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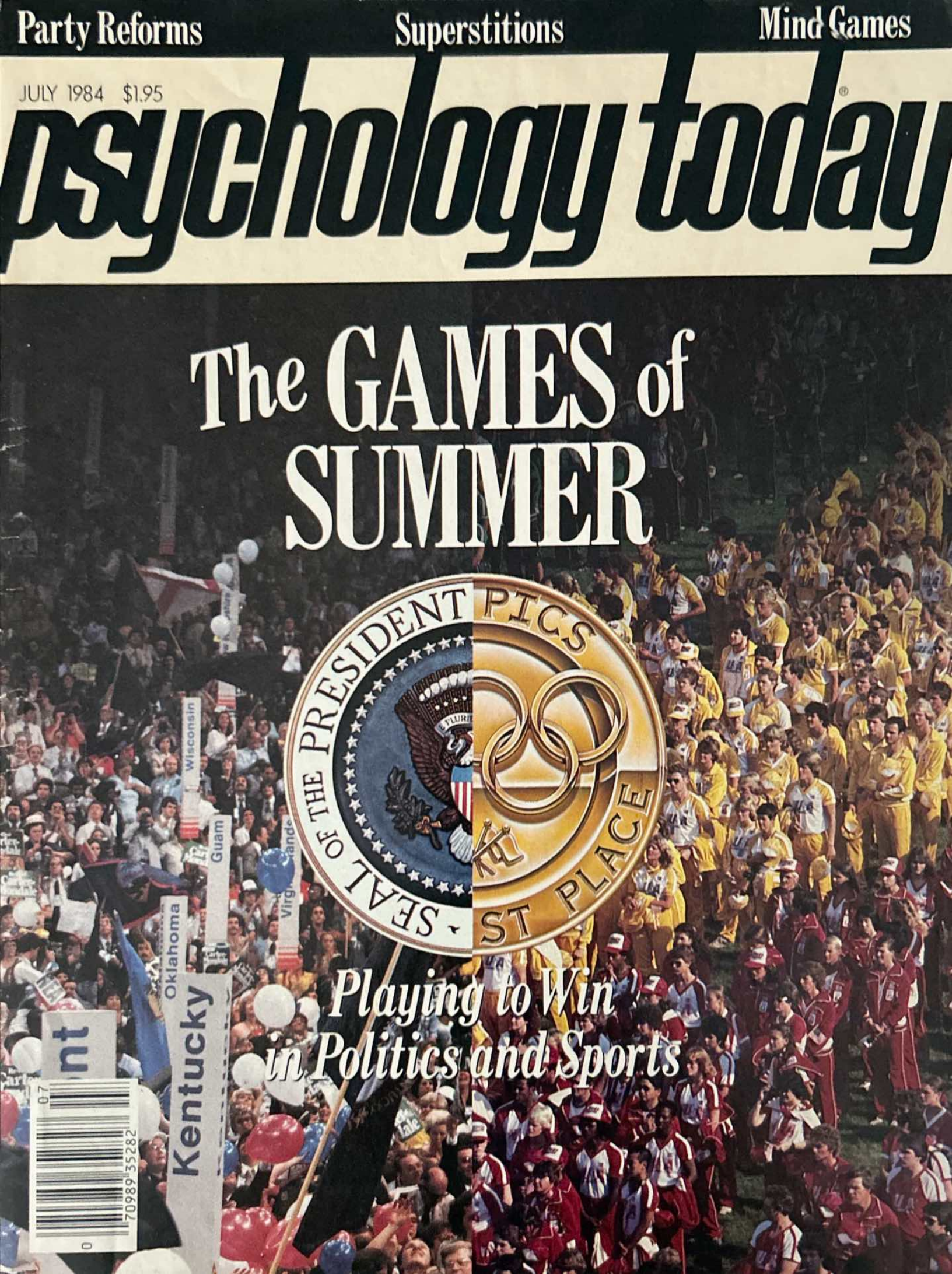
The GAMES of SUMMER

