

Superstitions in Sport: Hit or Miss?

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Former captain of Liverpool FC Steven Gerrard, when asked by BT Sport presenter Jake Humphrey if he was superstitious, recounted former teammate Luis García shouting, “Don’t touch the cup it’s bad luck” at each player as they left the dressing room to compete in the 2005 UEFA Champions League final in Istanbul. “Was he herding the players away from the trophy?” enquired Jake. “He was paranoid someone would touch it,” Stevie replied, and the rest, as they say, is history as Liverpool went on to lift their fifth European Cup.

Fast forward to May 2018, as Mail Online reported how fans accused French footballer Dimitri Payet of jinxing himself and Olympique de Marseille by touching the UEFA Europa League trophy before losing 3-0 to Atletico Madrid. Nothing went in Payet’s favour that day and eventually he was forced to leave the pitch in tears after just half an hour with a thigh injury. Consequently, some observant fans quickly pointed to the Frenchman’s decision to ignore an age-old tradition (superstition) as the cause of his misery. Comments on social media arrived thick and fast. “*Never touch the trophy before the final,*” and “*Did Dimitri curse himself before a ball was kicked?*” the fans asked. Their comments confirmed that a general consensus still exists in professional sport, that placing hands on a piece of silverware before events are played out invites bad luck, yet as both sets of players made their way to the pitch, Payet couldn’t resist the urge to reach out and touch the trophy.

“I knew Marseille were going to lose because that’s usually an omen for not winning” argued one disgruntled fan. *“The first rule in football when playing a final is, do not touch the trophy. The second rule in football when playing a final is, do not touch the trophy”* added another. To bring this curious scenario full circle, consider how at half time in 2005 when AC Milan were beating Liverpool 3-0, midfielder Gennaro Gattuso famously committed similar sacrilege to Payet by touching the trophy prior to the Reds pulling off what is arguably the most memorable Champions League final comeback of all time.

In these types of scenarios, how can athletes distinguish (in falsifiable terms) between a ‘hit’ or ‘near miss’, given how many have touched silverware prior to competing and won, just as many refrained due to fear of losing and still lost? So what makes athletes value and rigidly adhere to superstitious routines and rituals which have not been evidenced to work beyond the rate of chance? Why not simply let go of superstitions the moment they fail, to focus instead on something more practical which can be observed, analysed, benchmarked, and reassessed? For some athletes, the prospect of removing a superstitious belief seems as difficult to comprehend as removing their own skin; but how can this be? Perhaps the following quote taken from an experiment conducted by cognitive neuroscientist Reza Habib of the Southern Illinois University Carbondale, charting the neurological habits of gambling addicts, can shed light on the equally addictive nature of athletes who re-enact superstitious beliefs which are neither productive nor conducive to well-being. Reza stated:

“What was really interesting were the near misses. To pathological gamblers, near misses looked like wins. Their brains reacted almost the same way. But to a nonpathological gambler, a near miss was like a loss. So people without a gambling habit were better at recognising that a near miss means you still lose.”

Perhaps superstitious athletes are pathological gamblers and attracted to orchestrating risk where it need not exist. Reza’s findings appear to describe a process of internal pacification, whereby pathological gamblers offset the idea of experiencing loss (and its ramifications) with the ongoing prospect of turning near misses into wins. This subtle distinction between a near miss and a loss compels gamblers to risk it

all once again, and a similar process appears to encourage superstitious athletes to tap dance around the ineptitude of routines and rituals which fail to provide definitive outcomes beyond the rate of chance. This causes them to grapple with two key dilemmas. To which lengths will they stoop to sustain their addiction, and do they actually care if their beliefs are true?

During the same interview discussing Payet's superstitious dilemma on BT Sport, former England international footballer Frank Lampard revealed, *"I'd use the same urinal in the dressing room, out of three, always the left one. I used to play left of three (players) in midfield so I'd always queue up for the left one, even when the other two urinals were free."* Frank looked somewhat sheepish when recounting the story, wary no doubt of ridicule from his peers. His apprehension was not unduly misplaced, as I couldn't help but consider the suspicious mind-set of unfortunate players who, on noticing Frank standing directly behind them looking intense, may have felt uneasy and a sense of intrusion given both urinals to their right-hand side were not in use. Such was Frank's attraction to the left-hand urinal that he made no attempt to diffuse their bemusement by moving to one which was already free. His refreshing honesty reminded me of the following quote by legendary Liverpool FC manager Bill Shankly, *"Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it's much more serious than that."* It seems Shankly was on to something after all.

The psychology of an athlete shapes and determines whether they are mediocre or meteoric because their beliefs don't exist in a vacuum. The way they perform is a manifestation and outward expression of their beliefs. So to cultivate a shared coaching experience, and given that the psychology of every athlete is of paramount importance to their continued well-being, I invite all sports protagonists to consider the following questions and post a response:

- Are you aware of having coached anyone with superstitious routines or rituals, and if so, can you share an example?
- Why do athletes sustain belief in a superstition with the same degree of sincerity when they lose? Why not simply give it up?
- How many times should an athlete have to lose (is there a rule of thumb) before the aura surrounding their superstitious spell is broken?
- How much time do you currently devote to helping athletes 'unlearn' any need for superstitious dependency, so they learn to place practical significance on taking ownership of how things work out?
- Are you in control of your superstitions or are superstitions in control of you?

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