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RITUALS IN SPORT

RITUALI V ŠPORTU

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to create a literature review on the influence of rituals in sports on elite and non-elite athletes and to try to find the circumstances under which they are especially committed to enacting rituals prior to a game (ritual commitment). The article also discusses the psychological risks and benefits of rituals in sport and the implications that relate to this topic. Review covers the time period from 2010 to 2016, while researchers were searching for the terms “sports rituals, sport superstition, religious rituals in sport”. Superstitious behavior was given to connection with type of sport, position in a team, locus of control and anxiety, gender differences, internality, controllability, identity and uncertainty. However, significant differences were found in the results. Several studies found that the use of superstitious rituals did not significantly reduce competitive anxiety levels or vary in frequency between genders while others postulate that superstitious rituals can reduce anxiety and increase self-confidence.

Key words: superstitious rituals, anxiety, self confidence, locus of control

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IZVLEČEK

Namen te raziskave je bil pripraviti pregled literature o vplivu ritualov v športu pri vrhunskih in ostalih športnikih ter poskušati opredeliti okoliščine, v katerih športniki še posebej predano izvajajo rituale pred tekmovanjem (predanost ritualom). Članek obravnava tudi psihološka tveganja in koristi ritualov v športu ter s tem povezane posledice. Pregled zajema obdobje 2010–2016, raziskovalci pa so iskali izraze, kot so »športni rituali, vraževeerje v športu, verski rituali v športu«. Vraževerno obnašanje je bilo povezano z vrsto športa, položajem v ekipi, mestom nadzora in tesnobo, razlikami med spoloma, ponotranjenostjo, sposobnostjo nadzora, identiteto in negotovostjo. V rezultatih so se pokazale značilne razlike. Več študij je pokazalo, da izvajanje vraževeernih ritualov ni pomembno zmanjšalo tekmovalne tesnobe ali se razlikovalo v pogostosti glede na spol, nekatere pa so si postavile za izhodišče, da vraževeerjni rituali lahko zmanjšajo tesnobo in povečajo samozavest.

Ključne besede: vraževeerjni rituali, tesnoba, samozavest, mesto nadzora

INTRODUCTION

The use of superstitious behavior is a widespread phenomenon in many sport disciplines (Foster & Weigand, 2006, Ofori et al., 2012). Schippers and Van Lange (2006) observed that 80.3% of respondents – all professional athletes, mentioned one or more superstitious ritual that they performed before a game, with an average of 2.6 rituals per person. However, athletes often practice at least one superstitious ritual and yet they did not feel superstitious (Breves et al., 2011).

Cherington (2014, p.517) observed a university basketball team for 15 months and states that “it was evident that individuals were involved in ‘ritualistic’ forms of behavior which, though irregular, were tremendously important to those who practised them”. He also gives a fine example of ritual description and athletes own understanding of this behavior:

It’s just superstition I suppose. Y’know, I’ve always done something on game day ... It just comes down to like eating the right kind of food and like I said I watch a film that gets me in the mood to play sort of thing ... I play crap when I’m not ready for it, and it’s just my way of getting ready for the game.” (Cherrington, 2014, p. 518)

Despite many given examples of superstitious behavior performed daily and reported within sport news, little empirical research has been conducted so far. (Bleak & Frederick, 1998).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The review of researches covered the period from 1999 to 2016. This 15-years period was considered to be a period which covers the most relevant studies concerning superstitious behavior in the context of sport environment. Relevant researches were searched through electronic database. At first ScienceDirect, ResearchGate, ShapeAmerica, Ingenta Connect, PLOS ONE, SPORT SCIENCE databases were searched through. The key words used to search the studies were: sports rituals, sport superstition, religious rituals in sport. Relevant studies were chosen according to fulfilling the topics superstitious behavior and sport. Studies that did not fulfill the following criteria were eliminated:

- i) Qualitative and quantitative studies were involved into the article.
- ii) The aim of the study was to examine the superstitious behavior in sport. (although a great research literature is available to explain superstitious behavior in general, it was not used, unless in the sport area).

