

When Character and Entrepreneurship Meet: A View from the World of Sport

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The study of character is both a legitimate and worthwhile topic for organizational discourse and analysis. Character (ethos) refers to those interpenetrable and habitual qualities within individuals, and applicable to organizations that both constrain and lead them to pursue personal and societal good. Considered through the lens of character strengths profiles, an interview with Gus Rethwisch, successful entrepreneur, world-class athlete, and professional actor, is used as a backdrop to help provide an engaging and provocative discussion of the topic of character. To that end, suggestions are provided which highlight how the topic of character can best be used to enlighten our organizational research and teaching.

A number of social commentators, including the author (Hunter, 2000; Sennett, 1998; Wright, 2011; Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Huang, 2008; Wright & Quick, 2011; Wright & Lauer, 2013) have suggested that the widely discussed crisis in leadership, personal integrity, psychic well-being, even zest for life and work, is clearly associated with the perceived decline in individual character formation. Hunter (2000) has gone so far as to suggest that character, as traditionally considered, is “dead” in today’s society. This is highly distressing for many as character plays an instrumental role in better understanding a wide spectrum of human activities and endeavors (Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Huang, 2012). For example, along with managing change (Giannantonio & Hurley, 2002), a number of scholars and practitioners alike have proposed that the most important need facing today’s human resource professional is the selection, training, and development of employees with demonstrated strengths of character (Wright & Lauer, 2013). This need is consistent with the increasing number of management scholars who have championed the call for business schools to return to asking questions that have a positive impact on not only people, but also students and society at large (Bell, 2010; Giacalone & Promislo, 2013).

Historically, the study of ethics (and character) education in business schools has primarily been limited to attempts on better equipping students with the necessary cognitive and intellectual skill sets to make good judgments (Steubs, 2011; Wright, 2011). Unfortunately, this approach has not proven sufficient in convincing enough students of the importance of ethical, character-based behavior, prompting the incorporation of such experiential learning techniques as self-reflection, self-assessment, role-playing and role-modeling (Steubs, 2011; Wright, 2011; Wright & Lauer, 2013).

One particularly promising role-modeling approach involves the use of an interview format to determine character strength profiles for successful individuals from the fields of higher education, business and professional sports (Wright & Wefald, 2012). For example, in an interview with Jon Wefald, the longtime president of Kansas State University (23 years), the authors provided real life examples of the prominent role of character in both Jon Wefald's success and failure as a university president (Wright & Wefald, 2012). Considered through the lens of his character strength profile, the current interview with Gus Rethwisch, successful entrepreneur, world-class athlete, and professional actor is used as the backdrop to provide an engaging and provocative discussion of the role played by one's strength of character in both personal and professional success.

World class athlete, professional screen actor, and highly successful entrepreneur, Gus Rethwisch is truly a man of many accomplishments. From a small town in Iowa and modest beginnings, Gus first achieved fame as a champion power lifter in the 1970's, even competing in 1978 in the highly successful, long-running, *World's Strongest Man* competition on CBS. Viewed by millions, and competing injured against such legendary sports icons as Bruce Wilhelm, Don Reinhoudt, Brian Oldfield, the Oakland Raider's John Matusak, Ivan Putski, and Jon Kolb at Universal Studios, Gus finished in the top 5. Transitioning from world class competitor to promoter, Gus promoted a number of major power lifting competitions on network TV from 1977 to 1981, upgrading the typical venue from high school gyms to such luxury resort hotel locations as the Turtle Bay Hilton Hotel on the north shore of Oahu.

Ever expanding his horizons, Gus gained cult status recognition for his memorable villain role as Eddie "Buzsaw" Vacowski in Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Running Man* and featured roles in such movies as *Twins*, *The Scorpion King*, and *The Concorde... Airport '79*, as well as such successful TV series as *Hawaii Five-0* with Jack Lord and *Magnum PI* with Tom Selleck. Currently, Gus is busy promoting *The World Association of Bench and Dead Lifters* (WABDL) in his latest entrepreneurial venture. Truly a world-wide organization, WABDL has had upwards of 3,500 paying members from just about every state and 29 countries. Using his signature strengths as the backdrop, Gus candidly and oftentimes humorously incorporates what it takes to be a successful, character-based entrepreneur in the high pressure world of competitive powerlifting. To that end, and given the importance of character in today's society, a brief overview of how character can best be considered and defined is provided next.

Character Considered and Defined

The topic of character raises numerous considerations, not the least of which involves just what is character? (Wright & Goodstein, 2007; London, 2013). Providing an adequate definition of character is no small achievement given that a number of supposedly related terms, including virtue, values, personality and themes are often used interchangeably. As a result, these terms have often been confounded in the literature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wright & Lauer, 2013). While a detailed analysis of each of these terms is beyond the scope of the present discussion, it is worthwhile to briefly consider how character and virtue have been previously compared and contrasted. Perhaps *Webster's Dictionary* is the best place to commence.

