of who athletes are at their personal best and supports

positive action to future success and who they would like to become. Through the awareness of their valuable personal resources, athletes will be more engaged and motivated to deliver their optimal performance (Ghaye et al., 2009; Linley & Harrington, 2006).

Rolo and Gould's (2007) implemented a hope-based intervention, utilizing cognitive behavioral tools, to assist a sample of 22 college athletes in reaching their potential. Rolo and Gould (2007) hypothesized athletes who optimistically pursue goals would achieve higher academic and athletic performances. The researchers found significant effects in the intervention increasing state hope, thinking in the given moment, but this finding did not directly impact athletic or academic performance. Despite the quantitative results, the qualitative program evaluation revealed athletes not only reported more learned skills in developing optimistic thinking in their performance setting, but also in other realms of their lives. This demonstrates the importance of searching for and implementing other empirically supported hope-based interventions designed in specific contexts that will foster behavior change in athletes and enhance their well-being (Rolo & Gould, 2007).

In a study incorporating gratitude and well-being into their research, Chen and Kee (2008) found gratitude positively correlated with team satisfaction and negatively correlated with athlete burnout in a sample of 265 adolescent athletes. Although these were noteworthy findings, no positive exercises were implemented to enhance well-being in this study. Chen and Kee (2008) suggests coaches, administrators, and sport psychologists develop a sport culture based on gratitude and provide opportunities to explore gratitude in the sport context

## **Well-being in Sport Psychology Literature**

Despite the increased awareness of the importance of studying positive well-being as a beneficial objective for athletes, sport psychology literature has failed to find a consistent definition and measure of well-being and one that reflects the main purpose of the study (Lundqvist, 2011). Researchers have yet to use both a hedonic and eudaimonic well-being construct (such as PERMA) to guide their study and use appropriate methodology to reflect their theoretical approach (Lundqvist, 2011). Lundqvist (2011) encourages sport psychology researchers to adopt an integrated and uniform model of well-being with both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, paying particular attention to the sport-related context in which well-being is described. Because athletes are fully immersed in and influenced by their daily competitive environment, Lundqvist (2011) suggests athletes' perceptions of their well-being may be directly based in their athletic experiences. Until sport psychology literature grasps a well-defined construct of well-being with appropriate indicators, further progress in the field and the application of evidence-based interventions aimed to increase well-being in athletes will be hampered. Studies that explore the different dimensions of well-being among athletes and use more qualitative approaches to explore well-being in greater detail and depth are preferred and recommended (Lundqvist, 2011).

## **Holistic Sport Psychology Consulting**

The study of well-being in the sport context has important implications for the field of applied sport psychology. Sport psychologists are moving away from solely focusing their interventions on the problems and challenges athletes face to building personal excellence that fosters optimal health and well-being (Miller & Kerr, 2002).

Miller & Kerr (2002) argue that strong personal development is the foundation for optimal performances; thus, this athlete-centered focus should be directed to building healthy and successful individuals before emphasizing athletic excellence. Watson & Kissinger (2007) also suggest athlete support services should center their attention on the athlete as a total person. This 'holistic' philosophy is supported by expert sport psychology consultants (Orlick & Friesen, 2010). In helping athletes achieve optimal performance, these consultants acknowledge the powerful influence of other life domains on the athletic domain, the significance of cultivating the core person within the athlete, and the vital awareness of the relationship between an athlete's thoughts, actions, and behaviors. In describing their theoretical paradigm, these consultants described their 'holistic approach' as being uniquely client-centered through supporting the capability of each athlete in running the intervention, learning from their experiences, and discovering their best meaningful and purposeful selves.

Positive psychology interventions are a strong and convincing fit for holistic sport psychology consulting. Although there has been increased attention from sport psychology researchers and practitioners to promote holistic well-being in athletes, few interventions have implemented the framework of PERMA to directly measure well-being or use positive psychology exercises to guide the intervention (Lundqvist, 2011). More emphasis should be placed on the long term and 'holistic' health and well-being of athletes that will not only be guided by their current status in sport but also their future quality of life (Miller & Kerr 2002; Orlick & Friesen 2011). Future sport psychology interventions should expand beyond traditional methodologies and pursue qualitative inquiries to study psycho-behavioral change, pay particular attention to individual

differences within the intervention, and frame the intervention within the sport environment (Vealy, 1994).

### **Purpose**

Positive psychology interventions using positive exercises to maximize the elements of well-being may develop, cultivate, and build the important attributes of successful people and performers, and have an immediate and long lasting impact on the mental and physical well-being of student-athletes. Because athletes are less likely to seek out professional counseling outside of the athletic department (Watson & Kissinger, 2007), they may initiate help from sport psychology consultants who understand their unique concerns, pressures, or needs.

Rich description of athletes' direct experiences with PPI's and a full understanding of how athletes' ascribe meaning to their experiences while performing PPI's in the sport context will not only advance the study of well-being in sports psychology literature, but also, enhance the quality of services delivered by applied sport psychology consultants. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and understand college athletes' perceptions of the influences of a comprehensive positive psychology intervention, delivered by their sport psychology consultant, aimed to improve well-being through maximizing PERMA elements. The role of the sport psychology consultant was that of a research participant, responsible for facilitating and describing the intervention to help each athlete capture the essence of each positive exercise in their world.



## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature will first introduce the study of positive psychology including a description of the main goals and perspectives of this field's positive approach to building well-being. Next, the various benefits of maximizing the PERMA (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement) elements of Martin Seligman's well-being theory will be presented. This will be followed by an exploration of specific empirically-based positive psychology interventions (PPI's) designed to empower individuals to boost these elements and enhance their well-being. An at risk population lacking significant positive psychology research is college athletes; therefore, empirical research supporting student-athlete high stress and poor well-being is emphasized to warrant positive psychology interventions within the sport environment. Optimal psychological functioning is then described as a prerequisite for optimal sport performances. In addition to developing positive emotions to influence optimal functioning, successful athletes exemplify other elements of well-being, and a variety of characteristics of highly accomplished elite athletes are highlighted. Although few PPI's have been targeted toward the sport environment, some attention has been given to the main goals grounded in PPI's within this context, and further application is discussed for cultivating strengths, hope, and gratitude in student-athletes. Well-being is inconsistently defined and measured in sports psychology literature, and this review highlights the importance of adopting a uniform model of well-being containing both subjective and objective perspectives to advance progress in the field. Finally, this review ends with illustrations of 'holistic' sport psychology and the implications of a client and athlete-centered practice aimed at building flourishing individuals, in addition to flourishing

athletes. It is proposed that PPI's are an appropriate and compelling match for this holistic practice.

### **Positive Psychology & Well-Being**

Positive psychology is the study of positive emotions, positive character, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The field focuses on improving happiness and well-being through the discovery and building of strengths as opposed to solely fixing weaknesses and treating mental disorders (Seligman et al., 2005). Seligman et al. (2005) stresses the importance of having a balanced therapeutic approach to the practice of psychology, involving separate interventions that both relieve suffering and increase well-being. Increasing human flourishing through the construct of well-being is the main goal of positive psychology. Fredrickson and Losada (2005) describe flourishing as living within an optimal range for human functioning that implies goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience. Well-being theory, developed by Martin Seligman, in the positive psychology movement is assessed through the five measurable traits of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011).

Seligman's well-being theory contains both subjective and objective measures. Positive emotions are described from a hedonic perspective, or subjective well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2011). From this approach to well-being, people choose activities that increase happiness and life satisfaction through maximizing pleasurable moments and positive affect (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2011). Engagement is described as a heightened state of awareness where one becomes totally absorbed in the activity and experiences a loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi & Jackson,

1999). Although engagement is also measured subjectively, the positive affect experienced is retrospective; the individual finds the experience rewarding after the activity is completed (Seligman, 2011). Relationships, meaning, and achievement are described from an eudaimonic perspective, separate from solely subjective pleasure and happiness, and involve the activities people engage in for positive relationships with others, purpose in life, self-acceptance and autonomy, and mastery and personal growth (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Seligman, 2011). As opposed to being purely motivated to attain happiness from a hedonic perspective, people guided by an eudaimonic perspective choose activities that are in line with their values and help them reach individual potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Because these eudaimonic elements are not solely subjective states, they can be measured objectively. This suggests what a person believes to be meaningful, relational, and high accomplishing can be deceiving or misleading (Seligman, 2011). For example, an individual may perceive a close and strong friendship with another, but this relationship may not be supportive or rewarding for the person on the receiving end. Although there may be some overlap between the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to well-being, Seligman (2011) explains all PERMA elements can be pursued for their own sake and are measured independently of each other. Seligman (2011) exclaims, “The upshot of this is that well-being cannot just exist in your own head: well-being is a combination of feeling good as well as actually having meaning, good relationships, and accomplishment. The way we choose our course in life is to maximize all five of these elements” (p. 25).

**Positive Emotions.** Empirical evidence supports several benefits of maximizing PERMA elements (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Beyond generating positive feelings and emotions, positive affect has been discovered to broaden scope of attention and thought-action repertoires (i.e. play, explore, discover) (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005), improve one's ability to make intuitive judgments (Bolte, Goschkey, & Kuhl, 2003), enhance creative performances (Isen, Daubman, & Nowicki, 1987), increase brain and immune function (Davidson, Kabat-Zinn, Schumacher, Rosenkranz, & Muller, 2003), foster psychological growth and resilience to adversity (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003), reduce levels of cortisol and inflammatory responses to stress (Steptoe, Wardle, & Marmot, 2005), increase longevity (Danner, Snowdon, & Friesen, 2001), build personal resources (i.e. social connections, coping strategies, and environmental knowledge) (Fredrickson, Brown, Cohn, Conway, & Mikels, 2005), and produce future health and well-being (Fredrickson, 2001).

**Engagement.** According to Csikszentmihayli (1996), high levels of engagement lead to the experience of "flow" or "being in the zone." Complete absorption and immersion into what one is doing characterizes a happy and fulfilled life (Nakamura & Csikszentmihayli, 2002). The fundamentals that best describe the state of "flow" are challenge-skill balance (an optimal balance between the situational challenge and the individual's set of skills to meet the challenge), action-awareness merging (feeling fully emerged and engrossed in the activity), clear goals, unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time, and autotelic experience (Csikszentmihayli & Jackson, 1999). People who experience "flow" find their activities intrinsically rewarding, and consequently feel strong and

successful, productive, happy, and fulfilled (Lyumbomirsky, 2008). Flow experiences have been found to be associated with subjective well-being including positive mental health, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and job satisfaction (Bryce & Haworth, 2002; Clarke & Haworth, 1994). Cantor and Sanderson (1999) also link flow to eudaimonic well-being, specifically in achieving personal and valued goals. Lastly, a high challenge-skill balance has been discovered to relate to improved performance, especially among individuals with a high need for achievement (Eisenberger, Jones, Stinglhamber, Shanock, Randall, 2005).

**Relationships.** The importance of social relationships to happiness and well-being is highlighted by Berscheid (2003) as the “single most important factor responsible for the survival of homo sapiens” (p. 39). In a large meta-analysis, Lyubomirsky, King, and Diener (2005) found happy people to be more social, active, and energetic and have more friends, social support, and interpersonal relationships. Reis and Gable (2003) also revealed social support, the belief that one is loved and cared for, as the main contributing factor to well-being. Individuals are emotionally and cognitively motivated by the need to belong and establish positive and pleasant interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Easterlin (2005) discovered these needs and desires are stable over the course of a lifetime despite individuals’ changing circumstances, specifically in relation to children and happy marriages. There is also empirical support suggesting a lack of strong social attachments results in a variety of physical and mental health issues, including an increased risk for mortality (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; House, Landis, Umberson, 1988).

**Meaning.** Literature also supports the need for meaning and accomplishment to boost levels of well-being. Seligman (2011) describes meaning as the “feeling of belonging and serving something larger than the self” (pg. 17). Seligman (2011) suggests people can achieve a rich meaningful life that is not necessarily related to positive emotions. Meaning creates a sense of purpose and significance in life for the individual and is central to optimal human functioning (Seligman, 2002). Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) discovered that the “full life” is not only obtained individually through pleasure and engagement, but also through meaning. Life satisfaction was associated with individuals who described their life as one that has lasting meaning, serves a higher purpose, benefits others people, and makes the world a better place (Peterson et al., 2005).

**Achievement.** Achievement, or the need to feel accomplished and competent, is grounded in Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Self Determination Theory (SDT). The three intrinsic psychological needs of SDT are autonomy (free will and volition), relatedness (positive relationships), and competence. Ryan, Huta, & Deci (2008) define competence as the sense of efficacy individuals have in relation to their internal and external environments. From this perspective, people are motivated to pursue intrinsic goals and aspirations that promote growth, interest and enjoyment, mastery, pride, and self-esteem. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), satisfying all SDT psychological needs will increase life satisfaction, performance, and well-being.

### **Positive Psychology Interventions**

A significant amount of attention has been given to evidence-based positive psychology interventions (PPI’s) that have been discovered to boost the well-being

elements of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Successful PPI's have been reported to increase happiness and improve well-being for depressed patients, soldiers in the military, trauma victims, people suffering from chronic illnesses, children in the public school system, college students, and people looking to improve well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Giannopoulos and Vella-Broderick, 2010; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Intentional activity has received support in the 'Architecture of Sustainable Change' theory proposed by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005). After analyzing a vast amount of cross-sectional research involving well-being, the researchers suggest 50% of the variance in happiness is due to genetics, 10% is related to life circumstances, and 40% is attributed to intentional activity. PPI's are directed at capturing this controllable 40% where people have the ability to seek out positive exercises to increase well-being and nurture positive feelings, behaviors, and cognitions (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

In a six group randomly assigned and placebo controlled study, Seligman et al. (2005) used his website intervention ([www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org)) to recruit participants, design and test five "happiness" exercises and one controlled exercise to determine changes in depression and happiness symptoms. Participants were asked to complete the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D) symptoms survey and Steen Happiness Index (SHI) online. The SHI, developed by Seligman et al. (2005), is a 20 item questionnaire that measures the pleasant life (positive emotions), the engaged life (engagement), and the meaningful life (meaning). Participants were then

assigned to one of the following exercises: *early memories* (placebo controlled), *gratitude visit*, *three good things in life*, *you at your best*, *using signature strengths in a new way*, or *identifying signature strengths*. After they had performed their exercise, participants were asked to complete the same questionnaires online for five different assessment dates. Seligman et al. (2005) found two of the exercises, *using signature strengths in a new way* (identifying signature strengths and virtues from *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)* and using one of these top strengths in a new way) and *three good things* (increasing awareness of what is positive about one's life by writing down three good things that happened each day) increased happiness and decreased depressive symptoms for six months. The *gratitude visit* (sending a letter of appreciation to a significant person) showed the largest positive changes during the one month follow-up. The placebo controlled *early memories* exercise demonstrated a boost in happiness immediately after performing the exercise, but happiness levels returned to baseline every testing date thereafter. In this study, *using signature strengths in a new way*, the *gratitude visit* and *three good things* proved to be the most beneficial happiness activities (increased positive emotions, engagement, and meaning), especially for those who continued to adhere to the exercises on their own (Seligman et al., 2005).

**Identifying Signature Strengths.** Seligman et al. (2005) found individuals who participated in *using signature strengths in new ways* experienced more positive emotions, engagement, and meaning in their daily lives and less depressive symptoms compared to their SIH and CES-D scores at the beginning of the intervention. Peterson and Seligman (2004) created the *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* to highlight and classify strengths and values that contribute to fulfillment



and psychological well-being. Character strengths are defined as “positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004. p. 603). Using the reliable and valid instrument of the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths*, twenty-four character strengths are measured to identify the most prominent positive traits in individuals (Peterson et al., 2005). Six virtues were identified as inclusive themes to encompass all character strengths: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These twenty-four strengths were found to be consistently supported among adults in the U.S. and around the world with greater intensity displayed in kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, and judgment (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Variability in strengths was discovered between U.S. adults and U.S. youths, revealing hope, teamwork, and zest to be more prevalent among youth and appreciation of beauty, authenticity, leadership, and open-mindedness among adults (Park et al., 2005). When considering what strengths contribute to life satisfaction, Park et al. (2004) discovered zest, gratitude, hope, and love (also identified as “strengths of the heart”) demonstrated more reports of satisfaction in life compared to intellectual strengths. Proyer, Ruch, and Buschor (2013) suggests these “strengths of the heart” should be emphasized when delivering strength-based interventions designed to improve the elements of well-being.

Using a similar procedure as Seligman et al. (2005), Forest, Mageau, Crevier-Braud, and Bergeson (2012) found participants who performed *identifying signature strengths* and *using signature strengths in new ways* within the work context achieved higher levels of well-being. Discovering, implementing, and maximizing one’s signature strengths in the workplace led to an increase in “harmonious passion,” consequently

predicting more life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and vitality. Vallerand, Blanchard, Mageau, Koestner, Ratelle, Leonard, Gagne, and Marsolais (2003) define “harmonious passion” as a result of “an autonomous internalization of an activity into one’s identity” (p.757). Individuals are motivated to freely engage in an activity that is both intrinsically important to them and is in harmony with other aspects of their lives (Vallerand et al., 2003). “Harmonious passion” allows individuals to focus fully on the task at hand, cultivate positive experiences both during and after the activity, engage in or disengage from the activity willingly, and achieve flow experiences (Carpentier, Mageau, & Vallerand 2012; Vallerand et al., 2003).

Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy and Welch (2009) confirmed the *VIA-IS* to be useful and effective in the college student population. Given the findings that a significant number of character strengths were found to be correlated with general life satisfaction, college satisfaction, and grade point average, opportunities for tailored interventions encompassing the individual strengths of each college student were highlighted and encouraged (Lounsbury et al., 2009).

**Counting Blessings.** Building thankfulness and appreciation in one’s life not only increases positive changes in well-being when performing the *gratitude visit* (Seligman et al., 2005), but also enhances positive emotions and relationships by *counting one’s blessings*. Emmons and McCullough (2003) performed three studies testing exercises involving both a sample of undergraduate students and people suffering from either congenital or adult-onset neuromuscular disease (NMD). Participants were assigned to one of three experimental conditions: *counting’s one blessings* (writing about things one is grateful for), *listing of daily hassles*, and either *listing of routine life events* or

*downward social comparisons*. In the first study, undergraduate students participated in one of three exercises over a ten week period. Emmons and McCollough (2003) found undergraduates who listed their blessings in their diary weekly experienced a more positive and optimistic mindset, engaged in more physical activity, and reported fewer physical symptoms than those who listed daily hassles or routine life events. In the second and third studies, participants were asked to perform one of the three exercises daily over a two week period. Undergraduates in the gratitude condition reported more positive affect and were more likely to offer emotional support to others. Participants suffering from NMD in the gratitude condition also reported more positive affect, as well as more sleep, higher optimism, and a greater sense of connection to others (Emmons & McCollough, 2003). Because participants in these studies were more likely to offer emotional support and feel a stronger connection to others, *counting one's blessings* can also be suggested to maximize relationships in addition to positive emotions.

**Random Acts of Kindness.** Not only does the *gratitude visit* and *counting one's blessings* lead to improved well-being, so does performing *random acts of kindness* for others (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005, Otake et al., 2006). Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) asked students to perform five acts of kindness per week over the course of six weeks. These five acts, described as those that benefit others or make people happy, were either completed all in one day or spread throughout the week. Compared to the control group, participants who committed acts of kindness experienced a significant increase in subjective well-being, but only for those who performed the acts all in one day. The significance of optimal timing was also supported in the second intervention, *counting one's blessings*. Participants who contemplated on the “things they were grateful for”

showed increased levels of subjective well-being compared to the control group, but only for those who performed the activity once a week compared to three times a week. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) indicates the reason for these findings may be due to the novelty and intensity of performing an activity once a week compared to multiple times a week where the activity may become less meaningful and prominent. Sheldon, Boehm, and Lyubomirsky (2012) also emphasizes the importance of performing varied kind acts over similar kind acts to achieve higher levels of well-being. Lastly, social support reinforcing autonomy in the participants to perform random acts of kindness resulted in large improvements in happiness (Della Porter, Jacobs Bao, & Lyubomirsky, 2012). Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) suggests performing *acts of kindness* contributes to better well-being by fostering interdependence and relatedness, reinforcing one's confidence in the ability to help, and assisting individuals in perceiving themselves as more altruistic, charitable, and grateful.

**Best Possible Selves.** Another intervention receiving significant attention in positive psychology literature is visualizing *best possible selves* (BPS) to increase positive emotions, relationships, engagement, and stimulate opportunities for achievement (King, 2001; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2012; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). In congruence with the study design of King (2001) where *best possible selves* (BPS) were found to be associated with high subjective well-being and decreased illness, undergraduate students were asked to write narrative descriptions over a four week period of their best possible selves including representation of their lifelong goals and ideal life in the future. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) were also interested if participants were motivated to participate in the exercises, if this motivation affected

their decision to continue to perform the exercise, and if their performance had to be continued to sustain positive emotion. Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (2006) found the BPS exercise produced the largest increase in positive affect compared to the gratitude and controlled conditions. Participants also expressed greater identification and interest in the BPS exercise, and thus were more motivated to participate in the exercise. Participants experienced a higher degree of positive affect and less negative emotion when they continued to perform, identify, and enjoy the exercise. King (2001) suggests writing about one's life goals contributes to happiness and well-being through self-regulation. Those who can focus on and visualize their life goals may be more successful in the pursuit through increased feelings of competence and intrinsic motivation as well an enhanced sense of control and awareness of personal values (King, 2001). Layous et al. (2012) also discovered *best possible selves* not only contributed to increases in positive affect, but also higher levels of reported flow experiences and stronger feelings of closeness and connectedness to others. In other studies, *PBS* resulted in larger increases in optimism, or future positive expectancies (Peters, Flink, Boersma, Linton, 2010), and life satisfaction (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011).

### **Implementing PPI's**

Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) also emphasizes individual differences, such as demographics and personality traits, are important to consider when matching individuals to specific interventions. Participants were more likely to choose exercises that represent a good fit with their goals, interests, strengths, values, and motives. In addition, individuals who display high effort and commitment in practicing happiness strategies, and who continued to engage in the activity after the intervention, were more likely to

achieve improvements in their well-being and depression (Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005). With most PPI interventions being delivered to participants who were unaware of the purpose of the study, Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) was interested if conscious knowledge of the intervention's purpose would lead to higher levels of well-being. Individuals who selected themselves to *best possible selves* or *the gratitude visit* achieved higher levels of happiness not only immediately after the intervention, but also six months later. Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) concluded that participants need both the "will" (expectations, motivation, effort, and social support) and a "proper way" (awareness of efficacious PPI's) to accomplish enhanced well-being.

In perhaps the most significant study verifying the effectiveness of PPI's, Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 51 positive psychology interventions involving 4,226 individuals to see if intentional activities directed at cultivating positive feelings, behaviors, and cognitions improved well-being. They discovered PPI's significantly enhance well-being (mean  $r=.29$ ) and significantly decrease depressive symptoms (mean  $r=.31$ ). The effectiveness of the interventions was also positively influenced by self-selection, individual therapy vs. group therapy, a "shotgun" approach (multiple exercises implemented at once), and long durations of interventions.

### **PPI Comprehensive Intervention**

In an effort to create a comprehensive positive psychology intervention encompassing previous PPI findings, Huffman et al. (2011) developed an eight-week, phone-based intervention highlighting optimism, kindness, and gratitude for patients hospitalized with acute cardiac disease. Participants were randomized to one of three conditions: Positive Psychology (PP) Intervention, Relaxation Response, (meditation

based), and Recollection (recalling and listing events). Patients in the PP intervention group were asked to complete one evidence-based intervention daily per week and write about their acts, goals, or feelings while participating in the exercise. Patients participated in *three good things*, *counting blessings*, *the gratitude letter*, *best possible self*, *practicing acts of kindness*, and lastly, were invited to choose an exercise that best fit their interests and their personality during the last two weeks of the intervention. Outcome measures of this study included feasibility, global utility, and depression (Center for Epidemiologic Studies- Depression Scale [CES-D]), happiness (Subjective Happiness Scale, positive affect subscale of CES-D), anxiety (Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale- Anxiety Subscale), and mental health-related quality of life (Medical Outcomes Study Short-Form 12 Mental Component Score). Exercise completion rates were highest in the PP group (76.5%) and participants were more likely to rate the PP intervention as easy to compete and globally helpful. The PP intervention group also had improved optimism, greater improvement in depression symptoms, anxiety, happiness, and health-related quality of life compared to the other groups (Huffman et al., 2011).

### **Future PPI Research**

Collectively, positive psychology intervention research verifies the effectiveness of performing the PPI exercises of *three good things*, *the gratitude visit*, *identifying signature strengths*, *counting one's blessings*, *practicing acts of kindness*, and *best possible selves* to improve happiness and well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Giannopoulos and Vella-Broderick, 2010; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These activities are particularly beneficial for those who

identify with, show greater interest in, enjoy, and commit and adhere to the exercises (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Schueller, 2010; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Lastly, an intervention that packages a variety of exercises together, encourages individuals to choose exercises for themselves, accomplishes exercises once a week, engages social support, and is implemented over a longer duration of time will be most influential (Della Porta, 2012; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Parks et al., 2012; Schueller & Parks, 2012; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) states researchers now understand the “how” of pursuing happiness, but future research should be directed to describing “why” experiences performing PPI’s increase well-being. Research on PPI’s is lacking qualitative inquiry aimed at understanding participants lived experiences with the interventions and depicting the ways in which PERMA elements contribute to their personal well-being. Cohn and Fredrickson (2010) suggests this “why” can be partly explained by Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. According to this theory, positive emotions broaden thought-action repertoires and consequently create long lasting emotions. As participants learn new and beneficial thoughts and behaviors while participating in PPI’s, they will be likely to carry these enhanced personal resources over to other aspects of their lives and improve their well-being. In one of the most profound discoveries thus far in positive psychology research, Cohn and Fredrickson (2010) found that in over a course of the year, adults were still using and enjoying the beneficial skills (evoking feelings of love, compassion, and other positive emotions) taught in a loving-kindness meditation PPI.



## **College Athletes, Stress, & Poor Well-Being**

Despite the growing literature stressing the importance of PPI's in various populations, one group lacking attention in this positive psychology approach is college athletics. Although researchers have shown that exercise can act as a buffer to stress for normal college students and sport participation can promote positive experiences and health (Hudd et al., 2000; Tracey & Elcombe, 2004), the complexities of intercollegiate athletics act as additional stressors for student-athletes (Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Watson & Kissinger, 2007; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005). College athletes live in a world where sport dominates their daily decisions and routines. Although many athletes have satisfying and rewarding sport experiences, others struggle with competing athletic, academic, and social demands (Papanikolaou et al., 2003; Watson & Kissinger, 2007; Wilson & Pritchard, 2005).

In a study by Wilson and Pritchard (2005), students and student-athletes at a private Division I college participated in surveys that measured different stressors faced during their freshman year. Using The Survey of Recent Life Experiences developed by Kohn, Lafreniere, & Gurevich (1990), participants were asked to rate 57 events on a scale of 1 (not at all a part of my life) to 4 (very much a part of my life). The researchers found differences between the stressful events reported by the non student-athletes and those of the student-athletes. Students described stressors concerning financial burdens, making important decisions about their education, social conflict with a roommate or friend, difficulties with transportation, social isolation, and being dissatisfied with their physical appearance. In contrast, student-athletes reported more stress with increased

responsibilities and time management issues, not getting enough rest, and heavy demands from their sport.

With a sport culture that emphasizes winning and achievement, college athletes are challenged by pressures to perform and succeed in highly stressful environments (Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thorgersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Lundqvist, 2011; Papanikolaou et al. 2003; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Because of these external and internal pressures, some athletes fail to find identities outside their athletic roles, attribute failure to their overall self-worth, struggle to form interpersonal relationships, find difficulty with transitions out of sport, experience reduced enjoyment and satisfaction in competition, use ineffective coping strategies to deal with acute and chronic injuries, experience high levels of anxiety, and are subjected to overtraining and burnout (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Tracey & Elcombe, 2004; Watson, 2005; Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Humphrey et al. (2000) investigated the impact of stress on student athletes and discovered half of surveyed athletes reported that stress associated with sport participation affected their emotional and mental health. Lack of sleep, continuous tension, fatigue, headaches, and digestive problems were also reported as physical concerns.

Compared to 8-9% of the non-athlete college student population, 10-15% of athletes reported psychological issues that could merit professional counseling (Watson & Kissinger, 2007). Some of these negative psychological issues include disordered eating (Pritchard, Milligan, Elgin, Rush, & Shea, 2007; Reel, 2007) and depression (Maniar, Chamberlain, & Moore, 2005; Yang, Peek-Asa, Corlette, Cheng, Foster, & Albright, 2007). Using the Individual Self: An Evidence-Based Model of Wellness (IS-

Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2005), Watson & Kissinger (2007) found students reporting higher levels of wellness compared to student-athletes. Student-athletes were especially low in Social Self, the ability to develop strong and lasting social relationships, and Essential Self, the ability to find meaning and a sense of purpose in their lives.

### **Optimal Functioning in Athletes**

Despite the prevalence of high stress and poor well-being in student-athletes, to increase chances for delivering optimal performances and achieving success, athletes must exhibit high levels of psychological functioning and emotional regulation. A “challenge competitive state” is preferred over a “threat state” in which the athlete demonstrates high self-efficacy compared to low self-efficacy, a perception of control rather than little control, and a focus on approach goals versus avoidance goals (Jones, Meijen, McCarthy, & Sheffield, 2009, p. 167). In a challenge state, the athlete appraises he/she has the resources to meet the competitive demands and has adaptive neuroendocrine and cardiovascular responses that are associated with constructive and positive cognitions, full engagement in the competition, and anaerobic power. The challenge state has also been found to be associated with more positive emotions compared to negative emotions, and these positive emotions will be perceived as helpful to performance (Jones et al., 2009). Lundqvist & Kentta (2010) found positive emotions developed from positive appraisals also foster efficient recoveries in athletes. Together, these findings have contributed to sport psychology’s relatively new interest in nurturing positive emotions and improving the well-being and health of athletes.

## **Positive Emotions & Optimal Sport Performances**

Although positive emotions and affect have been shown to increase and enhance psychological and physical well-being, the mechanism in which they contribute to optimal sports performance remains unclear (McCarthy, 2011). McCarthy and Jones (2007) found sport enjoyment to be a key factor in sport motivation and commitment. Csikszentmihalyi and Jackson (1999) also shared athletes who reported enjoyment during an activity were more likely to achieve “flow” states. Fun and rewarding experiences are also linked to realistic expectations, minimal perceived stress and pressure from the environment, high confidence, and a relaxed and healthy approach to sport (Cohn, 1991). McCarthy (2011) noted there is an abundance of literature supporting the valued role positive emotions play in achieving successful performances, but these relationships seem to be explained indirectly rather than through direct empirical support. It is important to understand the exact impact positive emotions have on athletes’ well-being and performances, and McCarthy (2011) notes that it would be beneficial for sport psychologists, specifically, to explore the associations between positive emotions and positive personal traits. Initiating and evaluating practical interventions that introduce positive emotions into the sport context and understand the ways and means they contribute to positive well-being and optimal performances should be a top priority among researchers (Blanchard et al., 2009; McCarthy, 2011).

## **Characteristics of Successful Athletes**

Not only do positive emotions have an integral role in optimal sport performances, successful athletes conceptually exemplify other PERMA elements of well-being both in and out of the sport context. In two studies measuring the

characteristics of highly accomplished athletes with long successful sport careers, researchers found many attributes related to well-being including (a) positive interpersonal relationships with teammates, coaches, parents, and support staff, (b) high self-esteem and confidence, (c) intrinsic motivation, (d) effective coping strategies to deal with pressure and adversity, (e) positive mindsets and a healthy perspective toward sport, (f) life balance, (g) creativity and innovation, (h) use of self-reflection, visualization, and evaluation, (i) resiliency, (j) hope and optimism, (k) the ability to achieve goals, and (l) high levels of mental and physical health (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould et al., 2002; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002; Williams & Krane, 2001). Although the majority of these psychological characteristics have been examined in sport psychology literature, the constructs of optimism and hope were relatively new to the field. Gould et al. (2002) interviewed ten Olympic athletes, their coaches, and their parents/siblings to identify the psychological characteristics that help them succeed as athletes. All ten athletes, eight of their parents/siblings, and seven of their coaches labeled the athlete as optimistic and positive. Hope, the way individuals set, seek, out, and achieve goals, was also high among this group of elite athletes, exhibiting a high sense of agency and pathway to accomplishing goals. These findings support interventions to increase optimism and hope in the athletic environment (Gould et al., 2002).

Underlying the importance of athletes' perceived sense of achievement and supportive relationships, Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self Determination Theory (SDT) has received significant attention in relation to motivation and well-being in sport (Blanchard, Amiot, Perreault, Vallerand, 2009; Gagne, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2010). Blanchard et al. (2009) found a significant positive relationship between athletes' perceptions of need

satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and reported self determination (intrinsic motivation), positively predicting satisfaction and positive emotions in sport. Similarly, in a study involving 33 competitive gymnasts, (Gagne et al., 2010) discovered perceptions of supported autonomy from parents and coaches resulted in more autonomous motivation for the athletes. Also, daily need satisfaction in practice led to higher levels of positive affect, subjective vitality (extent to which people feel alive and full of energy), and self-esteem (Gagne et al., 2010). Gagne et al. (2010) underscores the value of building a sport environment that supports athletes in their free will and choices, provides opportunities to enhance athlete-athlete, coach-athlete and parent-athlete relationships, and offers positive and constructive feedback to support competence. In a study involving interviews of eleven international elite track-and-field athletes, Brady and Shamrock (2003) discovered that a high athletic quality of life was also characterized by autonomy, self-interest in fulfilling one's own needs, success in sport performance, and support from others.

Vallerand, Rousseau, Grouzet, Dumais, Grenier, and Blanchard (2006) found elite athletes who reported their sport as important to them and displayed high levels of autonomous personality (identified regulation and intrinsic motivation) achieved more “harmonious passion” in their sport experiences, leading to more positive affect, satisfaction and vitality, and subjective well-being. In a similar study, “harmonious passion” was also a positive predictor of mastery goal pursuit (Vallerand, Mageau, Elliot, Dumais, Demers, & Rousseaul, 2008). Mastery goals, emphasizing skill process and skill development, were strongly correlated with athletes' engagement in deliberate practice and consequently contributed to high performance. Vallerand et al. (2008) argues these

findings are significant because they reveal athletes can attain high levels of performance while still maintaining balance, positive well-being, and harmony with other aspects of their lives.

### **Athletes & PPI's**

Research is lacking in the study of empirically based positive psychology interventions aimed at improving well-being in athletes. However, some attention has been given to the main goals grounded in PPI's within this sport context, namely in strengths, "possible best selves," hope, and gratitude.

Little is known about the relationship between character strengths and athlete well-being. However, Linley and Harrington (2006) stresses the importance of moving away from a weakness and problem-focused approach in coaching to a potential-guided and solution-focused emphasis. It is argued that a strength-based approach allows clients or athletes to harness and build their best constructive selves. Through the awareness of their valuable personal resources, athletes will be more engaged and motivated to deliver their optimal performance (Ghaye, et al., 2009; Linley & Harrington, 2006). Ghaye et al. (2009) also affirms strength-based conversations, emphasizing praise rather than criticism, contributes to more positive emotions and high quality connections, and consequently, increases athletes' confidence and improvement in performance. Supporting King and Lyubomirsky (2006) and King (2001), strengths are identified and recognized through reflection of "best-self" and "possible best selves" (Ghaye et al., 2009). Ghaye et al. (2009) suggests that narrative reflective writing of "best-selves" and "possible best-selves" encourages not only a healthy perspective of sport, such as winning with integrity and care, but also promotes a positive portrayal of who athletes are

at their personal best and supports positive action to future success and who they would like to become. Understanding and acknowledging individual and collective strengths have important implications for athletic support staff in engineering specific opportunities for athletes and teams to capitalize on their strengths in a thriving setting (Ghaye et al., 2009).