DEFINITION

Superstitions in sport have most often been defined as “actions, which are repetitive, formal, sequential, distinct from technical performance and which the athletes believe to be powerful in controlling luck or other external factors.” The repetitive nature of these actions permits the term ‘ritual’ to be used to describe superstitious behaviors (Bleak & Frederick, 1998). A detailed description of superstitious behavior in different sport disciplines, with given examples, may be found in Živanović (2012). Wormack (1992 in Ofori et al., 2012, p.3) defines sport ritual as “conscious activity involving heightened arousal with focused attention that provides a way of

coping with a high stress situation”. Moran 1996 (in Foster & Weigand, 2006) also define superstitious behavior as a behavior which does not have a clear technical function in the execution of skill, yet which is believed to control luck and/or other external factors and state.

An unclear line between superstitious behavior and pre-performance routines has been established during the research. Pre-performance routines may also involve formal, repetitive and sequential behavior, but compared to superstitious behavior they clearly fulfill a different function as they intentionally help to regulate arousal and thus enhance concentration and optimize physiological and psychological states (Foster & Weigand, 2006; Cohn, 1990). Superstitious behavior is also characterized by excessive rigid timing and fixed order a normal pre-performance routine would not have (Schippers & Van Lange, 2006).

Quite a few studies try to distinguish between sport superstitions and “religious rituals”. A vast literature on the topic can be found (Storch et al., 2001; Kreider, 2003; Czech et al., 2004; Lawrence, 2005; Murray et al., 2005; Watson, Czech, 2005; Miller, 2008; Price 2009 Hoffman, 2010; Maranise, 2013). Newberg and Waldman (2010, p.41) state that “Participation in “religious rituals,” even within a sporting context, are indissolubly bound together with spirituality in that “religious rituals give personal meaning to theological ideas.”

Maranise (2013) presents several factors that are similar for religious rituals and superstitions such as continual repetition, believe that these actions make sport performance more effective, giving personal meaning to these activities and finally having a sense of reaching out beyond the self and being aware of a force beyond human control and total human comprehension. On the other hand religious rituals “promote greater holistic (mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual) well-being and add significant meaning to life in a way that superstitions cannot” (Maranise, 2013, p. 86).

Ofori et al. (2012) distinguish superstitious behavior endorsed by professional footballers into several categories, while the top three categories were Clothing and Appearance, Prayer and Team rituals.

Živanović et al. (2012) differentiate between verbal superstitious behavior (specific words and phrases, such as “calm yourself!; Concentrate!; I am ready etc.), non-verbal superstitious behavior (gestures, mime, sounds, movements, such as pinching, stroking, rubbing a certain spot etc.) and mixed (these include both verbal and non-verbal actions).

PREVALENCE

Dodo et al. (2015) found that the tendency to use rituals increases with winning demand or pressure on team and for players to perform well. Schippers and Van Lange (2006) observed that 80.3% of respondents – all professional athletes, mentioned one or more sport rituals that they performed before a game, with an average of 2.6 rituals per person. Burger and Lynn (2005) states that 74.3% of baseball players listed at least one superstition they sometimes engage in before or during a game. 53,3 % of the players, when asked how often they engaged in superstitious behavior, indicated every game. Živanović et al. (2012) do not include prevalence numbers into the article, yet talk about significant amount of superstition and rituals in sport. Breves et al. (2013) reported similar number to Schippers and Van Lange and Burger and Lynn, stating that 75.8% of participants reported one or more superstitious rituals. Surprisingly Flanagan et al.

(2013) found that athletes in the team sports were more superstitious than athletes in individual sports. Bal et al. (2014) support this idea when they conclude that the individual sport group has low superstitious belief and better decision making level as compared to their counterpart dual and team sport.

FUNCTION

Six different reasons for superstitious pre-competition rituals were suggested in the articles. A structured summary is provided in Table 1. Although terminological differences are clearly to be seen between the studies, certain overall similarity connected to athletes trying to reduce pre-competition anxiety can be found.

Table 1. Functions of pre-competitions rituals.