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1989) defines character as “the aggregate of features and traits that form the apparent individual nature of some person or thing” and refers to its adherence to “moral qualities, ethical standards, principles and the like.” Highly consistent with their definition of character, Webster (1989) defined virtue as the “conformity of one’s life and conduct to moral and ethical principles,” and “a good or admirable quality, as of a person or some aspect of personality.” Inherent in these traditional definitions of *both* character and virtue is the notion of a moral standard or code against which behavior can (and should) be measured (Velasquez, 2002; Wright & Goodstein, 2007). However, while Webster suggested that character and virtue are virtually interchangeable constructs, Peterson and Seligman (2004) provided a useful mechanism for scholars concerned with distinguishing between the terms.

Building their framework on the Linnaean classification system of species (i.e., levels ranging from the general and abstract to the concrete and specific), psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) provided a worthwhile virtue/character distinction based upon a conceptual level (for a further discussion, see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Virtue is considered to be the more abstract and general level and Peterson and Seligman listed six broad virtue categories (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence). According to Peterson and Seligman, these general virtues were the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and theologians. Peterson and Seligman suggested these virtues as being universal, potentially even transcending time and culture (cf., Wright, 1997). In addition, they were potentially grounded in biology through the evolutionary process of assisting in the survival of the species. They also maintained that these six “universals” must be present at above-threshold levels for an individual to be considered as someone of “good” virtue.

Peterson and Seligman purposely determined not to measure these six virtues because they were considered to be too general and abstract for meaningful measurement. Alternatively, they advocated that strengths of character held greater promise for research because of the increased level of construct specificity. In particular, for Peterson and Seligman, character strengths were the psychological ingredients (processes or mechanisms) that defined virtues. For example, the virtue of courage could be achieved through such strengths of character as persistence, integrity, and what they call vitality or zest – approaching life with excitement and energy. For Peterson and Seligman, these strengths of character were similar in that they all involved

emotional strengths that entailed the exercise of will in order to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, irrespective of whether this opposition was generated external or internal to the individual. In previous work, the author and his colleagues (Wright, 2011; Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Huang, 2008; Wright & Quick, 2011; Wright & Wefald, 2012; Wright & Lauer, 2013) proposed a more traditional approach to character based upon the fundamental adherence to a morally-based framework.

Throughout the ages, traditional views of character have been influenced by a wide variety of sources (Wright & Lauer, 2013). These sources include Aristotelian thought, Judeo-Christian beliefs as especially expressed in Saint Paul's faith, hope, and charity, such Eastern philosophies as Confucianism, as well as by the more modern, secular approaches proposed by utilitarian, justice, and social contract models (Hunter, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Wefald, 2012). Benjamin Franklin's (1790/1961) widely-known classification of strengths of character and virtue promoted the many benefits of being humble, industrious, sincere, clean, and long provided the inspiration for the mission of such institutions as the YMCA and the Boy and Girl Scouts (Wright & Lauer, 2013). Traditional definitions of character typically contain moral and social dimensions and, as a result, character is best considered as a multidimensional construct (for a further discussion, see Peterson & Park, 2006; Wright & Huang, 2008; Wright & Wefald, 2012). A number of scholars agree that the following three character dimensions are the most widely accepted throughout recorded history: moral discipline, moral attachment, and moral autonomy (Hunter, 2000; Wright & Goodstein, 2007).

An individual exhibits *moral discipline* (the first dimension), if he or she suppresses individual and personal needs for those of a "greater good" considered at the group, organization, or societal levels. As one example of being highly disciplined, Gus Rethwisch discussed his willingness to sacrifice his personal life for the betterment of his organization and consistently work 12 or more hours per day for 7 days a week. Students found it utterly amazing when Rethwisch noted that he hadn't taken a single day off from work in more than 10 years!

The second dimension of character is *moral attachment*. Moral attachment constitutes a clear affirmation of an individual's commitment to someone or something greater than themselves. Hunter (2000, p. 16) presented this in terms of embracing an "ideal" that attracts and inspires. Wright and Wefald (2012) discussed how universities have increasingly attempted to incorporate the concept of "family" in order to assist in forming this sense of attachment.

The third dimension is *moral autonomy*. One exhibits moral autonomy if he or she has the capacity to freely make ethical, character-based decisions. Autonomy means that a person has both the necessary discretion *and* the skills of judgment at their disposal to freely act morally. In an interview with a student who voluntarily admitted to "successfully" cheating (not getting caught), Wright (2004) described that because the student considered the author as a positive role model and also desired to be a positive role model for his daughter (moral attachment), the student committed to never again cheat in the future (moral autonomy). This example of the role of character in moral transformation is consistent with an increasing body of evidence that indicates individuals will sometimes contemplate abandoning self-interest and do what is morally right (Nesteruk, 2012; Wright & Lauer, 2013).

Distinguishable from values (Wright & Quick, 2011), personality (Wright & Lauer, 2013), image norms (Hurley-Hanson & Giannantonio, 2007), and themes (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), character is shaped by one's convictions and is best evidenced by the ability to persist in those convictions in the face of temptation or challenge (Hunter, 2000). Perhaps William James (1920) best expressed this strong sense of commitment in noting that character involves those mental and moral attributes that leave people the most deeply and intensely vibrant and alive. For James, this special and even transcendent moment is best personified by one's inner self telling them that "This is the real me!" Influenced by James and the three moral dimensions, character was previously defined as those interpenetrable and habitual qualities within individuals, and applicable to organizations that both constrain and lead them to desire and pursue personal and societal good (Wright & Goodstein, 2007; Wright & Huang, 2008; Wright & Quick, 2011; Wright & Lauer, 2013).