Rolo and Gould (2007) designed the intervention, 'First Steps to Athletic and Academic Success,' to cultivate hope in a sample of college athletes. In this study, hope was defined as a "thinking process about one's goals, in which a person has the perceived pathways and agency to achieve their goals" (Snyder, 1992). Using strategically planned cognitive-behavioral tools to assist athletes in reaching their potential, Rolo and Gould (2007) hypothesized athletes who optimistically pursue goals would achieve higher academic and athletic performances. The researchers found significant effects in the intervention increasing state hope, thinking in the given moment, but this finding did not directly impact athletic or academic performance. Despite the quantitative results, the qualitative program evaluation revealed athletes not only reported more learned skills in developing optimistic thinking in their performance setting, but also in other realms of their lives. This demonstrates the importance of searching for and implementing other empirically supported hope-based interventions designed in specific contexts that will foster behavior change in athletes and enhance their well-being (Rolo & Gould, 2007).

Chen and Kee (2008) was one of few studies discovered to incorporate gratitude and well-being into their research with athletes. They asked a sample of high school athletes to complete The Gratitude Questionnaire, Team Satisfaction Scale, and Satisfaction with Life Scale, and the Athlete Burnout Questionnaire. Chen and Kee



(2008) found dispositional gratitude (general gratitude felt towards daily life and people) positively correlated with team satisfaction and life satisfaction, and negatively correlated with athlete burnout. In a stronger relationship between gratitude and well being, sport-domain gratitude (gratitude felt toward the coach, teammates, and sport experience) positively correlated with team satisfaction and negatively correlated with athlete burnout. Gratitude creates opportunities to build perceived social support, enhancing athlete's well-being (Chen, 2012). Although these were noteworthy findings, no positive exercises were implemented to enhance well-being in this study. Chen and Kee (2008) suggests coaches, administrators, and sport psychologists develop a sport culture based on gratitude and provide opportunities to explore gratitude in the sport context.

### **Well-being in Sport Psychology Literature**

Despite the increased awareness of the importance of studying positive well-being as a beneficial objective for athletes, sport psychology literature has failed to find a consistent definition and measure of well-being for athletics and one that reflects the main purpose of the study. In fact, in a review of conceptual considerations of well-being in competitive sport, Lundqvist (2011) found the majority of studies assessed well-being through only one variable, failed to provide a conceptual rationale, and selected assessments that didn't fit with the chosen theoretical perspective. Researchers have yet to use both a hedonic and eudaimonic well-being construct (such as PERMA) to guide their study and use appropriate methodology to reflect their theoretical approach (Lundqvist, 2011). Lundqvist (2011) encourages sport psychology researchers to adopt an integrated and uniform model of well-being with both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, paying particular attention to the sport-related context in which well-being

is described. Because athletes are fully immersed in and influenced by their daily competitive environment, Lundqvist (2011) suggests athletes' perceptions of their well-being may be directly based in their athletic experiences. Future measurement of well-being should entail both subjective and objective measures to capture the complete depiction of the construct (Forgeard et al., 2011; Proyer et al., 2012). This includes the understanding of the hedonic perspective emphasizing positive emotions and engagement to increase subjective experiences of life satisfaction and happiness. Most importantly, future measurement should include the eudaimonic perspective underlining both subjective and objective measures of relationships, meaning, and accomplishment aimed at increasing positive connections with others, purpose in life, and mastery and personal growth (Proyer et al., 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Seligman, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005). Until sport psychology literature grasps a well-defined construct of well-being with appropriate indicators, further progress in the field and the application of evidence-based interventions aimed to increase flourishing in athletes will be hampered. Studies that explore the different dimensions of well-being among athletes and use more qualitative research for greater detail and depth are recommended (Lundqvist, 2011).

### **Holistic Sport Psychology Consulting**

The study of well-being in the sport context has important implications for the field of applied sport psychology. Seligman et al. (2005) comments positive psychology interventions are not positioned to replace therapeutic interventions aimed at alleviating depressive systems, but instead, serve as complimentary tools that provide opportunities for clients to build and discover their strengths in addition to reducing weaknesses. Until recently, most sport psychologists focused their interventions on the problems and

challenges athletes may experience. These support services seek to improve the quality of the sport experience through performance enhancement techniques or mental/psychological skills training (Orlick & Friesen, 2010; Vealy, 1994), indirectly improving athlete well-being. In addition to these interventions that produce performance excellence, Miller & Kerr (2002) share it is equally important to target interventions toward personal excellence. Personal excellence is defined as “the achievement of developmentally appropriate tasks across the length of one’s life and the acquisition of personal qualities that contribute to optimal health and well-being” (Miller & Kerr, 2002, p. 141). Miller & Kerr (2002) argue that strong personal development is the foundation for optimal performances; thus, this athlete-centered focus should be directed to building healthy and successful individuals before emphasizing athletic excellence. This philosophy aims to protect athletes from adopting sole athletic identities in sport or experiencing stressful traumatic transitions out of sport by fostering an holistic atmosphere where both personal and athletic development live together in the sport environment (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Shurts & Shoffner (2004) also suggest tailoring interventions to increase athletes’ interests, beliefs, qualities, and values to expand their life perspectives. Because of the specific challenges and concerns college athletes encounter, Watson and Kissinger (2007) suggest initiating support services to increase athletes’ engagement in nurturing positive relationships in and outside of the sport context and assist athletes in finding meaning and purpose outside their sole identification as an athlete. These support services focus on the athlete as a total person, thus increasing their well-being.

Miller and Kerr (2002) discusses the roles of sport providers in promoting this 'holistic' approach to enhance health and well-being in sport, especially referencing the role of the sport psychology consultant. By fostering self-reflection and self-awareness in and out of the sport domain, consultants can encourage athletes to think critically about their current circumstances, promoting positive coping skills (Miller & Kerr, 2002). In an attempt to pursue the meaning of 'holistic' sport psychology further, Orlick & Friesen (2010) interviewed three expert 'holistic' sport psychology consultants to understand the essence of 'holistic' sport psychology and its practice. In helping athletes achieve optimal performance, the participants acknowledge the powerful influence of other life domains on the athletic domain, the significance of cultivating the core person within the athlete, and the vital awareness of the relationship between an athlete's thoughts, actions, and behaviors. From a 'holistic perspective,' these consultants value caring, authenticity, and professionalism in their working alliances and believe athletes are normal people comprised of various roles with different responsibilities and needs (Orlick & Friesen, 2010). In describing their theoretical paradigm, these consultants described their 'holistic approach' as being uniquely client-centered through supporting the capability of each athlete in running the intervention, learning from their experiences, and discovering their best meaningful and purposeful selves. Anderson, Miles, Robinson, and Mahoney (2002) researched elite athletes' perceptions of sports psychology consultant effectiveness, and found athletes benefited from relationships with consultants who attended to issues outside of the athletic realm, empowered athletes to take initiative, increased athletes' self awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and embraced a 'holistic' approach to consulting, considering all aspects of athletes' lives.

Positive psychology interventions are a strong and convincing fit for holistic sport psychology consulting. Although there has been increased attention from sport psychology researchers and practitioners to promote holistic well-being in athletes, few interventions have implemented the framework of PERMA to directly measure well-being or use positive psychology exercises to guide the intervention (Lundqvist, 2011). More emphasis should be placed on the long term and 'holistic' health and well-being of athletes that will not only be guided by their current status in sport but also their future quality of life (Miller & Kerr, 2002; Orlick & Friesen, 2011). Future sport psychology interventions should expand beyond traditional methodologies and pursue qualitative inquiries to study psycho-behavioral change, pay particular attention to individual differences within the intervention, and frame the intervention within the sport environment (Vealy, 1994).

Positive psychology interventions using positive exercises to maximize the elements of well-being may develop, cultivate, and build the important attributes of successful people and performers, and have an immediate and long lasting impact on the mental and physical well-being of student-athletes. Because athletes are less likely to seek out professional counseling outside of the athletic department (Watson & Kissinger, 2007), they may initiate help from sport psychology consultants who understand their unique concerns, pressures, or needs. Seligman et al. (2005) argues positive psychology interventions may be even more influential when delivered by a skilled coach who has strong caring relationships with the clients. Although there are clinical issues that warrant professional counseling, positive psychology interventions administered by trusted sport psychology consultants may have a profound impact in empowering student athletes to

increase positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement in their lives. Because PPI's are fun, simple, and self-reinforcing, student-athletes will be equipped with personal resources and tools to significantly improve their well-being and become flourishing people as well as athletes.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

### Research Design Methodological Approach

Interventions that employ existential phenomenology as the guiding approach to qualitative inquiry are encouraged in sport psychology literature, highlighting athletes' conscious and subjective experiences in sport (Dale, 1996). Phenomenology was first constructed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) through his "intentionality of consciousness" perspective, the understanding that conscious subjects and objects are inseparable. Supporting the interpretivism paradigm, the meaning of phenomena cannot be described without accounting for the subject's first person experience with the phenomena (Crotty, 1998). In this sense, well-being exists from the perspective of the individual and is influenced by his or her perceptions, experiences, interactions, and environment (Seligman, 2011). Combining both Husserl's philosophy and Soren Kierkegaard's beliefs in existentialism (1813-1855), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) developed existential phenomenology, proposing humans are "beings-in-their world," and cannot be expressed separately from their world nor can the world be expressed separately from them (Crotty, 1998). Applying the notion to the context of sport, Dale (1996) states:

Proponents of existential phenomenology would view an athlete as being indissolubly linked to his or her world whether it be in practice or competition. The two (athlete and world) do not exist apart from each other and each individual and his or her own world are said to constitute one another, which is another way of saying you cannot really talk about the athlete without talking about his or her world. (p. 309)

Phenomenologists are interested in the direct and immediate experiences of individuals with the phenomenon before any sense of meaning is created; thus, it is

important for researchers to bracket any initial thoughts, attitudes, or assumptions they may previously possess with the phenomenon (Crotty, 1996). Husserl defines this bracketing as “epoche” (Crotty, 1998). Phenomenology calls individuals to set aside any influences and biases of culturally derived meanings and social systems, and liberate themselves to new discoveries. This form of inquiry supports researchers and participants in challenging familiarity and building “reinterpretations” of their experiences (Crotty, 1998). For the purpose of this study, well-being was explored with the critical awareness of the barriers and limits the sport culture may impose on the construct’s meaning. Well-being, described by sport, may not be a true or accurate interpretation of well-being as described by the sport performer. With this in mind, Dale (1996) suggests athletes have “situated freedom”, defined by Valle, King, and Halling (1989). Athletes are free to choose their interpretations and uncover potential meaning in their immediate experiences with the phenomenon. Because athletes make choices everyday in relation to their well-being, it is important to understand the central meaning of their direct experiences by giving them opportunities to freely share their experiences in their world (Dale, 1996). In Friesen & Orlick (2010), ‘holistic’ sport psychology consultants agree athletes are the experts of their experiences and should lead the intervention. A consultant’s role is to help and facilitate discovery of meaning. Skilled sport psychology consultant, Ken Ravizza, shares:

My perspective has always been grounded in existential philosophy, which emphasizes accountability and responsibility. The athlete makes choices and he or she is responsible for these choices. That is their freedom. I have athletes reflect on their experience. I value the athletes’ experience and what they can learn from it. If she comes up with a solution then she will take ownership of it...It’s coming from her and she has just communicated a productive level of awareness, responsibility, and knowledge of what to do mentally to get back on track. I am



going to follow the athlete's lead until I am convinced it is not effective (Aoyagi & Poczwardowski, 2012, p. 210).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and understand college athletes' perceptions of the influences of a comprehensive positive psychology intervention (PPI's) aimed to improve well-being through maximizing PERMA elements (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement). The role of the researcher was that of a researcher participant, relying heavily on the interaction with the student-athletes during the stages of the intervention. The researcher was responsible for facilitating and describing the positive exercises to help each athlete capture the essence of each activity in their world.

Consistent with phenomenological research, this study was interested in describing the “essence” of these college athletes' lived experiences with the positive psychology intervention. The inquiry was concerned with “what” athletes experience in the intervention and “how” they experience it to grasp a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The two primary research questions for this phenomenological study were the following:

1. What meaning do athletes ascribe to their experiences in the positive psychology intervention?
2. How do athletes perceive the influences of the positive psychology intervention?

### **Researcher as Instrument**

My experiences include working as a sports psychology consultant for both the women's gymnastics and volleyball teams under a comprehensive sports psychology service delivery program for an NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletic department. I

joined the gymnastics support staff in Fall 2011 and the volleyball support staff in Spring 2012. As a former collegiate basketball player, the language and culture of these sports were unfamiliar having no experience participating in either sport. Trust and rapport were progressively built with the athletes and their coaches in our working alliances.

Responsibilities in my consulting work involve weekly team meetings, observing practice three times a week in their training facility, daily one-on-one sessions with specific volleyball players and gymnasts in their training complex, and attendance at meets/matches in the university's performance center. Many of the performance-related mental issues I observe with the teams stem from competitive stress, fear of failure, threats to self-worth, poor communication, and negative coach-athlete relationships. Most of the athletes have been competing in this sport since they were young girls and have spent countless hours training in the gym. College-athletes strive for perfection in their skills, statistics, performances, and even their physical appearance. Some of these athletes consult with counseling psychologists for depression and eating disorders.

Although gymnasts and volleyball players may be susceptible to particular psychological issues, they are not the only athletes that express psychological distress and emotional concerns. These problems seem to be consistent across all sports. College athletes live in a world where sport becomes their main focus. With external pressures to perform and succeed and a "win at all costs" mentality, some athletes fail to find balance in their lives and find roles/identities outside that of a student-athlete. Consequently, their well-being and performance suffers.

This challenging student-athlete experience is one I lived through personally. I played college basketball for four years at a competitive NCAA Division I University. I

identified myself first as an athlete, and most of the decisions I made were centered around my passion for the sport. My college career was extremely difficult. Our women's basketball program was constantly in transition, with three head coaches in four years. One of these coaches was fired for verbal and physical abuse. My team's sense of well-being was poor, and we often used ineffective coping strategies. My senior year was extremely difficult as I accepted a new role on my team. I went from being the leading scorer my junior year to very little playing time my senior year. While I tried to keep positive throughout the transition and focus on encouraging my teammates, inside I was suffering. I felt alone, embarrassed, and rejected. I also felt myself falling into depression. I was failing in the only world I knew.

In my life today, multiple outlets and opportunities contribute to my positive well-being and happiness. But as a student-athlete, totally immersed in sport, finding a healthy balance is often not achieved or even emphasized. It is imperative that athletes receive resources to help them achieve this balance, assist them in becoming flourishing and accomplishing athletes, and increase their likelihood of leading satisfying and fulfilling lives. I believe PPI's are instrumental to this opportunity.

Because my experiences as a student-athlete and sports psych consultant brought me to this research topic, it was impossible to totally separate myself from the text in the phenomenological interpretive approach (Creswell, 2007). However, even though PPI's have been reported to be successful in improving well-being for a variety of populations, I cannot assume they will enhance well-being for collegiate volleyball players and gymnasts. Although my strong trust and rapport with both teams compelled me as the sports psychology consultant to deliver the positive psychology

intervention from the sports psychology consultant, the awareness of my emotional involvement with these athletes acquired extra attention for fair collection and interpretation of data.

### **Participants**

Phenomenology studies use criterion-based sampling, or purposeful sampling, where all participants represent those who have experienced the phenomenon and have the ability to express the phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). The criterion sample for this study consisted of 24 current and former female collegiate gymnasts and volleyball players currently working with the lead researcher from a large public university located in Midwestern United States. Criterion-based sampling typically involves 5-25 participants; however, a large recruitment number was suggested to ensure saturation of the conception of themes and because of the probability some athletes may decline participation (Creswell, 2007). Three gymnasts declined participation and a final sample of 21 participants consented to the study. The athletes were between the ages of 18 and 22, represent all academic years in college, were competitive members of their current teams or were one-two year post-eligibility, and were full time college students. Description of athletes participating in study is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1 Description of athletes (n=21) participating in the study**

Athlete Pseudonym	Sport	Eligibility
Alyssa	Gymnastics	2 yr post
Anna	Gymnastics	Freshman
Beth	Gymnastics	Junior
Blythe	Gymnastics	Sophomore
Brandy	Gymnastics	Junior
Cassie	Gymnastics	Senior
Cody	Gymnastics	Injured/Medical
Karla	Gymnastics	Junior
Lana	Gymnastics	Junior
Macy	Gymnastics	2 yr post
Mallory	Gymnastics	Senior
Misty	Gymnastics	Sophomore
Randa	Gymnastics	Sophomore
Sasha	Gymnastics	1 yr post
Emma	Volleyball	Junior
Lily	Volleyball	Sophomore
Liz	Volleyball	Senior
Morgan	Volleyball	Senior
Rebel	Volleyball	Sophomore
Samantha	Volleyball	Junior
Willow	Volleyball	Junior

### **Intervention**

In a large meta-analysis of positive psychology interventions, Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) discovered a “shotgun” approach, or practicing a cluster of multiple exercises, over a longer duration of time related to significant increases in well-being. Given these important findings, this study implemented a comprehensive positive psychology intervention involving seven weeks of empirically-based positive psychology exercises designed to enhance positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. The exercises consisted of *identifying signature strengths*, *three good things*, *best possible selves*, *counting one’s blessings*, *the gratitude visit*, and *practicing acts of kindness* (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et

al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). All athletes were invited to participate in the voluntary study in a regular team meeting with the sports psychology consultant and directed to those who wish to enhance their well-being. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, confidentiality and anonymity was emphasized during the informed consent process. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym after the informed consent form was signed.

In the initial consultation, participants were debriefed about the purpose and procedure of the study and introduced to the first PPI exercise. The researcher provided each athlete with a treatment manual, designed by Huffman et al., 2011 for patients with acute cardiovascular disease, but adapted to fit and reflect college athletes' lived experiences in and out of the sport environment. This manual was constructed as a condensed version of Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky's (2008) book *The How of Happiness*, explaining the details of the study, directions for performing each exercises, and validation of the exercise benefits (Huffman et al., 2011). See Appendix E for complete intervention manual. Supporting both the novelty and increased intensity of engaging in an activity once a week (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and the limited time and energy athletes have in their high demand environment, participants were responsible for performing one exercise each week in a single day. They were instructed to write for 10-20 minutes in their manuals about the specific events and acts completed throughout the intervention as well as their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes while participating in each exercise (Huffman et al., 2011). Athletes were also instructed to complete three 5-point Likert-scale questions at the end of each exercise inquiring about the ease, likelihood to continue, and helpfulness of the exercise. The researcher and group of participants met

four times in separate team meetings throughout the seven weeks to review and reflect on the previous performed exercises and to assign and introduce the next PPI exercise for the following week. Because timing was not feasible for former competitive athletes to make all group meetings, the consultant reviewed and delivered specific PPI exercises in separate consultations for these individuals. To protect against undue harm, one athlete received a one-month extension to finish the intervention upon request. The participants' coaches also received invitation to attend and observe the team meetings. Coaches of the volleyball team attended two of the four meetings.

Protocol for administering each exercise followed procedures used in PPI literature (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). As described by Huffman et al. (2011), these exercises focused on promoting gratitude, kindness, and optimism in the participants.

**Week 1- Using Signature Strengths in a New Way.** Before performing this exercise, athletes were invited to complete the web-based *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) by personal email. The VIA-IS is a 240 item self-assessment of 24 distinct character strengths and is measured on 5-point Likert-scale (from 1= "very much like me" through 5= "very much unlike me"). Participants received personalized feedback about their top five *signature strengths* and were instructed to choose one *signature strength* and use that strength in a new and different way. They were then instructed to record in their treatment manual how they used the strength (Huffman et al., 2011). Seligman et al. (2005) found individuals who used strengths in new ways were happier and less depressed during a one month follow-

up compared to baseline measures. Forest et al., (2012) also revealed discovering, implementing, and maximizing one's signature strengths in the workplace lead to an increase in "harmonious passion", consequently predicting more life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and vitality.

**Week 2- Three Good Things.** In concordance with Seligman et al., 2005 and Huffman et al. (2011), athletes were instructed to write down three things that went well during their day and explain in detail why they went well. *Three good things* has been found to significantly increase happiness and lower depressive symptoms from baseline measures to six month follow-ups (Seligman et al., 2005).

**Week 3- Best Possible Self.** Adapted from King (2001), participants were instructed to write a narrative description of their *best possible selves*. The following description will be provided:

"Think about your best possible self" means that you imagine yourself in the future, after everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realization of your life dreams, and of your best potentials. In all of these cases, you are identifying the best possible ways that things might turn out in your life, in order to help guide your decisions now.

Writing about *best possible selves* increases positive affect, confidence, competence, motivation, and a sense of control, especially when individuals continue to perform, identify, and enjoy the exercise (King, 2001; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). *Best possible selves* also has been discovered to contribute to higher levels of reported flow experiences, stronger feelings of closeness and connectedness to others, large increases in optimism, and life satisfaction (Boehm, et al., 2011; Layous et al.; 2012, Peters et al., 2010).



**Week 4- Counting One's Blessings.** Athletes were instructed to think over the last week and write in detail up to five things “they are grateful for” (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Individuals who reflect on their blessings have demonstrated higher levels of well-being, including a more optimistic and positive mindset, engagement in physical activity, fewer reported physical concerns, and more offered emotional support to others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005).

**Week 5- The Gratitude Letter.** In this positive exercise, participants were “given one week to write and then deliver a letter of gratitude in person to someone who they have never properly thanked” (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 416). Athletes were instructed to write about how an individual’s behavior had affected her life, why she was grateful, the impact of this act on her current life, and how often the individual’s efforts were recalled (Huffman, et al., 2011). When implemented with other positive exercises, *the gratitude letter* was discovered to demonstrate the largest positive change in happiness and in depressive symptoms from baseline measures to a one-month follow up (Seligman et al., 2005).

**Week 6- Random Acts of Kindness.** Participants were instructed to perform three acts of kindness for others in a single day and then write about the acts they achieved (Huffman et al., 2011). These acts are described as those that benefit others or make people happy and go beyond what is typically done (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). Individuals who perform *random acts of kindness* in one day have revealed significant increases in well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006).

**Week 7- Choice.** In the last week, participants were instructed to choose and perform a positive exercise from the six previous weeks they most identified with, were

interested in, and enjoyed. A strong person-activity match is associated with more positive influences and benefits in relation to well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) This self-selection is also supported by Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) and Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009).

### **Data Collection**

In line with phenomenological studies, in-depth interviews ranging from 20-60 minutes were conducted with each participant 2-3 month post intervention. Because of the strong working alliance between the sport psychology consultant and the participants and importance of bracketing assumptions and judgments during the interview, the researcher trained another member of the research team to perform phenomenological interviews. In addition to phenomenological interview training, the interviewer was instructed to read the intervention manual associated with the intervention to become familiar with the research process and procedure.

Parallel to phenomenological non-standardized interviews where the interaction and conversation between the interviewer and interviewee is emphasized (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson, 1997), each participant was asked an open-ended broad questions to guide the flowing dialogue of the interview: What have you experienced in terms of the positive psychology intervention? How did you perceive the intervention? How has the intervention influenced you, if at all? How do you perceive the intervention as a whole? A series of descriptive probing and follow-up questions were then asked to clarify and elaborate on the meaning of participant responses throughout the dialogue, reinforcing the athlete as the expert of their experiences (Pollio et al., 1997). Pollio et al. (1997)

states this participant-centered unstructured approach allows central themes of individuals to repeatedly emerge in the interviews. It is the goal of the phenomenological researcher to stay at the level of the participant's experience rather than confirm the researcher's previously held assumptions (Dale, 1996). Interviews were conducted in a private place chosen by each participant. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by members of the research team.

In addition to conducting interviews, participant treatment manuals were collected at the end of the intervention. Participants' thoughts, feelings, and attitudes while participating in each exercise were analyzed and triangulated with interviews to provide corroborating evidence that the researcher achieved an accurate depiction of the athletes' experiences with the positive psychology intervention (Creswell, 2007). After transcription and collection, all interviews and treatment manuals remained locked in the lead researcher's office to ensure confidentiality.

### **Proposed Data Analysis**

Data analysis methods employed the existential phenomenology approach of Pollio et al. (1997). First, each transcript was individually read several times to get a sense of the "whole". Next, significant statements from each interview were identified and organized into meaningful units. These meaningful units were then categorized into sub-themes based on similarities. Finally, the researcher compared and contrasted all themes across the transcripts to discover the "essence" of athletes' lived experiences with the positive psychology intervention. To make certain the lead researcher was bracketing personal assumptions and staying at the level of the participant's experience, use of the participant's first-person language and interpretations of the data with a research team

were incorporated (Dale, 1996; Pollio et al. 1997). A peer debriefing team, organized by the lead researcher, interpreted the first transcript with the researcher to assist in fair and accurate interpretation of meaning and connection of relationships in and between phrases (Dale, 1996). The peer debriefing team consisted of three master level and two doctoral level students who either had experience or were currently enrolled in graduate research methods courses. The lead researcher interpreted the remaining transcripts alone. After the researcher had captured the final themes and written a structural description that characterize athletes' experiences with the positive psychology intervention, the results were taken back to the research team to see if these themes, features, and connections describe the athletes' experiences completely and truthfully. In addition to bracketing, the researcher participated in the process of the "hermeneutic circle," understanding the relationship between the text's whole and its parts, and vice versa (Crotty, 1998), through idiographic and nomothetic interpretation (Dale, 1996). First, in idiographic interpretation, the experience of the individual was emphasized and individual differences with the phenomenon were highlighted. Second, during nomothetic interpretation, the researcher interpreted an individual's experience in relation to all other experiences for similarities and differences. Treatment manuals were also analyzed using the same phenomenological approach, paying particular attention to the strengths and weaknesses described for each positive exercise. Averages to the three 5-point Likert-scale questions were computed for each exercise and are presented after the qualitative findings.

The researcher conducted participant checks to ensure accurate representation and agreement in the emerging themes for each athlete (Polkinghorne, 1989). The researcher

also provided a code map in the Appendix demonstrating how the resulting themes were derived.

### **Trustworthiness**

Several strategies were incorporated into this research to maintain trustworthiness and dependability. First, the researcher had participated in consistent engagement and observation in the field (Creswell, 2007). As the sport psychology consultant for both teams, the researcher built trust with the participants and learned the culture of each team's sport. The study used triangulation involving multiple data sources and investigators to provide confirming evidence of the resulting themes. As discussed in the proposed data analysis, the researcher implemented a research team to assess the accuracy of both the process and the product of the final structural description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The researcher provided a reflexive statement so that the reader understood how biases and assumptions impacted the inquiry. And finally, in-depth unstructured interviews, transcription of data, storage of transcripts, a code map, thick and rich description of athletes' experiences, and participant checks were all encompassed (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989).

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Preliminary Findings

The idiographic interpretations for all twenty-one participants are described below. Individual participants' experiences with the intervention are emphasized; relations and patterns within each interview are also highlighted. In line with phenomenological data analysis, the goal of the initial analysis was to determine the "essence" of each individual's experience with the intervention by treating each transcript as a case study before connecting to all other experiences for similarities and differences (Dale, 1996). Sport psychology researchers share the importance of interpreting individual interview transcripts to aid in identification of salient individual differences within the participants' experiences (Dale, 1996).

After each transcript was analyzed, member checking was conducted for each individual summary to ensure accurate representation in emerging themes. Each participant was encouraged to adjust, challenge, or verify the findings. Eighteen participants responded to the request: all indicated their summaries represented an accurate description of their experiences. The following responses were representative of the comments received:

- "This is spot on. I wouldn't change a thing."
- "This sounds great. It does a good job of representing how I felt about the study."
- "This was a perfect summary of my thoughts. It was quite the experience living it for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time!"

- “I read over the summary of the interview from last fall and it looks very accurate. I believe all the findings are correct.”

### **Individual Cases**

**Alyssa.** Alyssa shared her experiences participating in the intervention generally improved her happiness during and after the intervention. Although she believed all the exercises were valuable, she specifically noted *random acts of kindness* and *counting one’s blessings* as being most influential. She described performing *random acts of kindness* as fun, and she enjoyed witnessing the surprised reaction from those who were on the receiving end of her acts. Filling others with positive emotions resulted in her feeling immediate positive emotions. An example of a *random act* performed by Alyssa is provided in Appendix D.

Alyssa shared *counting one’s blessings* was most impactful during times when she was upset, frustrated, and stressed. As she counted her blessings, she was not only thankful for her opportunities, but her values and what was important to her were realized and highlighted. She discussed having a stronger conviction in her values and a better understanding of why living through her values increased her happiness. “I remember writing down that these (blessings) prove values and these prove where I needed to spend my time, or where I needed to make extra effort.”

The most difficult exercise for Alyssa was *best possible self* as she struggled to envision a perfect life. She describes herself as a “realistic” person and idealistic planning for the future was a difficult task for her. “It was good but kind of overwhelming at times because it makes me think about how I need to have my life going on a path and a plan, and almost like I need to be getting it to go in that direction.”

Alyssa still incorporates *random acts of kindness* and *counting one's blessings* into her life as she recently transitioned to medical school in another country. Although she lacks a physical connection, these exercises provide her support as each intervention allows her to tap into the emotional connection with friends and family back home. In her most recent interview with the principal investigator, Alyssa reports:

Mainly, I feel like I'm not alone. I just moved from a place that's comforting where I had friends...and then I come here. I don't know anyone so it is comforting to know that I am here by myself, but I still have people that I can lean on or go back to and talk to.

**Anna.** As Anna recounted her experiences with the intervention, she shared her mind was opened to a new positive perspective regarding her approach to gymnastics and other aspects of her life. The exercises increased her awareness in how she thinks and interacts with herself and others, resulting in a newfound direction and intention to increase her performance athletically and socially:

Just for a few gymnastics stuff, to kind of step back and look at everything in a different perspective and kind of think about how, okay, how do I really think, and how do I need to fix so I can perform better...and realize how I think and how I interact...how, I guess, mentally prepare for things.

She shared that purposeful writing of appreciation through a *gratitude letter* deepened her sense of thankfulness for and connection to the recipient. "So being able to sit down and write out why I'm thankful and why this person matters to me, it made me feel... close to them even if they didn't know about it necessarily."

While *counting one's blessings*, Anna realized the tremendous growth she experienced as an athlete and person throughout her gymnastics career. She also realized the value of her teammates and the unconditional support and love they have provided:



They are the people (teammates) that I am surrounded by and so taking a step back and looking at the five things I care about kind of made me think I'm in a good situation...I have good people around me and everything is good.

Anna further acknowledged that this growth and support allowed her to put “rough” days in perspective. She expanded her reflection commenting that such growth and support have also left her with a sense of assurance, pride, and purpose in and outside of the gym:

I just feel like I am more prepared for everything and that I want to get things done faster, and I just feel like gymnastics has helped me become more productive, and to mentally, when things get rough, to step away and be like “it’s just a bad day, and it’s not a bad life”.

As a result of identifying and deploying her *signature strengths*, Anna shifted her focus from fixing weaknesses to harnessing her strengths. “I mean they made me feel good because it wasn’t something negative...it wasn’t looking at specific weaknesses you could fix. It was something you had, you were already strong in and it was just finding ways you could make them stronger.” Utilizing and maximizing her strengths in and beyond the gym (written reflection provided in Appendix D) assisted Anna to reach outside her comfort zone and fulfill her role on the team as someone her teammates rely on for affirmation and positive energy:

And I was like...you know in the gym I can be the one who is up and playing around and having fun, and I can use that to keep a positive attitude or keep the positive energy in the gym. If someone is down, I can go up and get them back up again.

As a freshman on the team, this role assisted Anna in feeling more confident, part of the team, and having an important voice that was respected by underclassmen as well as upperclassmen. Anna continued her examination of her experience by stating:

It made me feel better about myself than walking in and feeling like I'm not really wanted or you know, I don't want to be the weak one on the team, but now, I feel like my strengths, it's like I kind of feel like I'm a part of something too.

Anna's focus on strengths also positively transferred into her performance as she shares she now finds herself choosing positive thoughts over negative, self defeating thoughts that hurt her performance:

I think I'm more likely to think about the positive things when I'm competing and everything. I feel like I am more able to think straight to the positives like "I can do this!" rather than "I hope I don't fall!" or "I hope I don't disappoint my team!" and to be more like "I'm not going to disappoint my team, I'm going to do my job."

**Beth.** Beth's experience was marked by her strong enjoyment for the intervention and a strong sense of engagement and time investment in each exercise. Specifically, Beth discussed she was able to transform her way of thinking. Although she shared some of the exercises were already part of her daily routine, her full commitment to the comprehensive set of exercises resulted in a new awareness of mindfulness and an increased connection to the positive events in her life:

I decided this intervention, you can really get as much out of it as you put into it...actually intentionally trying to make the activities matter, I think I really did get a lot out of it...just a general feeling of happiness.

She discovered her personal journal writing directed more positive energy toward feelings of lasting joy, especially through intentionally focusing on good things that happened each day and her blessings. By giving more attention and thought to her blessings, she noticed that she taught herself to recognize their significance consistently throughout the day:

It was kind of like journaling on steroids. It was like everything that I do but all channeled in this really positive way toward joy. I think I've learned through this how to be more focused on thinking what I'm grateful for and thinking about my day and meditating on different circumstances I've had rather than pushing them to the back of my head.

Beth enjoyed the challenge of writing about her *best possible self* and visualizing her future goals. However, she also found it strange to imagine a perfect life; Beth referenced her strong faith in His plan and that she does not have complete control over her life's circumstances. Beth and her teammate embraced the opportunity to write and share their *best possible selves* with each other, deepening their connection and relationship outside gymnastics.

Her experience writing the *gratitude letter* was intensely personal and powerful. Beth chose to write to a former coach who had left the program earlier that year. She stated the opportunity to write a *gratitude letter* came at a perfect time as she had enough time to reflect on and process the profound impact this coach had on her personal growth and the growth of her teammates. Beth's experience writing the *gratitude letter* as a part of the intervention was a therapeutic and affirming experience. As she wrote her letter with great honesty and openness, it was also encouraging to receive a loving response from the coach; Beth reported increased confidence and feelings of importance and self-worth after reading her coach's comments.

When I get encouragement, encouragement is definitely one of my love languages. When people encourage me, it's like a great, great feeling. Like I just love, I mean I'm sure anyone does, but me in particular, I feel I just love being encouraged in that way. It just builds up and makes me feel loved and worth it.

As she recalls the experience of writing the letter, she is still filled with positive emotions, describing it as a flow experience during which she had the opportunity to influence someone she cared for entirely and sincerely.

It was really, really cool to influence someone so deeply without even trying that hard. The letter was really great for me to write, but I'm sure it was even better for my coach to read. It probably affected her more than it affected me. I probably can't even understand how much that meant to her.

Beth and her teammate's participation in an intentional *random act of kindness* above and beyond what one would typically do in a day also highlighted the blessings in her own life. She described the random act as a very inspiring and uplifting experience as she challenged herself to reach outside her comfort zone to help others. The simplicity of the act resonated with her, especially the power of both giving and receiving graciously. Beth also enjoyed participating in the act with her close friend and teammate. Together, their meaningful reflection after the act celebrated the collective growth they experienced together.

But it's just being a light in the darkness of that world that you don't think about...I wouldn't have done it by myself...two people together have so much more courage to do something a little scary or out of the ordinary.

She feels the intervention had a positive influence on her communication with her teammates and also between teammates inside and outside the gym. She believes that she and her teammates are doing a better job affirming and supporting each other in practice by giving attention to things they are doing well, their strengths, and best possible selves.

But just acknowledging each other's words, good qualities and best possible selves, it's like, "No, you are worth it, you are enough, you can do this" ...I think it probably helped us all make it more of a habit to be more mindful of that and just positive thinking as a whole.

Not only did Beth share that her mindset before practice was influenced positively by this intervention, she believes the collective mindfulness of thinking positively has contributed to more a cohesive, trusting, fun, and energy-filled team environment.

**Blythe.** Blythe shared the summer intervention brought her an increased awareness and enhanced focus on the positive things in her life, especially her blessings. "Because now it's been kind of my nature that everyday I notice things, like, 'Oh I should be thankful for this.'" Her newfound appreciation for her family, friends, and teammates

was grounded in her daily actions toward them. Through *counting her blessings*, her *best possible self* became more attainable; she realized the exceptional support and opportunities she has been given.