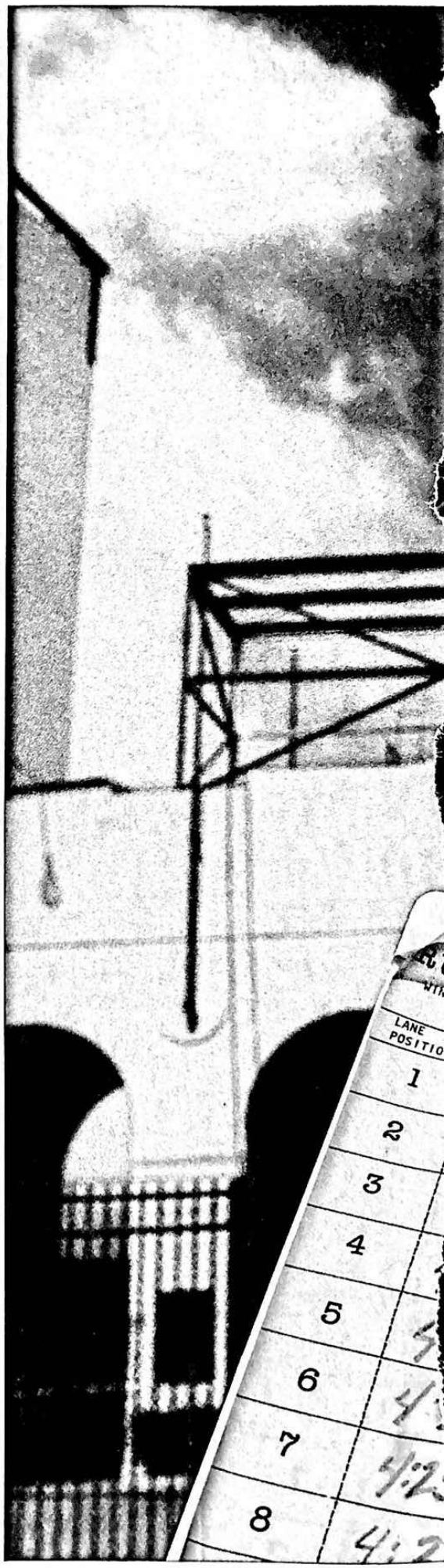


Playing to Win in Politics and Sports

Courting the Gods of Sport

ATHLETES USE SUPERSTITIONS TO WARD OFF THE DEVILS OF INJURY AND BAD LUCK.

BY JUDITH ZIMMER



Throughout his 18-year career with the Boston Bruins and New York Rangers, Phil Esposito prepared for every hockey game in the same way. Dressed in a carefully selected black tie, he would make sure to drive through the same tollbooth he had passed through before his last winning game. Once in the locker room, he put on a black turtleneck he had first worn before a game years earlier to ease a sore throat. When he ended up being that game's high scorer, the black sweater became a permanent part of his game wardrobe.

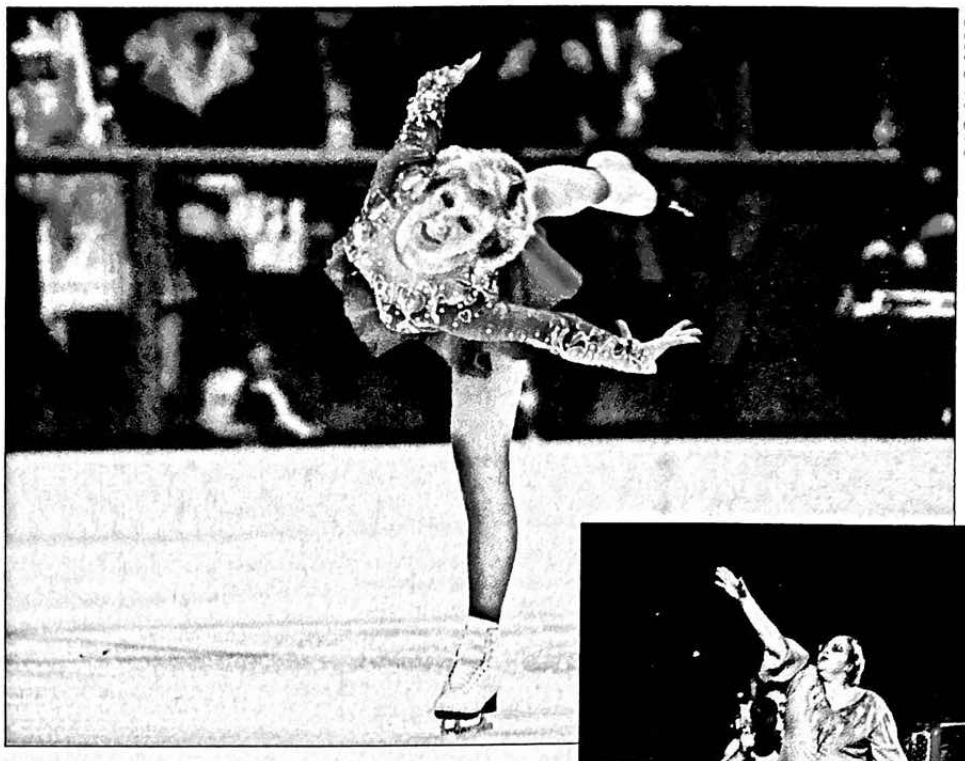
He then put on his gear in precisely this order: underwear, pants, skates, laces. He placed a pack of gum plus one individual stick next to him, and arranged his equipment just so: black tape on the bottom, white tape stacked on top, gloves placed palms up on either side of the hockey stick, which was aligned precisely with the tips of the gloves. While the national anthem was played, he said a Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer and prayed that his team played well, and that no one on either side would be hurt. Only then was he ready to start the game.