Character Measured

The most comprehensive classification framework to date in the social sciences for measuring character was developed by Peterson and Seligman and is called the *Values in Action—Inventory of Strengths* (VIA-IS). The VIA-IS is a 240-item self-report questionnaire that uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure the degree to which respondents endorse strength-relevant statements about themselves (1 = very much unlike me, through 5 = very much like me). As noted earlier, Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified 6 core virtues (with the strengths of character common to each virtue listed in parentheses): wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, critical-thinking, love of learning, perspective); courage (valor, integrity, industry, zest); humanity (kindness, love, social intelligence); justice (fairness, leadership, citizenship); temperance (forgiveness, modesty, prudence, self-regulation); and transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality). Each of the 24 strengths of character was assessed with 10 items. For example, sample items of the character strength *zest* includes "I never approach things halfheartedly" and "I look forward to each new day"; sample items for the character strength *hope* includes "I know that I will succeed with the goals I have set for myself" and "If I feel down, I always think about what is good in my life"; sample items for the character strength *valor* includes "I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition" and "I must stand up for what I believe even if there are negative results".

Building upon Peterson and Seligman's 24 strengths of character taxonomy and incorporating a focus group approach (Wright, 2011; Quick & Wright, 2011; Wright & Quick, 2011; Wright & Lauer, 2013; Wright & Wefald, 2012), the author developed a number of "top-5" profiles (from the population of all 24 VIA-IS strengths) which respondents (both graduate and undergraduate business students and actual business practitioners) considered to be the most beneficial in achieving a successful leadership role in a growing number of work occupations. For instance, the "top-5" profile for an accountant included: prudence, integrity, industry, critical-thinking and valor. Nurses had a top-5 profile which included: kindness, prudence, integrity, equity, and forgiveness. The profile for engineers is composed of critical thinking, curiosity, creativity, love of learning, and integrity. For sales and marketing, the top-5 signature

strength profile included zest, social intelligence, creativity, humor, and curiosity. The top-5 profile for longtime Kansas State University President, Jon Wefald included hope, humor, leadership, capacity to love and be loved, and fairness. An increasingly popular potential career option that more and more students seriously consider is the entrepreneur route exemplified by the career path of Gus Rethwisch.

The study of entrepreneurs has become extremely popular over the last 30 years (Littunen, 2000; Rae, 2005). Entrepreneurs can be found in all occupations, can be both male and female, and come from diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds (Rae, 2005). Such personality traits and characteristics as having a high need for achievement, being goal-oriented, taking initiative, high internal focus of control, adventurous and risk-taking have consistently been identified (Beugelsdijk & Noorderhaven, 2005; Brockhaus, 1982; Casson, 1982; Fagenson, 1993). Entrepreneurs can be defined as individuals who acquire or exhibit habitual traits, abilities and strengths of character utilized to effectively recognize opportunities, assume risks in a start-up business venture, and overcome obstacles (Quick & Wright, 2011). Entrepreneurs successfully incorporate new ideas and concepts or bring existing ideas together in new ways. Signature strength optimal profiles for entrepreneurs include the following strengths: hope, industry, zest, curiosity, and self-regulation (Wright & Lauer, 2013). Classroom discussion of the profiles in character concept, emphasizing the profiles of such successful entrepreneurs as Gus Rethwisch, highlighted the importance of character strength to entrepreneurial success. To that end, and incorporating input from students, working adults and actual entrepreneurs, class discussions regarding what constitutes the strengths of character to be a successful entrepreneur proved to be very enlightening.

For those who have known Gus Rethwisch over the years, it comes as no surprise that his character signature strength profile, as measured by the VIA-IS questionnaire (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), embodied those of an entrepreneur and included such strengths as hope, industry, zest, valor, and kindness. According to Rethwisch, the most successful entrepreneurs that he has known over the years have had an abundance of the strengths of zest, hope and optimism. For Rethwisch, another key to being a successful entrepreneur is being able to persist in the face of adversity. This persistence was certainly evidenced several years ago right before the start of WABDL's competition lifting season when he required emergency open heart surgery. As a story backdrop, Rethwisch is a hands-on CEO, who makes every effort to attend as many meets as he can in person (each meet is usually promoted by a local business person). WABDL's competition season typically extends from February to the World Championships in late November. Then headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Rethwisch had previously committed to represent WABDL in Missoula, Montana five weeks after his open heart surgery. From Missoula, he had committed to attend a meet in Pasco, Washington the next week, Chico, California the week after that, and Dallas, Texas the following week (competition meets are typically on Saturdays and the World Championships in November involve a weeklong, gala event in a destination city such as Las Vegas). Further compounding his ordeal, because he personally transports customized, heavy lifting equipment, he drives to the competition events. Adhering to a "the show must go on" philosophy, Rethwisch ended up driving the 5,600 miles by himself in wintry,

oftentimes hazardous road conditions, all within 2 months of his surgery! Students are always amazed at his dedication and grit, although they understand why his family was very concerned for his safety.