The *best possible self* helped me focus on my goals more...where I want to go in life, and I really got to see, like, “Oh, I can receive these, I can get there because I have all these amazing blessings and I’ve gotten all this help all the way up.”

A shift in focus from weaknesses to strengths also helped Blythe feel more pride and see herself in a positive light. Blythe shared all of her *signature strengths* resonated with her, especially self-control, which was affirming as she continued to harness this strength in and outside of gymnastics. Identifying her *signature strengths* also gave Blythe confidence in the ability to attain her best self and fulfill her dream goal of going to medical school.

While participating in *random acts of kindness*, she consequently reaped positive emotions after helping others, fueling her motivation to do more:

It just made your day better by helping others and just doing nice things. It just made you feel better inside. You weren’t doing them because you wanted to feel better but that was just an after effect that happened, so that was pretty cool.

By giving herself freely and unconditionally, she gained new friendships and grew closer to her teammates through many of these acts. In doing so, she contributed to a larger inner circle of caring and supportive people.

Blythe feels that her team became more positive and happier after the intervention. She believes the exercises gave them the tools that assisted them in actualizing their goal of creating a positive and focused practice environment.

I think a lot of people have become generally happier. One of our team goals this year that we have focused on is not coming into the gym and being negative...and so I think it’s helped everybody because we wouldn’t have even thought up that goal if we hadn’t been on the track of thinking more positively.

Blythe shares that this new enthusiastic and energy filled culture helps them stay driven and hopeful for the future. Not only has she noticed more positive interaction between her teammates, but she also has built a stronger connection by becoming more encouraging and affirming for her teammates. She shares this stronger engagement and investment in each other contributes to a stronger will and a more relaxed and trusting mindset that motivates and frees her to perform on both easy and challenging days in the gym. “I feel like my skills are actually getting better...just from whenever someone will cheer me on from across the gym, it just gives you a little more fire to do better.”

Overall, Blythe feels the intervention assisted the team in becoming more cohesive and family-oriented. “If you’re surrounded by people that are happy and thinking positively, you want to be surrounded by them more so you hang out with them more. And so, it’s made our team closer.”

**Brandy.** Brandy believed the intervention provided her with some introspection on who she is and how she interacts with other people. She shared she enjoyed writing down her experiences and reflecting on the personal growth she gained through participation in the exercises. She highlighted and savored the good things that happened each day and also enjoyed performing simple kindness acts for others. She was filled with positive emotions through these acts, which increased her motivation to engage in them more often. “It makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside, just to make a person’s day better or help them out with something.” Brandy also recognized positive emotions as her awareness was heightened of simple acts being performed around her by others.

While counting her blessings, Brandy shifted her perspective regarding her rehabilitation of her injury. Her daily gratitude toward her progression nurtured a positive

mindset that was conducive to her recovery (see Appendix D for written reflection). The practice of writing down her appreciation of the small steps she made each day helped her embrace the challenges inherent to her injury rather than becoming wrapped up in frustration and defeat.

I remember one morning during running, I had this moment of thought, “Wow! I shouldn’t be hating myself for having to run right now.” I thought, “I can run, so why I am upset that I’m running? I shouldn’t be upset. This is something I should be grateful for. I haven’t done it in awhile.” That was a big moment from writing things down.

She positively influenced teammates who were battling similar injuries by sharing this new perspective. Brandy feels this intervention helped her find meaning in her relationships with the team, and consequently, assisted her in making smart choices relative to her injury for the benefit of the group.

Just being open-minded and taking my time and doing what’s best for my body, gymnastics, and the team. I’m all about being there for the team more so than myself. I wanna make myself better, but for the team.

By imagining her *best possible future self*, Brandy heightened her focus and intention in her present life. By visioning her end goals, she was able to prioritize her responsibilities with a strengthened sense of control. “That kind of made me think of what I have to look forward to and what I really want in my life and what I need to do right now to achieve that in the future.” Brandy admits she hadn’t put much thought into her experiences with the intervention until the interview. As she created meaning through her responses, she realized the importance of re-visiting the exercises to continue to think and write about the *three good things* that happen each day, *random acts of kindness*, and how she can best harness her *signature strengths* to continue her growth as a leader for her team.

Brandy believes this intervention, especially *counting blessings*, had a positive influence on the team by helping them reframe potential negative situations with positive appraisals focused on improvement.

We try not to complain as much because when you step back and look at it, there's not much to complain about. So we're trying to limit our complaining and be grateful. Instead of being "Aw! I have to do conditioning," be like, "No! We're going to do conditioning because we'll get stronger and do really well this year."

**Cassie.** Cassie's participation in the intervention led to a mental and social transformation and provided enhanced opportunities for self-reflection and introspection. She gained a new confidence and reached outside her comfort zone to help others. She enjoyed the positive emotions experienced from performing simple acts of kindness. She found purpose outside herself as she discovered the positive influence she had on others. Her success with the acts increased her commitment and motivation to do more.

It's really not that hard to go up to somebody and just do a *random act of kindness*. I have always been a little more on the shy side. It was kind of a challenge and then after I did it, I was like, "Geez, that's not bad" ...it was very rewarding...it got me a lot more comfortable, actually.

Cassie found a new appreciation for her father by writing a heartfelt *gratitude letter* to him. This experience strengthened their bond as she realized she aspired to be just like him. "It made me realize that he has a lot of the qualities I hope to possess one day. He's really ambitious and always strives for something more...I think the letter really touched his heart."

Cassie also gained perspective about her values and goals for the future when writing about her *best possible self*. Visualization improved Cassie's intentional goal-oriented focus and increased her sense of control and motivation to start attaining in the present. By expressing more autonomy, Cassie also expressed self-determination to fulfill



her life's goals and work toward the gymnastics career she envisioned for herself. "It just made me realize what I really want to get out of this year. It was nice to know that I am in full control and I can make my season however I want it to be." Maximizing her values especially increased her commitment to her time management and her study habits.

Cassie's mindful, intentional participation in the activities transformed her mindset and performance in the gym. Her new perspective allowed her to focus on the good things that happened each day; this mindset supported her positivity during practice and reminded her to not allow frustration and defeat into her training regime. She discovered a better attitude in the gym and was more confident in her ability to re-focus and perform after making mistakes.

I definitely have been getting less and less frustrated...I've tried to dial in more and put things in perspective and use it (mistake) as motivation to make the next turn...I think it has made gym so much more enjoyable...I've learned to lighten up a bit, not necessarily with my expectations but just my feelings after each turn.

Cassie felt she was very engaged in the process, rather than the outcome, while enjoying the small steps of improvement. By discovering a purpose in the gym, she rid herself of distractions, performed with a present mindset, and challenged herself.

Before the summer, I was kind of going into my senior year as a nervous person...I realized I have to focus on the now, and I can't really get distracted or worry about everything outside of me. I think it's helped me concentrate a lot more...I kind of wrote up my goals on my own after doing this (intervention) and kind of put a time frame on it. I feel organized with everything I want to accomplish.

Cassie believes her entire team gained a new perspective as well, highlighting individual and team awareness of their shared values. She feels the team grew a healthier relationship with their sport, influencing their daily approach to practice in the gym. In addition to feeling more comfortable helping new people, she also feels more

comfortable interacting with her teammates after the intervention. “Now it feels so much more natural and I feel I can completely be myself.” She believes the team has become more cohesive and achieved a stronger bond (familial atmosphere). She thinks the intervention impacted the team’s commitment to establish and uphold their values and goals for this year. She notes that writing goals on paper helped the team stay engaged in the process and collectively reach outside their comfort zone to stay on the road to their mission.

**Cody.** Cody shared her experiences participating in the intervention were especially beneficial as she transitioned out of gymnastics from a career-ending injury. The activities helped her find purpose and meaning outside of sport and supported her in a positive direction to her *best possible self*.

Gymnastics as a sport shouldn’t be the center and it’s not anymore. The activities helped me realize I have a future, and I will be okay without it, and I can still do these activities to make my life more positive.

She shared she continues to commit to writing about her blessings and the good things that happen each day. This exercise has become a therapeutic experience as she reflects on her control over overwhelming and stressful events; Cody processes these stressors more quickly and reported an increased understanding of what it means to release the stressors that are out of her control. Cody communicates that she built an optimistic and positive mindset:

If I having trouble or something, I will just go write it out and then always coming up with a blessing in my life, so I know it’s okay to be stressed but I can still look at it in a different way...it always calms me down after...I’m not as stressed and just...happy.

She shared the exercises helped her cope with a particularly difficult transition in her athletic career, while each activity also served as a personal learning tool that proved

significant to gain a new appreciation for the positives in her life. These tools were also valuable for Cody to strengthen her connection with her teammates after she experienced feelings of isolation from her injury.

So when that person said their strengths, I tried to remember at least two of them so I could make a better connection with them. That's the one thing I've been struggling with...And just realizing my teammates are there for me, that they would still listen to me and want to help.

She found it comforting to become mindful that she was not experiencing this injury "alone." Her recognition of her *signature strengths* and the strengths of others allowed Cody to harness and maximize her new role on the team. Although no longer physically competing, Cody shared the intervention helped her contribute to the team in other ways; such contributions fulfilled needs of acceptance, belonging, and achievement. Cody acknowledged her increased courage and reported that expressing her voice for the team provided support to freshmen struggling with similar experiences. She believed that she could build their experience on the team and in sport by offering her new perspective.

I like being able to use my past experiences and give advice to them (freshmen) and let them know it's not the end of the world. They can still have the best four years of their lives even though gymnastics isn't the biggest part of it. And it's just really an accomplishing feeling I got that I could actually use my knowledge and experience to help the other freshmen.

Cody believes that the opportunities to share and reflect over participation in the exercises brought the team closer together after attaining deeper insights into each others' lives. "We would all share, at least most of us. It wasn't just dead silence. So you got to get closer with them just by the activities, you would know more about the girl." She believes it developed trust within the group and assisted the team in achieving their goal to become more cohesive and unified. "We wanted to be brought together as one...and

when you would share and not feel awkward and not feel like you shouldn't because it's going to get out or be taken the wrong way, I think that really helped us."

**Karla.** Karla shared the summer intervention allowed her to pause from her demanding schedule as a student-athlete and reflect on and savor the blessings in her life. "I feel with athletes, we're so busy...and focus on getting things done instead of enjoying them as we're doing them, so I find that aspect really helped." The process of writing about her experiences after participating in the exercises served as a conscious reminder for Karla to be grateful for and appreciate the multiple opportunities and people in her life. "Just reminders of 'Wow, this is something that is important in my life' and how I do go everyday without recognizing it's important and essential to my well-being." She believes the ultimate goal in life is to enjoy living, and this can only be achieved when finding purpose and meaning in the grand picture.

Whenever I feel like I am enjoying life, I feel like I am spreading joy to other people and helping them enjoy life too. The whole point is to just help other people enjoy it, because life would be really boring if it was alone.

Karla stretched the intervention beyond the six weeks to invest the attention and energy she believed the exercises deserved. After finishing a stressful class schedule over the summer, she gained more insight and perspective when she returned home for summer break. During the *counting blessings* exercise, she experienced a moving, touching moment from a new perspective when reading her adoption papers. Karla's written reflection of this blessing is provided in Appendix D. As a result, she became thankful for her life and family and was recognized how her adoption shaped her as the woman she is today.

It's funny, like, I'm sure I'd looked at the paper before, and I'm sure I read it before, but my view and the way I digested it this time was so different than anytime before. I guess it just shows how much we change through time periods.

Karla also shared her gratitude for the adversity and obstacles she faced during her athletic career, and she realizes these setbacks helped her find her faith and grow into a resilient and balanced student-athlete.

All the bad things that happened...I feel are blessings. I feel like those were the strongest points of growth. Without those struggles, I would have never found my faith. I put my faith in everything when I had nothing, and in turn, it gave me everything.

This realization helped her cope with her latest injury, overcome feelings of frustration, and persevere through defeat.

Karla's affirmed her purpose in life as a participant in the exercises, especially as she engaged in *random acts of kindness*. Karla believed that she inspired others by demonstrating empathy and compassion; she recognized that kindness brings an abundance of positive emotions and feelings of happiness to her life. She harnessed and maximized her *signature strength* of "religiousness and spirituality" through these random acts, which increased her motivation and passion to have an even bigger influence. Karla acted from her faith as an engaged participant in this exercise without feeling she was preaching or forcing her religion upon others. Karla and her teammate participated in uplifting and memorable acts of kindness that went above and beyond what they would normally do in a given day. Although she hesitated to share her random acts in front of her team for fear of being perceived as self-righteous, she enjoyed describing the experience and hoped it influenced and inspired others to engage in similar fulfilling acts.

Recognizing her strengths/values and understanding her purpose in life has also empowered Karla to embrace her leadership role this season. She gained more confidence in her voice after her teammates recognized and appreciated her strengths as a selfless, positive, and insightful leader. Karla has harnessed her “faith strength” with strangers and with her teammates alike. While her teammates perceived Karla to be a very happy and positive person, they have initiated conversations with Karla about her faith.

And it’s really cool whenever it actually works. My teammates, would ask me “Why are you so happy? Why do you seem to love life all the time?” and it was actually a chance for me to share it, “Honestly, if you really want to know, this is why.” I feel like they are more open to it (faith) than ever before.

Karla’s recognition of her strength-based faith has been the initiating factor to organize team bible studies during which she can continue to positively impact her teammates by sharing her personal meaning and purpose in life. She believes these team meetings opened the door for her teammates to tell their stories and be vulnerable in front of each other. She feels these intimate settings build closer and trusting relationships among teammates, improving the team’s chemistry and collective resiliency and purpose.

I was, like, “C’mon, let’s build this shield where nothing is going to tear us down...bad things are going to happen but nothing can take away the joy in our life.” I feel no one can take away, like nothing, no bad thing can take away your purpose in life...there is hope.

Karla believes this cohesive bond in which her teammates genuinely enjoy and care for each other has had a positive influence on their production output in the gym. They are united under a common goal and make a more conscious and intentional effort to help each other achieve their best possible selves in athletics and beyond.

When we did this (intervention) all together, knowing that we all shared and we got to see where everyone is at, I guess it really helped us encourage each other more. Whenever you are hearing more vulnerable things and understanding them

more, it just makes you care about them more. In the gym, you really do want to see them succeed.

Consequently, there is more passion and a stronger work ethic in the gym where everyone is striving to attain team goals. Karla continues to nurture this culture during organized team meetings and uses the lessons and skills gained from the summer intervention to continue to build a strong foundation for her team and establish caring and authentic relationships with her teammates.

Although Karla felt some of her teammates had to rush through the exercises because of their busy schedules, she feels any time spent reflecting about aspects of their lives they normally would not have considered was beneficial.

**Lana.** Although Lana was overwhelmed with the writing in the intervention manual, she was pleasantly surprised after investing her time in some of the exercises and reflecting about the meaning they had in her world. The *three good things* was beneficial for Lana as she experienced a difficult transition from one coach to another. Although difficult at the time, she found perspective regarding the coaching change by becoming mindful of the good things (provided in Appendix D) that were happening inside and outside of practice. “Well, I kept an open mind about the whole thing because obviously they made the change for a reason. So instead of being bitter about it or whatever, I just tried to accept it and I thought that helped.”

Lana shared that any opportunity to cultivate gratitude for her mother and her family helped add perspective to her life. She expressed appreciation for their support and her blessings. She realized cultivating gratitude each day needs to become a habit. “It makes me feel good. I’m lucky to have people always there for me and I just need to be more thankful and always remind them ‘Hey, thanks for doing this,’ like, ‘You’re the

best.” Although she was not surprised by her *signatures strengths*, it was affirming for her to see the results of the values in action survey. She especially enjoyed harnessing her strength of humor and filling others with joy. She made a goal to maximize her humor during camp and pledged to contribute additional fun experiences for all involved.

Overall, Lana feels this intervention did not change her dramatically, but it was an important reminder to be mindful of the supportive people in her life and the privileged opportunities she has been given. She noted she often fails to rid negatives and bad events from her daily life. She believes the team as a whole shares this sentiment, especially her teammates who play a similar role on the team.

It was kind of cool because me and Beth got to connect during the *count your blessings* one and we just talked about our freshmen year, and well, we’re both walk-ons. Even though we have to pay for school, we are so lucky to be here. Even though we would always complain about having to pay for school, someone else has to pay for school, but they don’t get to do gymnastics. That’s pretty cool.

**Macy.** Macy believed the summer intervention offered valuable personal resources that helped increase her mood by shifting her focus from the negative to the positive. She described feeling loved and appreciated after becoming more mindful of her blessings and the good things in her life. Her awareness of her self-defeating thinking increased, which empowered her to choose positive and constructive thoughts over frustrating and stressful thoughts.

I consider myself a positive person so when I do see myself choosing not to be happy, it’s kind of surprising and a little wake-up call. It’s good to catch yourself and just realize how easy it is to fall down that way and the difference it makes when you actually choose to be focused on the positive and good things.

Macy’s heightened awareness also positively influenced her decision making for herself and others. “It helps me rethink what I’m doing. Before I fully commit to do



something or thinking something, ‘Is this really going to benefit me and everybody else in a positive way?’”

Her experiences writing *gratitude letters* helped her savor past positive interactions with her teammates and coaches and allowed her to recognize and appreciate the strong impact these special people had on her life. Macy felt more altruistic and charitable after performing random small acts of kindness for others. She realized the power in the simplest act of giving on both the receiver and the giver. “Afterwards, I feel like I benefited from it as well. It made me feel good about myself, and what I am doing for others. It was another way to see how easy it is to do something for someone else.”

Macy believes the intervention aided her transition out of sport by helping her find meaning and purpose outside the sole identity of a student-athlete. She discovered her blessed opportunities by engaging in the positive exercises, especially the *best possible self* exercise. “It made me realize that I don’t need my sport anymore.” She enjoyed the challenge of envisioning a future life without gymnastics. Through this intentional writing, she became more cognizant of the person she wants to become and was able to enhance her present focus and prioritize her responsibilities with a strengthened sense of control. Macy’s reflection of her *best possible self* is provided in Appendix D.

**Mallory.** Through her experiences with the summer intervention, Mallory shared she became more mindful and aware of the little things she takes for granted. She became more appreciative of small events and victories in her life, which contributed to a positive mindset that was influential to her happiness in and out of the gym and also conducive to the rehab for her shoulder injury. “I can remember when we started, one of the best things

of the day was that I could put my hair up, which was a really exciting moment for me at the time.” She discovered a new perspective that allowed her to contribute to the team in other ways than competing; she embraced her leadership role that focused on setting a good example of a strong work ethic and selfless mentality for her teammates.

You don’t have to compete on every event to contribute and put all of your energy and heart into the team...I know as long as I am doing something, I’m making a difference... so just the smaller things sometimes mean the most.

In addition to finding purpose inside the gym, Mallory gained meaning outside the gym as she engaged in and appreciated the *random acts of kindness* that brightened the days of others.

When you think about it, people always say that stupid cliché, “Life is short,” but I mean it really is. When you think about it, days go by fast so why not help others and make a difference in someone’s life...I mean it makes them happy and it makes you happy, so, why not?

Mallory enjoyed visualizing her *best possible self* in detail, and she shared that actualizing this vision fuels her determination to attain her goals. “Writing about your life in detail...that is just really cool...and it makes it seem like it is really going to happen and it gives you a whole new motivation to make it to go to that point.”

The *gratitude letter* presented an opportunity to write to a coach who was instrumental to her success and transformation to a confident and assertive gymnast. As she expressed heartfelt gratitude to her coach in the letter, she realized the significant growth she had experienced through her career and was filled with positive emotions as she recognized the amazing influence of this selfless and passionate coach. Mallory’s gratitude letter is provided in Appendix D. Receiving an appreciative response from her coach also instilled positive emotions and their bond grew stronger through this correspondence. Mallory believes that support still contributes to her confidence and

positive mindset in the gym while she continues to reflect about her coach as a blessing in her life.

Jane was the person that made me go from hating beam to loving it. I'm really grateful now because it's a blessing that I did end up being good on beam and having her help me through, because now with my shoulders, beam is the only thing I can do. So this last year, I owe it to her to have that confidence and everything because she helped me get it.

Although Mallory is still making progress in this area, she feels this intervention has helped her become more positive and calm when dealing with stressful moments and difficult practices. She feels a positive and optimistic mindset facilitates a better outlook toward the desired goal and helps her benefit from constructive criticism from coaches.

When you are not in a good mood and someone tells you you did something wrong, it's like, "Whoa, step out of her way, she is going to punch you in the face (laughter)...no, I'm just kidding, she won't punch you." Being in a good mood and being optimistic about those things and taking criticism well is a really big part of gymnastics...being more positive and happy really does help that happen and makes it flow better.

Overall, Mallory feels she is more mindful of the tools that contribute to her happiness: reflecting on her blessings, good things that happen each day, and helping others. "Just being more positive helps you be happier and in turn that helps every aspect of your life be better."

Mallory believes the summer intervention helped her team become more positive, cohesive, and achieve a stronger bond. "We haven't had the best chemistry on the team in the past couple of years, and I can honestly say that it is so much better this year, and I feel the positive-ness of this summer really did help." The exercises offered opportunities to express kindness to each other in ways they normally might not have considered. She believes a fun atmosphere has been created in and outside the gym as they strive together to accomplish difficult tasks and genuinely enjoy each other's company. "Even the

terrible workouts that are so hard...and then as soon as it is over, we're just like talking and laughing...and even when it's happening...I mean it just makes everything more fun and enjoyable for the entire team.”

**Misty.** Misty found it difficult to dedicate the time and energy to participate in the summer intervention. Although she revealed all the exercises had the potential to be valuable and beneficial in her life, her demanding academic schedule became her main priority. “I just felt I didn't give it the time that it needed or the attention.” However, she fully participated in the *signature strength* exercise and enjoyed discovering and learning about the uniqueness of her teammates' strengths. Learning about her own strengths was also very affirming for Misty.

One of my mine was forgiveness. Not a lot of people had that as one of their options and it makes sense because usually I'm more quick to say, “That's okay, like, people mess up,” or as a lot of other people hold grudges for a lot longer than I do...it was cool.

Misty's written reflection of using this *signature strength in a new way* is provided in Appendix D.

Misty shared she appreciated the summer intervention team meetings when she engaged in her teammates' experiences with the exercises. She was especially inspired by *random acts of kindness*. She thought these meetings improved her team's chemistry and encouraged her teammates to attain more positive emotions by performing kind acts more often. Misty is more aware of a specific teammate that goes out of her way to make sure Misty feels loved and cared for.

Blythe randomly does, like, sweet things...she gave me a pack of pencils, because I kept complaining about how I was running out of pencils all the time...and then I go to my desk, and there's a brand new pack. It was the best thing ever.

Misty believes the intervention had a small, but positive, influence on her development. Although she has no intention of revisiting the intervention manual, she does feel she is more mindful of her blessings and the good things in her life. She realizes the importance of allotting more time to pause and reflect on the gratitude and how she can express more appreciation or perform kind acts for others.

**Randa.** Randa recounted she enjoyed her time during the intervention because the exercise provided opportunities for self-reflection and introspection through intentional writing. After performing *random acts of kindness*, the power of giving resonated with her and she discovered a “greater purpose outside herself.”

Her experience of writing a *gratitude letter* to her mother was even more influential. Her heartfelt and detailed letter was filled with profound appreciation for her mother’s sacrifices that allowed Randa to fulfill her dream as a college gymnast. Randa experienced an added determination to take advantage of her opportunities as a gymnast after cultivating gratitude for the difficult journey her mother had traveled. The genuine and sincere exchange of the letter was very emotional and Randa believes just this simple act of caring created a stronger bond.

I think it’s made us even closer. If there were any questions in her mind of how I felt about her, I think it (the letter) got rid of those. I just think it made the relationship more open. Of course we are mother and daughter, but now we are friends...she is my best friend.

Randa shared that her mother’s faith and belief in her is not only encouraging and comforting, but also fuels her motivation to persevere and stay resilient through tough times. “I know she is always behind me and if she didn’t think I could, I know she wouldn’t have worked so hard for me to be here.”

Randa was startled by the realization that the future life she was envisioning was approaching quickly so her experiences writing about her *best possible self* were compelling. She discussed an amplified motivation to make every day count toward this best self. Through her writing, she also became cognizant of the person she didn't want to be and of the actions made in the past that were not in harmony with her values and her goals.

Often you don't think what you are doing is bad until you sit down and tell yourself, "Okay, like, look at it," or else you keep going in the same habit. So I think it (*Best Possible Self*) helped me in that way. Just helped me be, like, okay, this is the girl you used to be, and this is the girl you are now, and this is the person you want to be in the future.

The exercise helped her re-evaluate her current self and her actions and was confirmation she was heading in the right direction. This confirmation increased her sense of control and enhanced her inner confidence.

Referencing her perfectionistic sport that deducts scores for mistakes and errors, Randa shared *three good things* helps her focus on the good things that are happening each day and stay engaged in the process to the outcome she desires.

I think it's really important to notice the small things you did correct. Maybe they were small or maybe they were big, but it kind of helps you balance things out. Honestly, I guess now the attitude I have is "As long as I am moving forward, I'm doing well"... because often I want to make leaps and bounds toward success... but it's just little by little.

She shared she enjoys and savors small progressions while fully immersing herself in the present. This "right here, right now" focus fosters a positive mindset that is conducive to being productive and successful in and out of the gym.

Randa believes the summer intervention helped her teammates become more secure in their identity as student-athletes and have more conviction in their values. She

feels there is an improved level of comfort and trust among her teammates, increasing positive and constructive communication and the level of perceived support. This interaction has been especially important for Randa as she feels she missed these important relationships the preceding year. “It’s hard not to have people that you can count on, and I think I am really happy that I do have people I know will be there for me and who will have my back. That is a really good feeling.” She feels lessons from the intervention have also transferred into practice, creating a fun, positive, and energy filled atmosphere that assists the team in keeping their mission in perspective. Consequently, Randa voices this favorable atmosphere helps them stay productive in the gym, focused on the task at hand, composed during stressful events, and in tune with each other’s needs.

It (atmosphere) helps me get more stuff done. It helps me not get frustrated. I like seeing other people do well, too, and so I think it helps just knowing each teammate, how they function, and if they are frustrated or not. Just being loud (encouragement) helps you get past yourself...instead of getting wrapped up in the little things.

Overall, Randa believes her happiness was increased by the experience of the intervention as she gained understanding of her ability to proactively respond to adversity.

I am feeling secure...motivated...happy...I mean there have been things that have happened since...I have had breakdowns. But I think it would have been even worse if I didn’t do it (intervention). I guess it helped me understand things are going to happen but it’s all in the way you handle it.

**Sasha.** Sasha described the intervention as fun and exciting because of the multiple opportunities to share and give to others. She considered herself to be a positive person as many of the exercises were already part of her daily life, but she feels she learned new techniques in how she could bring joy to herself and others through

reflective writing. “You learn to know yourself and you learn what works for you and what doesn’t work for you. There were some exercises I liked more than others.”

Sasha enjoys writing gratitude letters and realizes how small acts of kindness make a difference and have a positive and lasting impact on the receiver. She shares that she likes to perform kind acts for others because it fills her with positive emotions. Finding meaning and purpose outside herself to make others happy is an exciting and rewarding experience.

I mean it gives me excitement to think I am doing something for others and gives me joy to see others happy. It’s nice to have someone that can make you feel that the world is not going to roll over or go under. Just impacting people makes me feel good and makes me want to do it even more.

Sasha took the time to write a *gratitude letter* to a teacher she felt wasn’t appreciated or thanked enough for her investment in a summer abroad program. Sasha was relieved when her teacher expressed her gratitude to Sasha for recognizing her meaningful efforts. The act of writing the letter was a flowing experience for Sasha as she anticipated the positive reaction from the teacher, and experienced even more satisfaction when she discovered the positive emotions sparked for the teacher. Sasha’s gratitude letter is provided in Appendix D.

The only exercise Sasha didn’t enjoy was writing about her *best possible self*. She found it frustrating to write about a life that was unknown and out of her control. She struggled envisioning her future life and believes destiny will take its course. “So to me that was just not fun, it just stressed me out.”

Sasha recognized the importance of counting her blessings because appreciating the gifts in life provides a solid foundation and healthy perspective as one continues to strive for success. This understanding became even more convincing for Sasha as she



reflected on her blessings while studying abroad in Africa. Sasha was ignited with motivation and inspiration to make a career of helping others. “Doing all this stuff is something I want to go into ...so it just made me realize why I want to do this a little more.”

Sasha also enjoyed becoming mindful of her *signature strengths*. She discovered new ways she could employ and maximize her strengths by influencing others to do the same. “I’m curious about everything...I used this strength to influence others to be curious and want to know and think critically. That was fun...and kind of exciting.” Implementing her strengths in positive ways was very affirming for Sasha and she again described this experience as intrinsically rewarding.

Sasha plans to really hone into exercises learned from the intervention as she returns to school and is faced with the reality that she is no longer a member of the gymnastics team. She hopes to utilize these new tools and skills to become a supportive and wise mentor to her former teammates.

It is important for me to know that there is a lot of other ways I can help them. I will use my strengths and what I’ve learned from helping people to be there for my teammates in different ways...and teaching them what I’ve learned and what I have experienced... and helping them develop that way.

**Emma.** Emma recounted she enjoyed the summer intervention as she became more mindful of the *good things* that happened each day and performed new and different *acts of kindness* that surpassed her typical actions. She believed the exercises helped her reach outside her comfort zone to give positive feedback to her teammates.

I would go up to them and be, “You did really good at this at practice today” or something like that. I’m not that kind of person, so that was a bit harder for me to do, but they felt really good about themselves, which made feel good about myself.

She shared these interactions filled her with positive emotions and left her with feelings of accomplishment.

When writing a gratitude letter to her parents, she realized she takes their commitment for granted and discovered a new appreciation for their love and support.

Emma found it rewarding to witness transformation of several teammates through the intervention. She believes some of her more “negative” teammates discovered a new perspective by becoming mindful of their blessings, the good things, and small acts for others. Emma feels the team meetings during which they were given the opportunity to open up and share their unique experiences brought the team closer together.

The same thing isn't going to make different people happy...and seeing how someone did something differently to make them happy was really cool...people were kind of tense, but then after sharing and relating our experiences, people were more relaxed and having fun.

She shares this closeness has also impacted their communication to positively affirm and hold each other to higher standards. “We can say to each other, ‘You are doing really good today’ or ‘You need to do this better,’ but it’s nice we can talk to each other about those things. I think it’s definitely influenced our play on the court.”

Even more significant, Emily believes this intervention had a strong positive influence on the coaching staff and their communication their players. After the coaches attended some of the meetings, they incorporated some of the positive exercises into their constructive instruction in and out of the gym. “For a coach, it’s easy to be ‘Come on! You need to do that!’ But, I think now, they realized those little thing help us and help us perform better. I think they’ve been using that a lot more.” Emma shares this new approach has contributed to a fun and stress free practice environment where everyone is happy and motivated to give their best.

Emma feels the intervention has helped her grow into a better person; she discovered meaning and purpose outside herself by simply giving to others. She experiences joy by bringing joy to others. Focusing on the positives of each day contributes to a healthier and optimistic mindset. She continues to reflect on *good things* that happen each day, particularly savoring encouraging comments from coaches at practices, which in turn, motivates and inspires her to work harder. Anna's written reflection of *three good things* is provided in Appendix D.

**Lily.** Lily shared she enjoyed the intervention as it helped her reflect and become mindful of her blessings. Although she was frustrated with a lack of playing time on this year's team, she adopted a positive mindset both in and out of the gym as she realized perspective in her life and her role on the team. The exercises served as tools to transform her negative thoughts into positive thoughts and reframe previously perceived negative events into challenges and opportunities.

I could be complaining about things, like, "I don't want to go to class today," and I'd be, like, "Wait, I have free tuition," and "I don't want to wake up for 6am's (workouts), but I'm getting exercise, and I have all of these people around me." I would have some kind of negative thought in my head, and I would be, like, "Look, so many people would love to be in my situation right now, and in the long run, it's best for me."

Lily feels the summer intervention influenced her team's chemistry as they shared personal reflections of their participation in the exercises during team meetings. Lily revealed vulnerability was a consistent theme during intervention discussions and this new comfort of sharing one's whole self created a deeper and stronger connection among teammates. She feels a closer bond with her teammates; she discovered their *signature strengths*, giving her a better glimpse of not only what makes each teammate tick, but also understanding their needs in times of struggle. She also believes learning more about

her teammates helped her gain a new selfless mentality as she worked to improve these relationships. “I think it helps you look at everyone in a different perspective and it helps you meet halfway on a lot of things. You think of their perspective, too, and not just your own.” During the intervention, she harnessed her strengths and maximized identifying those of others to navigate potential storms.

I have leadership, and so does Morgan, so we have to respect each other’s strengths...we could just drop it (conflict) instead of having it hang over our heads. I thought about it from her perspective and tried to put myself in her shoes, so I think it really just helped me let it go.

Lily’s strength of kindness or “caring” was especially affirming; she nurtured this strength to embrace her supportive role on the team.

It made me realize more than anything that when I’m not playing, I might have these negative thoughts, but I’m also aware the part of my heart that’s, like, I would never want to see my teammates upset. I think it has helped me become at peace with what my role is, thinking about other people and they deserve it, too.

Most importantly, Lily shared this intervention helped her find meaning and purpose outside of volleyball and the sole identity of an athlete. As she wrote about her *best possible self*, provided in Appendix D, the door opened to other opportunities outside of sport in which she could utilize her gifts as a caring and giving individual. She found the courage to embrace these new discoveries in her search for “true happiness.”

And now my life is bigger than just having playing time...I think this whole experience has helped me realize I have so many more passions, and I don’t just have to focus on volleyball. It’s just helped me to be more well-rounded...just being able to open my heart up and be willing to accept anything that comes into my world.

Lily renewed her passion and love for her sport as she surrendered to “something bigger than herself” and learned to identify the complete college experience. As she counted her blessings throughout the intervention, her relationship with her mother grew

stronger; she became mindful of her mother's unconditional love and support. Lily shared the growth of this relationship helped her relieve stress during difficult times in the season and to re-focus on the task at hand.

In a general sense, Lily believes the team's environment is healthier compared to that of the previous season due to a more cohesive team that communicates positively and supports each other on and off the court. "If someone is having a bad day, one of us will go up to that person and we'll know how to talk to them to get them out of it. We've also opened up to each other...we know that everyone cares." She noticed that her teammates improved their ability to re-focus in practice and quickly let go of errors and mistakes. She feels a genuine bond exists among her teammates; they have established trust from summer meetings and are more in tune with each other's lives.

It (intervention) allowed the team to meet outside of the volleyball world and talk about things that are more personal related. This whole process is just about getting to know each other...when everyone has to go to that uncomfortable level, it forms that vulnerability, but we all got each other, and we are all there for each other. No one is hiding behind a shield.

**Liz.** Liz shared the summer intervention increased her awareness of the blessings she takes for granted in and beyond sport; she reflected on the positive exercises through intentional writing. She enjoyed expressing her thoughts and feelings in a new and different way and experienced both personal discovery and growth. She shared the new outlook and tools she gained will continue to shape her into the person she wants to become. "I've gotten to know myself a little better. I've learned a lot about myself and about my teammates and that kind of puts a different perspective on my life...kind of changed the way I live a little bit."

She recognized new appreciation for her mother after she invested time in writing a gratitude letter. As she reflected on her mother's unconditional love and support, Liz was inspired by her mother's selflessness and motivation to put her family first. "It's crazy to think that you'll love somebody more than you love yourself." She feels the gratitude letter sparked a more open relationship and influenced her desire to live a life of meaning and purpose similar to her mother's.

Liz enjoyed learning about her *signature strengths* and discovering new ways she could implement her strengths in and out of the gym. She felt her strengths defined her accurately, but found it interesting that some were more than just a reflection of personality but were actual gifts she could implement to maximize her potential. Liz's written reflection of *using a signature strength in a new way* is provided in Appendix D. She found herself taking more ownership and having more confidence in her strengths, especially in her leadership role on the team. "Just like communication or being in front of my team and having to talk to them and using my strengths to settle them down or get them pumped up during other times." The assessment of her strengths assisted her in gaining a respected and commanding voice with her teammates.

Liz appreciated affirming her teammates' strengths and how they harnessed their own strengths within their roles on the team.