FUNCTIONS	RESEARCHES
Regulate psychological tension	Schippers and Van Lange, 2006
Create feelings of control in uncontrollable situations	Becker, 1975; Matute, 1994
Reduce anxiety	Becker, 1975; Neil, 1980; Buhrmann et al., 1982; Womack, 1992; Bleak and Frederick, 1998
Help to build or restore confidence	Becker, 1975; Neil, 1980
Help to cope with uncertainty	Neil, 1980; Schippers and Van Lange, 2006, Burke et al., 2006; Watson and Czech, 2005
Help to maintain emotional stability	Womack, 1992
Provide heightened feelings of self-efficacy	Damisch et al., 2010
Psychological placebos	Neil, 1980

Živanović et al. (2012, p. 221) provides yet another structured view at sport superstitious behavior functions:

“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.”

Burke et al. (2005) states that the sport environment is often perceived as uncomfortable which leads to high levels of anxiety athletes and coaches experience. When athletes begin to experience performance anxiety before a competition, superstitious ritual can be used to alleviate pressure and in this way such a behavior becomes a tool for removal of performance anxiety. Superstitious behavior thus serves as a scapegoat – if the athlete fails in the competition, if he performs poorly, superstition can become the cause of the poor outcome rather than his own achievement.

As mentioned above, superstitious behavior may as well be performed in the form of religious rituals. The use of religious rituals in sport, especially Christian prayer has revealed “a complex

multi-dimensional construct” (Miller & Thoresen, 2003, p. 4). Watson and Czech (2005) argue that the use of religious prayer alleviates anxiety and stress in uncertain situations and may seem similar to the use of sport superstitions or rituals. Coakley (2003, p.28) presents six possible reasons while athletes use prayer: “prayer as a coping mechanism for uncertain stressful situations, to help live a morally sound life, to sanctify athletes’ commitment to sport, to put sport into perspective, to establish a strong bond of attachment between teammates, and to maintain social control”. Finally Murray et al. (2005) state that coaches sometimes even implement a ritual prayers before and/or after contests for athletes to participate, as they want to help the team to bear performance anxiety, concerns for team cohesion and collective performance, fear of shame or humiliation or parental disappointment.

LOCUS OF CONTROL AND OTHER CORRELATION

Beliefs in good luck seems to be significantly related to optimism and irrational beliefs (Day & Maltby, 2003), while negative links were found between beliefs in good luck and depression and anxiety. Also people who were anxious were more superstitious than those who were not (Wiseman & Watt, 2004).

Superstitious practices in sports have in past been linked to the theoretical perspectives of attribution, achievement motivation, reinforcement, and locus of control (Ofori et al., 2012).

Todd & Brown (2003) state that athletic identity and locus of control were significant predictors of superstition. However the strength of this relationship was after additional data analyses found only among Division III athletes with locus of control emerging as the only significant predictor.

Barkoukis et al. (2011) found that positive superstitious beliefs significantly predicted self-handicapping and external locus of control. On the other hand negative superstitious beliefs were significant predictors of somatic anxiety, worry, and performance avoidance goals. The less sport experience the athletes had, the stronger effect of superstitions beliefs on worry was found.

Brevers et al. (2011) show similar results finding ritual commitment to be greater in young elite athletes than in the national and regional players. Positive correlation also emerged between athletic identity and superstitious rituals, while the intensity of superstition depended on situational factors, such as pregame psychological tension which increased superstition or level of uncertainty and the importance of the game which also increased the level of ritual commitment. Psychological tension mediated the effect of both uncertainty and importance on ritual commitment. Authors present an observation that superstitious rituals may act as a “psychological placebo” used as a means to control pre-game tension. Although superstitious rituals may seem irrational, the authors suggest they may be a part of the mental and physical preparation for competitions perceived as uncertain and important and therefore useful.