Above all else, an entrepreneur has to find their niche and provide their customer base with a distinct added value. For Gus Rethwisch, this meant targeting Master's level lifters, those 40 years of age and older, for WABDL. Successful in this pursuit, today roughly 50% of WABDL's membership is composed of Master's level lifters. In addition, by recognizing that many Master's level lifters suffer from knee injuries and cannot easily do squats, Rethwisch made WABDL the first major lifting organization to become a two-lift organization and focus only on the bench press and dead lift. As a result of these insights, membership (and revenue) in the organization jumped significantly and WABDL reached a peak of roughly 3,500 active members worldwide. Ongoing research and classroom discussions strongly suggest that students benefit from reading interviews and case studies documenting how engaging, successful people like Gus Rethwisch have optimally utilized their top-5 profiles to achieve professional success. As discussed next, this student benefit is further enhanced from the knowledge of their own top-5 strength profile.

Student Character Profiles

Over the last 10 years, hundreds of the author's undergraduate and graduate business students at the University of Nevada, Reno, Kansas State University, and Fordham University have completed the 240-item VIA-IS questionnaire. After filling out the survey online, the students received immediate feedback detailing their scores. Responses were averaged within scales, so that the respondents learned the relative (within subject) ranking of their 24 strengths of character. With their scores in hand, students engaged in animated discussions on the role of character on a wide range of topics, including employee success and well-being, the development of character-based leadership and the comparison of their top-5 strength profile with various occupation-specific signature strength profiles (Wright & Lauer, 2013).

Unfortunately, ongoing research suggested that relatively few business students initially had the optimal profile of character strengths deemed necessary for maximizing success in any number of occupations, including as an entrepreneur. In fact, the findings indicated that actual top-5 student profiles were consistently and significantly at variance from their proposed or ideal profiles (Wright & Lauer, 2013). For instance, students ranked social intelligence as being one of the top strengths necessary to be an effective manager. Likewise, love of learning was considered as one of the top-5 character strengths needed to be an effective MBA student. However, both of these strengths of character were actually among the least commonly self-reported by the students (Wright & Quick, 2011; Wright & Lauer, 2013). Similar results were found among undergraduate business students. In fact, in some undergraduate cohorts, upwards of 30% of male students self-ranked love of learning as their lowest strength of character (out of 24). Furthermore, business students consistently self-rated themselves low on the entrepreneurial signature strengths of zest, self-regulation, curiosity and industry. The importance of being industrious bears further discussion.

Students readily acknowledged that it was important to be persistent and industrious. However, many only became truly engaged in the discussion when they were aware of just how much time and effort people were actually called upon to expend in their quest for success. Without exception, students were amazed with what Rethwisch was able to accomplish in the wake of his open heart surgery. In his interview, President Wefald confirmed that he typically spent 14-15 hours a day on the job, remarking that he always seemed to be working (Wright & Wefald, 2012). Gus Rethwisch similarly acknowledged the need to work long hours. Typically, the first classroom response from many students was whether these were accurate assessments. When informed that successful people really do work extraordinarily long hours, the tone of the discussion changed to one that was more serious and contemplative in nature. The classes were then informed that almost all highly successful people shared the strength of character, zest. Since students invariably scored very low on this strength of character point, typically animated discussions were had of ways for them to become more passionate and zestful in their professional and personal pursuits.

To address these types of inconsistencies between obtained student and actual occupation-specific top-5 profiles, and adopting Bandura's social learning or modeling framework (Bandura, 1977, 1997), students were encouraged to become more proactive and self-regulatory through the development of an agentic motivational perspective to character formation and development (Wright & Lauer, 2013). The underlying assumption of an agentic approach to learning is that students were motivated to consider themselves as self-regulatory and self-reflective organisms, not just as passive beings reacting to influences from their environment (Wright, 2011; Wright & Lauer, 2013). For example, Bandura and Walters (1963) found that boys from intact, affluent homes modeled the negative, aggressive attitudes of their parents. In addition, Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963), using the famous Bobo doll framework, extended the scope of social learning by demonstrating that learning could occur in the absence of immediate reinforcement. Various social learning techniques were used in the aforementioned classes. Methods used included multiple forms of role-playing, the development of a character-based vocabulary, identification of character role models, and role-modeling through the use of interviews and class presentations by successful business practitioners.

One particularly successful role play involved having students identify each morning three aspects of their life ("Good Things") for which they were grateful (cf., Seligman et al., 2005). Regarding the development of a character-based vocabulary, each in-class topic discussion and assignment made explicit reference to such character strengths as "equity", "gratitude", "kindness", "hope", "industry", "integrity", and "valor". For Rethwisch, the integrity and reputation of WABDL was intricately associated with running WABDL as a drug-free organization. Interestingly, according to Rethwisch, drug testing was not systematically incorporated into Olympic lifting events until the Montreal 1976 Olympics. It was incorporated into competitive powerlifting even later, in 1982. It is obvious from the interview that Gus Rethwisch was proud of the efforts that WABDL has undertaken regarding random drug testing. While other power lifting organizations have mandates that lifters pay the cost of testing, WABDL pays for the cost when testing competitors for performance-enhancing drugs. It was obvious that

Rethwisch believed strongly in doing whatever it took to guarantee the integrity of any world records (there have been many) set in WABDL-sanctioned competitions. Students showed considerable interest in these self-reflective exercises. The use of interviews with successful management practitioners, such as Gus Rethwisch, proved to be highly successful in engaging business students to consider the importance of character education (Wright, 2011; Wright & Wefald, 2012). As with teaching, the study of character holds much promise for management research.

