

Should I worry about my superstitious players?

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Did you know that eight out of ten players you coach are likely to have some sort of pre-match superstitious ritual? In fact the average number of rituals they will have is between two and three. As a coach should you worry about this and try to change their behaviours? New research from the Netherlands suggests not.

Research in this area goes right back to the 1940s with experiments that first discovered superstitions among pigeons! From this the research moved on humans which proves more relevant for anyone involved in sport. In particular it was discovered that when the outcome of a match is uncertain, and also important, then people are more likely to display signs of superstition.

To test this idea researchers in the Netherlands worked with 97 top-class sportspersons in football, volleyball, and hockey and asked them about their pre-match behaviours in a number of different situations. For example they compared important events such as finals to less important events such as training matches, or competing against different quality opponents.

The experiment supported the notion that superstitious rituals happen more often when the uncertainty of the match is high and the game is especially important. So how is this helpful for a coach? The researchers provide a number of key points to consider.

Rituals help reduce psychological tension in players and more often than not will help a player. Indeed the enactment of rituals may help players perform better and therefore coaches should acknowledge and encourage (or at least not discourage) whatever rituals players have. Coaches should be aware that superstitious individuals are probably less self-confident and experience higher levels of psychological tension before a match than less superstitious players. When to draw the line

Of course there are times when rituals can become obsessive or too frequent and although they reduce anxiety they are detrimental to performance. In those cases the researchers recommend that it might be better to develop other rituals with no harmful side effects.

Ultimately managing rituals and superstitions among players is just like any other coaching – knowing the players as individuals makes all the difference.

This blog is based on new research published in the Journal of Applied Psychology: Schippers, M. & Van Lange, P. (2013) The Psychological Benefits of Superstitious Rituals in Top Sport: A Study Among Top Sportsmen. To read the whole article click [HERE](#)