SUPERSTITIONS AND RITUALS IN MODERN SPORT

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Abstract

Sport is often referred to as “a religion of the modern world”. At first glance this is unusual, but it is not without at least some justification. In sport the man-athlete aims to overcome his physical abilities. He tries to satisfy the human desire for perfection. The man who is not satisfied with what he has achieved is always trying to surpass it and is under constant psychological pressure. The same goes for athletes. For that reason they are trying to find help outside themselves, in something supernatural, which might help them give their maximum and achieve their desired goal. Thus beliefs and superstitions have a special place in the professional and everyday activities of athletes. The first ritual the athlete does before the start of his performance is to let his subconscious know that everything is all right. In this way he obtains additional support for his performance. Any type of breaking away from the usual ritual can disturb him.

Keywords: physical abilities, amulets, sport psychologists, athletes, emotional mood, mental state

INTRODUCTION

Sport is often referred to as “a religion of the modern world”. At the first glance this is unusual, but it is not without at least some justification. In sport, the man-athlete aims to overcome his physical abilities. He tries to satisfy the human desire for perfection. The man who is not satisfied with what he has achieved is always trying to surpass it and is under constant psychological pressure. The same situation is valid for athletes too. For that reason they are trying to find help outside themselves, in something supernatural which might help them to give their maximum and achieve their desired goal. Besides the mastery of techniques, sport also demands a certain amount of luck. Thus beliefs and superstitions have a special place in the professional and everyday activities of athletes.

Besides the competition and the results achieved, a certain rituals that some athletes perform before their public appearance are almost equally interesting. In order to win, they are ready to perform some strange rituals, they believe in omens, wearing their talismans, “lucky” T-shirts and shorts, they believe in horoscopes, visiting psychics and they entrust into wizards and shamans who should influence toward the suitable, good final results within the competition (match). One may of surmising that the reason for this lies in the fact that sport is an activity which involves a great risks. Each individual athlete or a team are facing only two options once they are in the game: to win or to lose. The fact that everyone wants to be among the winners and not on the losing side justifies all means, even the ones that involve magic and charms – because no one will judge the winner.

THE ESSENCE AND NATURE OF SUPERSTITIONS AND RITUALS

Even the ancient people were making attempts of subduing spirits of nature through magic rituals in order to gain control over their lives and the surrounding. They believe that it is really possible to control the Nature has survived to the modern days. People is still trying to control the direction of their lives with a prayers, magic words, talismans or their own willpower and determination.

SUPERSTITIONS

Superstition (superstitio – lat) is defined as a collection of unreasonable beliefs about the cause and the effect, i.e. the conviction that the future is affected by certain actions without any logical causal relationship. It is important to make a difference between superstitions and prejudices, defined as certain attitudes which are not based on rational arguments or experiences but are results of one’s subjective opinion and generalization.

Throughout the history, all people and communities have had their own reasons to invent a relationship between the natural events and their consequences, despite the fact that no logical connection has ever been determined. All superstitions are based on practical reasons. Superstition is always a sign of hope and effective power.

Psychologists believe that superstition is more than merely pointless enchantment. A great deal of research points towards the fact that superstition significantly increases people’s self-confidence and improves the results of both mental and physical work. It helps in bringing of some order into everyday chaos; e.g. when
people are convinced that certain precaution measures will prevent negative consequences or results. Talismans and symbols have the similar effects. The first who thought of using an animal – a bulldog – as a mascot were the students of the American Yale University. Later on, other colleges too were start creating their image in American football, the most popular sport in the USA, in a similar way, using eagles, tigers, buffaloes and even bees. Scientists believe that talismans increase one’s faith in their own potential and release the tension, which enables people to feel the control and increases their faith that nothing stands in the way of performing a certain task in the best possible way. The main reason for this is not the magic power of a talisman but the faith and trust vested in it. If someone firmly believes that they can do something, then they will indeed be successful. A talisman helps some people to feel such faith and that is why they can restore the inner balance. That person then has an ability of better focusing and becomes more relaxed when dealing with a problem. In difficult and tense situations, talismans help both individuals and groups, even communities to remain calm, by giving a sense of security and a belief that everything is not at the mercy of faith.

Athletes are probably among the most superstitious people although many of them are not willing to admit that fact or to speak openly about it. A special example that might illustrate this thesis is the Olympic Games that took place in China – they started on the eighth of the eighth month at eight minutes past eight. Eight is a lucky number in China and the decision to start the Olympic Games on that day at that particular time was not a coincidence. It was meant to assure everyone that this significant event will be organized without any problems.

RITUALS

A ritual is a sequence of activities, which, when performed regularly lead to a certain result. The variety and duration of these activities are conditioned only by the final aim and conditions of their application and their result is the change in one’s mental state and interpersonal relationships.