Esposito's rituals were unusual only in their elaborateness. Lucky charms, routines and rituals are as much a part of sports as warming up. They are not only tolerated but sometimes encouraged by many coaches and sports psychologists who recognize that superstition can sometimes boost an athlete's confidence.

"Superstition is a real coping strategy, a way to handle the anxiety that comes with competition," says Graham Neil, associate professor of physical education and sports psychology at McGill University in Montreal. Superstitious behavior helps athletes prepare for a game and gives them a sense of security and control over the vagaries of weather, injury and bad luck. Performing a ritual or routine can also have a calming effect, giving skilled men and women further assurance that they'll perform well, preventing distracting or negative thoughts and leaving them free to concentrate on the game itself.

In an extensive study of superstition in sports, psychologist Jane Gregory of Western Ontario University interviewed 137 intercollegiate athletes and 115 nonathletes. One-third of the

THE GREATER THE RISK, OR THE MORE A PLAYER HAS RIDING ON A GAME, THE MORE SUPERSTITION PREVAILS.



FOCUS ON SPORTS

BERNIE MOSER

Skater Zayak trusted stuffed monkeys. The Flyers believed in Kate Smith.

athletes admitted to having superstitions, and half said they knew of others who had them. The athletes knew twice as many sports superstitions as the nonathletes, although the nonathletes consistently knew of more general superstitions.

Superstitious behavior is usually based on uncertainty and fear of the unknown. A classic example is given in anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's observation of Trobriand Islanders in the South Seas. He found that islanders who fished in the lagoon, where there was little danger and plenty of fish, relied on their own skills. Those who fished in the open seas, less certain of their safety and their catch, used rituals and charms to help them.

Athletes are particularly susceptible to superstition because, like the Trobriand fishermen on the open seas, they have limited control over the outcome of their efforts. No matter how well trained they are, there is always fate—the bad bounce, the bad call, the unexpected injury—that can lose a game or a championship. To offset this, they try to gain a little edge by evoking good luck to help control these uncertainties.

In her study, Gregory found that most superstitions focus on the particulars of a sport—equipment, uniforms, numbers and so on—although religion, hair, hands, charms, coins and food are also popular fodder. Some athletes concentrate on the order in which a team enters the arena or what they do in the dressing room, or adopt the superstitions of other sports people they see. Hockey players, who use a lot of equipment, have many superstitions related to it; basketball players, burdened with much less gear, generate more superstitions associated with the ball and scoring. Athletes in sports such as swimming or gymnastics, which involve little equipment, usually rely on lucky charms and numbers or repeating a particular phrase before performing.

Each sport has its own taboos. In hockey, some players are uneasy about crossed sticks, believing it brings injury. Baseball players are superstitious about stepping on foul lines, seeing crossed bats in the dugout and mentioning the word "no-hitter" while one is in progress. And although figure skaters are performers as well as athletes, they never use the good-luck phrase popular with actors before a performance, "Break a leg," for fear it might come true.

Even coaches aren't immune to odd beliefs. Figure skating coach Peter Burrows, who trained 1984 Olympian Elaine Zayak, won't allow any of his skaters to compete in a green outfit because he once had an accident with a green car and knows of a green house that burned down. The superstition has been passed on to some of the skaters' parents, who are also careful to avoid green. Stan Albeck, now head coach of the New Jersey Nets, coached the San Antonio Spurs last year. Preparing for games in Texas, he wore the same cowboy boots, used the same shaving kit and read the same billboards on the way to a home game and always stood behind the same player during the playing of the national anthem.

Superstitions often begin spontaneously. A player brushes his teeth a new way or picks up a quarter on the way to the stadium and then plays his best game. To invoke the same good luck, the athlete repeats the toothbrushing routine, carries the coin or, like Esposito, wears the same sweater.

The rationale, if it can be called that, is that since the magic worked once, it might work again. In 1948, B. F. Skinner found that hungry pigeons developed similar "superstitious" behavior. Several of them began to associate their activity immediately prior to being fed with the delivery of food. One bird made several turns in the cage, while another made jerking movements with its head. When they were fed soon afterward, their behavior was reinforced, and they continued it.