New Research Directions on Character

While Peterson and Seligman (2004) listed 24 strengths of character, it is clear that a number of their strengths of character, while all certainly positive traits, talents or attributes, did not fulfill the moral component criterion (Quick & Wright, 2011; Wright & Quick, 2011). For example, social intelligence, humor, and zest are lacking in a moral dimension as traditionally understood. In particular, unlike strengths such as kindness or gratitude, an individual high on social intelligence could more easily use this talent for either good or bad in their dealings with other people. Finally, leadership might be best considered as either a cause or consequence of good character. In today's highly distrusting political climate, a woman known for her honesty and critical-thinking strengths might be sought out for leadership positions, given the apparent lack of these strengths in many politicians. Thus, her potential opportunity to lead could be considered a consequence of her honesty and critical-thinking strengths.

In examining the "master" or "cardinal" strengths of character (and virtues) over time and culture (Wright & Goodstein, 2007), it becomes readily apparent that certain strengths have been consistently considered as "elevated" or preeminent in nature (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These strengths include: valor, industry, integrity, critical-thinking (wisdom), and self-regulation. Interestingly, in discussions with both students and management practitioners, these same five strengths were consistently mentioned as being worthy of consideration as "Top-5 Signature Strength" status. Upon reflection, this makes sense as there is the theoretical basis to posit that each one of these strengths of character is related to such variables as psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007), the Big-5 personality traits (Wright & Lauer, 2013), job and life satisfaction (Peterson et al., 2009), core self-evaluations (Judge et al., 2003), psychological well-being (Wright & Huang, 2008), and various aspects of work performance and achievement (Quick & Wright, 2011; Wright & Quick, 2011).

The relation between strength of character and individual well-being, however defined (Wright & Doherty, 1998; Wright & Cropanzano, 2007), has long been recognized with "good" character considered as a central and defining feature for individual health and well-being (Gavin, et al., 2003; Wright, 2013; Wright & Lauer, 2014). For example, the well-being benefits of being industrious and persistent have been documented for cancer (Ferrell et al., 2003), arthritis (Lambert et al., 1989), and HIV/AIDS patients (Goodman, Chesney, & Tipton, 1995). Singh and Jha (2008) found that a measure of perseverance was positively related to both happiness and life satisfaction, while Mino and Kanemitsu (2005) established a relation with job satisfaction. In addition, Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) found evidence that

self-regulation was positively related with psychological well-being, while Wright and Walton (2003) investigated the relation between creativity and psychological well-being. Finally, spousal integrity was found to build relationship trust and was instrumental in marital well-being and satisfaction (Yeh et al., 2006). These findings provided support to the longstanding belief that an association exists between various strengths of character and individual well-being (Wright & Lauer, 2014).

Character is also proposed to be instrumental in fostering long-term health and well-being at both the organizational and societal levels. For example, given that leadership is best considered in the context of emotional experience and social exchange (Ashkanasy & Dasborough, 2003), a leader “well-being contagion” effect may exist in settings in which leaders (i.e., teachers) demonstrate not only interpersonal competence (cf., Olian et al., 1988), but also exhibit such strengths of character as integrity, valor, gratitude, and kindness. As a result, through their actions, character-based leaders (teachers) may well model the display of these strengths of character in their subordinates (students). Next, research will be discussed that suggests a possible relation among the character strengths, valor, industry, and critical-thinking, with performance and achievement.

Worline, Wrzesniewski, and Rafaeli (2002) proposed that valor, under certain circumstances, can be instrumental in helping motivate individuals to take on new, challenging tasks in extreme, stressful situations. Likewise, Markham and Baron (2003) hypothesized that individuals high in perseverance performed better and experienced fewer feelings of anxiety under challenging circumstances. Finally, Barrick and Mount (1991) provided preliminary evidence that self-regulation may have been related to performance. Building upon these initial findings, future research is now needed to more fully investigate the theoretical basis for suggesting relationships between strengths of character and such work and nonwork-related correlates as psychological well-being, work performance, job and life satisfaction, job commitment, and absenteeism.

Concluding Thoughts

This interview provided the necessary backdrop that supported the influential role of “profiles in character” in the determination of both individual and business entrepreneurial success. In particular, the use of interviews with successful management practitioners, such as Gus Rethwisch, proved to be an important pedagogical mechanism in helping inform both students and actual business practitioners of the importance of character education (Wright, 2011; Wright & Wefald, 2012). As with teaching, character holds much promise for how, as well as what, is researched. Hopefully, this interview with Gus Rethwisch provided compelling evidence of the possible benefits of studying character in organizational and business school settings. This is obviously an exciting time to be conducting research in character.

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Appendix A

Interview with Gus Rethwisch - CEO WABDL

Interviewer: Before we get started, it might be helpful for you to distinguish for the readership among Olympic style weight lifting, powerlifting and bodybuilding.