It made you a little more confident in who you are, and if they said stuff about what they liked about you, you obviously acted like that a little more. If they said you were caring, sweet, and always there for somebody, I felt that person would really feel like that was their role of the team, so they really took that in.

She learned to value each teammate's uniqueness and experienced more empathy, patience, kindness, and gratitude in her communication with teammates who possessed different strengths than her own.

I am typically not the nicest person, especially in volleyball, so I try to take a step back and think about what I say before I say it...sometimes you can say the same exact thing but the way you say it means the world to somebody. I try to meet everyone's needs and try to understand what they are going through.

Although difficult at times, she believes her willingness to step outside her comfort zone and reach out to understand her teammates has a positive impact on her team's confidence and perceived support off and on the court. Liz feels she has embraced her leadership role this season and the positive reinforcement and feedback she receives from her teammates increases her motivation to continue to evolve into a better leader.

I think it changed how I think about things, and I've been that type of a person to where I have been, but it's just different when everybody is telling you how good of a leader you are. So just me trying to change who I am and trying to grow as a leader.

The positive affirmations she received from her teammates for emerging into a more positive and encouraging person also helped Liz hold herself accountable to higher standards she sets for herself and models to the team.

It was really hard for me to be positive about everything...I've had to go in and do things above and beyond so others will follow that lead...I feel like I have grown a lot as a player and as a person throughout that.

Liz believes her teammates grew closer after the intervention because the team meetings provided opportunities to be open and vulnerable and establish deeper and meaningful relationships. Any barriers between upperclassmen and underclassmen were dismantled.

I've tried to really go out of my way to make the freshmen feel like they don't have to be scared of me or feel like we don't have anything in common because I am a senior and they are a freshman. I think it's changed my relationship with everybody, just going above and reaching out to people to be friends and having conversations with them.

She feels having a very cohesive team with sound values has contributed to a greater team work ethic and a healthy mindset that is focused on the process and not the result. Liz believes this approach to the game has helped her team play with a relaxed intensity and composed manner with the ability to focus on what is directly in their control.

It's really changed the way I play. I feel like it's taken a lot of pressure off of me and my teammates...just trying to play my best and not necessarily getting all the kills or digs, but just trying to do what is necessary.

Not only did Liz reach out her comfort zone with her teammates, but also when performing *random acts of kindness* for strangers. She realized how a simple act could turn someone's day around and finds herself seeking other opportunities to be more sociable and considerate.

**Morgan.** Morgan enjoyed sharing her experiences with the summer intervention in a group setting with her team. Although she struggled to find significance during the written reflections, she found meaning through interacting with her teammates. She feels the summer was a perfect opportunity to discuss the student athlete's culture and climate in purposeful team meetings. Not only did she feel her team grew closer, but she also experienced both personal discovery and growth during her senior season.

Her experience writing a gratitude letter to her coaching staff was particularly eye-opening and influential. She discovered a new appreciation for her athletic career and the supportive coaches who nurtured her into the athlete she is today. She feels this realization has helped her savor every experience of her senior year, even through tough and frustrating times in and out of the gym.

Writing the letter this summer just really made me realize this is my last year and to take advantage of it as much as I could...I really try to enjoy every moment,



even the annoyingness (laughter) of it...I really try to embrace it all...even the hard practices.

Her enhanced gratitude for coaches and her improved focus helps her respond to feedback and seek out constructive instruction to expand her skills. Although in past years she acknowledged frustration with constant feedback from coaches, she now views her coaches differently and feels fortunate to have resources that invest in her individually.

I have definitely grown a lot closer to them. I think a lot of it is that I see them in a positive way now. I think writing it down just made me realize how much they really do. I appreciate them a lot more...so I'm more open to feedback they give me.

Recognizing her coaches as caring individuals that want the best for her has fueled Morgan's motivation to focus on improvements to bring her game to the next level. "Realizing how good they are as coaches and like realizing they are pushing me because they care about me has made it easier to focus on the little things...I'm always thinking 'Ok, I can get better'...I never satisfied with it."

Her new sense of empowerment for her last season has also influenced her interaction with her teammates. Describing herself as independent, she increased her effort and commitment to share her experiences with younger teammates to provide them with the perspective she wishes she had gained earlier in her career.

I really have tried to do more team bonding things or set up times to hang out with the freshmen or go out of my way to do things where that's not really me at all. I think it has a lot with me being a senior and realizing I don't have much time left.

She feels this year's team atmosphere is much improved compared to past years and is directly related to her happiness. "I think it 's (appreciation) just made this season much

more enjoyable and a lot more fun. I enjoy the whole experience. I think that's made a difference in terms of how happy I've been this season versus others."

She enjoyed identifying her signature strengths and the strengths of her teammates and how to maximize these strengths to benefit the team and become a highly effective leader. Utilizing her strengths was affirming and increased her confidence in her leadership voice. As a modest and humble person, Morgan shared the open and comfortable environment established during the intervention encouraged her to express her strengths. Morgan also gained understanding and empathy for teammates she struggled to connect with in the past. She appreciated these teammates as people and how their unique strengths were important to team success. "Where now I can see her role on the team is really, really important and talking about that in a team setting, I think makes them also feel accepted and needed." Morgan believes her teammates also found it easier to be open with and relate to her knowing her signature strengths. Because Morgan utilized her strengths to demonstrate her unconditional support and belief in her team, she feels her teammates grew more confident.

Like the one (strength) with 'hope'...we've had conversations about it and they're like "You always say things and when you say things, I think they're true...you could say 'We're going to beat this team 25 to 2', and I would totally believe you!" And I think things like that and realizing how much that impacts the people around me...like knowing I'm going to be supportive of them and believe in them regardless of what happens, makes it easier for them to play, perform, and just be themselves."

She believes this new mindful communication, thriving on each other's strengths and individual needs, has limited conflict and unnecessary drama this year and also promoted individual and team growth.

Morgan believes the intervention also fostered a positive influence on the coaching staff as they became aware of their players' strengths.

I think they (coaches) have been a lot more understanding, and it seems they relate to all people a lot better. There will be times when they will get frustrated with a certain person, and instead of reacting in a certain way, they'll react in different ways for different people.

She feels the coaches exhibited an effort to consistently affirm all roles. She shares this intentional positive communication helps her teammates embrace their roles and contribute to a productive team environment.

I can tell the coaches and the whole team really appreciates those roles. I can tell from how the coaches talk, they always give credit to people who don't necessarily get a lot of playing time. It makes everyone happy and when everyone is happy, it makes it a lot easier to function as a team.

Morgan found envisioning her *best possible future self* to be challenging because of her intense focus on making the most of her volleyball career. She adjusted the exercise to write more specifically about the goals she had for the season.

Reflecting on her summer experience, Morgan shares this intervention resulted in a fun summer and has been only a positive experience for her. She is generally happier this year because of the abundance of positive emotions she experiences on a daily basis. She believes her happiness has contributed to a healthier mindset as a player. "You know, when you're happy and when you're enjoying life and the things you have, it's so much easier to go to practice everyday ready to work hard and ready to get better." She feels her teammates would echo the same sentiments.

Morgan believes her team is more cohesive this year because of the care, trust, and safe environment that was built through the intentional exercises. "I could never see them (teammates) being mean or doing bad things just because we have spent so much

more time together and we know each other better. We are on a different level than we were last year.” Consequently, her team is having a lot of fun with the positive attitudes and perspectives nurtured throughout the intervention. She believes the intervention will continue to influence the team’s culture in years to come. She also thinks a similar experience would be beneficial for other women’s and men’s teams.

**Rebel.** Rebel enjoyed the opportunities to reflect on the positive exercises through intentional writing and also during team meetings. Although she doesn’t consider herself a strong writer, she felt that she was able to find deeper meaning through the challenge of the writing process. She feels the intervention positively influenced her, and she enjoyed bringing her “whole” self to the experience and not just her “athlete” self.

I feel this intervention came at a good time. It looks at sport psychology but in a different way. It looked at it in a more, like “you” and not necessarily sport wise, but, “you” as a person...It makes you have a broader outlook on things.

While participating in the summer intervention, she became more aware and appreciative of the good things that happened each day. Seeking out positive events helped her cultivate positive emotions. After performing *random acts of kindness*, she is now more mindful of the “little things” and makes an effort to think outside herself and engage in simple, kind acts for others and her teammates. As she reaps positive emotions from her acts, she is inspired to continue to bring others joy.

I guess I do that (random acts) more often, even the little things, like opening the door for other people, saying thank you, and even with teammates...grabbing their pin for them even if they don’t ask...just thinking of others.

Rebel wrote her mother a *gratitude letter* thanking her for unconditional love and support. While investing time and genuine thought into writing the letter, she realized she took her mother for granted and became more appreciative of their relationship.

Experiencing her mother's intense positive emotional response brought Rebel positive emotions after her mother affirmed her expression of gratitude. She feels they have grown closer since the gratitude letter. "I feel like ever since the gratitude letter, we've gotten stronger and have a better bond, which is really good."

Rebel used one of her *signature strengths* in a new way by leading the team through a team bonding activity during the signature strength team meeting. She believes learning about the individual and collective strengths of the team and then affirming the importance of each teammate's role for team success brought the team closer together and set the tone for the summer. "It made people realize, like, this person does bring a quality to the team, or this person does have a big role even if it's a little role." Rebel enjoyed leading the activity and felt empowered to embrace her leadership voice with the team.

Rebel found it difficult to write about her *best possible future self*; she found it strange to imagine a life that seemed distant from her current life as a student-athlete. She chose to write about her best possible "athlete self" and the weight room standards she wanted to accomplish.

Rebel believes the team grew closer throughout the intervention with the opportunities to be open about their lives outside of volleyball, to discuss their values and who they were as people, and to discover a variety of unique experiences. Rebel shares this more cohesive and supportive bond has helped the team unite under a collective mission that positions team goals with individual goals. "When you are around people that you love and know a lot about, you not only play for your goals, but you play for their goals. You want to be able to achieve them all." She feels that finding meaning in

something bigger than themselves allows them to hold each other accountable to higher standards on and off the volleyball court. The coaches' attendance at meetings enabled them to learn more about their players and establish personal relationships. Intimidating communication barriers between the players and the coaching staff were dismantled, resulting in a more relaxed and intimate team atmosphere.

Rebel believes this intervention required an investment of time and energy in order to reap the benefits. She is happy and proud she stayed committed to the exercises and gave the reflective writing her best effort.

**Samantha.** Samantha shared she enjoyed the intervention; she paused to remove herself from the fast paced athletic world to reflect on and appreciate her blessings as well as her purpose in and out of the volleyball environment. The intervention also provided her with opportunities for mindful introspection, especially when writing about her *best possible future self* and best athlete self. She feels the goals she set for herself and the team this season are related to the team's success.

Samantha chose her mother as the recipient of her gratitude letter because she feels her mother is underappreciated. While writing the letter, she recognized the amazing support and love her mother selflessly gives despite being hundreds of miles away. Samantha also experienced gratitude and pride for her upbringing. Since the gratitude letter experience, she feels she is more understanding of her mother's feelings and needs and she makes more of an effort to communicate with her. Samantha is filled with positive emotions knowing that her mother recognizes how important she is to Samantha.

I make it a point to try and call her and Skype her a lot more...it makes me feel good...I mean she cares that much, and it means a lot to me. I think it makes me feel better too that I'm making her more relaxed.

Samantha's reflection of her *random acts of kindness* positively reinforced her dream and goals of jumpstarting her own non-profit organization. She is inspired and passionate about helping other people and finding meaning outside herself. She feels this intervention shaped a healthy and fresh perspective that was "open to new people and new ideas." She concluded that through helping others she was actually helping herself. After giving of herself unconditionally, she not only experienced a variety of positive emotions, but also became more confident and self-assured in her identity.

When you're kinder...you feel better about yourself, because you're not only impacting other people, but yourself as well. It's kind of like an endorphin thing. When you do these little acts of kindness, it makes you feel so better about who you are as a person. I try to pay attention to those things a little more.

Samantha believes her team experienced significant growth throughout the intervention. She feels they became much closer and cohesive when sharing their experiences with the different exercises. She especially acknowledged *identifying signature strengths* as a beneficial and fun activity during which teammates affirmed and praised each other's unique strengths.

I love the one when you find about the five traits that you're best at and define you. We all gave feedback on, "Oh, that makes sense, I understand why you have that trait" and we touch on that... so we're always building each other up. I think it really helps us grow as a team and really makes us a lot closer. I feel like these things helped us get to a better place.

She discussed the value of a unified team that highlights and focuses on strengths, and builds trust and support that is crucial to well-being.

The meaning derived from the team meetings with the returners influenced the approach and interaction with the incoming freshmen. Samantha revealed the returners were able to establish closer and personal bonds with the freshman by sharing the new perspective founded on student-athlete blessings and open and selfless relationships.

I think how we shared it with them kind of opened their eyes to the fact that this is a very special group of people and we're very privileged to be here...it kind of helped them connect with us on a deeper level.

Unlike past years, Samantha believes the freshmen felt accepted immediately which unlocked doors for mentorship and effective communication. Samantha shared she harnessed her strengths to help her become an insightful and caring role model for the freshmen.

I think those (strengths) definitely helped...I am really invested in wanting to help other people. I would always check up on them...and often remind them to look at the bigger picture because it is so easy to get focused on the small little things that stress you out.

The positive reinforcement she received from the freshmen increased her motivation to continue to grow into a mature and respected leader for the team.

Samantha feels the growth gained through the intervention also positively influences the team's performance in the gym. The team created a list of standards that defined their best possible selves and goals for the season. She shared that gratitude, kindness, strengths, respect, and optimism were consistent themes built into these standards for the season. She believes the investment and engagement of the team to write the standards has contributed to their success this year; it defines the culture they intend to live. This team-generated culture has developed trust among team members.

At the end of the day, all of those things (standards) come down to trust, and if you don't have trust within your team, it's not going to work. It's all been written down, so I think that's a huge thing in order for us to move forward, and it definitely has been successful so far.

Samantha believes this trust transferred onto the court, helping her perform with composure and confidence. The mutual trust also assists the team in holding each other to higher standards and a higher level of play.



Especially in volleyball, it's a six person game. You really do need to have that trust, and I really do trust every single person on my team. We hold ourselves accountable because we know how good we are and how much better we can be...It's almost like weight off my shoulders because each person is able to contribute. I might not get the perfect pass but I trust Morgan to get that set...Morgan might not have the perfect set but I trust that hitter...It's really awesome to be able to have that close-knit unit and that trust at the end of the day.

Reflecting on the summer intervention, Samantha discusses a sense of nostalgia after recognizing how close she, her team, and the coaching staff became over the course of a year. She believes the rewarding achievements her team experiences are partly due to the activities they invested in over the summer.

You never realize that being able to acknowledge those things are going to take you to another place or to that next level. Without any kind of intervention, we wouldn't be able to be as close...I don't think it would have carried us to where we are now...it's really cool to think about that.

**Willow.** Willow shared the summer intervention helped her reflect on her life from a different perspective. Without the demanding schedule of volleyball and academics during the regular season, the summer allowed her to devote more time and energy to participation in the intervention exercises.

She shared she became more mindful and aware of ways she could be kinder and helpful to others when performing *random acts of kindness*.

It was hard for me because I like people, but then I hate people. A lot of times I want to punch people in the face for doing the stupidest things (laughs). I mean they weren't the greatest heroic acts, but I feel it's way more than I usually do. Sometimes I am really mean to people so it was nice to help people out when you see how happy it makes them.

She describes the acts as fun opportunities to challenge herself and also inspire others to participate.

While writing about her blessings, she put her difficult days into perspective and appreciated her student-athlete opportunities. She paused and reflected on the many

opportunities she takes for granted and realize the many gifts in her life. Since the summer, she makes an effort to cultivate gratitude, especially during stressful and demanding days as a student-athlete. She feels expressing gratitude is a part of her spirituality, and also helps her put mistakes in a healthier perspective and play with composure and a positive and present focus.

Whenever we are doing something like that (hard practice), I think, “Okay, if this person were here they would be living the life,” and here I am being a pout because, “Oh no, I had to run a sprint,” or “Oh no, I messed up.” I think of things like that and pause for a second, it just makes me calm down more, and I’m like “Okay, it’s whatever because no one can have a perfect day, ever”...counting your blessings really go to me.

Willow believes her transformation into a calm and collective player had a positive impact on her teammates, especially the freshmen.

I’m the calming person out there now and that was not me last year at all. I notice it myself, and I’ve had everyone come up to me and tell me they’ve noticed it. I think it has rubbed off on other people...especially with the freshmen because they are probably terrified.

She has embraced her role as a positive model and feels this modeling influence has contributed to the freshmen playing fearlessly on the court and confidently in their roles. “They’ve been taking risks and doing great things on the court, so you can tell they’re being comfortable and feel good where they are.”

Willow enjoyed the process of writing her parents and an old coach *gratitude letters*. When writing her parents, she realized the sacrifices made to help her achieve her goal of playing college volleyball. She discovered a newly found appreciation for their support and love and enjoyed the opportunity to communicate her deep sense of gratitude. She feels her parents appreciate the achievements in her personal growth.

Although her past experiences with her former club coach were intense and grueling, Willow wrote a gratitude letter to this coach thanking him for making her a mentally and physically tougher athlete. She now realizes this coach helped shape her into the resilient and perseverant woman she is today.

Without him, I would have never known how to get through tough times. I know that because I could get through him, I can get through college and whatever else comes. And whenever I go through hard times now, I can just think back to my 17<sup>th</sup> year, and well, I got through that so....

Willow believes the summer intervention positively influenced her team. She feels her team's collective focus was enhanced after engaging in the exercises. She believes the new appreciation discovered together for their student-athlete opportunities contributed to a stronger conviction in who they were and what they wanted to become.

I feel after the summer everyone is working hard for what they want...from being here three years, I've never seen our team so focused on something. I think the summer intervention tied everything together...it really made us focus and realize how great we have it and how special this opportunity is...I think that helped a lot with what we need to do with it and use it for our benefit.

Willow feels the intervention gave her resources and skills to help her feel better as a person, experience a full array of positive emotions, and make her days more rewarding and fulfilling. Overall, Willow shared she enjoyed the summer intervention.

It was probably one of the most fun summers I've ever had in college. It really brings out great memories and just to have the intervention really makes it better, because I can have fun and realize I was having fun in, like, a different perspective...makes you think how awesome life is and the fun things you're doing and why they're fun.

## Findings of Overall Essence

After capturing each athlete's individual experience, the next stage of the phenomenological approach was employed across each case to find the overall essence of the athletes' lived experiences with the positive psychology intervention. Nomothetic descriptions were developed as each individual's experience was interpreted relative to all other experiences for similarities and differences. First, significant statements from each interview were identified and organized into 775 meaningful units. These meaningful units were then organized and categorized into fifteen sub-themes. Lastly, sub-themes were compared and contrasted across all transcripts to discover the final thematic structure. Seven central themes that described athletes' experiences emerged: *mindfulness/awareness, self-introspection/reflection, relationships, meaning and purpose, positive emotions, growth, and engagement in exercises.*

The first two themes, *mindfulness/awareness* and *self-introspection/reflection*, are presented as foundations for generating the resulting themes of (a) *relationships*, (b) *meaning*, (c) *positive emotions*, (d) *growth*, and (e) *engagement in exercises*. In the following sections, all themes and their respective sub-themes are discussed with additional support from representative meaningful units. The number of athletes represented in each of the sub-themes is shown in Table 2. Results are shared in the context of athletes' individual and team participation in *identifying signature strengths, three good things, best possible selves, counting one's blessings, the gratitude visit, and random acts of kindness*. Continuous effort was made to stay at the level of each athlete's experience by interpreting the data using the participant's language. Of particular importance in phenomenological research, the final thematic description is

presented with rich and thick first-person descriptions of each athlete's experiences with the intervention (Dale, 1996). In final reporting of phenomenological research, Wertz et. al (2011) shares:

In virtually all reports, references to concrete data and lifeworld situations, using quotations of participants, are included to render psychological insights and psychological terms intelligible with reference to actual examples and to provide readers with intuitive understanding of the findings (p. 161).

The athletes who appear more frequently in the analysis were selected based on the richness of their descriptions and self-reported engagement in the intervention from start to finish. However, while these interviews in particular were more expressive statements pertaining to the essence themes, the methodology used to code and triangulate among all interviews is representative of all athletes' experiences with the positive psychology intervention.

**Table 2 Number of Athletes Contributing to Sub-Themes**

Central Themes	Sub-Themes	N
Mindfulness/Awareness		21
Self-Reflection/Introspection		21
Relationships	Investment and Learning	14
	Closeness and Connectedness	18
	Positive Communication	13
	Perceived Support	17
	Team Cohesion	14
Meaning and Purpose	Meaning and Purpose Outside Sport	20
	Meaning and Purpose Inside Sport	15
Growth	Determination and Optimism	18
	Positive Mindsets	18
	Resilience	16
	Enhanced Focus	15
Engagement in Exercises	Commitment to Exercises	18
	Intentional Writing	15
	Opportunities for Expression	14
Positive Emotions	Happiness and Joy	20
	Fun and Enjoyment	21

### Final Structural Description

*Mindfulness/ awareness* and *self-reflection/ introspection* provide a means to (a) strengthen *relationships*, (b) discover *meaning and purpose* in and out of sport, (c) achieve personal and collective *growth*, (d) increase *engagement in the exercises*, and (e) reap *positive emotions*. These two foundational themes are presented first followed by subsequent sub-themes.

## **Mindfulness/Awareness**

Athletes in this study shared they became more mindful and experienced a heightened awareness of the positive events in their daily lives both during and after their participation in the intervention. “My eyes have finally been opened” (Randa). Writing about *three good things* that went well each day allowed participants to consciously recognize the good things often overlooked in the busy and demanding schedule of a student-athlete. Brandy described, “It was interesting to make myself think about each thing...like the *three good things* that happened in the day, I usually don’t do that, but it helped me realize I do have good things that happen in the day.” Rebel also acknowledged she enjoyed this new insight.

It makes you realize, “Oh yeah, that happened, that was good.” And so, I liked it. Even the simple things, like talking to one of my family members on the phone, that’s a good part of the day that you sometimes just skip over.

Emma stated participation in *three good things* helped her become more cognizant of the positive feedback given by her coaches that she had often failed to acknowledge. “I remember a coach coming up to me during practices and workouts and saying ‘Good job, you’re doing a really good job at this, keep it up.’”

When cultivating gratitude during *counting one’s blessings* and writing a *gratitude letter*, athletes reported becoming more mindful of the people and opportunities they took for granted. “It just makes you open your eyes and appreciate what you have and just helped me recognize things that I probably haven’t before” (Sasha).

Participants became more mindful of other people when engaging in *random acts of kindness*. “So it was a good reminder, that they (homeless) don’t have people in their lives that do kind things for them” (Beth). Brandy also became more aware of people

performing kind acts around her. “I’m like ‘Wow! People still do that these days?’ It was so nice of him. I was like ‘Wow!’ I think everyone on the bus was like ‘Oh! That really just happened?’”

During the practice of *identifying signature strengths* and values in action, athletes discovered strengths that were previously unknown, “Oh, okay, so these are the things I’m good at!” (Anna) or weren’t fully realized, “My mom always told me I had a big heart. I always knew I had that (caring strength) but being aware that it’s, like, actually on paper that I tend to have one of those characteristics, has helped me” (Lily). Athletes also discussed being surprised that some of their qualities could be harnessed as strengths.

There were some you wouldn’t normally get...like there was humor, zest, and different stuff you wouldn’t normally think of as strengths. It kind of changed things for me because I’ve always thought, or people always say I have humor, but I never thought that was an actual strength for me (Liz).

After participating in the exercises, athletes’ increased mindfulness and heightened awareness exposed negative thinking, “I think it made me kind of catch myself if I am not thinking positively or anything like that” (Macy) and accentuated positive events throughout their day. “Those are the things that really pop out to me for sure” (Beth). Similarly, Blythe shared, “Because now, it’s become my nature that everyday I notice those things.” Athletes further developed their mindfulness and awareness by pondering their encounters. “Thinking about what I’m grateful for and thinking about my day and meditating on the different experiences I’ve had rather than just pushing them to the back of my head”(Beth). Karla stated she also meditated on her experiences by stopping to “smell the roses every once in awhile.” Effort was highlighted as a precursor to recognizing potential positive events. “I mean, you



definitely have to be conscious of working on being more positive...I feel like I am more conscious about the ways in which I can be positive” (Mallory).

### **Introspection/Self-Reflection**

Athletes stated participation in the exercises assisted them in examining their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. “I’ve never thought about the things I do during the day and never really sat down and thought about how I approach things” (Anna). They discussed taking a “step back” and reflecting on who they are as people, “It just made me kind of look at myself more, like who I am and what I am as a person” (Brandy) and what makes them function, “You learn to know yourself and know what works for you and what doesn’t work for you”(Sasha). Rebel enjoyed reaching past the sole identity of a student-athlete. “I feel like this intervention came at a good time and looked at sport psychology, but in a different way. It looked at it in more, like, ‘you’ and not necessarily sport wise, but like, ‘you’ as a person.”

Cassie shared introspection gained throughout the intervention helped her feel more able and competent. “I think it just made me realize a lot more about myself than I thought, and it made me realize that I’m a lot more capable of things.” Athletes were also able to look back on their careers and acknowledge their growth as athletes. “I think it makes me think about, like, where I am and how I’ve gotten there and just all the work I’ve put in” (Morgan).

In addition to learning more about their past and present selves, athletes also gained a new understanding of who they wanted to become. “Allowing myself to open my eyes...I think it’s helped me realize that I don’t think that’s my goal (professional

volleyball player), what I want to be anymore” (Lily). After writing about her *best possible self*, Randa stated she was able re-evaluate her decision-making and actions.

Often you don’t think about what you are doing is bad until you sit down and tell yourself, okay, like, look at it, or else you just keep going in the same habit. So I think it just helped me in that way. Just like this is the girl you used to be and this is the girl you are now. And this is the person you want to be in the future.

In addition, Liz revealed the self-knowledge gained through the exercises shaped her course of action moving forward.

I think it helped guide me where I want to be as a person and to sit back and think about the different things I’ve learned. I’ve learned a lot about myself and about my teammates and that kind of puts a different perspective on my life and kind of changed the way I live a little bit.

Athletes discussed seeing things “in a new light” (Samantha) or “from a different perspective” (Alyssa) after they *counted blessings*, wrote *gratitude letters*, and engaged in *random acts of kindness*. After cultivating gratitude in the exercises, they discovered a new appreciation for family and friends. “Just helped me realize how important they are in my life” (Cody). Athletes especially realized they took their parents for granted and acknowledged a larger indebtedness for their parents’ unconditional love and support. “I guess it just reminds me that everything goes back to my mom...so I should always remind myself or thank my mom whenever I can” (Lana). Thankfulness for teammates and shared experiences with teammates were also emphasized, “It really did make you reflect back on all the positive encounters you had and how much impact it had on your life...you think back on the things that happened and how that teammate helped you through them” (Macy). In addition, gratitude for student-athlete experiences was highlighted, “A lot of it made you realize things you are lucky to have...you should

always remember you have it a lot better than other people just by being a student-athlete” (Lana).

After reflecting on their *signature strengths*, athletes stated they realized ways they could best harness and maximize these strengths to be more productive in their sport, “And it gives me, like okay, I can use this strength somehow in the gym” (Anna) and become better teammates, “... the strengths have helped me because it really helped me to realize that I could really use them to help other people on the team” (Morgan).

For Karla, introspection and self-reflection affirmed her purpose in life. “I guess the activity put it into a huge grand picture that we have to step back, back, back, and ever more back, to realize that the purpose of life is to enjoy it and that’s the ultimate goal.” Samantha excitedly acknowledged the thrill and pleasure of life. “It just makes you think how awesome life is and the fun things you are doing and why they are fun.”

### **Relationships**

All athletes revealed their participation in the intervention developed and strengthened relationships with their family, friends, coaches, and teammates. These relationships were built and reinforced through *investment and learning, closeness and connectedness, perceived support, positive communication, and team cohesion*. Each sub-theme is discussed in depth below.

**Investment and learning.** The team meetings held throughout the intervention provided valuable opportunities for athletes to invest in each other’s lives and learn more about their teammates. “I think the whole process is just getting to know each other a lot more” (Lily). Participants reflected on their experiences in the positive exercises together,

allowing time for athletes to gain insight into the lives of their teammates outside their sport.

Like all the activities we did, we met every week to talk about it. It allowed our team to meet outside of the volleyball world and talk about things that aren't just volleyball...they are more personal related...I think it helps you look at everyone in a different perspective (Lily).

Athletes stated they enjoyed learning about each other's *best possible selves*.

"Everyone would share, like, something. Like the one with you writing down your future and what you think it'd be, Lana and Beth shared theirs. It was cool to see what other people thought" (Cody). More specifically, some athletes discussed they found it interesting to learn about their teammates' aspirations. "It was cool to hear about people's goals and just, like, what they want to do and stuff" (Beth). Rebel agreed, "It was good to hear about their goals in their life and I guess what is driving them."

Athletes also appreciated discovering their teammates' *signature strengths* and values in action relative to their personal strengths and values. "It was good to see other people's strengths and what they hold with importance. And I guess, vice versa, you know certain people hold things to a higher standard. Everyone got everyone's perspective on things" (Rebel). Identifying the strengths of fellow teammates was very confirming for some athletes, "When we all talked about our strengths, it was so weird because they all went with, like, who we are" (Rebel). These understandings gave them some common language to identify and affirm those strengths in each other, "So it was kind of nice identifying with them and being able to compliment our teammates on the fact, like, 'Oh, you do have a lot of honesty...or you have a lot of perseverance'...so it was good to acknowledge it" (Randa).

Recognizing previously untapped or unrealized strengths in teammates also elicited valuable team understandings.

How like they've always seen those strengths in themselves and then never realizing that also can be a strength...we realized we are all different and it was just weird to think that people think we are all the same because we play the same sport and have the same goal, but it's, like, we are all different and have our own goals and personality (Liz).

Participants stated they comprehended how strengths unlike their own are significant and important to team success. "It made you realize this person does bring a quality to the team, or this person does have a big role even if it's a little role" (Rebel). After reporting frustration with teammates who she labeled as overly emotional, Morgan shared:

I just thought it was a really cool experience to be able to understand why that person is so sensitive now. It's because they are really caring...so you know they use their strengths to help the team...but then you can, at least, understand that you cannot be mad at someone for who they are.

In addition to embracing differences, commonalities between strengths assisted some athletes to find a common ground and to navigate through potential adversity.

One of my strengths is that I have leadership, but it's also Morgan's so we have to respect each other's. She does have more experience so I think it's just a way of seeing where we are coming from. Once you think about it from her perspective, then you try to put yourself in her shoes. I think it helped me let it go (Lily).

Some teammates expressed amusement when learning about each other's *random acts of kindness*. "I liked it... especially the random acts of kindness where Karla and Beth took pizzas to homeless people sitting downtown on the street...that was funny" (Misty).

The volleyball team revealed their coaches' participation in the team meetings was influential to the staff's perceived investment in the team members' interventions.

“Even the coaches and everyone would be there. And so, they got to see, how we took it” (Rebel). Team members agreed that their coaches gained more understanding about what best supports and motivates their athletes.

I think our coaches came to some of our meetings, and I think they’ve also kind of realized that those things help us and make us want to keep working hard and it’s, like, doing those little things definitely helps (Emma).

Coaches also had the opportunity to learn more about their team members as student-athletes. “We talked about our strengths, and they know what we are good at and what we struggle with, and what we can handle and what we can’t” (Morgan) and each player’s contribution to the team, “But, I think this year the coaches just understand the roles of people better” (Rebel).

Participants enjoyed learning about the different exercises their teammates chose to increase their happiness. “Like, hearing other people share experiences was really cool because obviously the same thing isn’t going to make different people happy, but, like, seeing how someone did something differently to make them happy was really cool” (Emma). Their shared experiences opened the door for teammates to learn from each other’s happiness.

Raleen asked me, “Why are you so happy?” and they’re like “Why do you seem like you love life all the time?” and I was like “Honestly, if you really want to know, this is why...” I feel she’s way more open to it than, like, before (Karla).

**Closeness and connectedness.** For athletes in this study, participation in the intervention resulted in feelings of closeness and connectedness with friends, family, teammates, and coaches. After writing to people they had never appropriately thanked, athletes were surprised by the powerful impact the letters had on the receivers. “It was crazy because, just writing a letter, you don’t think it’s that big of a deal, you know? I

think it really touched his heart” (Cassie). Athletes described achieving more intimate relationships with their parents after expressing appreciation for their unconditional love and support.

I cried because she was crying on the phone so it was like there weren't many words, just emotions...I think it's made us even closer. We were already close, but I think that if there were any questions in her mind of how I felt, I think I got rid of those. I just think it made our relationship even more open. Of course we are, like, mother and daughter, but now we are best friends (Randa).

Liz also stated the exchange of the *gratitude letter* left a positive mark on her relationship with her mother. “I wasn't there, but she texted me and thanked me and was overwhelmed with joy and excited...it just changed our relationship a little bit...probably just more open.” Rebel revealed similar sentiments, “I feel like ever since the *gratitude letter*, we've gotten stronger and have a better bond, which is really good.”

In addition to athletes connecting on more deeply with their parents through *gratitude letters*, athletes also reported the exercise helped them grow their communication and relationships with past and present coaches. After writing a letter of appreciation for her coaches' help and support leading up to her senior year, Morgan shared, “I think I have definitely grown closer to them, and I think a lot of it is because I see them in such a positive way.” Beth seized the opportunity to send a heartfelt letter to an influential coach, who she did not have a chance to sincerely thank during her junior year. Although the gratitude letter did not translate to the athlete's physical presence upon the receipt of the letter, the encouraging and affirming exchange between the two fostered a strong emotional bond.

She said something to the effect of how much she loves me and how much I made her day and how much she needed to hear that. So getting her response back just saying, “I love you forever” and “You're always in my heart” and all those kind

of things, I was like “Awwww!” I don’t get to see her much so it was cool to know that she still thinks fond of us because we still think about her (Beth).

Athletes who did not deliver their *gratitude letters* still experienced strong attachments to the receivers. “Being able to sit down and write out why I’m thankful and why this person matters to me, it made feel close to them even though they didn’t know about it, necessarily” (Anna).

While participating in *random acts of kindness*, athletes’ relationships with friends grew stronger. A text sent to a friend thanking him/her for their friendship produced a positive result. “And from that, it ended up that now we talk almost on a daily basis from it. And so now, we’ve grown a lot closer” (Blythe).

Some athletes stated they formed deeper bonds with teammates while participating in the exercises together. After Beth engaged in conversation with Lana about their *best possible selves*, she shared, “It was just cool to feel I was connected to her about hers.” Similarly, regarding their shared experience cultivating gratitude, Lana stated:

I mean it just felt cool because Beth and I got to connect during *counting one’s blessings*. We just talked about freshmen year. We’re both walk-ons, so we just talked about, even though we had to pay for school, we are still so lucky to be here.

After team meetings when the intervention was discussed, athletes revealed they grew closer and established a stronger connection with their teammates. “I think they’ve (teammates) been a lot more understanding...it seems they relate to people a lot better” (Morgan). This was especially beneficial for athletes who desired opportunities to work beyond feelings of being “closed off from everybody” (Blythe) to achieve a feeling of belonging. In reference to her career-ending injury, Cody stated, “It helped that I actually



got to do it (intervention) with the team. It may not seem like a big deal to someone else, but, like, to me, just feeling part of the team. I had to fight my way onto the team so actually doing it meant a lot.” Not only were these opportunities important for injured athletes, but also for incoming freshmen.

We are able to get to know each other on a personal basis, and I think all these little things helped them (freshmen) open their eyes to different things and, I don’t know, got us closer as a team and helped them connect with us on a deeper level (Samantha).

Relying on the warm, safe atmosphere nurtured throughout the team meetings, athletes were confident to discuss vulnerability as an important factor to experiencing closeness and connectedness. “Then it kind of turned to where we started doing team activities and talking about things like this and kind of opening up with everybody...it was vulnerable... so I think that really helped” (Liz). Lily shared she found it easier to relate to her teammates after learning about their insecurities and doubts.

