



# Sports and Strengths:

## How the Clifton StrengthsFinder is changing the sport of volleyball

By Joseph Dworak and Heather Pieper-Olson

January 2007

**W**e will never coach the same way again. After a combined 20+ years of coaching, the way we motivate players, work with our co-coaches, and ultimately field a team has changed forever. Why? Gallup's StrengthsQuest program and Clifton StrengthsFinder talent assessment tool allowed us to see ourselves and our players in a whole new light.

### ABOUT THE TEAM

The Junior Olympic Volleyball Club, Minnesota Select, is a competitive youth sports club whose teams participate in national competitions sanctioned by USA Volleyball, the national governing body of the sport of volleyball in the United States. There are more than 150 girls ages 11 to 18 who play for Minnesota Select. USA Volleyball divides Junior Olympic teams into seven age groups from 18-and-under to 12-and-under. Players who turn 18 by September of a given year will compete as an 18-and-Under during that season. Players can play in an older age group, but never in a younger age group. Minnesota Select typically has two teams at each age level (e.g., 17-1, 17-2, 18-1, 18-2).

After only its third season in existence, Minnesota Select is one of the most successful Junior Olympic programs in Minnesota. In the past three years, Minnesota Select has sent 41 players to collegiate volleyball programs. Of those players, four went to NCAA Division I programs and 16 went to NCAA Division II programs.

### JOSEPH: THE STRENGTHS GAME PLAN

Last year, all of the coaches from the Minnesota Select took the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. I'm a Gallup Strengths coach, so with the help of another Minnesota Select coach, I took all 30 of my fellow coaches through the results together, with the intent to increase the levels of self-awareness among all of our coaches. Though each coach had his or her own unique set of Signature Themes, as a group we were dominant

in Competition, Command, Maximizer, Relator, and Achiever. The Clifton StrengthsFinder identified our commonalities and differences, and it was easy to see how a group of very different coaches, with unique approaches and skill sets, had built successful coaching careers around their strengths. The process helped us build and refine our talents as individual volleyball coaches and as a coaching staff throughout the remainder of the season.

### HEATHER: COACHING WITH STRENGTHS

After the coaches went through the process of discovering their Strengths, my assistant coaches and I asked Joseph to take our team through the process as well.

I am the head coach of the top team in the 17-and-under age group at Minnesota Select, known as the 17-1 team. Unfortunately, our team had struggled all season with team chemistry. In fact, most of these players had played together for several seasons, and in each of those previous seasons the players were judgmental and jealous of one another. On the court, the 17-1 team was easily angered when, for example, one player tried to take a leadership role and was perceived as too intense or when another player was frustrated with her own play and became quiet. Though very talented, the 17-1 team was struggling to overcome personality differences for yet another season.

Joseph led all 10 of the 15-17 year-old young women from the 17-1 team through the Clifton StrengthsFinder process and StrengthsQuest activities. The team and the coaches spent two sessions with Joseph finding out about their Signature Themes and how their unique personalities worked, and, sometimes, did *not* work well together. During the first session, the power of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment was obvious when I saw a player especially talented in the Competition

*Continued*→

---

---

theme frantically searching through the theme descriptions for Woo while Joseph was explaining a theme possessed by a teammate. So, I asked her if she was looking to see if Woo was a “better” theme than the five her Signature Themes Report had shown. Though surprised by the directness of the question, the Competition-dominant player sheepishly smiled and admitted that she was doing exactly that! Leave it to a player strong in Competition to compare her own themes with those of her teammates.

### **A WIN FOR PLAYERS AND COACHES**

The 17-1 players said they learned a lot from the Clifton StrengthsFinder experience — and not just information that is of value to them on the court. Society seems to want us all to default to conformity, and homogeneity is pushed upon us from the outside. Dave Matthews rebelled against this concept in his song, “Typical Situation” where he sarcastically asked the question, “Why are you different? Why are you that way? If you don’t get in line, we’ll lock you away.”

But we are all unique. Whether we are coaches, educators, or scientists we all go about doing those jobs in our own unique way. Why does society want us to do it the same way? This was the struggle facing the 17-1 team prior to taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Many of the players did not really understand that their teammates were approaching volleyball, school, and their family and friends very differently than they were. Because they were all friends, came from similar backgrounds, and seemed to have similar goals, they assumed that they all had similar perspectives on the world and how to approach it. They learned that leaders do not all share the same talents, which allowed them to redefine their understanding of what leadership looks like.

Additionally, the 17-1 team used the strengths discovery process to their competitive advantage by creating a common positive language to improve team chemistry.

Since team chemistry is an essential component of any team sport, teammates must resolve conflict effectively and efficiently. Throughout the remainder of their season the 17-1 team committed to using the increased awareness of their strengths to communicate more effectively on and off the court.

Their commitment to positive team chemistry paid off. During the 2005-6 season, the 17-1 team competed in three national qualifier tournaments and finished 9<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup>, respectively in those tournaments. They won the North Central Regional Qualifying tournament as well. At the United States Junior Olympic Volleyball National Tournament, the team was seeded 9<sup>th</sup> — ranking the MN Select 17-1 team in the top 40 of the 124 teams who qualified for the USJO National Championships. All of these accomplishments are more impressive when taking into account that the 17-1 team was struggling with team chemistry at the beginning of the season.

Coaches who know their strengths are more self-aware and are more likely to lead their teams in a way that works from who they truly are as a coach and a leader. But coaches who also know about their players’ strengths have great insight into how to effectively manage and motivate each individual player. Why waste time asking people to be more competitive when they are dominant in Empathy and Restorative? Why spend loads of time trying to make players strong in Adaptability more focused? Instead, we can encourage a player with Empathy to console a teammate with Competition after a loss, and ask a player with Maximizer to help a frustrated teammate to focus on her strengths instead of on the source of her frustration. Additionally, as a tool to help resolve the conflicts that are inevitable on any team of adolescents, the common positive language created by the Clifton StrengthsFinder is invaluable. •