Rituals are used in sport for completing the following tasks:

1. Building up an appropriate emotional state for the purposes of competition;
2. Creating a specific situation for the performance of the subsequent action, procedure, approach, etc.;
3. Preparation of the functional body systems for the performance of competitive activities;
4. Achieving confidence regarding the successful ending of the activity and the entire performance;
5. Strengthening the obtained information, obtaining psychological “support” in the training process;
6. Deactualization of negative consequences caused by a failed attempt, procedure or action, contrary to the previous task, with the aim of re-achieving and optimizing the emotional balance.

Performing rituals is a means of regulating one’s mental state right before the activity. Judging by the way of athlete’s performance of the ritual, a psychologist or a coach may assess their current mental state. Rituals are classified based on the type of the activity in the following way:

a. Verbal – certain words and phrases (e.g. “Calm yourself!”’, “Concentrate!”’, “I’m ready!”’, “I can do it!” etc.) that athletes repeat to themselves, their own reflections in the mirror, their portraits, etc.

b. Non-verbal – gestures, mime, sounds, body movements (e.g. shrugging one’s shoulders, rubbing one’s palms, pinching, stroking, etc.)

c. Mixed – a ritual that includes both verbal and non-verbal activities (it is usually a swift command followed by a swift movement).

MANIFESTATIONS OF SUPERSTITIONS AND RITUALS IN SPORT

The reasons for superstitions vary; they depend on the individual and may appear suddenly, during a particular event.

Performing strictly determined series of actions (of a ritual type) helps highly sensitive and nervous people to reduce the tension, apprehension and fears. Believers pray to God in stressful situations and those prayers are not random but are a part of a daily routine. Unlike the prayer, which is emotionally charged, a ritual keeps the feeling of security for a short period of time. That may be the reason why people often are making more and more complex rituals, which wastes both of their time and nerves because the ritual is merely a stereotypical, pre-planned activity, the result of which is transferred to an outward entity. Thus, the stress caused by a demand for winning is shared between an athlete and an outward force, which enables the athlete to focus on the activity and achieve success. Various talismans, symbols of success etc. can assume the role of “the responsible entity” (e.g. a skier Elena Vialbe [Елена Вяльбе], a three-time Olympic champion, always brought a statue of the Merciful God to the competitions.). Hardly any football games go without players kissing a talisman before the game or after scoring a goal. It is usually a cross on a necklace or a medallion with a picture of the beloved ones or a wedding ring. Footballers also often make the sign of the Cross, murmur various sentences or kiss the grass on the field. Former Spanish football star Butragueno used to enter the plane as a last person and meditate before the match, whereas Maradonna used to turn his hotel room into a chapel with plenty of candles and crosses.

It should not be overlooked that professional athletes are having very organized lives. Each athlete’s everyday agenda can also be considered as type of a ritual. Their way of life is often very strict and stereotypical without many redundant and unusual situations. Therefore, it is natural that when an unusual situation occurs, athletes remember it for a very long time. Let us say for
example, that an athlete decides to redo his laces right before the game. If his team wins afterwards, then he can make a rule out of it. Famous Canadian ice hockey player Raymond Jean “Ray” Bourque did it – after the training he would undo his laces and do them again right before the match.

Some athletes imbue the objects they use during the game or performance with a “magic force”. For example, they prepare their equipment themselves, not allowing anyone else to help them. Similarly, a special meaning can be assigned to “lucky” socks, sneakers, outfits, etc. Thus, for example, Michael Jordan, one of the best basketball players ever, always used to wear his North Carolina State University shorts under the official Chicago Bulls ones, because he believed they brought him a good luck. However, as time went by, he began to wear the shorts even when out of a basketball court. He managed to get over this obsession only after a series of sessions with a therapist.

There are many rituals in the realm of sport. Sometimes viewers, when watching sport competitions live or on television, do not even realize that athletes are performing “magic” rituals right in front of their eyes. For example, tennis player Serena Williams always bounces the ball five times before the first service and twice before the second service. She claims that this procedure can be successful only if it is performed persistently and constantly.

Hockey players always put on pieces of their equipment in a particular way, unique for each player. Furthermore, they come out on the ice rink following a particular order, established among them. This ritual was brought to an extreme by the players of the NHL team “Montreal Canadiens” in the 90s. The players came out on the ice rink in a line where each of them had his own spot; no one but the coach was allowed to break the line. Sumo wrestlers never take off their mawashi (a special kind of a belt). Some footballers wear their “magic” shoes (football boots) until the shoes literally fall apart. Some hockey players refuse to shave during the competition in order to win.

**SOME EXAMPLES OF SUPERSTITIONS AND RITUALS IN SPORT**

**FOOTBALL**

*David Robert Joseph Beckham*

English football star reluctantly admitted to seeing a psychiatrist due to an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Apparently, one of the biggest sport celebrities always tries to keep everything around him in perfect symmetry. At first, this rule was only applied to games: he tried to keep his socks even and to have an even number of water bottles. However, nowadays he suffers from a panic attack unless everything around him is in even numbers: he throws away extra items of food in the fridge to keep the number of items even, he has to have at least two towels, two bathrobes, two soaps, two bottles of shampoo, lotion, etc. in the bathroom. The problem became so acute that at one point he even wanted to double the number of his extremely expensive cars?!

