

On the importance of rituals in sport

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Abstract

In this short article, we took a look at the importance of rituals in sports. First we explained the concepts of religion, creed, superstitions, fallacies and rituals. Then we described superstitious thinking and religiosity in psychological terms and on this basis we referred to rituals in sport. We explained the meaning of rituals in sport based on our own professional experiences with athletes. This article is an introduction for conducting a pilot study.

Key words: sports psychology, sport, rituals, creed, superstition

What is religion, in the first place? Probably each of us has their own personal definition of the word. For some it is a part of the family tradition, for others it is a sphere of life where one can find relief from everyday worries and problems. Upon analyzing the meaning of religion, one must take into account the system of beliefs and practices that define the relationship between the variously understood sphere of the sacred (holiness), the sphere of God and the sphere of society, a given group or a given individual. It manifests itself in the doctrinal dimension (doctrine, beliefs), in religious activities (e.g. cult, rituals), in the socio-organizational sphere (religious community, e.g. the Church) and in the sphere of individual spirituality (e.g. mysticism) [1] . In other words, it is a set of beliefs about the existence of God or gods, the origin and purpose of human life, the origin of the world and rites, moral principles and organizational forms related with the former. At this point, it is necessary to explain the meaning of the term “creed”. It is not a synonym for the term “religion”, but a phrase describing a religious group based on one set of truths of faith. Religion is always professed by a given group of people, and a religious group exists within a larger religious current. Therefore, creed is contained in religion and is a part of it. According to the hierarchy of meanings, religion is in the lead, followed by creed.

There are between 4,200 and 10,000 religions in the world in the 21st century. The most popular of these is definitely Christianity. According to the data of the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life [2], at present the population of Christians in the world amounts to 2,168,330,000. The second most popular religion is Islam. The numerical share of Islam’s followers in the world’s population is 1,599,700,000. Then, there is a very large group of people who are not associated with any classified religion: 1,131,150,000 people. They are followed by the Hindus, Buddhists, followers of folk religions and Jews, along with other followers of smaller religions. On average, 8 out of 10 people identify themselves with a religion. There are 5.8 billion people in the world associated with a religion, and in 2010 they represented 84% of the entire population of our globe. These

include Christians - 32%, Islam followers - 23%, Hindus - 15%, Buddhists - 7%, Jews - 0.2%, followers of folk religions - 6%, and followers of other religions - 0.8%. On the other hand, 1 in 6 people in the world are not affiliated with any of the aforementioned religions. These people make up 16% of the world's population, and, according to research, some of them have certain religious or spiritual beliefs, even though they do not identify themselves with any particular creed.

Among many religions of the world there are certain superstitions, fallacies or rituals that are meant to make life better or bring happiness [3]. Some of them are also warnings of a sort, telling people that it is better not to do something for our own good, so that it does not turn against us and that nothing bad happens to us. Superstitions should be understood as believing in mysterious, supernatural connections between phenomena, in the fateful power of words, things and signs. These are also various practices resulting from this belief. Fallacy, on the other hand, is a groundless, stubbornly held and insensitive to argumentation belief in the existence of a cause-and-effect relationship between given events. It may result from stereotypes rooted in tradition and culture. It is devoid of rational foundations and cannot be verified [4]. The ritual itself refers to an established form of symbolic activity, consisting of a religious rite, a magical practice, or a solemn celebration. But it is also a set of activities the frequent repetition of which creates a habit [5]. Therefore, a ritual should be understood as a set of culture-specific symbolic sequences of formalized actions and statements, performed in order to achieve the desired result, which, however, may be significantly detached from the apparently obvious functional purpose.

Both superstitious thinking and religious thinking are, at least in part, based on beliefs and views that cannot be investigated and substantiated empirically, but must be accepted with blind faith [6]. Awareness of contact with phenomena from the sacred sphere can stimulate the emergence of thinking and behavior beyond rational justification, but at the same time they can help people understand their faith more deeply. These are phenomena that cannot be touched, felt or seen in real time. It is a belief in something intangible, beyond examination. What they have in common is that thanks to them people try to explain to themselves the world and situations that surround them. Therefore, superstitions or rituals often have religious foundation. From the point of view of psychology, these specific cultural and social patterns lead to treating superstitious thinking and religiousness as strategies for reducing stress, coping with uncertainty and difficulties [7]. People take advantage of these

non-rational methods when they are unable to fully control the occurring physical or social phenomena.

Many athletes, through their pre-start behavior, show that they are inclined to believe in something that makes them compete with greater confidence [8]. They are convinced that this “something” allows them to somehow manifest their own sporting achievement more confidently and easily. Also, fans perform various rituals to help athletes during competitions or matches that are important to them [9]. But there are also athletes who do not feel the need to believe in “something” because they feel calm and confident in their preparation for a match or competition. They know what to do in order to win, and feel confident [10, 11]. This is due to their mental preparation [12]. However, the fact is that regardless of a professed religion or its lack, rituals help athletes a lot in their careers, boost their well-being before competitions, and they actually observe the real impact of these activities on their results, or general feelings during the competition [8, 13]. Rituals in sport are more neutral than those related to a specific religion. But that does not change the fact that it is a strong demonstration of the relationship between faith and sport. Especially for fans, sport can also be a kind of invisible religion [9, 14]. That is why fans treat some sportsmen as gods and the matches as ceremonies. This is very evident in the soccer community. Faith in sport manifests itself in many forms, starting with rituals, superstitions and ending with special stadium settings or masses in the intention of athletes. Undoubtedly, the existence of faith in sport is very broad. Many athletes are religious and put their values into practice [15, 16, 17]. Faith gives them the mental strength that “something” is with them and keeps them safe. It is by far the more popular way of building self-confidence and mental resilience, as it comes from the indigenous traditions and culture of beliefs of a given region. On the other hand, atheist athletes approach mental preparation only through targeted psychological methods and a belief in their own sense of value and agency. Both believers and non-believers are very effective, nonetheless [18, 19, 20]. In both groups, rituals are the norm, and they trigger mental readiness for competition [21, 22, 23]. Therefore, rituals in sport are an important issue [24], but individual for each athlete and relate to things and issues important only for him or her.

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