

Silly Sports Rituals? Think Again

July 23, 2012



The rituals that athletes count on to win might be more than just mere superstitions.

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Have you seen [Michelle Jenneke's prerace routine](#)? How about [Stephanie Rice before](#) she swims? When an event begins, there is no telling how it will end. How can players cope with the unpredictability of Olympic competition? The [rituals that athletes count](#) on to win a tip off or sink a game-winning shot — like the [college basketball shorts](#) Michael Jordan used to wear under his NBA uniform — might be more than just mere superstitions.

Gregg Steinberg, Austin Peay State University, studies human performance in sports. From his time as an athlete, he noticed that the best players had a handle on their emotions and could rebound from bad breaks. And one seemingly silly tool athletes use to cope is good luck charms.

“Athletes...never know how they're going to play, how the other team is going to play,” said Steinberg in a [CNN](#) article. “So when you do something that's superstitious, like wearing a trinket, it gives you a greater sense of control.”

Research published in [Psychological Science](#) supports Steinberg's statement. Superstitions are typically seen as irrational or inconsequential, but many people rely on superstitious thoughts and practices in their daily routines.

Psychological scientists at the University of Cologne found that participants who had a lucky charm demonstrated improved performance in golfing, motor dexterity, memory, and anagram games. The authors proposed that being in the presence, versus the absence, of a personal lucky charm, leads to improved performance by boosting people's belief in their ability to master a task, or self-efficacy. The boost in self-efficacy from a lucky charm in turn leads to higher self-set goals and increased persistence, which both further improve performance.

So whether you wear lucky underwear, grow a playoff beard, listen to pre-game pump-up jams, do the Haka dance or a slow clap, the science so far shows that observing these rituals will help you bring your A game, no matter how obscure or silly they may seem.

Damisch, L., Stoberock, B., & Mussweiler, T. (2010). Keep Your Fingers Crossed!: How Superstition Improves Performance. *Psychological Science*, 21 (7), 1014-1020 DOI: [10.1177/0956797610372631](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610372631)