Rethwisch: Olympic style weight lifting is the oldest organized form of lifting. It was integral to the first modern Olympics in Athens, Greece in 1896. The first games did not have weight divisions, but separated competitions into one or two-handed lifts. One-armed lifts were discontinued from the Olympic Games in 1928 and the official lifts consisted of the snatch, clean and jerk and the press. Starting in the 1950's bodybuilding grew in popularity, thanks to the work of such early legendary entrepreneurs as Bob Hoffman and Joe Weider. As I like to put it, body builders lift to look good, while power lifters lift to do good. Truly international in nature, during the same period, an early form of powerlifting composed of three lifts, the bicep curl, bench press and squat became hugely popular in Great Britain. In fact, many talented lifters from around the world went to Great Britain to compete. Later, the curl was replaced with the deadlift, forming the current three power lifts.

Interviewer: From 1977 to 1981, you were involved in 5 major events on network TV. It looked like power lifting was becoming more main stream until someone put the label “trash sport” on it. What happened?

Rethwisch: There were a number of reasons for this label of “trash sport”. First, in one of the initial World's Strongest Man contests, which are still going, no pun intended, strong today, the Italian body builder, Franco Columbo, broke his leg in a refrigerator race. Viewed by millions, it was horrible and brought a lot of negative publicity to the sport. Arnold Schwarzenegger was his expert witness in a high-profile lawsuit. Columbo won. As a result, the networks dropped the event. It went overseas and became a cult event. Without American competitors, the ratings dramatically dropped. ESPN eventually picked it up.

Interviewer: With that backdrop established, please tell us a little about your formative years.

Rethwisch: My roots are from small town America; I grew up in rural Iowa. I know it sounds funny, but I got interested in sports in general and powerlifting in particular because, for a short while, I was the victim of bullying in grade school.

Interviewer: That reminds me of the Charles Atlas legend of getting his start by having sand kicked in his face at the beach. Given that you were a robust 6”3 and 340 pounds in your prime, I guess bullying can happen to anyone at some point in their life.

Rethwisch: That's right and being bullied was my motivation to get bigger and stronger; I did not like bullies, nor did I personally like being bullied. My father had a lumber yard and I took great pride in eventually being able to work harder, lift more than anyone, developing my strength through constantly lifting heavy pieces of lumber, cement sacks and plasterboard. In a short period of time, I went from being someone who lacked motivation to someone who came to value the benefits of hard work. My willingness to work hard and put in 12, 14, 16 hour days has been very helpful in helping me achieve whatever success I have obtained as an entrepreneur.

Interviewer: Your character strength profile is consistent with those of other successful

entrepreneurs and includes the three entrepreneurial signature strengths of hope, industry and zest, along with valor and kindness. Is your character strength profile consistent with your perception of yourself?

Rethwisch: Yes, it is. I would maintain that every successful entrepreneur must be industrious, have a true zest for life in general and what they are doing in particular, and be optimistic or hopeful that they will succeed. I also think an entrepreneur must be courageous, especially when starting out. In addition, I was pleased to learn that kindness was one of my signature strengths. On the other hand, I am not surprised that I ranked lower in self-regulation.....

Interviewer: Has your character strength profile influenced your management style?

Rethwisch: Yes, it has. I always try to solve the problem at hand. In an arena composed of world-class athletes, as you might expect, I have to deal with individuals with large egos. I am a very direct person and early on in my promoting career, I would often speak before I thought things through. I got a chuckle when I learned that the questionnaire identified self-regulation as not being one of my signature strengths. Early on, my accountant was always encouraging me to slow down and carefully consider all the options. I didn't always follow his advice and it has cost me over the years.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate how these signature strengths have been beneficial in making WABDL a success?

Rethwisch: Working for my father established the precedent of putting in 12, 14, 16 hour days. My father was my first role model for hard work and industry. As a result, I have always been industrious. I can honestly state that I have not had a day off from WABDL in over 10 years!

Interviewer: That is an amazing statistic. Given that work schedule, how have you remained so zestful?

Rethwisch: To me, hope and zest go hand-in-hand. Early on, my passion or zest for powerlifting was as a competitor. I had a very good career, but I knew that I wouldn't be a world-class competitor forever. I wanted to stay connected to the sport, so I looked to the opportunities provided by event promotion.

Interviewer: This was in the 1970's. How was the business of powerlifting conducted?

Rethwisch: It was very haphazard. The typical event would be at the local high school gym or YMCA. I knew that I could do better than that as a promoter.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate further?

Rethwisch: My first power lifting promotion was at the Turtle Bay Hilton on the north shore of Oahu. Not wanting to leave anything to chance, we included everything..... We had a woman's bikini contest, men's body building exhibition, and some world class guest lifters. Well, the contest was a success, but I learned an important lesson.

Interviewer: What was that?

Rethwisch: The competition went on all day and well into the night. It was too long. As a point of comparison, at that time, a typical major league baseball game was roughly 2 and 1/2 hours and an NBA basketball game ran about 2 hours. However, as I noted, powerlifting meets could take all day to complete, with competitions in three lifts, the bench press, squat and dead lift, combined to determine an overall champion. I immediately realized that I could not continue to succeed with contests lasting 10, 12 or more hours. I just could not compete with other sports, nor could I keep viewer

attention that long. I was not providing a value-added. What I did was simple, but it worked and continues to work. WABDL was the first major power lifting federation to move from sanctioning three competitive lifts to just two lifts, the bench press and dead lift.