I think everyone realized we can all share those things and the emotional sides of us with each other...I think anything where everyone almost has to go to that uncomfortable level and share what they are feeling is good for the team...we all get each other and are there for each other (Lily).

Personal exposure among teammates also resulted in more genuine support.

I guess whenever you feel like you’re hearing more vulnerable things about people, and you’re understanding them more, it just makes you care about them more. So in the gym, like, you really do want them to succeed, and it’s different than being, like, “Oh, let’s cheer her on because we’re supposed to cheer” (Karla).

The vulnerability and openness generated throughout the meetings assisted athletes to reach new levels of comfort with their teammates during the intervention. “After people started sharing, I feel like everyone just kind of lightened up...people were kind of tense, but then after sharing and relating our experiences, people were more relaxed and having fun and happy about it” (Emma). Athletes also discussed finding

more confidence to reach outside their comfort zones to interact with their teammates. “It made me feel more comfortable. Because they said something and got the courage to say something, you knew you could. And so when I saw everyone else do it, I was like ‘Okay’” (Cody).

This new level of comfort with teammates continued after the intervention was over. “No one is hiding behind a shield, so I think it’s awesome for the team to get to that level” (Lily). As a senior, Morgan discovered she felt more secure in her leadership voice,

I think being able to talk about that (strength of optimism) and share about that just gave me confidence and really made it to where I can really be like that. Like before, I would think, “I really think we can do that, but do I want to say it? How are they going to react? What are they going to think?” But now, I feel more accepted for, like, that being me.

After expressing past fears to engage in conversations with her teammates, Cassie revealed, “I feel comfortable, very comfortable, with everyone on my team...now it just feels so much more natural, and I feel like I can completely be myself.” The upperclassmen also noticed the underclassmen were more likely to seek them out for support or advice. “They (freshmen) were, like, ‘Oh, she’s not afraid to say all these things, I can confide in her’...So many of them are coming up to me, I mean coming up to all of us, about little things, like school, playing time...” (Samantha). In addition, athletes reported more assertiveness in giving their input to the team. “We have a lot of people who are shy, or who don’t like to talk a lot. I think it’s helped them be comfortable with speaking up if they don’t agree with something” (Randa).

Closeness and connectedness among participants also fostered trust among team members. “You can’t share things with people you don’t trust. It almost felt surprising to

me to know that they (freshmen) trusted us that much to open up to those things.”

Athletes discussed feeling safer and more comfortable in an environment where they could trust their teammates. “I could never see them doing mean or bad things to each other because we spent more time together, and we know each other better. It’s just we are on a different level than we were last year” (Morgan).

Not only did teammates grow closer and become more connected to their teammates during and after the intervention, but also with their coaching staff. Athletes and coaches saw each other from a holistic perspective, breaking down intimidation barriers,

Plus, on the coaches’ side, it’s like “You’re scary!” It’s your coach...you don’t really go and talk with them about whatever. But now, I feel our coaches are just normal people. They have heard what we had to say about things, and we heard about what they had to say about things and what they hold to a higher level. It’s more of a relaxed and intimate type of setting... which is really good (Rebel).

After acknowledging the closeness and connectedness achieved throughout the summer, athletes’ motivation to further develop their relationships with their teammates increased. “So I think that kind of changed my relationship with everybody...like going above and reaching out to people and, like, trying to be friends with them and making conversations with them” (Liz). As a senior, Morgan felt even more of a sense of urgency to connect with her teammates during her last year. “But I really have tried to do a lot more things, like have more team bonding things, or set up times to hang out with freshmen...where that’s not really me at all, so I think that’s really changed” (Morgan).

**Positive communication.** The intervention was influenced by the quality and quantity of positive communication given and received from family, teammates, and coaches. After receiving a positive response from a *gratitude letter* sent to her former

coach, Beth described the exchange as fulfilling and rewarding. “Encouragement is definitely one of my love languages. Like when people encourage me, it’s a great, great feeling. I just love being encouraged in that way. It just builds me up, being told that I am loved, and that I am worth it.”

After writing *gratitude letters* to their family members, athletes reported sincere efforts to express their appreciation. “I, like, really reached out to my parents and said, ‘I know you have always loved me so much, and you’re always there for me,’ but I never really thanked them for how much they are there for me” (Lily). Athletes also committed themselves to initiating contact with their parents regularly. “Just like a quick text...I make a point to try to call her and Skype her a lot more now. So I think that definitely helps her because I am the only child, so it’s definitely hard on her” (Samantha).

Communication between teammates outside of the gym was enhanced after learning about each other’s *signature strengths*. Athletes shared they discovered effective language that assisted them in undertaking important conversations and interactions with their teammates. “It helps you meet halfway on a lot of things. It makes you think of their perspectives, too, just not your own” (Lily). After revealing she was initially intimidated to approach a senior about a conflict, Cody was able to find confidence by affirming the senior’s strengths to guide the dialogue.

It gave me the courage and strength to go up to her and ask her to dinner and talk about our issues. I started off with something positive about her. It opened her mind more to what I was going to say and it wasn’t like, “Oh, she is coming at me with something I did wrong.”

Liz found herself selecting communication styles that best fit her teammates’ strengths after experiencing more empathy for some of these individuals.

I'm probably more sensitive to people who are more caring. Sometimes telling them stuff doesn't come out the nicest way, so I've tried to take a step back and think about what I say before I say it...because sometimes you can say the same exact thing, but the way you say it means the world to somebody. I meet everyone's needs in trying to understand what they're going through and changing what I say.

Morgan also channeled her direct and strong communication style to maximize the strengths of her teammates. Because she engaged in authentic and careful exchanges, Morgan believed her teammates gained more self-worth.

But being able to see that's really who they are, I'm going to be a little more subtle when I'm talking to them, because I'm naturally a bit more aggressive. But now, I see her role on the team is really important...I think it makes them feel more accepted and needed.

In addition to *signature strengths*, athletes shared the lessons learned from the various exercises increased awareness of their teammates when they offered continued affirmation and validation to one another.

I think we have done a good job of telling each other when we're doing good stuff...like acknowledging each other's words and each other's good qualities and best possible selves. It's like, "No, you are worth it, like you are enough, you can do this" kind of thing. I think it probably helped us make it more of a habit to be more mindful of that and just positive thinking as a whole (Beth).

In addition to improvements to communication between teammates outside the performance arena, enhanced communication during practice and games also resulted from the intervention. Athletes reported harnessing a more vocal and encouraging presence in the gym. "Well for me, it's hard to say to someone on my team, 'You did really good at practice today.' I'm not that kind of person, but after, they felt really good about themselves which made me feel really good about myself" (Emma). In addition to acknowledging good events, athletes were also in tune with their teammates during

challenges. “If someone is having a bad day, then one of us will go up to that person and we’ll know how to talk to them or get them out of it” (Lily).

Collectively, athletes stated they were inspired to build a positive and spirited atmosphere. “We’re a lot more enthusiastic and we have a lot more energy...we’ve got more cheering...and just telling each other more positive things so that we’re thinking more positive and all on the same track” (Blythe). Randa shared the lively team environment helped her overcome frustration and self-defeating thoughts. “We’re louder, which is really helpful when it comes to gymnastics, especially when you’re having an off day or something. Just being loud helps you not think about, ‘Oh my gosh, this sucks.’ It helps you get past yourself.” Athletes revealed that the positive encouragement they received from their teammates fueled their motivation. “It’s helped me a lot. I feel my skills are actually getting better just from when someone will cheer me on from across the gym. It just gives you a little bit more fire to do better” (Blythe). This positive reinforcement also nurtured their inner confidence:

It made me feel more empowered to do it of course. Like, I did it right after she said, “No, like right now, you can do this, I trust you,” and for me to get up there and be like, “You’re right, I can do this...what’s stopping me from doing this?” (Beth)

Lastly, athletes stated coach-athlete interactions improved after the team meetings, supporting the relaxed and positive performance environment.

For a coach, it’s easy to say, “Come on! You need to do that!” but I think they realize those little things in the intervention help us and help us perform better. They’ve been using that a lot more. It really has made the atmosphere at practice a lot more fun and everyone’s happy to be there (Emma).

After volleyball coaches learned about their players’ *signature strengths*, athletes noticed the coaches became more accustomed to and invested in each individual’s needs.

These understandings positively impacted their constructive instruction, “I think being able to say it in the right way makes a huge difference to help us improve, and I think they have done a good job of that” (Morgan) and personal feedback, “There will be times where they get frustrated with a certain person. Instead of reacting a certain way, they react a different way, and they’ll react different ways for different people, knowing this is their strength” (Morgan). Finally, athletes shared their coaches cultivated gratitude for each player’s strengths and made an effort to affirm all roles on the team. “They, like, really appreciate those roles, and I can tell from how the coaches talk, they always give credit to people who don’t necessarily get a lot of playing time. I think that does a lot for our team” (Morgan).

**Perceived support.** Athletes revealed they perceived more support from their family, friends, and teammates during and after their participation in the intervention. By *counting one’s blessings*, athletes shared their feelings of isolation from their family and friends were alleviated after cultivating more appreciation for their care and empathy. “Having someone that understands what I’m going through (injury) just makes it a lot easier...it’s just another way to recognize I’m not by myself...tells me it’s going to be okay and just that extra comfort makes everything better” (Cody). This was important for Alyssa as she strengthened her emotional connection to her support system after moving abroad for medical school. “So it is comforting to know that I am here by myself, but I still have people that I can lean on or go back and talk to.” As Blythe *counted her blessings*, she realized she was not alone on her course to achieve her goals. “I really want to get into medical school...so seeing my blessings helped me realize my family is constantly behind me.”

In addition to the support athletes identified from family and friends as a result of increasing their awareness for gratitude, athletes also recognized increased gratitude for teammates. Anna, who counted her teammates as one of her blessings, stated “It kind of made me think, I’m in a good situation. I have good people surrounding me and to be around...everything is good.” Similarly, Cody stated she could rely on her teammates to be entirely there for her. “Just going back to the *counting your blessings* assignment...like even though I feel it would be a hassle to tell them, you know, that I’m having a hard time, they would still listen to me and want to help.”

In addition to *counting blessings*, athletes also garnered more thankfulness for their parents’ continuous support while writing *gratitude letters*. “My mom is always there and so now I can look back at it...why not appreciate my mom because she’s been there for me literally every step of the way” (Lily). Willow realized her college athletic opportunities would never have actualized without the support of her parents.

It was kind of cool seeing what they did for me...how far they got me in life because without them, I probably wouldn’t play volleyball, and I don’t like school so I might not be in college. Without them doing all the stuff they did for me, I would probably be working at McDonald’s somewhere.

Randa revealed similar admiration for her mother. “My mom has been the one person who has been there through everything, like, no matter what...if it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here, because there were times when my dad wanted me to stop gymnastics.” Lana realized the importance of cultivating more appreciation for her mother while living the demanding schedule of a student-athlete. “It’s just like without them (parents), I couldn’t do a lot of things I can do, so if I ever get too caught up in the moment, like, all of the good things I have here, it’s really because of her (mother).”



Moreover, acknowledgement of parental support in the form of conveyed belief in and allegiance to the athlete was instrumental. “So whenever I feel like I’m having a rough time, or I can’t get through it, I just know she is always behind me and if she didn’t think I could, I know she wouldn’t have worked so hard for me to be here” (Randa). During stressful days, athletes also found comfort to have their parents’ encouragement through small acts of care. “Our relationship is stronger and it’s been easier to go through these hard times this year with knowing my parents are there...like my mom writes me a letter every week. Those little things have helped me” (Lily). Likewise, Samantha stated she was more grateful for her mother’s tangible reminders of support. “She always sends me, like, four or five quotes. It’s like our tradition before all games. She sends me these motivational quotes and I love that. It makes me feel good knowing she cares that much.”

**Team cohesion.** Because athletes revealed they gained understanding, established closer connections, engaged in positive communication, and perceived support in relationships with their teammates, they believe their respective teams became more cohesive throughout the intervention. The cohesion experiences of both the volleyball and gymnastics teams are described separately below.

***Gymnastics.*** After participation in the positive exercises, gymnasts believed their team formed authentic and caring relationships that were conducive to personal and team success in the gym.

A big thing we wanted to have this year was genuineness, because you cannot fake team chemistry, and you can’t fake caring about people. When it is all real, it just makes you more passionate about it (gymnastics). And I think when you’re more passionate, you work harder to achieve those goals...so it was a stepping stone to what we’re aiming for (Karla).

Cody expressed enthusiasm for the opportunity to bridge the gaps that were destructive during the previous year. “Yeah, that (intervention) was bringing us together. Another issue we had last year was cliques and stuff. We wanted to be brought together as one and conquer this next season together.” Likewise, Mallory shared the intervention assisted her team in building positive interactions that were missing from last year’s team.

We haven’t had the best team chemistry in the past couple of years, and I can honestly say that it is so much better this year, and I feel like the positive-ness of this summer really did help us bond together and do things we probably normally wouldn’t.

Randa revealed the team improved its capacity to set aside past differences as they fostered individual and collective confidence. “I think everyone is secure in who they are now. Our whole team...we know who we are and we are secure in that...there is no judging. We’re all moving forward in a positive direction.”

Resulting from the tone set by upperclassmen during the summer, gymnasts stated the team built a strong foundation for the incoming freshmen. “Whenever the freshmen came, the door was already open for the team to be a real team and more down to earth” (Karla). Consequently, the freshmen felt included and accepted as significant members of the team. “I definitely feel more confident in myself, and I feel more confident that I am a part of a team that’s equal. I can go up to an older athlete and they can come to me. We’re all the same” (Anna).

Gymnasts shared their team chemistry contributed to an enjoyable and constructive environment both in and outside the performance arena.

We hang out a lot more outside of practice, and we do little things. We’ll all go to dinner for someone’s birthday or something. If you’re surrounded by people that

are happy and thinking positively, you want to be surrounded by them more... so you hang out with them more (Mallory).

Mallory also stated her teammates discovered more appreciation for each other's company, even through demanding workouts.

It (team chemistry) just makes everything more fun. I mean just having the inside jokes and just doing things with each other more than we used to...like going to dinner and really enjoying everything we do...even the terrible workouts that are so hard...as soon as it's over we're just talking and laughing (Mallory).

Lastly, gymnasts expressed excitement for accomplishing a unified group that is committed to team success.

I just feel a lot better about our team chemistry and the way we bond. That makes me so excited for the upcoming season, because I think we truly have a family now. I think it's the one last step we need to be great...I guess our slogan is "championship culture" so we wrote down our values and goals to try to abide by that championship culture (Cassie).

**Volleyball.** All seven volleyball players revealed their team became closer while participating in the intervention throughout the summer. "I think this really helped us grow as a team. Our team is so close. I feel like these things just help us get even to a better place" (Samantha). This was especially important for a team that encountered conflicts and storms during the previous year. Morgan discussed this transition,

I think that, just in general, it's just made a huge difference. We haven't had any drama and it's the best thing in the world. I couldn't have asked for more for my senior year. Just being able to get along and not have any of those annoying issues, I think, has been huge for us as a team.

Volleyball players revealed the cohesiveness of their team inspired a shared mission with sound values to reach their highest potential.

The standards we made were a really big deal for us, defining what we needed to do to move forward to be the best possible teammates and best possible version of ourselves. It's all been written down so I think that's a huge thing in order for us to move forward, and it definitely has been successful so far (Samantha).

Rebel discussed the trust her team built from the intervention supported their shared mission and their individual goals.

I feel when you are around people you love and know a lot about, you not only play for your own goals, but you play for their goals, and you want to be able to achieve them all...you may slip up at one point, but you know someone else is going to be there and have your back so you can still achieve that goal. You're going to have a support system.

Athletes conveyed their sense of trust in one another onto the volleyball court by holding themselves and one another to higher standards and levels of play. "Especially in volleyball, it's a six person game, you really need to have that trust. I really do trust every single person on my team when they're playing to give one hundred percent on and off the court" (Samantha).

As the team formed its high standards in their collective beliefs and faith, athletes became more comfortable to approach and challenge each other in the performance environment.

We can go to each other and say "You're doing really good today" or "You need to do this better today." But it's nice we can talk to each other about those things. I think it's definitely influenced our play on the court (Emma).

Comparable to the gymnastics team, the volleyball upperclassmen described the time and effort they invested into the freshmen to effectively integrate them into the team's culture.

I feel like it kind of sucked for them (last year's freshmen) because they didn't really know what was expected. This year we've really tried to set the standard high. I've tried to go out of my way to make them feel like they (freshmen) don't have to be scared of me (Liz).

Reflecting on how her role as a senior captain could be perceived as intimidating to freshmen teammates, Morgan invested time to develop her relationships with the freshmen to break this barrier. "Especially because they look up to me a lot. So knowing I

am going to be supportive and believe in them, regardless of what happens, makes it easier for them to play and perform and be themselves.” Willow shared their success to help the freshmen feel secure and confident in their roles contributed to the greater team’s success. “It’s exciting to know that they’re going to do what they need to do and what they think they need do to win games...they’ve taken risks on the court so they’re being comfortable and feel good where they are.”

Overall, the volleyball team described their team’s newly established cohesion and positive team culture as more enjoyable and uplifting than previous years. “Our whole environment of our team just seems happier. It seems like we are more in it together” (Lily). Morgan elaborated on her teammate’s interpretation.

It (team cohesion) makes everyone happy and when everyone is happy, it makes it a lot easier to function...we all care about each other and we all want what is best for each other so it is a lot easier to enjoy it, and it’s just been a lot more fun.

Nostalgic for the summer and reminiscent to how far her team had come, Samantha revealed, “Without those things, without any kind of intervention, we wouldn’t be able to be as close, I think. I don’t think it would have carried us to where we are now, so it’s really cool to think about.”

### **Meaning and Purpose**

Athletes found meaning in something greater than themselves and purpose in and out of sport during and after their participation in the positive psychology intervention. Athletes discovered meaning and purpose outside the performance environment as they engaged in altruistic acts, stretched beyond their comfort zones, and transitioned from the sole identity of a student-athlete. Inside the performance environment, athletes found meaning and purpose through role actualization and surrendering to the team.

**Meaning and purpose outside of the performance environment.** During their participation in the intervention, athletes were encouraged to take a step back from the performance environment and find purpose outside of sport. “I think it helped me just not have my main focus be on volleyball, because this whole college experience is about interacting with other people” (Lily). As athletes found meaning in helping and caring for others through *random acts of kindness*, they shared they consequently felt more charitable and altruistic. “It felt really good that I was able to brighten someone’s day and make them a little happier” (Alyssa). They also reaped a variety of positive sensations, “It makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside just to make a person’s day better” (Brandy) and positive emotions,

It gives me excitement to know that I am doing something for others and gives me joy to see other people be happy...and it’s nice to have someone who can make you feel like the world is not going to roll over and go under tomorrow (Sasha).

Athletes stated the benefit to “feeling good” resulted from intentionally reaching out to assist and care for others.

It just made your day better by helping others, and just doing nice things made you feel better inside. You weren’t doing them because you wanted to feel better, that was just an after effect that happened...so that was pretty cool” (Blythe).

Athletes reported feeling happier and also described an enhanced self-concept. “Doing little things for other people and seeing how much they appreciate those little things...I think it’s made me a better all-around person” (Emma). Moreover, athletes reported heightened feelings of self-worth. “It’s kind of like an endorphin thing...when you do these little simple *acts of kindness*, it makes you feel so much better about who you are as a person” (Samantha).

Many athletes expressed amazement when the result of a simple and small *random act* was momentous. “It was easy to do and it was very effortless, but it still made a difference” (Sasha) and had a lasting impact on the receiver, “It’s really underrated, it’s like we don’t really think we can affect people as much as we do” (Beth).

Some athletes connected their faith and spirituality to their participation in the *random acts*; this connection to their faith affirmed their purpose in the world. After delivering slices of pizza to the homeless, Beth stated, “It was a cool reminder for us of God’s grace and everything we get from Him...and ways you can help other people and ways you can be a light in the world that’s a really dark world.” Karla, Beth’s teammate who participated in the act of kindness with Beth, revealed a shared understanding.

I guess compassion and just showing empathy makes life more fulfilling. I feel like, in a way, this positive psychology stuff is about faith...faith for me is Jesus...and that’s what I see, at least...because when I think positive, I think of Jesus.

For Willow, acting through her faith aided her to actualize her best possible self. “I think it (being kind to others) helps a lot, and I’m also a very spiritual person. I feel it definitely helps me in my faith. I am trying to uphold everything to a higher standard and to think of things from a different viewpoint.”

For athletes who described themselves as cautious and introverted, *random acts of kindness* provided them with opportunities to stretch beyond their comfort zones. “It’s really not that hard to go up to somebody and just do a *random act of kindness*. I’ve always been a little more on the shy side. It was kind of a challenge...but was very rewarding for me” (Cassie). Liz also surprised herself as she worked up the courage to compliment a lady at a department store. “It was something that I wouldn’t typically do

or would have never done, but it was nice to feel I could go up to somebody and be that outgoing and give me my opinion and have someone value that opinion.”

As athletes became more comfortable with this part of the intervention, they discussed their engagement in *random acts* for others became a habit. “And now it’s like after doing it so many times, I guess it comes naturally to help other people rather than standing back in the corner. It’s something where I feel like I am interacting more with people” (Anna). Similarly, Cassie revealed she became more open and friendly in general. “Because I’ve noticed lately, I’ll just start talking to a person at our apartment complex because they have dogs. I’ll just go up to them and start a conversation because who doesn’t like dogs?”

Athletes also discovered meaning outside themselves while writing *gratitude letters* and realizing the powerful impact the letters had on the receivers. “I loved writing *gratitude letters* because I have received a couple myself, and it gives you an amazing feeling. So me doing it, I know that I’m doing something good for others, and I know they are going to feel well” (Sasha). Beth recognized her letter had a larger influence on her receiver. “Like it probably affected her more than it affected me because it was directed towards her, but I probably can’t even understand how much it meant to her.”

Commitment to others was very apparent for Mallory as she realized the necessity to make the most of her limited time. “And when you think about it, people say that stupid cliché, ‘Life is short,’ but I mean it really is...days go by so fast so why not help others and make a difference in someone’s life.” Willow shared she dialed into other people specifically during stressful days. “Like the acts of kindness, like, ‘Okay, my day might suck today, but I can make someone else’s better.’ It just makes me think of it as a



whole different perspective than what most twenty-year-olds think.” Randa supported this outlook, “I feel like I am here for a greater purpose than myself. And so I just feel like I’m working towards that.” Samantha commented her commitment to others was reinforced by an increased awareness of the number of people in need of help and support. “I think that’s how I look at things a lot more. I am really open to new ideas and new people all the time.”

For athletes transitioning out of sport, finding meaning throughout the summer intervention assisted them to find purpose outside the sole identity of a student-athlete.

After suffering a career ending injury, Cody shared,

It made me realize that even though I’m struggling having transitioned to real life without gymnastics, I still have other blessings than gymnastics. The activities helped me in my transition and showed me that gymnastics shouldn’t be the center and stuff, and it isn’t anymore.

As Macy cultivated gratitude during the positive exercises, she also realized she had more to offer the world than her athletic talent.

I think it (intervention) helps a lot, because it made you realize that you don’t need just your sport anymore...doing all of those activities really makes you realize how many good things you do have going. I think it really helped remind me that, “No, I do have a lot more things in my life that I can focus on and work towards besides gymnastics.”

For athletes on the team, discovering meaning during the intervention supported a healthy identity with sport and opened their minds to untapped passions.

And now life is bigger than having playing time, you know? I think I realized that those different areas like volunteering and interacting with people outside of volleyball...that’s where a lot of my true happiness comes from. It’s just helped me be more well rounded, just being able to open your heart up and be willing to accept anything that comes into your world (Lily).

**Meaning and purpose inside the sport environment.** After participating in the intervention, athletes stated they found meaning inside their sport environment as they surrendered to something bigger than themselves.

Last year I kind of lost my passion for volleyball. This year with this new attitude of, you know, it's just not for me...like I have free tuition, all these wonderful people and this facility to help with my academics and stuff...I think it's really helped me just count my blessings (Lily).

Athletes also discovered more value in identifying with the collective mission of the team rather than their own individual accomplishments. "When you achieve something that you've wanted to achieve, like yeah, it's great. But, if you help someone achieve one of their goals, I feel like it's more rewarding" (Rebel). Brandy shared this collective identity assisted her in making smart choices during the rehab of her injury.

Just being open-minded and taking my time and doing what's best for my body and gymnastics and the team. I'm all about being for there for the team more so than myself. I want to make myself better, but you know, for the team.

Likewise, after suffering an injury that limited her physical role on the team, Mallory discovered a new perspective that assisted her to achieve a fulfilling athletic experience.

You don't have to compete on every event to contribute and put all of your energy and heart into the team. I know that as long as I'm doing something, I'm making a difference. So just the smaller things mean the most.

Athletes stated they were more in tune with their teammates after the intervention and enjoyed the team's success in addition to their own accomplishments. Gymnasts also reported this sentiment, even as athletes who compete in an individual-centered sport. "I noticed it (team interaction) a lot, and I cheered a lot more than I used to because I want other people to do well." Randa also expressed more incentive to support her teammates. "I like it (positive, energetic atmosphere) because I like seeing other people do well, too,

so I think just knowing each teammate, knowing how they function, and knowing if they are frustrated or not, is important.”

After identifying their *signature strengths*, athletes discovered new ways to harness and maximize their strengths to actualize their role on the team. This discovery was important for freshmen as they searched for acceptance and inclusion. After Anna identified “zest” as one of her *signature strengths*, she shared,

And I was like, “Oh!” you know in the gym, I can be the one who is up and playing around and having fun, and I can use that to keep a positive attitude or keep the positive energy in the gym...So I’ve been using my strength in the gym to try to make sure I’m helping others...it makes me feel better about myself and that I am a part of something, too.

In addition, the upperclassmen also employed their strengths to support the freshmen during their transition to college. Samantha stated she channeled her strengths of “curiosity” and “perspective” to support her freshmen teammates.

I think those really helped because I am a curious person, so I really am invested in wanting to help other people. I would always check up on them (freshmen)...whether it’s boys or whatever...just to remind them to look at the bigger picture of things because it is so easy to get so focused on the things that stress you out.

In addition to the benefits freshmen realized by learning about their *signature strengths*, athletes who received limited playing time also found this exercise effective to their contribution to the team. Lily revealed she was able to accept and embrace her role on the team through the lens of her “kindness/generosity” strength.

I think just being aware of that (strength) has helped me be okay with the role I am in now. It’s like what is the best for the team right now. I think it’s helped me become at peace with my role and thinking about other people and that they deserve it, too.

Athletes who struggled to transition out of sport after injury or eligibility also found knowledge of their *signature strengths* reassuring as they assumed their new roles

for the team. Although no longer physically competing, Cody, as a student manager relied on her strengths to assist freshmen coping with similar career ending injuries.

I can't imagine, like, coming to school and being so excited but not even being able to do gymnastics and stuff. I really try to reach out to help them and hang out with them. I want them to feel like they have a big part in the team. I definitely feel like I am good at that strength.

Drawing upon insights about her strengths gained from the intervention, Sasha discovered purpose in her new role as a wise and supportive mentor.

It is important for me to know that there is a lot of other ways I can help them. I will use my strengths and what I've learned from helping people to be there for my teammates in different ways...and teaching them what I've learned and what I have experienced... and helping them develop that.

Especially noteworthy, senior captains stated greater likelihood to assert their voices as team leaders to effectively lead the team after examining their *signature strengths*.

Just being more confident in them (strengths). Like communication or being in front of my team and having to talk to them and using my strengths to settle them down or pump them up during other times...so it's just kind of using them in different ways (Liz).

After identifying her *signature strengths*, Morgan shared she discovered new approaches where she could be valuable and successful in her leadership role. "This (leadership strength) is something I am good at and this is how I'm going to use it to, like, help the team. It made me feel more confident in my leadership skills and also gave them (teammates) something to expect from me."

After receiving positive reinforcement for their guidance and direction, the captains were surprised by their teammates' affirmations: "To know that people actually looked at me like that, like I don't consider myself to be a real role model, you know? I

just have my values that I, like, stick to” (Karla) and consequently, were more motivated to continue to evolve and develop as leaders:

I think it’s changed how I think about things. I’ve always wanted to be a leader, and I’ve always been the type of person to where I have been. It’s just different when everybody is telling you how good of a leader you are. So me trying to change who I am and trying to grow as a leader, I’ve gotten a lot of positive feedback from them (Liz).

Similarly, Morgan’s teammates encouraged her to embrace her *signature strengths* as a valued team leader.

Like the one with “hope”...we’ve had conversations about it and they’re, like, “You always say things and when you say things, I think they’re true...you could say ‘We’re going to beat this team 25 to 2’, and I would totally believe you!” And I think things like that and realizing how much that impacts people makes me want to be like that more.

Senior captains exuded more confidence when harnessing and maximizing their strengths; they believed such confidence translated to their teammates’ increased strengths-based interactions as a team. After channeling her “hope” strength in and out of the performance arena, Morgan discussed,

I think they’re a lot more confident too...I think it makes them feel like I believe in them, and I don’t know, if in the past, they’ve always felt that way, but I can tell, like, they do feel that way, and I think that makes a big difference.

### **Growth**

Participants stated they achieved both individual and collective growth during and after their participation in the intervention. Participant growth is described as developed *optimism and determination*, nurtured *positive mindsets*, increased *resiliency* to stress and adversity, and *enhanced* life and performance *focus*.

**Optimism and determination.** Athletes shared they developed optimism throughout their participation in the summer intervention. As Karla continued to

recognize meaning and purpose in her life, she discovered, “There is hope. The ‘hope’ is huge. I think, a lot of the time, the negative things can just make people not have hope anymore.”

Athletes also revealed increased feelings of confidence and hopefulness for the future. After *counting their blessings*, Blythe stated, “But whenever you actually start looking at everything you’ve been given and all of the opportunities you’re given, you can see that you can actually reach those goals.” While writing about their *best possible selves*, athletes were able to visualize a positive portrayal of who they would like to become. “Writing about your life in detail was really cool and, like, made it seem like it’s really going to happen” (Mallory). For athletes who were transitioning out of sport, the *best possible self* helped them actualize opportunities outside the identity of a student-athlete. “Like the one where she had us write about our future, it helped me realize I have stuff to look forward to, and that I have a future, and I will be okay without it (gymnastics)” (Cody). Similarly, Macy shared this exercise opened her eyes to future prospects.

It did make think about it, and I think even if I don’t know where I’m going to be, I think the first step is kind of wondering and thinking about what the possibilities are with the potential you have. It was good to start that process.

Not only did athletes gain an optimistic mindset for their personal purposes during the intervention, but also for their team aspirations. “I think it’s (positive team environment) exciting, and I think it’s going to make our year better. We’re going to have better thoughts that will help us in the gym. And so, it’s really exciting to look forward to what’s going to happen this year” (Blythe). As a team captain, Morgan

harnessed her strength of “hope” to inspire her teammates’ optimistic mindset inherent to winning a conference championship.

I’m always so big on “We can do this” and I believe we can. I set really high goals for us. So, I didn’t know what they would think when I said we’re going to win the SEC’s this year. They’d be looking at me, and I’d be like, “I don’t know what they’re thinking” (laughter). But now they know these are my strengths and this is who I am, so they can expect that.

Enhanced optimism for the future resulted in strong determination to achieve personal ambitions.

I liked the *best possible self* one because that kind of made me think of what I have to look forward to in the future, and what I really want in my life, and what I need to do right now to achieve that in the future (Brandy).

Athletes also exercised perseverance and grit to be more productive with their time. “I keep reminding myself that you are almost there, just keep pushing to make every moment count. Because I don’t want to have too many times when I look back in regret” (Randa). Participants also felt a heightened sense of control and increased feelings of competence.

I’m a lot more capable of things if I just write it down and put my mind to it. Instead of just saying I’m going to do something, I am actually doing it this time. It was nice to know that I am, for sure, in full control, and I can make my season however I want to be (Cassie).

Comparable to optimism, determination to achieve personal goals was also strengthened by gratitude. After cultivating more appreciation for and establishing a closer connection with her coaching staff through a *gratitude letter*, Morgan stated,

It’s been really easy for me to go in a half hour before practice to work on those things (constructive feedback from coaches)...I’m always thinking I can get better. I am never satisfied with it. Seeing the results has made me only more motivated to do more...Writing this (letter) this summer has just made me realize this is my last year and to take advantage of it as much as I could.

For some athletes, finding meaning and purpose outside themselves while harnessing their *signature strengths* and participating in *random acts of kindness* led to a strengthened direction and enhanced desire to pursue higher education, “I feel like this kind of pertains to leadership and that’s another thing I know I want to do...be some kind of leader. So it just directed me to my next step of my life which is my master’s program” (Karla) and future professions:

I think that’s also like me wanting to work with people who are underprivileged or have less. I think that kind of comes into the whole non-profit organization being my end goal. So that was one of the hugest things, I don’t know, it just really impacted me.

Sasha’s participation in the intervention resulted in an intensified conviction with her interests and pursuits outside of herself.

It also makes you want to make a difference and motivates and inspires you to do something that will help other people. Doing all this stuff is something that I want to go into...so for me, it just made me realize why I want to do this a little more.

In addition to personal determination, the summer intervention also positively influenced team determination. After the volleyball team collectively *counted their blessings*, Emma shared, “The intervention really made us focus and realize how great we have it and how special this opportunity is. I think that helped a lot with what we need to do with it and use to our benefit.” Similarly, gymnasts stated the gratitude exercises helped their team keep perspective. “I think it’s affected a lot of people for the best. Just made them realize that things aren’t that big of a deal. If you really want something, you’ve just got to go after it” (Cassie). Consequently, both teams expressed a stronger work ethic, “I feel, after the summer, everyone’s working hard for what they want,” (Liz) and motivation to deliver their best, “Just giving our hundred percent in the gym all the time” (Randa). Athletes also reported positive feedback fueled their drive for team



progress. ““You’re doing a really good job, keep it up’...that’s really motivating for me and makes me want to keep working hard” (Emma).

Morgan revealed enthusiasm and pride for her team’s success after reflecting on the investment and commitment to improvement. “But then to see us work so hard and see my teammates work so hard and have it finally pay off... is like the best feeling, like honestly, I think that, more than anything, has made this season so special.”

**Positive mindsets.** Athletes nurtured a positive mindset throughout their participation in the intervention. In doing so, they shifted their focus from weaknesses to strengths, transformed their negative thinking, and adopted a healthy perspective with their sport.

Through the process of discovering their *signature strengths*, athletes enjoyed a shift in focus from weaknesses to strengths. This finding is particularly notable in the perfectionistic sport of gymnastics. “It helped me see myself in a more positive light and not just think of ‘Wow, there’s stuff that I need to work on’” (Blythe). Similarly, Anna appreciated the emphasis of a “build it” approach over a “fix it” approach.

It wasn’t looking at very specific weaknesses that you could fix. It was something you already had, you were already strong in and it was just finding ways you can make those stronger or use your strengths to help others to make them feel better and make them stronger. It made me feel good.

Athletes also discussed a transformation to their thinking during and after participation in the positive exercises. “The activities kind of made focus on the positive side of things and really made you look at the good and not the bad, which is what we kind of do, I feel like” (Macy). For some participants, this observation became apparent in their journal writings.

I was probably more positive in my journaling after because it transforms the way you look at daily activities and life as a whole...It was kind of like journaling on

steroids. It was like everything was magnified...it's just everything I do but all channeled in the really positive way (Beth).

Cody discovered more constructive substance in her journaling, as well. "So, now I have more stuff to write about and it's more directed to the positive."

While seeking out and writing about *three good things* that happened each day, athletes nurtured a positive mindset that transformed their self-defeating and negative thoughts to helpful and affirmative ways of thinking.

Especially in gymnastics because you are always working for that perfect ten...like it doesn't happen often so you always see what you did wrong even if it's the little things. So I think it's really important to notice the small things you did correct. Maybe they were small, or maybe they were big, but it helps you balance things out (Randa).

Injured athletes benefited greatly from this exercise by acknowledging small progressions made to their rehabilitation efforts.

Something as simple as running with the group was something that was really good that happened to me. Things like that are like my little positives of the day because it makes me think back to where I was a few months ago. It just makes me think that there are little things that I am grateful for. That just makes my day better (Brandy).