Dave Murphy, a marathon runner from England, listens to a tape of The Who one hour before every race. "I don't think consciously that I'm super-

stitious," he explains. "I saw the group perform at a time when I was running well. Maybe the music helped me." Zayak, a national figure skating champion, says she isn't superstitious. But she has brought the same stuffed monkey to every competition since winning her first when she was 6 years old.

Teams have superstitions, too. During the mid 1970s, the Philadelphia Flyers hockey team thought that Kate Smith's rendition of *God Bless America* brought them good luck and they requested the song instead of the national anthem before important games. The result: 54 wins, 9 losses and 2 ties. Then the magic faded, as the New York Islanders started a string of consecutive Stanley Cup titles. The anthem now rings out regularly before Flyers games.

In research done a decade ago, Gregory found that women were more superstitious than men about most things, but that since they were less involved in sports, they had fewer superstitions related to it. Recent studies by Neil show that female athletes today are no more superstitious than men about their game. "The sex of the individual has nothing to do with superstition," he says. "It depends on the level of involvement, how important the activity is to the athlete and how much time and energy are devoted to it."

The greater the risk, or the more a player has riding on a game, the more superstition prevails. There isn't much in casual, recreational play or with weekend athletes, and even professionals are more likely to be superstitious during a contest than during training or practice games.

Superstition is particularly tied to high-risk positions or players. George Gmelch, once a pro baseball player and the author of several articles on magic and baseball, has observed that pitchers and hitters have more superstitions about their efforts than do fielders. The reason, he says, is that a pitcher and a hitter have less control over the results they achieve, since each is being thwarted by the other. Fielders have no such obstacles. Similarly, the goalie in hockey is uniquely positioned to win or lose a game. Thus, tapping the goalie on the pads and tapping the goal posts before a game are common good-luck practices.

Some rituals and routines can have a direct bearing on performance and thereby be productive and helpful to athletes by taking the form of a warm-up. "The behavior can be an attempt at, or stimulus for, concentration, attention and relaxation and help an athlete get to the proper level of calm or excitation as needed," says Rod Dishman, professor of physical education at the University of California at Davis. "If an athlete has a certain time frame in which to prepare for a contest, the ritual can serve as a cue and as a countdown."

In tennis or golf, sports that involve high concentration, rituals can prepare a player by reducing physical stimulation and focusing attention on an environmental cue, like aligning the body with the putter in golf or a spot on the court in tennis. "When the technique of the ritual is related to the game, you're mixing therapy with strategy, a double whammy," Dishman says.

WHEN AN ATHLETE HAS ONLY A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF TIME TO PREPARE FOR A CONTEST, RITUAL CAN SERVE BOTH AS A CUE AND AS A COUNTDOWN.

Many sports psychologists agree that superstition can help in these ways but warn that sometimes athletes have to be weaned from a superstition that is out of control. Some develop superstitions that disrupt other players or the game itself. Others don't think they can play well if the ritual isn't completed or the lucky charm is lost. When this happens, superstition has replaced the athletes' belief in their own ability.

"If an athlete believes he's not going to perform well, that's a step toward not performing well. That's when a superstition becomes dangerous," says Rainer Martens, professor of physical education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and sports psychologist for the Nordic ski team. He deals with superstitions only when they become a problem for athletes. Then he tries to move the athletes' orientation away from the superstition and toward the performance itself. He sets up a series of routines, checklists and relaxation techniques to help them control their thoughts before the event.

Linda Lewis Griffith, a sports psychology specialist in Los Osos, California, has also worked with clients whose superstitions presented problems. One pro tennis player had to hit his racket on the side of the net for good luck every time he changed sides and ended up tapping constantly. To wean the player of the behavior, Griffith used a series of exercises in which the player tapped the racket one less time whenever he changed sides and then envisioned changing sides without tapping. The exercises were mixed with relaxation training until the player was comfortable without the taps. "The reason superstition works so well is that it helps athletes ease tension, so you have to teach a player how to relax without the ritual," Griffith explains.

Of course, many athletes are rational enough to ignore superstition or substitute one for another themselves when the original doesn't fit the schedule. Sue King, a marathon runner from Alabama, likes to eat pancakes before a race. She also likes to go to bed at the same hour on nights before a race and then warm up for 18 minutes before the run. But traveling to competitions sometimes doesn't allow her to follow all these rituals. "If I don't do things my way, it makes me nervous. But I know I'll do okay anyway," she says. "I adjust to situations and tell myself the superstitions make no difference, that they're really all in my head."

Judith Zimmer is a freelance writer who lives in New York City.