Unlocking the mind: The fascinating psychology of the Olympic athlete, fan rituals

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Credit: Vitaly Gariev from Pexels

Body paint, mismatched socks, hidden knick-knacks—what do they have in common when chasing glory on the biggest stage?

In the competitive world of sports, where every move matters, athletes often turn to rituals and superstitions to find comfort and boost confidence.
These unique habits can also extend to fans.

From the food on their plate to the clothes on their back, some sports enthusiasts also feel the success of their team hinges on having things done in such a particular manner that it's often unexplainable to anyone else.

With the Olympics underway—and these rituals on full display—UKNow called on two experts to better understand the psychology behind performance.

Marc Cormier, director of the Sport and Exercise Psychology graduate program housed in the College of Education's Department of Kinesiology and Health Promotion, and director of Counseling and Sport Psychology Services in UK Athletics, discusses how athletes handle high-pressure situations.

While Jenny Rice, an associate professor in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences, helps us explain the seemingly incomprehensible psychology behind superstitions.

**Athletes**

**UKNow: Let's start by explaining. What is sport psychology?**

Cormier: Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP) is a broad term that covers two main areas: mental health and mental fitness.

Sport psychology professionals study the relationship between psychological factors and optimizing human performance. In short, these
can include emotional regulation, anxiety, psychological adjustment, concentration, managing expectations and even team cohesion.

Think of it this way, most elite athletes have strength and conditioning coaches to train the body and athletic trainers to rehabilitate the body. Sport psychology professionals aim to do each of these—but from the mental side of performance.

We also help develop the "mental muscles." By making athletes aware of the importance of mental factors, we can hopefully help them understand they have control over the way they think, and therefore, how they perform.

**Building off this, help us understand what usually goes through an athlete's mind in high-pressure situations, such as the Olympics?**

Cormier: Stress and anxiety are very common in high-pressure situations.

Let's take a step back—imagine a UK student preparing for an end-of-semester presentation. They've invested dozens of hours, have practiced, fine-tuned it and received and implemented feedback. Still, despite their best efforts, most will experience anxiety or fear. This, in turn, can have a real impact on their performance. Physical symptoms (muscle tension, sweating, increased heart rate) may be the difference in the overall execution, enjoyment and outcome of the task.

Now, let's magnify this, and imagine what Olympians are going through. Not only do they invest more time, effort and money than our presenter, but they likely identify very strongly with their event/sport. Meaning, they don't go back to their "normal" routine after they're finished. Their
performances likely define who they are for years following the games.

In the end—as physically prepared as these athletes are—we must consider the mental factors that are involved.

**What role do rituals play among athletes competing in the Olympics? These athletes are clearly talented and well-trained, but they also are very ritualistic. Why is that?**

Cormier: We often assume high-achieving athletes are more ritualistic than non-athletes. The data is a bit mixed on that. Either way, there's no doubt that athletes commonly display ritualistic behaviors before, and during, a competition.

Athletes may develop rituals for several reasons, but the one that I hear most commonly is due to a desire to be—or remain—in control.

One of the more basic concepts in SPP (something we teach our graduate students at UK on day one) is, "control the controllables." In sport (and life), there are controllables (your effort, behavior, attitude, communication patterns, etc.) and uncontrollables (weather, time of competition, skill of opponent, etc.).

Routines, or process-driven behaviors, can help athletes feel grounded when faced with high-pressure and unpredictable environments. A routine should be a simple pattern of controllable behavior that allows athletes to mentally connect to a desired mindset.

For example, a sprinter may go through their warm-up/stretching/music routine hours before a competition. This establishes a pattern of behavior that is consistent, predictable, controllable and comfortable.
In your professional opinion, what is the key to success when trying to balance mental and physical performance?

Cormier: The answer is actually in your question: balance.

Every athlete has a different formula. The "success is 90% mental" myth is—you guessed it—a myth. The truth is, we don't know how much of performance is mental versus physical. It's different for every person, because people are different. It's as simple as that.

Ultimately, athletes need to meet their performance needs and not rely so heavily on what others, or competitors, do. In my experience, athletes naturally mimic those who are at the top of the performance spectrum without realizing it likely won't work for them. In other words, Michael Phelps', Simone Biles', Anthony Davis' routines work for them. Over many years, they've evaluated every piece of the performance puzzle to determine the most ideal formula in achieving the best possible experience/result.

Achieving balance has less to do with what others are doing and more to do with asking the right questions. "Is this working for me?" "What do I need most when the pressure is on?" "Who will I trust to be in my inner circle one hour before competition?" "How early do I need to arrive before practice to achieve the right mindset?"

How can athletes develop effective rituals that enhance their performance without becoming overly reliant on them?

Cormier: Self-awareness is key.
Developing effective rituals to enhance performance is about understanding yourself.

Most routines will develop over time, and completely at random, (e.g., "I do this before a competition because I did it once and played well, so I've been doing it ever since."). This is not a bad strategy, but an inefficient one. When athletes are more intentional, the above statement changes to, "I do this before a competition, because I've learned that I need a few extra minutes to myself before entering the locker room."

Ultimately, self-awareness is never a bad thing. If it leads to discovering something you don't like, you can work towards mitigating it.

Fans

**What is the difference between a ritual and a superstition?**

Rice: A superstition can be a ritual that is performed at very particular times—like when you see a falling star and make a wish. But superstitions also have a degree of magic and the supernatural attached to them. Rituals on their own are just habits performed regularly. I brush my teeth every morning, for example, which is a ritual. Superstitions, however, presume that the rituals I perform will have an effect that goes beyond my human ability.

**When it comes to superstitions, we often believe them knowing—on some level—they can't be true. Why do we believe the seemingly unbelievable?**

Rice: One explanation relates to cognitive dissonance. Our brains have a hard time believing that two opposite propositions are both true. When
we're faced with information that contradicts something we believe, our brains "solve the problem" by providing a rationalization that gets rid of the conflict.

For example, while most of us know that smoking is dangerous to our health, we might rationalize it by saying, "I only smoke when I am out with friends, so it's not like I'm a REAL smoker." So, we might believe that superstitions, in general, aren't true, but we might also believe that *this* specific ritual is meaningful and important. We tend to look at our own actions and beliefs as different from the larger category of things that are untrue, dangerous, unhealthy, etc.

**We often see fans "living by" superstitions during times of competition. Why do superstitions lend themselves to fan bases and athletic events?**

Rice: Since superstitions are—to some degree—about hoping to achieve a result that isn't within our own human abilities, it makes sense that they are part of fan culture. When watching basketball, we can't make the shots ourselves from the stands, but we may feel like we're able to able to "help" by performing a ritual that (we hope) will bring about that supernatural effect.

**Do superstitions give a false sense of having control over an outcome? If so, is that healthy or unhealthy behavior?**

Rice: Strong superstitious belief is all about a sense of control over a situation's outcome. While I wouldn't necessarily call it unhealthy behavior, there are certain times when we falsely believe that our situations are matters of pure luck—both good and bad. If I'm running a
marathon and end up with a terrible performance, I might attribute it to "bad luck." Maybe I forgot to wear my lucky socks, or I wore unlucky colors. But the truth probably has more to do with my preparation and training (or lack thereof). When we start thinking more in terms of luck than in personal accountability, superstitions can hold us back.

Even when our superstitions fail us, why do we still act on them?

Rice: We might not even necessarily be able to see that our superstitions failed. If I believe that my lucky Wildcats shirt always means a UK win, then I might explain a loss through some other reasoning. Maybe I was wearing the shirt, but I blame the fact that I washed it between games as the reason.

Provided by University of Kentucky

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