Interviewer: How did you decide on those two lifts and not the squat?

Rethwisch: Sometimes there is genius in simplicity. The squat is a very physically tough exercise on lifters with knee, hip, and back problems. I figured out early on that in order to succeed, we would have to attract Master's level competitors, lifters at least 40 years old. As a reference point, roughly 50% of our current membership is Master's level lifters. Since older lifters are more likely to have knee, hip, and back problems, the squat was the competitive lift that we eliminated. As a consequence, our competitions take less time to complete and are physically easier on lifters, especially those with knee, hip, and back problems.

Interviewer: What did you do next?

Rethwisch: After my first major promotion at the Turtle Bay Hilton, I knew I wanted to be a promoter. At this time, I was working at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel which had the largest hotel ballroom in the world, something like 40,000 square feet. It was huge! I had established a solid professional relationship with Mr. Kent, the hotel general manager. A kind man, Mr. Kent wanted his employees to succeed and he was impressed with my initiative when I told him about my promotional plans. He fully supported me and the competition was a huge success. We drew thousands of fans and filled the ballroom. To put it in perspective, as I recall, Frank Sinatra, Helen Reddy, Tony Orlando and Dawn, and Tony Bennett did not fill that ballroom. I ended up promoting 19 major events from Hawaii.

Interviewer: Like professional boxing, there are a number of competing powerlifting federations. How do you keep WABDL ahead of the crowd?

Rethwisch: As I noted, my passion for the sport translates into my willingness to work long hours, day in and day out. My job as president is really not that glamorous when you think about it. While I have administrative assistants who handle specific aspects of the organization, I am the point person. I get and return an enormous number of phone calls. My philosophy is that no question is without merit and every question must be treated with respect. I realized early on that I am in the people business. Without the people, there is no WABDL.

Interviewer: Speaking of being people-oriented and providing a value-added, your *Tabloid of Excellence* has been very popular with your membership.

Rethwisch: If you think about it, like baseball, powerlifting is a sport possessed with numbers and statistics. In baseball, everyone is familiar with Babe Ruth's 60 home runs, Joe DiMaggio's 56 game hitting streak and Ted Williams .406 batting average. Powerlifting is similarly disposed to numbers and statistics. Over the last few years, we have been diligently categorizing state and world "all-time" record lists, what I call the "Tabloid of Excellence". I personally have spent a lot of time creating the various lists. By creating these lists, I was hopeful that they will create interest and growth; they seem to have done just that! People can easily look on the internet and see that they are ranked #22 in the bench press at a certain age and weight and see that they need to lift, say, 45 more pounds to make it into the top 10. People thrive when they have goals that

are specific, measurable, and attainable. Everyone likes it when they can see that they can improve their standing in something they value and find important.

Interviewer: What major changes in the sport of powerlifting have you seen over the years?

Rethwisch: There have been a number of changes. One evolution in the sport has been the increased use of supportive powerlifting equipment or gear. Supportive equipment such as squat and deadlift suits and bench shirts are used for two primary purposes. First, at least in theory, they help protect the lifter from injury. Second, they act as an ergogenic aid and enable the competitor to lift more weight. The relative benefits of lifting “raw”, that is, without supportive equipment versus lifting with gear is a widespread debate in the sport.

Interviewer: Like society at large, everyone seems to be looking for that edge....

Rethwisch: While most lifters currently use gear, there is a wide range of performance results. Take the bench press. Forty years ago, the most the strongest man could bench press unaided or raw was 650 – 670 pounds. Today, these results are the same, even though people are “lifting” over 1000 pounds with supportive equipment. So the lifters are really no stronger, but because of improved supportive equipment, they can lift a lot more.....

Interviewer: And more is better, no matter how accomplished. Because of their use of illegal performance-enhancing drugs, Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds recently failed to garner the necessary votes to be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. How do you address the problem of performance-enhancing drugs in your organization?

Rethwisch: The use of performance enhancing drugs is a serious problem in all competitive sports. There is plenty of blame to go around. If you go back to the late 1970's, college team trainers would actually provide amphetamines to athletes. At that time, amphetamines were part of the game plan! Steroids then became part of the problem. There was no drug testing in Olympic lifting until, I believe, 1976. As I recall, the 1976 Olympics was the first time for systematic drug testing. We have a stringent policy of drug testing at WABDL and have for many years. Competitors know that we test at every event. I am proud of our efforts to have “clean” athletes and records.

Interviewer: Women are becoming more prominent in powerlifting in general and WABDL in particular. What are your thoughts?

Rethwisch: I love it; it is great!! While women are not well-suited to compete with men on the bench press due to the relative lack of upper body strength, they have an abundance of lower body core strength. This allows them to very effectively compete with men on a pound-for-pound basis in the dead lift. We see a number of women who are able to competitively lift over 3X their body weight. We also have both males and females competitively lifting well into their 80's. It is truly inspirational! Tom, as I recall, you were amazed at the strength of a number of Master's lifters when you competed in your first meet about 10 years ago in Pasco, Washington.