Similarly, Mallory recognized improvements during the recovery process from a shoulder injury. "I can remember when we started, one of my best things of the day and one of my good moments was that I could put my hair up...which was, like, a really exciting moment for me at the time." *Three good things* also helped athletes adopt a positive mindset during coaching changes. "Well, I kept an open mind about the whole thing because they made the change for a reason. So instead of being bitter about it, I just tried to accept it and I thought that (*three good things*) helped" (Lana).

The process of cultivating gratitude and appreciation reminded athletes to embrace their blessing and recognize the exceptional opportunities that accompany the

student-athlete experience. Gratitude for these opportunities limited the athletes' prior criticisms or dissatisfactions and also reframed their thinking.

I could be complaining about things, like, "I don't want to go to class today," and I'd be, like, "Wait, I have free tuition," and "I don't want to wake up for 6am's (workouts), but I'm getting exercise, and I have all of these people around me." I would have some kind of negative thought in my head, and I would be, like, "Look, so many people would love to be in my situation right now, and in the long run, it's best for me" (Lily).

*Counting one's blessings* was also influential for athletes who didn't earn a scholarship. "Even though we had to pay for school, we are still lucky to be here. Even though we would always complain about paying for school...someone else has to pay for school, but they don't get to do gymnastics" (Lana).

Appreciation and thankfulness for their sport experiences transferred directly into the practice environment. "It really did help me think more positively...during our practice I would say something negative, and I would be like, 'Wait,' and I would remember all these blessings that I had" (Lily). Not only did Morgan not "dread" going to practice anymore, but she also nurtured a positive mindset after becoming more grateful for her last year as a senior.

Even the hard practices, sometimes I'm like, "Dang, I wish I was doing something else." But it's a lot easier for me to say, like, "Okay, don't think that or don't say that because you really don't have all that much time left." A lot of this has come from the attitudes that have come from doing this (intervention) (Morgan).

In addition to *counting one's blessings*, athletes revealed the tools gained from other positive exercises during the intervention supported a positive mindset in practice.

Just being more mindful of other people around me and more mindful of other people's good qualities and their abilities and just feeding off the energy and being more happy-go-lucky as a whole, has definitely influenced my practice and my mindset going into practice each day (Beth).

Mallory shared her practices were enhanced as she transformed her thinking. “When you are more positive, you just have a better practice and you have a better outlook on everything that’s happening...it makes it flow better.”

The positive energy fostered in the practice environment assisted athletes to choose positive self-talk during performances.

I think I’m more likely to think about the positive things when I’m competing and everything. I feel like I am more able to think straight to the positives like “I can do this!” rather than “I hope I don’t fall!” or “I hope I don’t disappoint my team!” and to be more like “I’m not going to disappoint my team. I’m going to do my job” (Anna).

Similarly, Cassie welcomed a positive attitude that made her practices more enjoyable and allowed her to set realistic expectations and release unnecessary pressure.

I think it helps my attitude in the gym because if I were to fall on a skill, like, “Uhh, this rotation is, like, messed up.” So then you automatically go to the worst think possible, whereas you could really take control of it and look at it as another step, “The next turn I can get right this time,” instead of giving up.

Just as Cassie acknowledged the importance of engaging in the process to success, other athletes stated they achieved a healthy approach and perspective with their participation in sport.

I guess the attitude now I have is, as long as I’m moving forward, like, I’m doing well, because I often want to make leaps and bounds toward success, but, like, it’s just little by little. So I think that (*three good things*) helps me stay positive and is really helpful.

Athletes liberated themselves from the frustration of unfavorable results. In doing so, they also learned to value a healthy relationship with the outcome. “I know a lot of times when something bad happens in volleyball or I make a mistake, I, like, stop and think, ‘Okay, it’s just a game.’ I think a lot if it has to do with the summer thing (intervention)” (Willow). Likewise, Liz stated, “I think it’s not so much that we have to

win every single game. You kind of have to think of it as, ‘All I can do is my best,’ so I’m going to do my best and see what happens.”

While individual athletes experienced increased positive mindsets as a result of the intervention over the course of the summer, athletes also reported the impact of positive mindset growth on the collective team. “I think it probably helped us be more mindful of positive as a whole” (Beth). Emma revealed she found it very “rewarding” to witness her teammates’ transformations, especially those who were prone to negative thinking.

I’m a very positive person, but we have some that are more negative. I think with these things (positive exercises) they’ve realized there’s a lot more good than bad and just looking for those things makes it better. I think it’s definitely influenced my teammates.

Blythe shared the collective positive mindset nurtured during the intervention provided a context for the team to form goals to benefit the upcoming season.

One of our team goals this year we’ve focused on is not coming into the gym and being negative and saying, “Oh, I don’t want to work out right now. I’m so tired.” But like flipping that around and saying, “You know what? We’re going to have a great practice!” I think it’s helped everybody because we wouldn’t have even thought up that goal if we hadn’t been on the track of thinking more positively.

Upperclassmen specifically took it upon themselves to model positive behavior. “I’ve tried to be more positive, especially since I am a junior now and next year I’ll be a senior” (Willow). Noting the large impact she has on her teammates, Liz challenged herself to a higher standard.

It was really hard for me to be positive about everything, so I’ve had to go above and beyond so that other people will follow the lead. I feel like I have grown a lot as a player and as a person throughout that.

Overall, athletes stated they became more positive people after the intervention, reporting the significance the exercises had on their happiness. “Just being more positive

helps you be happier and, in turn, that helps every aspect of your life be better.

Everything's better when you are happy" (Mallory). Most importantly, some athletes related positive thinking as a skill that can be maximized with mindful practice. "If you can focus on those things, which we did, and do the exercises, you almost teach yourself to transform the way you think. I think that's when you can learn happiness" (Beth).

Recognizing positive thinking as a choice, Macy concentrated her efforts to choose positive thoughts in the midst of habitual negative thinking.

It's, like, a little depressing on how often it happens. I consider myself to be a positive person so when I do see myself choosing not to be happy, it's kind of surprising and a little wakeup call. It's good to catch yourself and just realize how easy it is to fall down that way and the difference it makes when you actually choose to be focused on the positive and good things.

**Resiliency.** As athletes nurtured positive mindsets throughout the intervention, they minimized their perceived stress and increased their resiliency to adversity. During difficult and demanding days as student-athletes, participants reflected on their blessings to keep their stressful and frustrating experiences in perspective.

I did like that one (*counting one's blessings*) because sometimes you'll feel down or upset about something that might not be going your way, and if you really take a step back and realize how lucky we are to have the opportunities we have...it really calms you down from stress (Alyssa).

Karla revealed she acquired the ability to interrupt her negative ruminations and cultivate gratitude during times when she felt mentally and physical exhausted. "Even like today, I'm just feeling really sick and tired and school's already becoming stressful, but then I just remind myself, 'Karla, you have so much to be thankful for.'" Anna also stated she positioned her "rough days" proportionally alongside her greater life perspectives. "Even if I am having a rough day and I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, my life sucks

right now,' I can take a step back and realize it's fine. I am grateful for everything I have, and it's just a rough day, not a rough life." Willow shared this viewpoint:

I just have to think, "Okay, you know, my life is okay, like that one thing, it's not a big deal," and so I think that really put things in perspective. That's just one little aspect and there's a huge big picture.

Including *counting one's blessings*, athletes revealed the positive exercises in the intervention were beneficial tools that supported their positive outlooks during challenging times. "Whenever I start to think about, 'Oh, my day is awful,' I can cue into the little acts that we've done and be like, 'My day isn't awful, I have so much to be thankful for'" (Blythe). Macy also discussed her appreciation to have a personal collection of tools to rely on during her transition to the life of a graduate student.

You know you're going through a hard time, or you're just bored or you need someone...you can just go do that (positive exercises). They really do lift your spirit up, and it's so good to know these tactics. When you need it, you can go back to them....So it (*counting one's blessings*) calmed me down a lot, because I was really nervous about coming here (graduate school).

Cassie stated she specifically relied on the *three good things* exercise as protection from feelings of defeat and failure.

If one little thing goes wrong in my day, I automatically think it's the worst day ever. I'm so dramatic about it, like, "Ahh, the world is ending." But, that (*three good things*) made me realize there are actually a lot of good things that go on in your day...I think I have been getting less and less frustrated, because sometimes I would start crying, to be honest.

Athletes stated their written participation in the intervention manuals initiated additional therapeutic opportunities to effectively cope with stress through journaling. The practice of journaling was especially important for Cody as she transitioned out of gymnastics and was in need of a new outlet for decompression. "When I start getting overwhelmed, I just take out a notebook, and start writing about it. It always calms me

down after. If I'm having trouble, I'll go write it out and then always come up with a blessing in my life" (Cody).

Athletes shared the positive exercises not only helped them become more resilient to stress and adversity in their daily lives, but also in their performance environments.

I feel like it (intervention) would help me get through the harder practices in an easier way...just when you are thinking more positively about the end result and not what's happening right now like, "Oh my gosh, my legs hurt so bad, I can't walk" (Mallory).

Athletes also discussed forming positive appraisals about their extensive training efforts and difficult workouts once they had cultivated increased gratitude for their student-athlete opportunities.

If this person (regular student) was here, they would be living the life and here I am being a pout because, "Oh no, I had to run a sprint," or "Oh no, I messed up," and so if I think of things like that and pause in my head for a second, it just makes me calm down and I'm just like, "Okay, it's whatever," because no one can have a perfect day, ever. I think the *count your blessings* really got to me (Willow).

Positive appraisals were especially important for athletes re-entering sport after being sidelined with injuries.

I was like, "Wow! I shouldn't be hating myself for having to run right now." I'm like, "I can run so why am I upset that I'm running?" and, "This conditioning is hard, but I shouldn't be upset. This is something I should be grateful for because I haven't done it in awhile" (Brandy).

Some athletes counted their previous injuries as blessings after acknowledging personal growth through challenging times. This reflection helped Karla to cope with her latest injury. "And it builds perseverance, because it's, like, once you get through it one time, you're just going to grow through that, so then the next time it comes, it definitely is not going to knock you down."



Comparably, Willow shared she learned perseverance through her past experiences with an intense club coach. After writing this coach a *gratitude letter*, she recognized her personal growth into a mentally strong and resilient athlete.

Without him, I would have never known how to get through tough times. I know that because I could get through him, I can get through college and whatever else comes. And whenever I go through hard times now, I can just think back to my 17<sup>th</sup> year, and well, I got through that, so...

After Morgan wrote a gratitude letter to her current coaches and gained more appreciation for their unconditional support, she stated she became more receptive and responsive to their feedback.

I think I've grown a lot as an athlete because I'm a lot more open to feedback they give me. So it's like I'm a lot better, not to say I wouldn't have gotten better if I didn't do this, but I just feel like it's been easier for me to really listen to what they're saying and really try to do the things they're doing (Morgan.)

In the same way, Mallory stated the positive mindset nurtured throughout the intervention helped her become more open and patient with her coaches' instruction.

When you are happier, you take criticism better, and that's a big part of gymnastics. When you are not in a good mood and someone tells you did something wrong, it's like, "Whoa, step out her way, she is going to punch you in the face (laughter)...no, I'm just kidding, she won't punch you."

In addition to athletes' assertions that they experienced individual growth related to resilience, adversity, and coaching feedback, collectively, members of both teams reported that they reflected on their purposes in the context of their sports. "I was like, 'C'mon, let's build this shield.' Nothing can tear us down. Bad things are going to happen, but nothing is going to take away our joy in life" (Karla). Together, they engaged in positive appraisals for improvement to grow more persistent as a unit in their performance environment. "Instead of being like, 'Aw! I have to do conditioning,' be

like, ‘No! We’re going to do conditioning because we’ll get stronger and do really well this year’” (Brandy).

Athletes shared they have been both emotionally and physically tested since their participation in the intervention, but of the growth in individual and team positive mindsets, athletes relied on their new understanding of self to support free will and autonomy. “I mean there have been things that have happened since...like I have had breakdowns and stuff. But I think it would have been worse if I didn’t do it (intervention). It helped me understand things are going to happen, but it’s all in the way you handle it” (Randa). Mallory also stated she was committed to making a lasting change. “I mean, I feel like I’ve gotten better (staying positive through challenging moments), but it’s always a work in progress.”

**Enhanced focus.** As athletes developed determination and optimism, nurtured positive mindsets, and increased their resiliency throughout the intervention, they revealed an enhanced focus in and out of the performance environment. After visualizing their *best possible selves*, athletes discussed they reduced conflict among their goals and increased their attention on their present being. “It helped me plan out what I should be focusing on and what my priorities should be right now, so that in the future I can be who I want to be” (Macy). Athletes shared they engaged in self-regulation to actualize their *best possible selves*, especially as this growth relates to academics. “So this year, like especially after writing all those goals down, I made a point to start studying” (Cassie). Brandy also realized the positive action required in the classroom to attain future success. “The *best possible self* helped me see what I really want in my life and what I need to do now to achieve that in the future...and how my decisions in school will affect it later.”

Blythe stated her *signature strength* of self-control will be beneficial in overcoming the obstacles of a demanding and time extensive future career. “And then, my strength being that I can study well and I can focus on stuff is also going to help me achieve getting into medical school which is really difficult.”

Lily revealed the exchange of a *gratitude letter* established a closer bond with her mother, which also resulted in more frequent communication that proved instrumental to her positive focus.

Once you get off the phone, it’s just a peaceful in a way, like you just feel, “Okay, now I can just refocus on what I need to focus on.” It’s just a time to relax and get my mind away from things that were stressful.

In compliance to her intervention-guided journaling, Cody discussed the process by which she releases herself from the distractions and stressors of the day and concentrates fully on the task in front of her. “Like, I can put everything aside and get done what I need to. I kind of just let it go, because this (stressor) is something that is out of my hands and out of my control.”

Athletes stated the enhanced focus achieved in their daily lives transferred into their performance environment. “I set some really big long-term goals, and then I revised it (*best possible self*) to focus more on the season and what I need to do now, step by step” (Samantha). After participating in the intervention, athletes shared they increased their mental preparation before practice. “I feel, like, in the gym I’m more focused and I’m more ready to do things rather than before, I was, like, ‘Uhhh, I don’t really want to do that today’” (Anna). Cassie also revealed she was equipped with specific intentions for practice. “Before, I would just kind of go through the motions, and now, I feel I truly

have a legit purpose and something I have to get done every single day.” A more efficient mindset was especially evident for seniors on the team during their last year of eligibility.

I think that (*best possible self*) just put everything more in perspective for me, especially since it’s my last year in gymnastics and it’s my senior year, the final go-around...I just realized I have to focus on the now, and I can’t really get distracted or worry about everything else outside of me. I think it’s helped me concentrate a lot more on what I want to get done this year (Cassie).

Similarly, Morgan shared she desired to savor her senior year experience after recognizing and reflecting on her student-athlete blessings.

I think that’s made a difference with how I’ve grown as an athlete. This has made me focus so much more in practice and just, like, take advantage of opportunities because you are not always going to have these resources...I try to enjoy every moment, even the annoyingness. I really try to embrace it all, even the hard practices...you know when you’re happy and enjoying your life, it so much easier to go to practice everyday ready to work hard and ready to get better.

Athletes stated the enhanced focus supported throughout the intervention improved their concentration in the performance environment but also enhanced their poise and composure.

Whenever I mess up, it doesn’t faze me, and I’m very calm about it. I mean that’s helped me tremendously and it’s made me grow as a player. It’s helped me focus on my skill and everything else. I think it’s rubbed off on other people (Willow). Athletes described feeling more comfortable and calm in the competitive

atmosphere after achieving a healthy perspective with their sport. As she focused on the process to success as opposed to the outcome, Liz shared:

It’s really changed the way I play. I feel like it’s taken a lot of pressure off me and my teammates. Not everything has to be perfect. I just try to play my best, and not necessarily get all the digs or kills, but just try to do what’s necessary.

Participants stated team cohesion also limited perceived pressure to perform flawlessly.

I feel so much better. It’s almost like the weight on my shoulders has been taken off a little because each person is able to contribute. I might not get the perfect pass, but I trust Morgan to get that set. You know, Morgan might not have the perfect set, but I trust that hitter (Samantha).

While individual athletes expressed focus to improve concentration and composure, athletes shared that their collective team focus to strengthen concentration and composure also improved. “And I mean, from being here for three years, I’ve never seen our team so focused on something. I think it has a lot to do with the intervention.” Lily revealed she witnessed her team’s growth in maintaining poise after errors. “Just after someone makes a mistake or something, you can see people wipe it away much quicker.” An emphasis on the process of playing one’s best also supported a healthy and calm mindset before competition.

Our mindset going into the game is just different and it kind of makes you a little more relaxed. When you go into something thinking you can’t lose and you have to win...that is a stressful situation...especially in times when you can’t have those feelings of clenching up and thinking I can’t lose (Liz).

### **Engagement in Exercises**

The fourth central theme, engagement in exercises, is characterized by athletes’ *commitment* (time, energy, and effort) *to the exercises* both during and after the intervention, purposeful *intentional writing* in the intervention manual, and *opportunities for expression* through individual and collective participation.

**Commitment to exercises.** Several athletes shared the summer provided an optimal time to participate in and commit themselves to the intervention. With fewer school and sport-related responsibilities, they were able to devote the time and energy necessary to benefit from the exercises. Beth, a gymnast, stated, “I think we did it at a good time because in the summer, there’s just so much less going on, and I felt I could actually focus on each one and actually have time to write them out and not feel like it was a burden” (Beth). The less demanding schedule in the summer was also favorable

for members of the volleyball team. “But for the summer, you just have your sport and everything else is just free and open. You can do whatever you want. I think with all that free time, it was really cool to do it in a regular day” (Willow). Despite many athletes commenting that summer is an ideal time of year for the intervention, some athletes discussed they struggled to find time for the intervention in the midst of their student-athlete priorities. “The most difficult thing I had with it was being busy and not having the time I would have liked to spend on it to make it more beneficial. I feel like I kind of brushed through it” (Misty). Similarly, Karla was overloaded with classes during the summer, but after receiving an extension to finish the intervention at home, she committed herself fully to the exercises.

I took some really stressful classes this summer so I was almost counteracting the activities. The whole purpose was to enjoy it and I feel like it was something we had to have done on a certain day. I just did it to get it done. But when I went home, I had time to put things into perspective (Karla).

Most athletes revealed purposeful effort and energy invested in the intervention was correlated with the received benefits. “I feel like when you’re intentionally trying to make something out of them (exercises) rather than just doing them as a chore, they make you more happy and make you want to do them again” (Beth). Liz spent a significant amount of time reflecting before delivering the gratitude letter she had written to her mother:

I had to go above and beyond to do it. It took me a couple of weeks to get started. I wanted to think about different things before giving it to her, and I didn’t want to “half ass” it. It took me a couple of days to do it.

Similarly, Sasha was fully dedicated to her gratitude letter, “I mean writing a letter takes me thirty minutes and even if I sacrifice that time, it is worth the thirty minutes because it makes me happy that it makes her happy.” Mallory shared the energy she put forth in her

*random acts of kindness* was also worthwhile. “It just takes a lot of time and effort, but people really do take it to heart when you spend time and effort doing little things like that.”

Rebel believed her team was fully committed to make the most of their experiences while participating in the exercises. “It takes a lot of time and you have to be willing to put forth the effort to do it. If you’re not really into it, I feel you’re not going to get out of it what you really can do...I feel like we were all really into it and gave it our best shot.” Her teammate Morgan discussed that although the interest might have not been there at the beginning of the intervention, persistence through the end of the intervention resulted in satisfying rewards. “Sometimes going through the exercises, I didn’t know why I was doing this or what I’m talking about, but then seeing it pay off and understanding the ‘why’ was a really cool thing.”

Participants stated their commitment to the exercises during the intervention transferred to their commitment to the exercises outside the intervention. Several athletes shared they incorporated the activities and exercises into their weekly routines. Some athletes discovered the sources of their happiness, and consequently, realized where they should devote and direct their attention in their daily lives. After moving away to medical school, Alyssa discussed the importance of staying in contact with friends and family.

These (blessings) prove my values and prove where I need to spend my time or where I need to make extra effort...the intervention proved it does make me happier so it’s worth, like, the time and effort I put into it.

Some participants revealed they continued to perform *random acts of kindness* for others. “I guess now I just do that more often, even the little things, like making sure you open

the door for other people” (Rebel). Macy stated she enjoyed “picking and choosing” the activities, and shared she plans to continue to practice the exercises until she becomes an expert.

I’ve done some of the activities since it was over. I wrote another gratitude letter to someone last week and this week I wrote down everything I was thankful for. It’s kind of a good way of reminding yourself to keep this going and it does make a difference. You should keep practicing until you are a pro.

Likewise, Sasha discovered what tools were more helpful than others because she committed to a variety of exercises throughout the intervention. “Great things come out of doing stuff like this. You learn to know yourself and you learn to know what works for you and what doesn’t work for you. There are some exercises that I liked more than others.” During her interview, Brandy created meaning from her experience, realizing the importance of recommitting herself to the exercises.

I haven’t thought about it recently, but I noticed after doing the exercises, it just helped me think about different things more, like the *three good things* and how I can apply my *strengths*. I should probably get back to thinking about those things again.

Some athletes believed their teams were completely invested in the exercises gained from the intervention, especially cultivating gratitude. “I think it made people be aware of what’s going on and not take this (sport) for granted. And to be able to use what we’ve learned, not only write it down, but it kind of continues with us” (Liz). Although Morgan was in her last year of eligibility on the volleyball team, she also believed the intervention would continue to positively influence her team in the years to come.

I think it’ll affect how the coaches coach and how these girls interact with their teammates next year. I think it’s made a big difference for us just in general. I think it will continue to do so even after this is long gone.



**Intentional writing.** Several athletes shared their engagement in the intervention heightened through intentional writing in the intervention manual. After the initial negative judgment of the expectations, some participants stated their interest in the reflective writing steadily increased. “Like, at the time, I was like, ‘Aww man! I have to write this all down.’ But then as I was writing, I’m like, ‘Oh, this is kind of fun to write down my experience’” (Brandy). Athletes discussed they created more meaning from the exercises as they were challenged to think deeply and then articulate into expressive words. “I’m not much of a writer, but writing it out, like what happened, was really good. I just had to push myself to think harder and deeper about things” (Rebel).

While writing about their *best possible selves*, athletes revealed they actualized their goals after having expressed them in written form. “But writing it down is a whole different thing, like actually, physically, being this is the best possible future life I could have. The writing it down part is something I rarely do” (Beth). Similarly, Cassie discussed writing about her *best possible self* resulted in an intensified conviction for her goals and a more deliberate plan. “Because I think normally I would just say it in my head or something and then it kind of gets pushed back, and I never really attacked it like I wanted to, but having it written down helps tremendously.” Randa also shared having articulated her goals provided her with some guidance. “It’s good to put on paper so you still know what direction you are going.” Several athletes stated they enjoyed writing elaborate ideas of their *best possible selves*. “I want to have a house like this and I want to have this job and a dog and this many kids and be married at this point...writing about your life in detail was just really cool” (Lana).

When writing *gratitude letters*, athletes revealed they cultivated more appreciation for their receivers through sincere written expression. “It was just nice to be able to write something down and think how that person has influenced your life” (Willow). After writing a letter instead of voicing her thankfulness to her mother, Randa stated, “I will say thank you, but I never put them all into words. When I did, she said it put her to tears.”

Athletes shared the strong engagement in intentional writing throughout the intervention inspired both teams to write down collective goals for the season. Cassie described this process for the gymnastics team. “Our slogan this year is ‘Championship Culture’ so we wrote down our values and goals to try to abide by that culture. So I think it helps having it written down on paper.” Similarly, the volleyball team wrote a list of standards defining the culture they intended to build and in which they would live during and after their season. “When you write everything out, it’s written. Everything’s not just said, it’s all been written down, so I think that’s a huge thing in order for us to move forward. It definitely has been successful so far” (Samantha).

**Opportunities for expression.** Participants shared the intervention offered multiple opportunities to express themselves through new avenues. “It got your feelings out a little easier. Rather than having to sit there and tell somebody about it, you got to write it down and express yourself in a different way” (Liz). Specifically, several athletes stated the *gratitude letter* provided an opening to express appreciation to people they had never appropriately thanked. For Beth, this person was her former coach.

When the gratitude letter came up, I was, like, I know exactly who I’m writing this to. It was kind of a perfect time because I had the whole summer to reflect on everything she had done for me. It was the easiest letter I have ever written

because it just flowed. I couldn't type fast enough, you know, you just write and it's all just flowery and you put all of your creative spins on it.

Gratitude letters provided an opportunity for athletes to express themselves entirely and passionately. "I really meant everything I said and it wasn't just saying it just to say, 'Hey, it was nice for you to be our coach' and just, like, go through the motions, but I actually put my heart into it" (Mallory). Athletes who wrote a letter but did not send to the receiver, still enjoyed contemplating genuine and heartfelt thoughts in preparation for future interactions. "So this gave me a chance to write down everything I wanted to say so if I did talk to the person, I knew exactly what I wanted to say" (Anna).

*Signature strengths* was also a noteworthy exercise that encouraged athletes to express themselves through their values during their participation in the intervention. Karla welcomed all opportunities to reveal her signature strength of religiousness and spirituality. "My faith is really important to me so that was a big deal that shaped all the activities I did...I got to show that through enjoying life and counting my blessings and just being happy." After sharing difficulty writing about the exercises on her own, Morgan stated the relaxed and open environment during team meetings assisted her to find significance and reveal her strength of modesty and humility.

Hearing other people sharing their experiences brought up things that I'm, like, "Oh yeah, that reminds me of something I've experienced that I want to write about." I don't like to talk about myself, but when given the opportunity, I'm pretty open to it...just to say, "Look, this is how I'm going to help the team"...it just gave me a lot more confidence.

### **Positive Emotions**

Lastly, athletes shared they realized a variety of positive emotions during their participation in the intervention. Participants specifically reported increased feelings of happiness and joy as they engaged in the exercises; they also reported lasting happiness

and joy both in and out of the performance environment. Athletes also described the intervention as “fun” and enjoyed their experiences with the positive exercises. This enjoyment gained from the intervention also transferred into their performance environment. Code maps linking participants’ comments to both sub-themes, *happiness and joy* and *fun and enjoyment*, are provided in Appendix A & B for further transparency.

## Quantitative Findings

After collecting and analyzing data from the intervention manuals, athletes reported *counting blessings* as the easiest exercise to complete (M= 4.44, SD=0.62) and *best possible selves* as the most challenging compared to the rest of the group (M= 3.78, SD=0.94). On average, athletes shared they were more likely to continue engagement in *counting blessings* (M=4.44, SD=0.70), the exercise of their *choice* (M=4.37, SD=0.72), *signature strengths* (M=4.21, SD=0.98), and the *gratitude letter* (M=4.00, SD=1.00) after the intervention was completed. All exercises were reported as helpful to very helpful, except for *best possible selves* whose average fell slightly below (M=3.73, SD=1.13). See Table 3 for further description of mean ratings.

**Table 3 Mean Ratings of Positive Exercises as a Function of Intervention Manual Questions (with Standard Deviations in Parentheses)**

Positive Exercise	Intervention Manual Questions		
	How easy was it to complete?	How likely are you to continue?	How helpful do you think it was?
Signature Strengths	4.11 (0.88)	4.21 (0.98)	4.40 (0.83)
Three Good Things	4.28 (0.67)	3.89 (0.83)	4.22 (0.88)
Best Possible Self	3.78 (0.94)	3.42 (1.24)	3.73 (1.13)
Counting Blessings	4.44 (0.62)	4.44 (0.70)	4.56 (0.70)
Gratitude Letter	4.00 (1.20)	4.00 (1.00)	4.47 (0.92)
Random Acts	3.89 (0.83)	3.83 (1.25)	4.22 (0.81)
Choice	4.25 (1.18)	4.37 (0.72)	4.50 (0.73)

Note: N=21, Questions were scored on a 5 point Likert Scale. Q1: From 1 =Very Difficult through 5=Very Easy, Q2: From 1=Very Unlikely through 5=Very Likely, Q3: From 1=Not Helpful through 5=Very Helpful

## Summary of Qualitative Findings

As athletes participated in *identifying signature strengths, three good things, best possible selves, counting one's blessings, the gratitude visit, and random acts of kindness* during the summer intervention, they became more mindful and experienced heightened awareness for positive events and influential people in their daily lives. Participants also gained introspection into their past, present, and future selves upon reflecting on and examining their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors while immersing themselves in the exercises. Both *mindfulness/ awareness* and *self-reflection/introspection* provided a strong foundation and means to a) strengthen *relationships*, b) discover *meaning and purpose* in and out of sport, c) achieve personal and collective *growth*, d) increase *engagement in the exercises*, and e) realize *positive emotions*.

Athletes developed and strengthened relationships with their family, friends, coaches, and teammates throughout the intervention. As athletes invested in each other's lives and learned more about their teammates through team meetings, members of both teams affirmed each other's *best possible selves* and *signature strengths*, discovered each team member's important contribution to team success, and gained understandings that would help navigate potential storms. Coaches' investment in team meetings that focused on the intervention was also influential as they learned how to best support and motivate their players.

Relationships were also strengthened through increased feelings of closeness and connectedness. After writing *gratitude letters* and performing *random acts of kindness*, athletes described achieving more intimate and stronger bonds with their friends and family members, as well as former and current coaches. Some athletes shared they established stronger connections with their teammates when performing the exercises together. The safe, warm environment nurtured during team meetings offered opportunities for athletes to express themselves more deeply, with consideration for vulnerability, new levels of comfort, and increased trust that contributed to closer connections during and after the intervention. Athletes grew closer to their teammates and coaches and also reported understanding one another from a more holistic perspective.

The quality and quantity of positive communication given and received from family, teammates, and coaches was also impactful to strong relationships. Athletes received encouraging and rewarding responses from the recipients of their *gratitude letters* and also continued to communicate their appreciation regularly. Communication outside the gym was enhanced as athletes learned more effective language using their *signature strengths* to approach interactions with their teammates. Inside the gym, communication also improved as athletes positioned themselves as stronger, more vocal leaders in the gym. As the athletes affirmed their leadership roles, they also fostered a positive and spirited atmosphere conducive to high performance. In addition, coach-athlete interactions were enhanced as coaches delivered individual positive instruction and affirmed all roles on the team.

Relationships were also strengthened through athletes' increased perceived support from family, friends, and teammates. Athletes alleviated feelings of isolation and loneliness as they *counted their blessings* and cultivated more appreciation and thankfulness for their parents' continuous and unconditional support through *gratitude letters*.

Lastly, the intervention resulted in stronger team cohesion. The gymnastics team achieved more authentic, caring relationships, fostered individual and collective confidence, built a strong foundation for the incoming freshmen, and created an enjoyable environment both in and out of the performance environment. Additionally, the volleyball team revealed they improved team chemistry compared to past seasons, inspired a shared mission with sound values, built mutual trust to support higher standards and levels of play, carefully integrated freshmen into their culture, and nurtured an uplifting environment in and out of the performance arena.

Athletes discovered meaning in something greater than themselves and purpose in and out of their sport during and after participation in the intervention. Outside of the performance environment, athletes reported heightened feelings of altruism and self-worth, experienced an enhanced self-concept, and discovered and affirmed their purpose in life as they engaged in *random acts of kindness* and wrote *gratitude letters*. *Random acts* also encouraged introverted athletes to stretch beyond their comfort zones, resulting in more comfort and ease to engage with and help others on a regular basis. The meaning athletes discovered throughout the intervention, assisted individuals to establish a healthy identity beyond the role of a student-athlete, to cultivate gratitude, and to realize their passions beyond their athletic talent.



Meaning inside the performance environment was also discovered as athletes surrendered individual interests in exchange for their contribution as a leader for the team. Athletes reported that *counting their blessings* for opportunities unique to the student-athlete experience helped them to identify with the team's collective mission. Moreover, athletes found purpose in their sport while gaining confidence in their *signature strengths* to actualize their role. Strengths were harnessed and maximized to gain acceptance and inclusion, provide support for the freshmen, and effectively lead and mentor the team.

Athletes attained individual and collective growth during and after participation in the intervention. This growth supported individual development related to optimism as athletes reflected on their meaning and purpose, cultivated gratitude, visualized their *best possible selves*, and harnessed strengths to inspire team aspirations. Enhanced optimism for the future resulted in strong determination to achieve personal and team ambitions, comprising of perseverance, a heightened sense of control, strong worth ethic, and motivation to deliver their very best.

Athletes also experienced personal growth in and out of the performance environment. Such growth is evidenced by athletes' attention to a positive mindset, re-shifting their focus from weaknesses to strengths after identifying *signature strengths*, transforming from negative thinking to helpful and affirmative thinking while seeking and writing about *three good things* and *blessings*, and adoption of a healthy perspective of sport participation that values the process over outcome. Collective positive mindsets among teammates were nurtured throughout the intervention; team goals were reframed to model positive behavior. Overall, athletes shared they became more positive people,

who recognize increased happiness in life and its connection to the control they have over their personal choices.

Participants minimized their perceived stress and increased their resiliency to adversity as they cultivated gratitude and tapped into other tools gained from positive exercises during difficult and demanding days as student-athletes. After forming positive appraisals of extensive training, difficult workouts, and coaches' feedback, athletes formed positive perspectives and outlooks during such challenging times in the performance environment. By reflecting on the meaning and purpose discovered in the performance environment, athletes developed resiliency and embraced opportunities for improvement as individuals and as members of the greater team.

Personal and collective growth was also achieved through athletes' enhanced focus on their present lives. After visualizing their *best possible selves*, athletes increased attention to their responsibilities and priorities to actualize their goals. Some athletes were able to re-focus from distractions and stressors after engaging in intervention-guided journaling; a similar re-focus from distractions and stressors resulted from recounting support from family as demonstrated through *gratitude letters*. Strengthened focus in daily life was transferred to the performance environment and reinforced through intentional mental preparation, improved concentration, and increased poise and composure generated from strong team cohesion and a healthy view of competition.

Athlete who committed time, energy, and effort to the exercises during and after the intervention reported greater levels of engagement. Purposeful investment in the intervention was associated with perceived benefits. Athletes committed themselves to the exercises post intervention after discovering specific sources of happiness and

choosing exercises considered to be personally favorable and beneficial. Knowledge and skills gained through the exercises continued throughout the season for both teams. Several athletes revealed engagement in the intervention was heightened through intentional writing in the intervention manual; athletes reported that this practice allowed them to actualize and inspire individual and team goals and were challenged to think deeply and articulate meaning via written expression. Lastly, the intervention offered opportunities for athletes to fully express their appreciation and values through *gratitude letters* and *signature strengths*.

Finally, a variety of positive emotions were realized throughout the athletes' participation in the intervention including happiness, joy, fun, and enjoyment. Participants shared immediate feelings of positive emotions while engaging in the exercises as well as lasting emotions post-intervention. These emotions were also present in their performance environment.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and understand college athletes' perceptions of the influences of a comprehensive positive psychology intervention (PPI's) aimed to improve well-being through maximizing PERMA elements (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement). The role of the sport psychology consultant was that of a research participant, whose responsibilities included facilitating and describing the interventions to assist each athlete capture the essence of the positive exercises in their worlds.

Consistent with phenomenological research, this study seeks to describe the “essence” of the college athletes’ lived experiences. The inquiry was concerned with “what” athletes experienced with the intervention and “how” they experienced it; analysis of these experiences was used to analyze the intervention’s efficacy to more closely understand the potential positive impact on the athletes lives in and beyond sport (Creswell, 2007). The two primary research questions for this phenomenological study include:

1. What meaning do athletes ascribe to their experiences in the positive psychology intervention?

2. How do athletes perceive the influences of the positive psychology intervention?

It is important to note that although the positive psychology intervention is grounded within a theoretical framework (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011), the analysis of athletes' experiences was not interpreted through a theoretical lens. In accordance with phenomenological research, this study was interested in the athletes' direct and immediate experiences with the intervention before any meaning was created (Crotty, 1996). The inquiry positioned participants as the experts of their experiences, with the understanding that well-being exists from the perspective of the athlete and is influenced by her perceptions, experiences, interactions, and environment (Dale, 1996; Seligman, 2011). This methodological approach allowed athletes to freely share their experiences and uncover meaning in their worlds, consequently, giving rise to new discoveries within the sport context.