Ofori et al. (2012) measured superstitious behavior and attributional styles of elite footballers in Ghana. A significant relationship between attribution style and superstitious behavior has been found. Authors also focused on causal dimensions rather than the four basic elements of attribution. These dimensions included locus of causality (internal, external), stability (stable, unstable), and controllability (controllable, uncontrollable). Significant negative correlations were found between superstitious behavior and total scores for positive – internality. A significant positive

correlation was found between superstitious behavior and positive-controllability. Positive-externality, negative-externality and negative-controllability were also significant predictors of the practice of superstitious behavior. To conclude, authors found that attributional styles were significant predictor of superstitious behavior. Fear of injury, culture and religiosity, pressure from team officials as well as the will to win will probably play important roles in determining the overall use of superstition in sport.

Ofori (2013) includes several studies into his theses. He divides superstitious behavior into positive and negative superstitions, both are significantly linked to gender and nationality. Ghanaian student athletes engaged in superstitious behavior more than British student athletes, while British student athletes tended to approve of both types of superstition more. Author also suggested that people may enact their positive superstitious beliefs and religion as coping mechanisms. It seems that superstitious and religious behavior can protect against debilitating interpretations of anxiety by increasing self-confidence and providing athletes with feeling of self-control. Anxiety symptoms can be then perceived as controllable and facilitate the performance. However athletes who acquired their superstitions by conformity did not improve their performance as much as those who activated their own personal superstitions. This group also reported that they often experienced cognitive dissonance. It seems that differences between athletes personal superstitious behavior and that of their team allowed self-doubt to arise and thus decreased ones confidence.

The last study by Ofori et al. (2016) also dealt with locus of control. As for results, personal control, coping mechanisms and control strategies were predictors of negative and positive superstitious beliefs. Exaggerated internal control, God-mediated control, emotional support, and substance use were predictors of negative superstitions. Exaggerated internal control, substance use, emotional support and acceptance were predictors of positive superstitions.

Flanagan et al. (2013) confirmed previous result, finding that there is a difference between superstitious behavior prevalence in groups of elite and non-elite athletes. Consistently with previous studies elite athletes were more superstitious than non-elites. Surprisingly the use of superstitious rituals did not in this study significantly reduce competitive anxiety levels or vary in frequency between genders.

Maranise et al. (2013) researched the topic of religious superstitious behavior. The study states that superstitious and religious behaviors cannot be considered the same, because of major differences between the two. Religious behaviors provides a wide range of psychological benefits, and a gives a holistic meaning to the sport experience, which may understand as a feeling of well-being by the athlete. Dodo et al. (2015) on the other hand conclude that spiritual rituals are used by players to boost their confidence during soccer competitions. And the use of spiritual rituals in sports is more of psycho-social interventions than spirituality of religion.

Perkos et al. (2013) states that superstitious behavior in sport is influenced by the athletes' locus of control and anxiety. Gender differences and differences that are related to the type of sport and the player position in a team can be found. This is contrary to finding of Ofori (2013) who did not find any differences in the use of superstitious behavior depending on sport position and in accordance with Breves et al. (2011) who found that woman exhibited more superstitious behaviors than man.

As the last presented study Torma et al. (2013) conclude that belief in sport superstition was correlated with somatosensory amplification and spirituality and was independent of dispositional optimism.

CONCLUSION

Superstitious behavior is a wide spread phenomenon in different sport disciplines. Even though it may take various shapes, its function is often to act as a way to reduce anxiety and boost self-confidence. Benefits come from the possibility of externalizing possible failure, which may decrease the level of anxiety athletes are experiencing. Under certain situational factors, such as confirming to the ritual in team rather than believing in it, negative consequences may also arise. Links between superstitious behavior and locus of control, coping strategies, anxiety levels have been established.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitation to our study. First of all, only articles in English were involved in the study due to language skills. As for research of this area superstitious behavior is often well camouflaged and even the holder may not know why she/he adheres to it or even that she/he is holding it. Furthermore Buhrmann et al. (1982) and Buhrmann and Zaugg (1981, 1983) highlighted the methodological limitations in trying to identify and isolate superstitious behaviors. They argued that often it is very difficult to differentiate between habitual, religious or superstitious practices since some overlap of behaviors does inevitably occur.

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