*Cecil John “Jack” Russell*

A former member of the English national team used to perform a series of ridiculous rituals before the game. He would use only one teabag for five days during the preparations, then he would have the same lunch twice a day, and take care that his cereals were being soaked in milk for exactly eight minutes. His dressing style suffered from the most extreme superstition: he would wear the same hat for so long that its stench would ultimately become unbearable for his team-mates.

*Mark Schwarzer*

The Australian goalkeeper used to wear the same knee pads since when he was 16.

*Basketball*

*Jason Eugene Terry*

On of the most superstitious NBA players: he sleeps in the opposing-team shorts the night before the game, always has roasted chicken for breakfast and changes five pairs of socks during each match.

*Hockey*

*Charles Robert “Chucks” Gardiner*

According to some reports, this hockey player used to dip his hockey stick in the toilet before each match.

*Patrick Roy*

On of the best NHL goalkeepers, nicknamed “St. Patrick” used to go around the goal in a special way before each game. During the game, he would often touch the goal in order to thank it for all the saved goals. In addition, he would never go across the blue line in the ice rink and he was never able to fall asleep without putting the puck in the net several times.

*Alexander Ovechkin*

This Russian hockey superstar talks to his hockey sticks, thus persuading them to be more precise.

*Tennis*

*Rafael Nadal Parera*

Tennis player Rafael Nadal pays special attention to the water bottles, his sneakers, tennis balls and his famous pants along with performing several rituals with a special meaning for him. For the time being he manages to focus on his game while performing the rituals at the same time, but he has sought expert help because he began to repeat his rituals out of the tennis court as well.

*Björn Borg*

He had a ritual at Wimbledon. According to him, growing a beard before the tournament and his “lucky” Fila T-shirt were his lucky charms.

*Goran Ivanišević*

This former Croatian tennis player used to be a real nuisance because he transferred his many superstitions from the court into a real life. During a match, after he won the other player’s serve, he would try to sit on a bench after the other player and he always took great care not to step on white lines. After winning a match, he would try to do exactly the same things before the next match: he would eat the same food in the same...
restaurant, talk to the same people and watch the same TV program. One year at Wimbledon, he had to watch children TV series the Teletubbies every morning; later, he wrote on his web page that the experience was very boring for him.

Serena Jameka Williams

Before going on court, she takes her showering slippers with her; she also has her own way of doing the shoe laces and never changes her socks during the match. Besides that, she performs a certain ritual when serving: she bounces the ball five times before the first service and twice before the second service.

ATHLETICS

Yelena Isinbayeva

This athlete is very specific when it comes to superstitions. The beautiful Russian is known to mutter several words before each pole vault she performs. However, she never reveals the exact words because she considers it would be unlucky for her. In addition, whenever she has a break, while preparing for the next performance, she lies down her face covered with a T-shirt. According to her, this is a way of defence from the evil eye and the negative energy that might hinder her success.

Javier Sotomayor Sanabria

A legendary Cuban high jump competitor used to cry while watching his reflection in the mirror before important competitions.

BASEBALL

Steven John “Turk” Wendell

His rituals included jumping over the lines drawn in the field, chewing gummy sweets when pitching and wearing a talisman made of teeth from animals killed during hunt.

CONCLUSION

Although the sphere of sport is public, some aspects of it are relatively unknown to the “outsiders”, so sport has all characteristics of a clearly defined subculture. Competitors in various sports clearly have their own cultural distinctions, but there are also some traits which are characteristic of all sportmen. Those traits common to both beginners and professional athletes are:

- constant stress,
- the notion of chance (luck vs. the lack of it) during the game, which results in numerous superstitions, beliefs, taboos, rituals, as well as certain fetish objects and talismans.

The small sample presented in this paper illustrates the significant amount of superstition and rituals in sport. It should not be neglected that there are even more athletes prone to superstition and rituals but reluctant to talk about it in public. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that athletes are very superstitious.

It is no longer a secret that many athletes believe that their success depends on their talismans, unusual habits and rituals. However, some of them have gone too far with their habits, transferring them to their private lives and were thus forced to seek professional help.

LITERATURE


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кој не е задоволен со постигнатото, постојано настојува да се надмине себе и се наоѓа под постојан психолошки притисок. Тоа е случај и со спортистите. Поради тоа, тие се обидуваат да проиђат помош навор од себе, во нешто што е вонтелесно кое може да им помогне, давајќи го максимумот за доаѓање до саканата цел. Заради тоа и верувањата во суеверијата имаат одредено место во професионалните и секојдневните активности на спортистите. Првоти ритуал кој спортистот го врши пред почетокот на настапот е да стави на знаење на својата подсвест дека сè е во ред. На тој начин, дополнително се потпира на своето ангажирање. Било какво отстапување од вообичаенот ритуал може да го исфрли од колосекот.

Ключни зборови: физички способности, аматери, спортски психолози, суеверности, емоционално расположение, психоложка состојба

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