A rich and thick description of participants' experiences in the positive psychology intervention revealed *mindfulness/ awareness* and *self-reflection/introspection* provided a means to (a) strengthen *relationships*, (b) discover *meaning and purpose* in and out of sport, (c) achieve personal and collective *growth*, (d) increase *engagement in the exercises*, and (e) reap *positive emotions*. Although these themes were represented separately, they are interconnected in many ways. Further discussion of these themes as each relates to existing theory and literature will offer fresh insights and understandings into athletes' perceived influences of the intervention.

The researcher's dual role as the primary investigator and sport psychology consultant allowed the athletes to lead the intervention, which helped to facilitate

discovery of personal meaning. As athletes were encouraged to think critically and share their perceptions, feelings, and knowledge gained during and after the intervention, they developed *mindfulness/awareness* of the positive events and influential people in their daily lives and gained *self-reflection/introspection* into their past, present, and future selves. This athlete-centered approach is consistent with holistic sport psychology wherein consultants value athletes' awareness and understanding of their experiences and the subsequent solutions they discover in their worlds (Dale, 1996; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Miller & Kerr, 2002). Because athletes were given multiple opportunities for self-discovery throughout participation in the various positive exercises, their heightened awareness and focused introspection provided the means to generate the resulting beliefs and attitudes with the intervention.

The findings of this qualitative study extend previous quantitative findings of efficacious positive psychology interventions discovered to boost well-being elements of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA) (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Giannopoulos and Vella-Broderick, 2010; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). The resulting themes of *relationships, meaning, growth, engagement in intervention, and positive emotions* were not generated through the PERMA theoretical framework; rather, these themes emerged as consistent themes within PERMA's key elements, either explicitly or implicitly. These findings strengthen implications associated with implementing PPI's within the student-athlete population; through qualitative inquiry, these findings also depict ways in which PERMA elements may contribute to improved well-being.

## **Relationships**

Relationships were strengthened with family, friends, coaches, and teammates through investment and learning, closeness and connectedness, positive communication, perceived social support, and team cohesion during and after participation in exercises. These results reinforce and extend previous findings that link PPI engagement to increased connections and likelihood to offer support to others (Emmons & McCollough, 2003; Layous et al., 2012).

These exercises were valuable practices to build stronger and more intimate bonds outside of the sport context, but the interventions also proved beneficial to express personal insights and reflections in safe and comfortable team settings. Accounts shared during organized team meetings during the intervention are particularly noteworthy. Relationships with teammates were strengthened as the athletes learned and affirmed each other's *signature strengths* and *best possible selves*. Additionally, athletes expressed and embraced vulnerability more deeply as a team. After gaining deeper insight into each others' lives, athletes developed empathy and care that further increased comfort and trust among team members. Most importantly, this comfort and trust transferred into the performance environment by means of positive communication in the form of encouragement and strong affirmations.

Most importantly, the intersections offered to strengthen relationships in and out of team meetings throughout the course of the intervention resulted in stronger team chemistry and cohesion that was influential to team success. Although team cohesion is a relatively new construct in positive psychology research, it is very prominent in sport psychology literature. Carron, Wildmeyer, and Brawley (1988) define cohesion as “a

dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs” (p.213). This definition of team cohesion is often described in two dimensions: task cohesion and social cohesion. Task cohesion, defined as unity toward a particular task or objective, has been associated with improved performance (Ball & Carron, 1976), while social cohesion, defined as unity toward member affective needs, has been connected to member satisfaction (Williams & Hacker, 1982). The findings of this study suggest sharing experiences while participating in the intervention resulted first in social cohesion and then task cohesion. Social cohesion allowed athletes to develop authentic and caring relationships, integrate freshmen into their culture, and build an enjoyable environment in and out of the performance environment. Social cohesion then fostered task cohesion as the gymnastics and volleyball teams strove to achieve a shared mission built on sound values and high standards.

### **Meaning and Purpose**

After participating in the intervention, athletes discovered meaning and purpose outside their environment. Athletes reported heightened feelings of altruism and self-worth, experienced an enhanced self-concept, and discovered and affirmed their purposes in life. These results support previous interpretations shared by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), suggesting *random acts of kindness* contribute to better well-being by fostering independence, reinforcing one’s confidence in the ability to help, and assisting individuals in perceiving themselves as more altruistic, charitable, and grateful. Building upon this previous research, the tools gained in the intervention also assisted athletes to establish self awareness beyond their primary identities as student-athletes; they stretched



their comfort zone to help others and realized passions beyond their athletic talent. This finding supports researchers' suggestions to tailor interventions to increase athletes' interests, beliefs, qualities, and values to expand their life perspectives. This finding also suggests increased attention to initiate support services to assist athletes in finding meaning outside the sole identification as an athlete (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004; Watson & Kissinger, 2007).

In addition to meaning outside the sport environment, athletes also found meaning and purpose inside their performance arena throughout their participation in the intervention. Of particular importance, athletes actualized their roles on the team while gaining confidence in harnessing and maximizing their *signature strengths* to gain acceptance and inclusion, provide support for the freshmen, or effectively lead and mentor the team. Early research examining *signature strengths* indicated discovering and implementing one's strengths into the workplace led to an increase in "harmonious passion," consequently predicting more life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and vitality (Forest et al., 2012). The results of this study further support this finding in the sport context as athletes internalized their *signature strengths* into their identities and engaged in actions that were intrinsically important and in harmony with other aspects of their lives (Vallerand et al., 2003). As Alyssa shared, "So I've been using my strength in the gym to try to make sure I'm helping others...it makes me feel better about myself and that I am a part of something, too."

### **Growth**

Results of this study indicated athletes attained individual and collective growth during and after their participation in the intervention. Athletes developed optimism as

they cultivated gratitude by *counting their blessings*. This finding is consistent with Emmons and McCollough's (2003) study which demonstrated that undergraduates who listed blessings in their diaries experienced a more positive and optimistic mindset. Athletes further developed optimism as they reflected on meaning and purpose, visualized their *best possible selves*, and harnessed *signature strengths* to inspire team aspirations. Enhanced optimism for the future resulted in strong determination to attain personal and team ambitions, comprising of perseverance, a heightened sense of control, strong work ethic, and motivation to deliver their very best. King (2001) supports these findings, suggesting those who can focus on and visualize their life goals may be more successful in that pursuit through feelings of competence and intrinsic motivation, as well as an enhanced sense of control and awareness of personal values.

As a supplement to existing positive psychology research, athletes also experienced personal growth in and out of the performance environment as they nurtured a positive mindset with a shift in focus from weaknesses to strengths, transformation from negative thinking to helpful and affirmative thinking, and adoption of a healthy perspective of sport participation that values the process over outcome. A shift in focus from weaknesses to strengths is supported by previous findings, where a strength-based approach allows athletes to harness and build their best constructive selves (Ghaye et al., 2013; Linley & Harrington, 2006). As athletes became more aware of their valuable internal resources, they shared they were more engaged and motivated to strive toward personal excellence. As Blythe revealed, "It wasn't looking at very specific weaknesses you could fix. It was something you were already strong in and it was just finding ways you can to make those stronger. It made me feel good."

Consistent with Emmons and McCollough (2003), athletes also transformed their negative thinking to positive thinking as they *counted their blessings* and became cognizant of *three good things*. As athletes reframed their thinking to practice positive-self talk inside the athletic environment, athletes observed advantages to a positive mindset in and out of the gym. Comparably, positive self-talk has received significant attention in sport psychology literature as an effective mental skill to manage stress, alleviate self-defeating thoughts, decrease perceptions of pain, and increase adherence to rehabilitation (Gould, Finch, & Jackson, 1993; Jones & Mace, 1998; Theodorakis, Beneca, Malliou, Antoniou, Goudas, & Laparidis, 1997). Healthy perspective of sport participation, emphasizing the process over the outcome, has also been highlighted in previous literature. In a study involving ten elite athletes, Durand-Bush and Salmela (2002) discovered focus on the process of performing, instead of fear and worry on the outcome, was crucial to athletic success. Similarly, athletes in the study shared they were able to free themselves from the stressors of the outcome as they engaged in the task at hand and focused on performing their best. Collective positive mindsets were also nurtured throughout the intervention as the team set beneficial goals to reframe negative thinking and model positive behavior. Lastly, after describing happiness as a skill acquired through personal choice, athletes shared they became more positive people, consequently increasing their enjoyment and productivity in the gym. This finding supports the ‘Architecture of Sustainable Change’ theory proposed by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), who suggests 40% of happiness is attributed to intentional activity where people have the ability to seek out positive exercises to increase well-being and nurture positive feelings, behaviors, and cognitions.

Athletes also shared they used the positive exercises to help cope with stress and adversity faced in and out of the performance environment. They grew more resilient as they cultivated gratitude during challenging times inherent to the lives of student-athletes. Emmons and McCoullough (2003) found students who counted their *blessings* reported more sleep, engaged in more physical activity, and fewer physical symptoms. Beyond physical resilience to illness, athletes in this study embraced positive appraisals of extensive training and difficult workouts. This finding is supported by research highlighting the effectiveness of “challenge-competitive state” over a “threat state” in the optimal psychological function and emotional regulation of athletes (Jones et. al, 2009).

Further growth was attained through an enhanced focus discovered throughout the intervention. Consistent with Ghaye et al. 2013, athletes increased their attention on their responsibilities and priorities to actualize their goals, supporting positive action to future success and who they would like to become. Enhanced focus in daily life was transferred into the performance environment and was reinforced through intentional mental preparation, improved concentration, and increased poise and composure generated from strong team cohesion and a healthy view of competition. These psychological characteristics have received considerable attention in studies involving highly successful athletes. A high level of commitment, the ability to cope with and control anxiety, mental toughness and resiliency, the ability to focus and block out distractions, and mental training plans for competition have all been identified as factors that positively contributed to optimal athletic performances in Olympian athletes (Gould & Dieffenbach, 2002; Orlick & Partington, 1988).

### **Engagement in Exercises**

Supporting previous findings, athletes experienced engagement in an intervention that packaged a variety of exercises together, encouraged individuals to choose exercises for themselves, accomplished exercises once a week, engaged social support, and was implemented over a longer duration of time (Della Porta, 2012; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Parks et al., 2012; Schueller & Parks, 2012; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Athletes' engagement increased after fully committing time, energy, and effort to the summer experience. A student-athlete's purposeful investment in her participation in the exercises followed by her intentional writing in the treatment manual was associated with perceived benefits. Athletes committed to the exercises post intervention after discovering their sources of happiness and choosing exercises that were personally favorable and beneficial. These present findings are also consistent with previous research discovering activities were particularly advantageous for those who identify with, show greater interest in, enjoy, and commit and adhere to the exercises (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Schueller, 2010; Seligman et al. 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Engagement and commitment gained through the intervention also transferred into the performance environment for both teams as they actualized and inspired individual and team goals in written form.

### **Positive Emotions**

Finally, athletes reaped a variety of positive emotions throughout their participation in the intervention. Participants shared feelings of happiness, joy, fun, and enjoyment while engaging in the exercises both during and after the intervention. These qualitative findings support vast research reinforcing the effectiveness of PPIs to increase

happiness (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Giannopoulos and Vella-Broderick, 2010; Huffman et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2011; Seligman, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These positive emotions transferred into their performance environment. In reference to happiness, Morgan shared, “It’s just made a big difference in how happy I’ve been versus other seasons.” After Cassie finished the intervention, she revealed, “Gym is so much more enjoyable.” Similarly, Lily discussed, “It allowed me to have fun with volleyball again.” These insights provide support to Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. As athletes learned new and beneficial thoughts and behaviors while engaging in the intervention, they carried these enhanced personal resources to other aspects of their lives, most notably, the performance arena. These findings are especially noteworthy as sport enjoyment is considered a key factor in sport motivation and commitment. Sport enjoyment is also a major contributor to achieve a “flow” state (Csikszentmihayli & Jackson, 1999; McCarthy, 2011).

### **Coach Involvement**

Results of the study offered further insights related to the volleyball coaches’ participation pertaining to the interventions during team meetings. Volleyball players shared their coaches’ investment was significant as coaches learned how to better support and motivate their players. Coach-athlete relationships have received significant attention in research as one of the most defining determinants of a positive athletic experience (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992; Gearity & Murray, 2011; McGuire, 2012; Smoll & Smith, 2001). In this study, coach-athlete interaction grew stronger as coaches delivered positive instruction and affirmed all strengths and roles on the team. Positive instruction

and strength-based conversation from coaches is supported by Ghaye et. al (2013), contributing to more positive emotions and high quality connections and increased confidence and improvement.

### **Application**

The results of this study revealed similar attributes related to well-being with studies measuring the characteristics of highly accomplished athletes including (a) positive interpersonal relationships with teammates, coaches, parents, and support staff, (b) high self-esteem and confidence, (c) intrinsic motivation, (d) effective coping strategies to deal with pressure and adversity, (e) positive mindsets and a healthy perspective toward sport, (f) life balance, (g) creativity and innovation, (h) use of self-reflection, visualization, and evaluation, (i) resiliency, (j) hope and optimism, (k) the ability to achieve goals, and (l) high levels of mental and physical health. (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002; Pensgaard & Duda, 2002; Williams & Krane, 2001). Previous literature findings related intrinsic motivation factors to satisfaction and positive emotions in sport, self-esteem, vitality, and a high quality of life; as an extension of this literature, the current study found similar factors to include autonomy (supporting athletes in their free will and choices), relatedness, and competence (efficacy athletes feel in and out of their performance environment) (Brady & Shamrock, 2003; Gagne et al., 2010). In addition, this study further supports relationships between sport-domain gratitude and team satisfaction (Chen & Kee, 2008; Chen & Kee, 2012). Providing application to this research, results of this study suggest

positive psychology interventions may provide the means and the mechanism to develop, cultivate, and promote positive traits and attributes in athletes.

Vallerand et al. (2008) argued athletes can attain high levels of performance while still maintaining balance, positive well-being, and harmony with other aspects of their lives. The results of this study further support this finding: by placing positive well-being as an athlete's foundation, athletes will maximize and harness psychological skills, which will more likely lead to high level performance. Reinforcing expert consultants' 'holistic' philosophy, this study encourages sport psychology consultants to adopt a holistic approach to their sport psychology practice, emphasizing the primary importance to develop the person before the athlete (Anderson et al., 2002, Miller & Kerr, 2002; Orlick & Friesen, 2010). Instead of solely introducing performance enhancement techniques or mental/psychological skills training, the findings support a focus shift to promote athlete well-being and happiness, highlighting strong personal development as the prerequisite to athletic excellence. Sports psychology consultants are expected to fix and alleviate athletes' problems and performance issues, but more importantly, consultants are responsible for building athletes' personal tools to prevent future issues and concerns. It is vital for sport psychology consultants to move away from a "fix it" to "build it" model (McGuire, 2012).

Personal development was enhanced throughout the intervention, but also, importantly, was team development. PPI's may serve as a unique catalyst to build and strengthen team cohesion as well as coach-athlete relationships, especially during the off-season when the team has more time and energy to devote to new training. Given these findings, sport psychology consultants are encouraged to educate coaches on the benefits



of improving student-athlete well-being and to promote coach participation in the intervention. Through education and participation, coaches are likely to expand opportunities to learn about their athletes on a deeper and more personal level, and also encourage their athlete's engagement by affirming the intervention's importance. Coaches are the environmental engineers of the sport environment and they have the influential ability to continue to teach, foster, and model the skills learned and resources gained post-intervention (McGuire, 2012).

The lead researcher in this intervention worked as a volleyball sport psychology consultant for one year and a gymnastics sport psychology consultant for two years before intervention implementation. The trust and rapport established with both teams was significant to the athletes' interest and commitment to the positive exercises. Supporting the findings of Watson & Kissinger (2007) and Seligman et. al (2005), athletes may be more likely to seek out support from skilled consultants who have strong caring relationships with the clients and who understand their unique concerns, pressure, or needs. With this, it is recommended that sport psychology consultants have substantial field experience with the targeted team before initiating an intervention of this nature. Another possibility for sport psychology consultants is to educate and teach the intervention material through an influential gatekeeper to the athlete or team. This population may include, but is not limited to, coaches, strength and conditioning staff, athletic trainers, mentors/tutors, career coaches, or academic coordinators. Because strong relationships were built with athletes throughout the working alliance, opportunities to deliver the intervention to athletes transitioning out of sport due to completion of eligibility or injury were presented. These athletes' rich accounts of helpful

experiences participating in the positive exercises may also have potential implications for life skill/career service coordinators and athletic trainers in adopting positive psychology interventions into their programs.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

This study employed an existential phenomenological approach with a purposeful sample of student-athletes working with the lead researcher. Because of the chosen qualitative methodology to elicit rich descriptions of experiences participating in the intervention, the study cannot explain causality or generalize findings to other athlete populations. Future projects are encouraged to determine the effectiveness of PPIs to enhance well-being (both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives) through valid quantitative measure depicting the whole construct. Additionally, the sample lacked ample freshman athlete representation. Because of the timing of the summer intervention, most freshmen had not yet arrived on campus. Another limitation related to the specific population is that no male student-athletes are included in the sample. The lead researcher was not working with any male sports, which adds further implications to the study to understand male athletes' perceptions of positive exercises. Future researchers should consider exploring the role of positive psychology interventions in these populations. Lastly, the findings in this study are representative of two sport teams from one large public university. Future researchers are encouraged to explore other contexts for program implementation.

This intervention was not an optimal experience for all student-athletes in the study. Two athletes struggled to find the time to fully commit to the exercises in the midst of their student-athlete responsibilities. Future researchers should not be bound by a seven-week parameter involving one exercise per week and should consider adapting the intervention to tailor individual needs. In addition, some initial negative and neutral judgments were formed at the beginning of the intervention. However, athletes created more meaning from the exercises as they were challenged to think deeply and then articulate into expressive words; their achieved growth positively shaped their beliefs and attitudes. Future researchers and sport psychology consultants are advised to provide ample encouragement and support to assist each student-athlete in completing the positive exercises in their entirety.

Furthermore, this study chose six empirically validated positive exercises from positive psychology literature and adapted each exercise to fit the student-athlete population. Positive psychology is an expanding field with new efficacious exercises and resources emerging continually. Future interventions should explore other beneficial exercises that would be appropriate for student-athletes and creatively package a unique comprehensive intervention. Finally, as discussed earlier, coaches are the providers of the sport experience, and consequently, their well-being may have a direct and immediate impact on the well-being of their athletes. Exploring coach participation in positive psychology interventions would add further insight into this theory.

While the purpose of the current research was not to determine a cause and effect relationship between PPIs interventions and enhanced athlete well-being and success, it is important to note the volleyball team in this study advanced to its first conference

championship win with a record of 35-1 and produced four All-Americans. The gymnastics team in this study improved their winning percentage by 28% from the previous year. Three gymnasts suffered mid-season, season, and career ending injuries shortly after the intervention. Although follow-up interviews were not conducted, it is promising the intervention was introduced at an ideal time for these gymnasts based on the experiences of the injured athletes in this study. Five of the remaining seven gymnasts in this study posted career-highs in all of their competitive events.

If an athletic department's goal is to build and maintain successful athletic programs, it is necessary to support student-athletes' success in and beyond sport. To do so, the current study demonstrates it is necessary to implement interventions that will enhance awareness of athletes' well-being and provide tools to assist students in becoming flourishing individuals and flourishing athletes. This study revealed positive psychology interventions may be instrumental to these opportunities as they are valuable and powerful tools that build happy, meaningful, and fulfilled lives.

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## APPENDIX A

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### PARTICIPANTS COMMENTS AND THEMES: POSITIVE EMOTIONS

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Subtheme: Happiness, Joy, Feeling Good

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<i>Athlete Pseudonym</i>	<i>Meaning Unit</i>
Alyssa	Those activities we did made me happier
Anna	It makes me feel good...they all helped me in a way
Beth	Just a general feeling of happiness or just like joy
Blythe	It helped me to be happier, in general
Brandy	It makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside
Cassie	It makes you feel good as well, It just felt so great
Cody	I'm not as stressed and just, like, happy
Karla	It makes you feel happier, then you have a reason to smile
Lana	It makes me feel good
Macy	It felt good to help someone out in a way
Mallory	I mean, it made me happy, it made me feel good...
Misty	It made me feel good
Randa	It made me happy because you don't put things in perspective a lot
Sasha	It gives me joy to see other people happy
Emma	I would say happiness... joy...feeling accomplished
Lily	Our whole environment of our team just seems happier
Liz	
Morgan	It's made a big difference in how happy I've been this season vs. others
Rebel	,,,it makes me feel good that I could do that for someone else
Samantha	...it brought up happy emotions
Willow	It brings up, like, happiness

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## APPENDIX B

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### PARTICIPANTS COMMENTS AND THEMES: POSITIVE EMOTIONS

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#### Subtheme: Fun and Enjoyment

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<i>Athlete Pseudonym</i>	<i>Meaning Unit</i>
Alyssa	Well it's always fun to surprise someone with something funny
Anna	I mean it was really cool...
Beth	I really enjoyed it, it was a really cool experience for me
Blythe	I think it's exciting and is going to make our year better
Brandy	Oh, this is kind of fun to write down my experience
Cassie	Gym is so much more enjoyable
Cody	I really like it...I really liked the whole thinking process and stuff
Karla	The activities were really cool, It was fun for us
Lana	Using my strength of humor, I just had more fun that week
Macy	I really the exercises, they weren't hard to do
Mallory	I like making people smile, it's just fun
Misty	I thought it was really cool to see the outcome of it
Randa	It made me happy because you don't put things in perspective a lot
Sasha	I had a lot of fun with it, it gives you a thrill or an excitement
Emma	I really enjoyed the whole experience, because it personally helped me
Lily	It has allowed me to have more fun with volleyball again
Liz	I really enjoyed it and wish I would have been able to do it sooner
Morgan	It's just made the season more enjoyable and a lot more fun
Rebel	... overall, I really enjoyed it
Samantha	I really like it, It was a really cool experience
Willow	I mean this was really fun, like the whole activity was really fun

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## APPENDIX C

### CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

**INVESTIGATOR'S NAME: Scotta Morton**

**PROJECT # 1208164**

**STUDY TITLE: The Call for Positive Psychology Interventions in College Athletics: Building Flourishing Student-Athletes**

#### INTRODUCTION

**This consent may contain words that you may not understand. Please ask the investigator or the study staff to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.**

This is a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to participate. As a study participant you have the right to know about the procedures that will be used in this research study so that you can make the decision whether or not to participate. The information presented here is simply an effort to make you better informed so that you may give or withhold your consent to participate in this research study.

You are being asked to take partake in this research because you are a current or former competitive student-athlete who's team works extensively with the principal investigator of this study, a sport psychology intern at the University of Missouri.

In order to participate in this study, it will be necessary to give your written consent.

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#### WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

College athletes live in a world where sport becomes their main focus. With external pressures to perform and succeed and a "win at all costs" mentality, some athletes fail to find balance in their lives and find roles/identities outside that of a student-athlete. Consequently, their well-being and performance suffers.

The researchers of this study believe it is imperative that athletes receive resources to help them achieve this balance, assist them in becoming flourishing and accomplishing athletes, and increase their likelihood of leading satisfying and fulfilling lives. We believe PPI's are instrumental to this opportunity.

A significant amount of attention has been given to evidence-based positive psychology interventions (PPI's) that have been discovered to boost the well-being elements of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA). Collectively, positive psychology intervention research verifies the effectiveness of performing the PPI exercises of *three good things*, *the gratitude visit*, *identifying signature strengths*, *counting one's blessings*, *practicing acts of kindness*, and *best possible selves* to improve happiness and well-being.

Positive psychology interventions using positive exercises to maximize the elements of well-being may develop, cultivate, and build the important attributes of successful people and performers, and have an immediate and long lasting impact on the mental and physical well-being of student-athletes.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe and understand college athletes' perceptions of the influences of a comprehensive positive psychology intervention, delivered by their sport psychology consultant, aimed to improve well-being through maximizing PERMA elements. The role of the sport psychology consultant will be that of a research participant, responsible for facilitating and describing the intervention to help each athlete capture the essence of each positive exercise in their world.

#### **HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

Specifically, 24 people will be invited to take part in this study. These are all current or former competitive volleyball players and gymnasts who have worked with the principal investigator for at least one year.

#### **WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THE STUDY?**

Upon completion of the informed consent form, those who choose to participate will be provided with the treatment manual for the study explaining the details of the study, directions for performing each exercises, and validation of the exercise benefits. The comprehensive positive psychology intervention will involve seven weeks of empirically-based positive psychology exercises designed to enhance positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement.

Because of the limited time and energy athletes have in their high demand environment, participants will be responsible for performing one exercise each week in a single day. In the first assigned exercise, participants will be instructed to take the *Values in Action* Survey at [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org). They will also be instructed to write for 10-20 minutes in their manuals about the specific events and acts completed throughout the intervention as well as their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes while participating in each exercise

The researcher and group of participants will meet every week to review and reflect on the previous performed exercise, and then the next PPI exercise for the following week will be introduced and assigned. Because timing may not be feasible for some athletes to make all group meetings, the principal investigator will review and deliver specific PPI exercises over the phone or in separate consultations for these individuals.

In-depth interviews ranging from 30-45 minutes long will be conducted with each participant one month post intervention. In addition to conducting interviews, participant treatment manuals will be collected at the end of the intervention. Participants' thoughts, feelings, and attitudes while participating in each exercise will be analyzed and triangulated with interviews to provide evidence that the researcher is achieving an accurate depiction of the athletes' experiences with the positive psychology intervention.

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### **HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?**

Your participation in the 7-week positive psychology intervention will begin the week of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 and end the week of July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Interviews will be conducted starting the week of August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013. We expect to have all of the interviews completed by August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

**You can stop participating at any time.**

### **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?**

We anticipate minimal, if any, risks or discomforts for the participants. No probing questions will be asked to elicit personal information or sensitive issues.

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### **ARE THERE BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?**

We hope and intend that the information learned from this study will advance the study of well-being in the sport context and enhance the quality of delivery of sport psychology consultants.

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### **WHAT ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY?**

Each participant who chooses to participate in the study will be assigned a pseudonym after the informed consent form is signed.

The consent forms will be the only link to the participants' participation in the study. No identifying demographic information will be collected on the informed consent form. No identifying information will be released in the written transcriptions of the interviews or the treatment manuals.

Audio files will be kept for a period of 7 years after the study is completed. All audio files, signed consent forms, manuals, and interview transcriptions will remain locked in the principal investigator's office and secured in locked file cabinets and password-protected computers.

No identifying information will be released in the final structural description of the phenomenon or in the publication of findings.

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**WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A PARTICIPANT?**

**Participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this study.** If you decide to participate, you can change your mind and drop out of the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty to you the participant.

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**WHOM DO I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?**

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the University of Missouri Campus Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants' rights) at (573) 882-9585.

You may ask more questions about the study at any time. For questions about the study contact Scotta Morton (cell: 406-581-0123 email: [scottamorton1@gmail.com](mailto:scottamorton1@gmail.com)) or Dr. Rick McGuire (cell: 573-882-0727 email: [McGuireR@missouri.edu](mailto:McGuireR@missouri.edu)).

A copy of this consent form will be given to you for your own records.

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**SIGNATURE**

I confirm that the purpose of the research, the study procedures, the possible risks and discomforts as well as potential benefits that I may experience have been explained to me. Alternatives to my participation in the study also have been discussed. I have read this consent form and my questions have been answered. My signature below indicates my willingness to participate in this study.

Participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**SIGNATURE OF STUDY REPRESENTATIVE**

I have explained the purpose of the research, the study procedures, identifying those that are investigational, the possible risks and discomforts as well as potential benefits and have answered questions regarding the study to the best of my ability.

Study Representative \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### Written Reflections from Intervention Manual

**Alyssa's** reflection of a *random act of kindness*:

*What I did:* Gave a friend a door decoration taken from a magazine. It was given to me by a camper, and I re-gifted it to a friend. It had "1 Direction" on it, which is my friend's favorite band.

*How I felt in the anticipation of the act:* Excited, I knew he was going to love it! I immediately thought of him when I was given the door decoration, so I wanted to give it to him.

*How I felt when I did the act, and how I felt afterward:* I made it a surprise for him, and I was glad I could brighten his day.

*The response the recipient had, if any:* He was excited, "Oh my gosh!" He put it on his door immediately and gave me a hug. He said thank you about 8 times.

*What was helpful about this exercise?* This has been my favorite so far! I really like surprising people with small things that made me think of them or brightening their day! I really liked this one!

**Anna's** reflection of *using signature strength in new way*: Zest

When I am in the gym, I want to give a very positive outlook, and I want my other teammates to be relaxed and have a good time while getting their work done as well. I want the mood to be light and when music is playing, I don't mind anymore grooving to the beat. Dancing for me is a stress reliever, and so when I dance, it makes me feel better and it keeps the energy up in the gym. When I feel energetic and 'zesty' I feel like I can accomplish more.

I used my personal strength as a way to lighten the mood. It is more fun to do assignments and have fun while doing it than just focusing on the gymnastics part. By offering a goofy side of me, it makes me feel good when others laugh or jump in and do the same thing. I feel like it relaxes the feel of things even it is only voluntary workouts.

I feel like everyone enjoys it. It is fun to get others dancing and trying new moves or just breaking down. It relaxes everyone and it's just a fun way to get to know everyone especially when everyone is involved. I feel great because I am relieving unwanted stress and making others feel good in the process. Dancing is a stress reliever and it makes me feel energized. Also, it helps keep me positive.

**Brandy's** reflection of her *blessings*: #2 Running, #2 Being cleared to do everything  
(Choice)

Being able to run was such a thing I took for granted before I was injured. After six long months, I was finally cleared to run and jump again and it is such a blessing. I always felt really annoyed that I was never going to get cleared, but when I did, it was probably the best part of my day! I just feel relieved that I can finally run again. It always made me on edge and nervous that I wasn't even going to be on track, but I have used a lot of patience to help me through this.

Being cleared to do everything is a blessing because it shows me that I am fortunate to not have suffered what could have been a career ending injury. It is also a blessing because it taught me how to become mentally tough through hard times, which we need on this team to reach our goals.

**Karla's** reflection of her *blessings*: Choice

For the last exercise, I decided to do the "feeling blessed" activity. Lately, I've had time to finally slow things down and see how undeserving I am of everything in my life that God has blessed me with. The first thing I am so thankful for are my parents. They were the biggest blessing to my life. What are the chances that out of all of the little Korean babies who needed adoption, and out of all the families in America that wanted adoption, I got paired with the coolest people. They have given me so many opportunities, it's unreal. I don't know why God gave me these two people in my life to guide me that are so wise, full of unconditional love, and just level-headed. Over the years, I've seen a lot of friends whose parents didn't have it all together and had a negative impact on them. I'm so blessed to have seriously great people to help me down my path to life and to help me grow. They have taught me hard work, discipline, how to save my money, how to love others, and the list could go on and on. I thank God everyday to have such amazing role models.

**Lana's** reflection of *three good things*: #3 Positive Coaching

I was vaulting today and I've been working on fixing my run and hurdle. In the past, this has been a challenging thing for me because I can be hard headed with corrections sometimes. So it's been about a week I've been practicing the new change, and Coach hadn't seen it for a week because he's been out of the gym a lot. He just simply said after my first vault that what we had changed looked really good and natural now.

It made me feel good because I thought it showed him I had worked hard even when he wasn't there to coach me. His positiveness made me feel more positive and happy with the new change on the vault.

It went well because in the past I wouldn't have adjusted well. I think it also proved to Coach that I listen to him and work on his changes even when he isn't there. It means a lot because he can trust me and I can trust him.

I can simply have more of this good thing by listening to all the coaches when they have new ways of teaching skills. As long as I have an open mind, I will get positive results.

**Macy's best possible self:**

There are many things I would like to accomplish in my future life. In the next couple of years I will be graduated from physical therapy school with a doctorate degree. By that time I will have moved back to Chicago and started a new job in an acute hospital. I will be working with people who suffer from neurological problems and helping them gain mobility. I will be making a large enough salary to be financially stable and own a car and hopefully a house or an apartment in the city. I will be close to my family and see them often. Also, I will have a close group of friends that support me. My job would also give me enough free time to help coach gymnastics on the side, ideally at a high school, even if it was just voluntarily. A little farther into the future I will find a great guy and get married. Eventually we may have kids, but I would continue my career in PT. In the future, I also will continue to be active and healthy. I will be committed to fitness and workout regularly. If possible, I will get into running more and work my way up to run the Chicago Marathon. I would also be able to travel and see many different places I have never seen. I would love to see Europe and Australia someday.

**Mallory's gratitude letter:**

Jane,

Where do I even begin... I really did not see this coming at all. I am so sorry about what has happened. How are you? I hope you're doing okay. How are Bailey and Matt doing?

I cannot express how much this team and myself are going to miss you. You have given up so much and come so far to be a part of this team. You've taken us in as your own children and opened up your life and your home for each one of us. You gave your all to each of us inside and outside of the gym every day and there is no doubt in my mind that you will continue to do great things! You are an amazing coach and woman and anyone would be stupid to not hire you. I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done for us and myself especially.

When you got here, I was doing single back handsprings on the low beam and look how far I have come. That was all you. You showed me that I was capable of doing beam when everyone else had given up on trying to help me. You took the time to help me fix my bad habits (maybe not completely, but you definitely made a huge dent lol). I don't know if some of those habits can be completely fixed... I can be a little special sometimes, but I will definitely keep trying. You taught me how to have confidence and definitely showed me to face my fears, especially through my concussion and getting

back on that beam. You know as well as anyone that that was one of the hardest things I've dealt with, but you didn't doubt that I would overcome it for a second. Gymnastics, especially beam, is a mental game and you have helped me to become mentally tough and not give up in the tiniest bit of weakness or struggle or fear. You taught me to have confidence and trust in myself. There is no doubt in my mind that that 9.9 at SEC's was a true reflection of you, your work ethic, and your abilities as a coach as well as mine.

Thank you so much for being our rock and foundation this past year through all of our struggles. No one else saw you, but after Katelyn tore her achillies in Colorado I went to the bathroom. On my way back, I looked out the door and saw you outside looking at the mountains bawling. Not that your love for this team is ever questionable, but in that moment it was apparent and showed how much you truly care for this team. I completely admire the way you were able to walk back into that arena and have a kick butt attitude like you always do, just for us even though I knew that your heart was broken inside. It takes a true leader to show that kind of support when they are completely torn down.

Please keep your head up and keep pushing forward. You've always told us to Attack, Get after it, Don't afraid to be good, and to believe in ourselves. Please do not give up on your desire to be a college coach. You do have what it takes and I know that you will go on to do great things. Now is when you need encouragement and every single one of us is here to give it to you when needed. Please do not be afraid to ask. It says a lot about someone who can do things by there self, but asking for help can be the single most courageous thing that we can do sometimes. You have let us into every part of your life and given us your all and we would love to do the same for you.

If there is anything at all that we can do, please let me know. I am currently at the lake, but I will be back Sunday afternoon until Tuesday morning some time. I will be back on the 27th at some point. I would love to get together with you if possible.

There is so much more that I could say, but I will wrap it up... Basically, I LOVE YOU, I'LL MISS YOU TIMES INFINITY, & GOOD LUCK (not that you need it)!!! ;)

Hope to see you soon!

Thank you Thank you Thank you!

**Misty's** reflection of *using signature strength in new way*: Forgiveness & Mercy

Blythe and Randa were very rude and mean to me for the first months we knew each other. They ridiculed and made fun of me to each other and other people. This made me want to stay in my shell even more than before and I constantly thought that I was worthless in all social aspects of my life. Finally, a good friend was able to call Blythe out on how mean she was being. This made me realize that the way she treated me was not good and could seriously affect me in terrible ways. She was able to apologize for being so mean.



I used my strength of forgiveness to help mend our relationship. It took me awhile to fully trust that she was being genuine with me, but I knew I would be able to accept the friendship in full force. I could trust that she wasn't intentionally trying to belittle me or lower my confidence and that she truly wanted the best for me. I knew that some aspects of her personality were going to have to mature before she could truly be genuine. But I accepted the situation because I had hope for the future. Me holding a grudge would have only been bad for our relationship and our team.