Interviewer: I certainly was amazed and truly inspired by the two lifters from Montana, Victor Starkel and Harold Smith. Both lifters were able to bench press over 300 pounds well into their 70's. I didn't know what to expect when I attended my first competition. I was impressed with the welcoming nature of WABDL and the friendliness of many of the lifters. In fact, I remember telling Victor and Harold that I wanted to be just like

them when I grew up.

Rethwisch: Your response is a typical one. So many lifters go to their first meet to test their competitive instincts and come away thoroughly enjoying the people they meet and compete against. They want to come back to compete and enjoy the fellowship.

Interviewer: Please describe your “typical” day as president of WABDL.

Rethwisch: I am constantly talking with people. I am on the phone for up to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. One of the reasons that our Federation is successful is that we operate under the premise that there is no such thing as a dumb question. We treat every question and person with respect.

Interviewer: The driving force for many entrepreneurs is that they do not like working for other people. Was that true in your case?

Rethwisch: I think I have always known that I performed better working for myself. For one thing, I’ve never been afraid to take chances with money.....so I guess it is better to take chances with my own money.....The second meet I put on at the Sheraton Waikiki Hotel could have been the end of my promoting career. My accountant informed me that I was going to be thousands of dollars in debt. Using that knowledge as my impetus, I was highly motivated and able to negotiate a deal with NBC Sports World to film the competition. As a result, I managed to stay out of debt. Even though our event was shown taped, we outdrew the major league baseball game in the same time slot!

Interviewer: What do you see as the future of powerlifting?

Rethwisch: There are more lifters today than ever before. About 50% of my membership is composed of Master’s lifters (40 or over years of age). I am actively reaching out to high school and college students. We now host the National High School and Intercollegiate Championships every year. This year (2013), the competitions were held in Kingwood, Texas. I also want to attract inner-city youth competitors and set-up weight-lifting programs. These young lifters are our future and I want WABDL to be a positive role model.

Interviewer: Speaking of the future, you have been doing this for a long time, what are your plans for the future?

Rethwisch: I had open heart surgery a few years ago and was told to cancel the entire competitive season by my doctors. It gave me great pause for reflection. I had my surgery on January 28. The schedule for the year was already set up and was an extremely arduous one. The first meet that I was promoting was scheduled for Missoula, Montana on March 7, the next meet was March 14 in Pasco, Washington. Chico, California was scheduled for March 21 and Dallas, Texas was March 28. WABDL was then based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I provide the equipment, all the weights, bars etc., so it is best to drive and I don’t like to fly. So, I am 6 weeks out from major surgery and I drove a total of 5,600 miles to these events and back to Minneapolis. Needless to say, my wife and family were not happy.

Interviewer: You are obviously driven to succeed. For WABDL the competition season starts in early February and ends in November, culminating in the World Championships. As a businessman, the World Championships can financially make or break you for that particular year. Describe the negotiation process.

Rethwisch: The negotiation process is both fascinating and frustrating. As you said, a poor showing at the World Championships can financially ruin your whole year

of competitions. This has been a real learning experience. Here is where I really had to work on my self-control and regulation skills. Hotels negotiate rates based upon the number of rooms that you will “guarantee” them. The more rooms that you can guarantee, the better the rate you will get. That rate applies to not only the rooms themselves, but also to the ballroom etc. Say I can get the best available rate by guaranteeing that I will fill 5,000 rooms for the week of the World Championships. At \$125 per room, per night, that’s \$625,000 revenue for the hotel. Throw in another \$300,000 for food, drink and entertainment and it’s obvious that we are providing the hotel with a large revenue stream. Here is where knowing your limitations is important. If there are no consequences for not filling your room guarantee, the hotel stands to lose a lot of money as well. So, hotels typically include attrition clauses, where there are penalties for not fulfilling your room guarantees. It gets very expensive if you don’t deliver. There have been a number of cases over the years where promoters have figuratively lost the shirt off their back by being overly optimistic.... It takes both skill and luck to get the best rate. As a word to the wise to future promoters, get a contract without an attrition clause if at all possible. Having a reputation for delivering the room guarantees certainly helps in the negotiation process.

Interviewer: Has the current economic downturn had a negative impact on WABDL?

Rethwisch: Yes and no. I am seeing roughly the same number of participants at the regional meets so far this year. However, people are not buying the souvenir items like t-shirts and programs as before. Overall the downturn in the economy has had an effect.

Interviewer: Any regrets?

Rethwisch: Not really. It has been an interesting ride to date. I suppose my biggest professional disappointment is that I did not get the opportunity to play major league baseball.

Interviewer: What advice do you have for someone interested in putting on a powerlifting meet?

Rethwisch: The signature strength profile for entrepreneurs was very illuminating and insightful for me. Invariably, the successful entrepreneurs that I have known over the years have an abundance of such strengths of character as zest, hope and optimism. Above all else, an entrepreneur certainly must be willing to persist in the face of adversity. Of course, it helps to be able to find one’s niche in a particular area and provide your customer base with a value-added. So, I can understand why successful entrepreneurs are curious. Speaking of which, I would be curious to know the character strength profiles for success in other occupations and whether character can be taught?