Blythe and I are now best friends. I can trust her for almost anything. There is no way that I would be where I am today without forgiveness. I feel proud of myself that I could overcome the obstacle and have such great things resulting from it.

**Sandra's gratitude letter:**

Dear Barbara,

I wanted to thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in this study abroad program. I can't even begin to explain how much this program and trip has meant to me. I want to show you my appreciation by writing a gratitude letter even though it is not nearly enough.

First, I wanted to thank you for all the work and effort you have put in to making this program available and possible. It is a study abroad program that goes beyond credits. It is a once in a lifetime experience and it would have never been possible without you.

Secondly, I wanted to thank you for bringing in and introducing us to all the guest speakers. I can only imagine how much time goes into planning and organizing everything. It has been very interesting to listen and learn from different people from different areas of expertise.

Thirdly, Thank you for being flexible with the schedule and with us. I know it must have been difficult trying to keep track of everyone at the same time. Thank you for taking care of us like we were your own children, always making sure that we were always in good hands and helping us overcome any challenge and obstacle that came our way.

Especially thank you for letting us be a part of your life and for showing us your home country and for introducing us to this amazing and new culture.

Some of the information and stories we have heard and the pictures and memorial sites we have seen have been hard to deal with, but having you among us has helped. You are the strongest woman I know. I admire your strength and work ethic and hope that one day I will be as passionate as you and make a difference in people's lives like you do each day.

I cannot forget to thank you for all the internships you arranged for me. I know you put a lot of thought behind each and every internship and it has been very exciting. Not only

did I have fun teaching girls different sports and games and help contribute, but it was also nice to hear about other people's internships as well.

The month and our time here is almost up. I will be going back to Norway and then USA to continue my studies with one experience richer. I might not exactly know how the time in Africa has impacted my life and how I can use this experience in the future, but I know it will always have a special place in my heart. You have given me something no other course or class could have...an indescribable experience, long lasting memories, and a new perspective on life. I hope I some day will be able to pay you back.

Thank you again for this opportunity and for being who you are...an inspiration for all.

**Emma's** reflection of *three good things*: #2 Received positive feedback from a coach

We were having a tough lifting workout, but I was doing a lot of weight still. My coach commented and said, "Great job Em, keep it up!" That really got me excited and made me feel good. It made me feel really good about myself, and what I was doing. I felt happiness, joy, success, and it really made me want to keep doing a lot of weight. It helped push me through the tough workout.

This went well for me because it gave me motivation to push through the tough workout and keep doing more weight. This really meant a lot to me because it means my coach cares about me and my success. I can have more of this good thing in the future by continuing to work hard and that will help me get more positive feedback.

**Lily's** reflection of her *best possible self*:

In the future, I see myself graduating from Mizzou with my special education degree. I see myself wanting to go to physical therapy school somewhere where I can be with Mike. He will be finished with school and have his finance degree. Maybe he can find a job in St. Louis or Columbia while I finish up physical therapy school. Ideally though, Mike will be playing pro or on the national team so we will probably still be doing long distance. I will finish up school hopefully and go to whatever country Mike is in, and I want to start a non-profit organization to help families with disabled that can't afford to help themselves. I would love to go to Africa and live there for a little while and help some villages accept and find the beauty in the disabled. Ghana would be awesome. After a year or so of traveling and helping the disabled, I would love to be engaged and hopefully married if Mike and I are financially stable enough. I want to move close to family, especially my parents because it meant so much to me to have my grandparents close by. Kirkwood would be an awesome area to live in. I want an old house that has been fixed up and a wrap around porch. I want a big yard for the two German Shepard puppies that I will get. I love porch swings and flower boxes. Hopefully, I can have kids soon after the marriage and house because I think it is important for kids to have parents that are still semi young and energetic. People are getting married too late. I want five kids...it doesn't matter what gender. Once my kids get a little older, I want to pursue my dream with my career (hopefully I hadn't stopped volunteering or even working part

time). I would love to work at Ranken Jordan Pediatric Hospital and work with special needs kids w/ PT. During the summer or at least once a year, I want to take my family overseas and do missionary work.

**Liz's reflection of *using signature strength in new way*: Humor**

I can think a lot of situations where I would use humor to maybe lighten the mood or brighten up someone's day. But...this situation I used was during 6am workouts with my team when things always don't go our way sometimes. It's hard to stay motivated. The workouts are extremely tough and people sometimes lose their focus or feel as if they can't do the workout.

I used my personal strength to keep the mood light and fun. People seem to respond well when they have a teammate that makes them laugh. I try to take the pressure off performing by distracting their negative thoughts. I do this quite often and most of the time I don't even realize that I'm doing it. Being funny is a strength for me and not really something I have to work at.

The result of using my personal strength was everyone made it through the workout and most importantly, enjoyed it. I think that using my humor always results in a positive way. I felt great while using it. I enjoy to make people laugh and want to make my team become stronger in all aspects.

**Willow's gratitude letter:**

Dear Paul,

Playing for you was the hardest thing I've had to do. You pushed me harder than I have ever been pushed. You showed me that although you can put up boundaries, you can break them. I never thought I was going to make it that year because I had never experienced anything like that. At such a young age, I learned about pushing my limits and learned that greatness is possible if you believe it is. While playing for you, I hated you. I hated you because to me, I was going through hell and I could do nothing about it. After that year was over, after we became the #1 team in the country, I realized how thankful I was for you. If I had never played for you, I wouldn't have learned what I learned. You helped me become a better all around player and for that I thank you. Without you, I might not be playing at Mizzou now and might have not gotten the opportunities that I've had. I can't imagine not playing for you and where I would be without you. Thank you Ping for everything you have done and taught me.

## APPENDIX E

*Welcome to “The Call for Positive Psychology Interventions in College Athletics: Building Flourishing Student-Athletes”!*

### **Why is this study being performed?**

College athletes live in a world where sport becomes their main focus. With external pressures to perform and succeed and a “win at all costs” mentality, some athletes fail to find balance in their lives and roles/identities outside that of a student-athlete, attribute failure to their overall self-worth, struggle to form interpersonal relationships, find difficulty with transitions out of sport, experience reduced enjoyment and satisfaction in competition, use ineffective coping strategies to deal with acute and chronic injuries, experience high levels of anxiety, and are subjected to overtraining and burnout. Consequently, their well-being and performance suffer!

The researchers of this study believe it is imperative that athletes receive resources to help them achieve this balance, assist them in becoming flourishing and accomplishing athletes, and increase their likelihood of leading satisfying and fulfilling lives. We believe PPI’s are instrumental to this opportunity.

A significant amount of attention has been given to evidence-based positive psychology interventions (PPI’s) that have been discovered to boost the well-being elements of **positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement (PERMA)**. Collectively, positive psychology intervention research verifies the effectiveness of performing the PPI exercises of *three good things, the gratitude visit, identifying signature strengths, counting one’s blessings, practicing acts of kindness, and best possible selves* to improve happiness and well-being.

Positive psychology interventions using positive exercises to maximize the elements of well-being may develop, cultivate, and build the important attributes of SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE and PERFORMERS, and have an immediate and long lasting impact on the mental and physical well-being of student-athletes.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe and understand college athletes’ perceptions of the influences of a comprehensive positive psychology intervention, delivered by their sport psychology consultant, aimed to improve well-being through maximizing PERMA elements. The role of the sport psychology consultant will be that of a research participant, responsible for facilitating and describing the intervention to help each athlete capture the essence of each positive exercise in their world.

### **What is my role?**

The comprehensive positive psychology intervention will involve seven weeks of empirically-based positive psychology exercises designed to enhance positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement.

Because of the limited time and energy athletes have in their high demand environment, participants will be responsible for performing one exercise each week in a single day. They will also be instructed to write for about 20 minutes in their manuals about the specific events and acts completed throughout the intervention as well as their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes while participating in each exercise.

The researcher and group of participants will meet every week to review and reflect on the previous performed exercise, and then the next PPI exercise for the following week will be introduced and assigned. Because timing may not be feasible for some athletes to make all group meetings, the consultant will review and deliver specific PPI exercises over the phone or in separate consultations for these individuals.

In-depth interviews ranging from 30-45 minutes long will be conducted with each participant one month post intervention. In addition to conducting interviews, participant treatment manuals will be collected at the end of the intervention.

### **So what is this ‘positive psychology’ anyway?**

Positive psychology is an area of psychology that is interested in helping people to experience more happiness and well-being through the discovery and building of strengths as opposed to solely fixing weaknesses and treating mental disorders. Increasing human flourishing is the main goal of positive psychology. Flourishing is described as living within an optimal range for human functioning that implies goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience.

There is an increasing amount of scientific research about the lasting power of positive psychology. At this stage, positive psychology exercises have been studied in over 4000 individuals, and they can improve mood, quality of life, and health.

### **Is happiness really under my control?**

Yes. It appears that almost half of a person’s happiness is directly under one’s own control (the rest is determined by genetics and life circumstances), and specific intentional activities (using your strengths, performing kind acts for others, or thinking about your best possible future) can maximize positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Like other activities that can benefit health, positive psychology exercises take practice, and there will be some exercises that may really be a great match for you while others may be less effective. But with some effort, we believe that you will discover positive psychology activities that you will enjoy and that will provide you with lasting benefit.

## **What are some myths about happiness?**

*“My circumstances have to change before I could possibly feel happy.”*

It is common to believe that if only something about the circumstances of our lives would change, then we would be happy. It is normal to think that finding a job, getting accepted into a prestigious grad school, winning a conference championship, having a successful win/loss record, buying a new car, attaining our ideal body size and shape, or having a life partner are required before one can achieve happiness.

However, this “I will be happy WHEN \_\_\_\_\_” thinking can really get in the way of happiness, since that circumstance may never happen. Furthermore, even if the desired event does happen, most people find that their level of happiness returns to its old level, even within a few months!

Though circumstances have an impact on happiness, there is no question that people can improve their level of happiness without a change in circumstances. In fact, it appears that intentional activity (like the exercises you will be completing) has a more powerful effect on happiness than life events! **So you do not need to wait until your circumstances change to feel more satisfied with your life.**

*“You are either a happy person or not—you either have it or you don’t.”*

It is true that genetics play a significant role in how happy people are—you may know some people who seem to be happy no matter what the circumstances are, and others who have a hard time feeling happy no matter what. However, through specific exercises, a person can improve his or her happiness and well-being (both short-term and long-term) through intentional activity, no matter what their “happiness set point” may be. In many ways, becoming happier is a lot like acquiring a new sport skill. Some athletes can learn physical skills more easily than others. But, with concentrated effort and practice, even those of us who have difficulty in the beginning will eventually master the new skill. Similarly, some people have found it a great struggle to experience happiness, but with intentional effort to increase the various PERMA elements of well-being, it is possible to feel happier.

## **Are these exercises applicable to my life as a student-athlete?**

Certainly some of the activities may at first sound superficial. Perhaps some of them will feel that way even after you try them, and may not feel like a good fit for you. Keep in mind that these exercises have been selected because there is evidence in scientific studies that they help people to feel happier. We encourage you to give each of the activities a try—as clichéd as they might seem—because many people find that the exercise actually ends up having a much more powerful effect than they expected.

Do you remember the first time you tried to ride a bike, type a paper, or perform a volleyball or gymnastic skill? Those activities may have felt quite unnatural or difficult at first, but with some practice they became easier, more natural, and more fun. Even if one of the exercises never feels right, even after an honest effort, one of the other exercises might really improve your happiness or well-being. This study will give you a chance to try many different exercises, and at least some of them may fit you really well.

### **Any advice for completing these exercises?**

We think that you might have the best success by keeping four important things in mind:

1. Mindfulness: During many of these exercises, it may be easy to have lots of negative thoughts creep in. This is normal; after all, you have various competing athletic, academic, and social demands. It is not at all unexpected that you would have distressing or hopeless thoughts stemming from pressures to perform in a highly competitive environment. Indeed, staying in the moment can be a real challenge.

Still, an important skill for these exercises (and for life!) is to be able to return your focus to the moment and to the positive emotional exercise that you are completing. If you notice yourself “heading negative,” it can be very helpful to deliberately and nonjudgmentally “turn your mind” back to the moment and to the exercise you are completing. You will hear about this a lot in the exercise instructions.

2. Novelty: Many of these exercises ask you to perform a mental or physical act. When we tested these exercises out for ourselves, we found that thinking about something new or trying something a little different can be much more powerful than a usual thought or act, even if the usual way is a positive one. For example, we found that when doing acts of kindness, doing something that wasn’t part of our daily routine boosted our happiness a lot more. Similarly, when we wrote letters of gratitude, we wrote about something for which we hadn’t already thanked that person. You too may find that doing something newer and different can give you a burst of positive feeling and may feel more meaningful.

3. Naming positive emotions: Finally, we will encourage you to work on developing a greater vocabulary for positive emotions. Rather than just feeling “good,” we think that by understanding and labeling your good feelings more specifically (like “joy” or “amusement” or “pride” or “awe”), it will be easier to more fully recognize and savor the positive events and feelings in your life.

4. Willingness: Even after all of this, you still may feel skeptical or unmotivated. Give the exercises a try! You may surprise yourself by being able to complete more of the activities than you expected, and may get more of a boost than you anticipated.

## USING SIGNATURE STRENGTHS IN NEW WAYS

Completed on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ time spent \_\_\_\_\_ min

As college athletes, we spend a lot of time working on our “weaknesses.” In some ways, this makes sense—if we hope to be more skilled or function at a higher level, it may be quite useful to improve areas of deficiency. At the same time, it can be hard—and not a lot of fun—to focus only on our weaknesses, and it can lead us to forget some of our best characteristics.

In contrast to only focusing on weaknesses, using our personal strengths can be really satisfying. These are areas in which we have natural interests and skills, and it can be gratifying to have a sense of mastering something. It can also be nice to “show off” our strengths to friends and strangers alike, so they get to see some of our best qualities. Finally, it’s satisfying to just remember that we do have some remarkable abilities by reconnecting with forgotten or underused talents.

Forest, Mageau, Crevier-Braud, Bergeron (2012) found participants who performed *identifying signature strengths* and *using signature strengths in new ways* within the work context achieved higher levels of well-being. Discovering, implementing, and maximizing one’s signature strengths in the workplace led to an increase in “harmonious passion,” consequently predicting more life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and vitality.

“Harmonious passion” is defined as a result of an autonomous internalization of an activity into one’s identity. Individuals are motivated to freely engage in an activity that is both intrinsically important to them and is in harmony with other aspects of their lives. “Harmonious passion” allows individuals to focus fully on the task at hand, cultivate positive experiences both during and after the activity, engage in or disengage from the activity willingly, and achieve flow experiences.

**It is argued that a strength-based approach allows athletes to harness and build their best constructive selves. Through the awareness of their valuable personal resources, athletes will be more engaged and motivated to deliver their optimal performance. In fact, it appears that using strengths can boost self-esteem, increase energy, reduce stress, and increase feelings of productivity.**

I



In this exercise, we will be identifying some of your signature strengths through the *Values in Action* survey, and then you will be instructed to use one of your strengths in some way over the next 24 hours.

The purpose of this exercise is to encourage you to own your “signature strengths” by finding a *new and/or more frequent use* of one such strength. First, you will need to pick one of your signature strengths. As described by Martin Seligman, a strength may be considered a *signature* strength if any of the following criteria apply:

Exercise:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity (“This is the real me.”)
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first
- A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced
- A desire to find new ways to use it
- A feeling of inevitability in using the strength (“Try and stop me.”)
- Invigoration rather than exhaustion while using the strength
- The creation and pursuit of personal projects that revolve around it
- Joy, zest, and enthusiasm while using the strength

This exercise has two parts:

1. You will complete the Values In Action Survey at [www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org) to discover your top 5 signature strengths. The Values in Action (VIA) of Character Strengths is located under “Engagement Questionnaires.” After you click on the survey, you will first need to create a login and password at this website. After you have created a free account, you will then complete the 240 question survey (roughly 20 minutes to complete).
2. You will then identify one signature strength and review it with your trainer. You will use that strength in some new way in the next week and will record how you used it, the result, and how you felt.

## The VIA Classification of Character Strengths

(Retrieved from <http://www.viacharacter.org>, updated Oct. 23, 2008)

**WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE** – Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

**Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it

**Curiosity** [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering

**Judgment & Open-Mindedness** [critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly

**Love of Learning:** Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows

**Perspective** [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

**COURAGE** – Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

**Bravery** [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it

**Perseverance** [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks

**Honesty** [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions

**Zest** [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

**HUMANITY** - Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

**Capacity to Love and Be Loved:** Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

**Kindness** [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them

**Social Intelligence** [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

**JUSTICE** - Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

**Teamwork** [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share

**Fairness:** Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.

**Leadership:** Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the time maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.

**TEMPERANCE** – Strengths that protect against excess

**Forgiveness & Mercy:** Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful

**Modesty & Humility:** Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is

**Prudence:** Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted

**Self-Regulation** [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

**TRANSCENDENCE** - Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

**Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence** [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

**Gratitude:** Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks

**Hope** [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

**Humor** [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes

**Religiousness & Spirituality** [faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

Visit <http://www.viacharacter.org> for more information about the VIA.

## THREE GOOD THINGS

Completed on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ time spent \_\_\_\_\_ min

Sometimes we can think too much about what goes wrong in our lives as student-athletes and not enough about what goes right. Of course, sometimes it makes sense to analyze bad events so that we can learn from them and avoid them in the future. However, it can be easy to overdo this focus on the negative, and a tendency to ruminate on bad events can set us up for anxiety, depression, and poor performances in and out of our competitive environment.

One way to keep this from happening is to develop our ability to think about the good in life. Most of us are not *nearly* as good at savoring and appreciating good events as we are at analyzing bad events, so this is a skill that needs practice. As you become better at focusing on the good in your life, you may become more grateful for what you have and more hopeful about the future.

The following exercise will ask you to identify three good things in your life. When you are trying to identify positive events in your life, maintaining a focus on the present—being “mindful” of each moment—can really help. By working to stay present and aware of what is happening right now, you may find it much easier to appreciate a good thing that is happening—and harder to stay stuck in a cycle of resentment or disappointment. This mindfulness can take practice, but can really help you to savor good things that are happening right now.

**I have been feeling low and my training is not going well—how can I possibly identify good things that are happening in my life?**

It is certainly true that it may at first seem very hard to identify positive events in the midst of great difficulty. For this very reason, now may be the most important time to remember that good things—even small ones—can happen, even in the midst of a serious injury, rough season, tough transition, or depression. If you get skilled at focusing your attention on pleasant moments that happen during a day as a student-athlete—a kind gesture from someone, a teammate/coach who listens, a greatly-appreciated phone call or email, good news about family or friends—you may even find it much easier to use these skills once the good things in your life are more obvious.

**Your assignment is as follows:**

Take 15 minutes to complete this exercise. Use this time to write down three things that went well this week. Use the space below to write about the events—it is important that you have a physical record of what you wrote. It is not enough to do this exercise in your head. The things you list can be relatively small in importance (“My roommate made me my favorite cookies.”) or relatively large in importance (“I got accepted into grad school.”) The second part of this exercise is to record the reasons WHY these three things went well.

As you write, follow these instructions:

1. Give the event a title (e.g., “My coach gave me very positive feedback on my effort.”)
2. Write down exactly what happened in as much detail as possible, including what you did or said, and if other people were involved, what they did or said.
3. Record how this event made you feel at the time. One goal is to help you use different positive emotional words to describe how you felt: Joyful? Inspired? Hopeful? Proud?
4. Record WHY this event went well (e.g., “I brought a fully positive and connected focus from start to finish.”)
5. Record how can you have more of this good thing in the future.

Some important tips:

The goal of the exercise is to remember the good event and then enjoy the good emotions that come with it. Don’t analyze the event itself in too much detail—the important thing here is being able to:

- *Experience and savor* the positive emotion, and then
- *Name and describe* that positive feeling as specifically as possible—not just that you felt “good.”
- If you find yourself focusing on negative feelings or emotions, turn your mind from the negative feeling and refocus yourself on the good event and the positive feelings that came along with it. This can take effort, but gets easier with practice and can make a real difference in how you feel.

## BEST POSSIBLE SELF

Today you will be doing an exercise that focuses on optimism.

*Why does optimistic thinking boost happiness?*

**First, optimism can help you to persevere and succeed.** If you're optimistic about the future—for example, you're confident that you'll be able to achieve your lifelong goals—you will invest effort in reaching those goals. For this reason, optimistic thoughts can be self-fulfilling—if you set a goal (like winning a conference championship, achieving a 4.0 next semester, or improving your relationship with your coach, teammates, or family members) and are optimistic about attaining it, you may persist in the plan even when you hit inevitable obstacles or when you have a setback. Not surprisingly, optimists are more likely to stick with a goal and to succeed in reaching it.

**Second, optimistic thinking can improve our ability to cope with stressful situations.** Another important way that optimism can enhance happiness is by prompting us to engage in active and effective coping. There is a great deal of evidence that optimists routinely maintain high levels of well-being and mental health during times of stress. For example, they appear to cope well with difficult health situations (such as dealing with an athletic injury), and are more likely to accept the situation, make the best of it, and even grow from it. Because feeling optimistic can make a person feel that their situation can change for the better, optimists may be more likely to make plans to attack the problem and to rally support from professionals and friends to overcome barriers.

**Finally, cultivating optimism can lead to more energy, higher morale, and more motivation.** You may not be surprised to learn that optimistic thinking promotes positive moods, vitality, and high morale. Studies show that optimists are also more likely to report a sense of mastery, and may have less anxiety and depression. It feels good to believe that your prospects are bright. If you have something to look forward to, you will feel energized, motivated, and enthusiastic. You will feel good about yourself, feel able to control your destiny, and, according to studies, even be better liked by others. In short, there are a lot of benefits that come from increasing your optimism, even if this is not natural for you.

*Does this really work?*

You may be skeptical about this. Making oneself “think positive” or “look on the bright side” perhaps seems foolish or far too simplistic. Perhaps you're a person who “sees things as they really are” above all else—that is, your primary motivation is to perceive yourself and your world in a realistic manner. In this view, reframing negative events in a positive and optimistic way or anticipating a sunny future would actually be wrong or, at the very least, unrealistic.

Being optimistic involves a choice about how you see the world. It **doesn't** mean denying the negative or avoiding all unfavorable information. It also **doesn't** mean constantly trying to control situations that cannot be controlled. Indeed, research shows that optimists are more, rather than less, aware of risks and threats (they don't have blinders on) and are aware that positive outcomes depend on their efforts—they don't wait around for good things to happen. In the end, you should aim for a “flexible optimism” that uses optimism when called for, but also seeing clearly and acknowledging problems when that approach is called for.

### **Best Possible Self**

*Completed on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ time spent \_\_\_\_\_ min*

Laura King suggests writing about one's life goals contributes to happiness and well-being through self-regulation. Those who can focus on and visualize their life goals may be more successful in the pursuit through increased feelings of competence and intrinsic motivation as well as an enhanced sense of control and awareness of personal values. Tony

Ghaye suggests that narrative reflective writing of “best-selves” and “possible best-selves” encourages not only a healthy perspective of sport, such as winning with integrity and care, but also promotes a positive portrayal of who athletes are at their personal best and supports positive action to future success and who they would like to become.

This Best Possible Self exercise might help you see the “big picture” of your life. It may provide a feeling of control (such as, “I now see a new way for my dream to come true.”) and may also help you recognize and reduce conflict among your goals and the obstacles that might stand in your way (such as, “Should I be more cautious of how I structure and prioritize my life?”) All those things may ultimately make you happier.

#### Exercise:

Please take a moment to think about your best possible life in the future with respect to your accomplishments. This could include meeting your goals in any number of different areas including school, athletics, raising children, friendships, health, hobbies, or volunteering.

Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. Perhaps you were able to meet your goal to volunteer twice a week. Or you graduated from school and found work in the area you love the most. Maybe you were able to raise two young children and help them to be happy, healthy, bright, and kind. Or perhaps your future could hold something else important to you and your happiness—really immersing yourself in a long-lost hobby, or maintaining participation in the sport you love.

Even if you do not currently have specific goals in these areas, imagine what you might want to accomplish once your college athletic career is over—feel free to dream, and to have fun with this exercise!

***An important note:*** It may be easy for this exercise to lead you to examine how your current life may not match this ‘best possible future.’ You may think about ways in which accomplishing goals has been very difficult for you in the past, or about financial/time/social barriers to being able to make these accomplishments happen. For the purpose of this exercise, however, we encourage you to focus on the future—imagine a brighter future in which you are your best self and your circumstances change just enough to make these accomplishments more possible.

**Instructions:**

For the next 15 minutes, please write continuously about what you imagined about this best possible future. Use the instructions below to help guide you through this process:

1. Be as creative and imaginative as you desire.
2. Use whatever writing style you please, but remember to imagine your ideal life in the FUTURE.
3. Do not worry about perfect grammar and spelling.
4. If you find yourself focused on current or past letdowns: we encourage you to turn your mind back to brighter future possibilities, even if they might seem slightly farfetched right now.
5. This exercise is most useful when it is very specific—if you think about having a house, describe what the house would look like and the neighborhood you might imagine in your best possible future. If you think about a job, imagine exactly what you would do, who you would work with, and where it would be. The more specific you are, the more engaged you will be in the exercise and the more you’ll get out of it. Have fun being creative with these details!

Write in the space on the next page.



## COUNTING ONE'S BLESSINGS

Completed on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ time spent \_\_\_\_\_ min

Sometimes we get so immersed in our demanding daily routine and high paced action of sport, we often forget to remember things we are grateful for. To some people, thinking about things one is grateful for comes naturally. But for others, this does not.

One way to keep this from happening is to develop our ability to think about our blessings in life. Most of us are not *nearly* as good at savoring and appreciating blessings as we are at analyzing things we are missing in life, so this is a skill that needs practice.

As you become better at focusing on the good in your life, you may become more grateful for what you have and more hopeful about the future.

Robert Emmons calls gratitude a “felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life.” Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough found undergraduates who listed their blessings weekly experienced a more positive and optimistic mindset, engaged in more physical activity, reported fewer physical symptoms, were more likely to offer emotional support to others, and a shared a greater sense of connection to others.

Also, sport psychology researchers found dispositional gratitude (general gratitude felt toward daily life and people) was positively associated with team satisfaction and life satisfaction, and negatively associated with athlete burnout. In a stronger relationship between gratitude and well-being, sport-domain gratitude (gratitude felt toward the coach, teammates, and sport experience) was positively associated with team satisfaction and negatively associated with athlete burnout.

### **Why does counting one's blessings work?**

Gratitude creates opportunities to build perceived social support by demonstrating more appreciation of others. Gratitude may also bring things or people that we have forgotten to appreciate back to our attention. Expressing gratitude puts you back “in the moment,” assists you in evaluating your life more favorably, and helps cope with up the obstacles and adversity faced in out and of the sports arena.

**Your assignment is as follows:**

Take 15 minutes to complete this exercise. There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Think back over the past week and write down up to five things in your life you are grateful or thankful for. These might include particular supportive relationships, sacrifices or contributions others have made for you, facts about your life such as advantages and opportunities, or even grateful for life itself, and the world we live in. In all of these cases you are identifying previously unappreciated aspects of your life, for which you can be thankful.

As you write, follow these instructions:

1. Give the blessing a title (e.g., “waking up in the morning ,the generosity of friends, for wonderful parents, for the opportunity to play the sport I love, for my education, to God for giving me determination”)
2. Write down the reasons for each blessing in as much detail as possible.
3. Record how each blessing makes you think and feel.

## GRATITUDE LETTER

Completed on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ time spent \_\_\_\_\_ min

As discussed in *counting one's blessings*, being able to feel gratitude is an important part of having a satisfying life. In fact, growing research is finding that life satisfaction depends far less on actual events, and far more on *what we decide to pay attention to*. To paraphrase a famous author, "Every life has enough good events for unrelenting joy, and enough bad events for sustained misery." One important and enjoyable way to experience gratitude is to think of a time when another person made a kind gesture toward you that resulted in joy, relief, serenity, or other good feelings.

Please take some time to think back over the past several years of your life and remember an instance when someone did something for you for which you are extremely grateful. For example, think of the people – parents, teachers, coaches, teammates, relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, doctors/therapists/nurses, employers, and so on – who have been especially kind to you but have never heard you fully express your gratitude.

When preparing for this exercise, **it may be most helpful to select a person or act that you haven't thought about for a while**—something that isn't always on your mind. Or if you do choose a person to whom you often feel grateful, it can be helpful to think about a different act (or aspect of the act) than the ones for which you usually feel grateful or express gratitude. It may be more helpful to bring these events out of the "back" of your mind than to select something that you often think about.

Now, for the next 15 minutes, write a gratitude letter to one of these individuals. Use the instructions below to help guide you through this process:

1. Use whatever format you like, but remember to write as though you are directly addressing the individual you are grateful to. If it is helpful to start the letter with “Dear so-and-so,” or end with “Sincerely, XXX,” feel free to do so.
2. Do not worry about perfect grammar and spelling.
3. Describe in specific terms why you are grateful to this individual and how the individual’s behavior affected your life. Focus on the specific parts of the behavior that most affected you and the details about how this affected you afterward.
4. Describe what you are doing now and how often you remember their efforts.
5. Although you are welcome to show or give this letter to anyone you please, for the purposes of this study, the letter you write is a private document in which you can express your gratitude freely without intent to deliver it to the person to whom you are writing it. **Feel free to take your gratitude letter out of the manual!**

Write the letter on the next page. When you next speak with your positive psychology trainer, you will review the letter and how you felt during and after writing the letter.

## ACTS OF KINDNESS

Completed on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ time spent \_\_\_\_\_ min

This exercise will focus on kindness, and performing kind acts for others.

### Why does doing kind deeds make people happy?

1. Being kind and generous **can lead you to perceive others more positively or more charitably** (“My teammate really appreciated me helping her today. Maybe she is nicer than I thought and is just having a hard time.”) and **fosters a heightened sense of interdependence and cooperation in your social community** (“We all must pitch in to improve the environment.”)
2. Kind acts can **relieve guilt or discomfort over others’ difficulties and encourage an appreciation for your own good fortune**. Helping others can make you feel advantaged (and thankful) by comparison (e.g., “I’m grateful I have the opportunity to participate in college athletics.”) Providing kindness or assistance to someone else can deliver a welcome distraction from your own ruminations and troubles, and can put things in perspective.
3. A considerable benefit of kindness is its **positive impact on self-esteem and self-perception**. When you commit acts of kindness, you may begin to view yourself as an altruistic and compassionate person. Studies find that helping others or volunteering for a worthy cause helps people to see their own abilities, resources, and expertise, and gives a greater feeling of control over their life.
4. Finally, **kindness can jump-start a cascade of positive social consequences**. Helping others leads people to like you, to appreciate you, and to offer gratitude. In our research, we have found that a chief reason that being kind to others made our participants happier was how much the recipients appreciated their kind acts. As an added benefit, by acting kind toward others, it may also lead people to reciprocate in *your* times of need. But, even without reciprocation, a person can become happy by acting kindly toward others.

### **Hold on! I’m feeling overloaded and stressed out with all of my student-athlete responsibilities. What if I don’t have time to perform random acts for others?**

It is sometimes helpful to perform kind acts exactly *when* you are not feeling your best. As noted, these acts can help to distract you from a difficult situation, or take you away from being “stuck” in a series of negative ruminations about yourself and your life. Furthermore, some people find that it is helpful to have external motivation to be active and involved with others—you may find it easier to be engaged with the world if you are doing it with a purpose to help others, rather than for yourself.

**I'm a very busy college-athlete. What kind of things could I possibly do here?**

As long as acts are consciously and intentionally done to help others, they can be small and simple, or big and important. Opening a door for someone, chatting with someone who looks lonely, or offering support to someone are all possible ideas. Furthermore, a phone call, email, or letter to another person outside your performance arena can also be a kind gesture that may connect you with your outside life.

**Exercise:**

Please take some time to think about three kind acts that you could perform today to help people in your life; it could be for someone you know or for a stranger. These generous acts should be something that is not normally required in your life, but that goes above and beyond what you typically do. Furthermore, these kind acts should involve some sacrifice (small or large) by you in terms of your effort, energy, money, or time. Identify these acts in your mind, and then go ahead and do them today.

Also, it is helpful to vary the type of kind acts you perform. Try a few different acts that require different amounts of effort and skill to see which work best for you.

Again, the most important part is not whether the acts are small or large, but that they are something you would not normally do, perhaps because you are a bit shy, or may be focused on your own difficulties or tasks. You may not need to plan every detail of each act—often kindness opportunities arise out of the blue—but it is helpful to come up with a specific plan for at least a couple of the acts, and then go ahead and do them.

Once you have done them, please write about the kind acts that you performed. Be sure to detail exactly what you did, how you felt, and what response the recipient had (if any).

## **CHOICE**

*Completed on (date) \_\_\_\_\_ time spent \_\_\_\_\_ min*

Positive psychology researchers have found participants who express greater identification and interest in positive exercises will be more motivated to participate in the exercises. Participants may experience a higher degree of positive affect and less negative emotions when they continued to perform, identify, and enjoy the exercise.

Researchers also emphasize individual differences, such as demographics and personality traits, are important to consider when matching individuals to specific interventions. Participants are more likely to choose exercises that represent a good fit with their goals, strengths, values, and motives. In addition, individuals who display high effort and commitment in practicing happiness strategies, and who continued to engage in the activity after the intervention, were more likely to achieve improvements in their well-being and depression.

**With these findings in mind, this positive exercise is guided by your choice!**

Exercise:

You are instructed to pick one exercise from the previous six weeks that best fits your interests, personality, needs, or weaknesses, etc. Please follow the same instructions from the previous exercises and complete the same questions from the chosen exercise on the following blank pages.

## **THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY!**

We hope this study has empowered you to improve your well-being and increase positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement in your daily lives. We believe that building healthy and flourishing individuals first through a **“win at all values’ mentality”** as opposed to a “win at all costs mentality” is the foundation for athletic excellence, optimal performances, and happy and fulfilled lives.

Although you will now be handing in your intervention manual to your sport psychology consultant, we encourage you to continue to incorporate the skills learned and resources gained from these positive exercises in your life from here on out!

As legendary basketball coach John Wooden proclaims:

*“Things turn out best for people who make the best of the way things turn out.”*

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## VITA

Scotta was born and raised in Gallatin Gateway MT, attending Gallatin Gateway School and Bozeman High. Scotta played basketball and softball for the Hawks for all four years as an All-Conference and All-State selection. Her dream of playing Division 1 Basketball in her hometown came true when she proudly represented the Montana State Bobcats from 2003-2007. As an academic all-conference selection (2003-2007), team captain (2006, 2007), strength athlete of the year (2006, 2007), recipient of the Bobcat Pride Award (2007), she also finished eighth in all time career three pointers at MSU. Her Bachelor's Degree in Psychology was awarded with highest honors. Scotta received her Master's Degree in Health Promotion & Education. Her master's project titled "College Transition & Personality: A study of NCAA D-I Football Athletes" was accepted for presentation by the NASPE Research Group in Social Sciences at the annual meeting of the American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance in Indianapolis, IN. During her master's program, she became a certified health and fitness specialist with ACSM.

She received her PhD in Health Promotion and Education with an emphasis in Sport Psychology at the University of Missouri and is a graduate assistant and mental strength coach for the Department of Intercollegiate Athletics. She consults for the Mizzou women's gymnastics, volleyball, and basketball teams. Scotta also serves on the "Women for Women" committee and leads the alcohol education/prevention programs for the department. Just this past month, she was awarded with University of Missouri Board of Curator's Distinguished Guest Presentation, WIN for Columbia Mentor of the Year Finalist, and Chancellor's Committee Tribute To University of Missouri Women Award. Last October, she was named honorable mention to the Association of Applied Sport Psychology's Distinguished Student-Practice Award. She is also the founder and director of *Sid & Frosty's* Girls Excellence Camp whose mission is to "Empower Growth through Community & Sport". Scotta teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in sport psychology. Through the Missouri Institute For Positive Coaching, Scotta serves as a member of a team of coaches and educators assisting Dr. McGuire with curriculum development, coaches' education and instruction, and applied sport psychology services to coaches and athletes.

