

Softball Superstition

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When a situation is uncertain or risky, some people find it comforting to create a routine to give them a sense of security and greater control. This routine has the potential to develop into a ritualistic practice that fluctuates depending on the results. In his essay, "Baseball Magic," George Gmelch examines the variations of superstition in America's national pastime. Gmelch relates the magical fishing practices of Trobriand Islanders to the ritualistic habits of baseball. He argues that both are occupations which use "a great deal of magical ritual to ensure safety" (349). Although some would not willingly admit it, the game of baseball has deeply rooted magical origins. It is a game of chance in which players have little control over the outcome of their hard work. Gmelch concentrates primarily on hitting and pitching in his article, but I personally include superstitious elements in my fielding as well. Daily rituals and fetishes are adopted to attract luck and keep it for as long as possible (349). In normal, daily situations, I do not consider myself a superstitious person. Yet, when I'm playing softball, magic's comforting rituals enwrap me and I find myself repeating actions in hope of continuing a streak.

I have always been enchanted with the notion of luck and sports. However, it was not until my freshman year of high school that superstition held a direct impact on my performance. Being the youngest member on the softball team, I was exceptionally nervous because I had never experienced a championship game before. My coach did not help abate my jitters. His pre-game speech was filled with terrifying details, including the scouting report on the opposing team's pitcher. She was one of the few pitchers at this level who had unpredictable movement on her pitches as well as a highly developed skill for change-ups and curveballs. This made the pit of my stomach clench, and I began to dread the first inning when I would be forced to face her. Later that night, I took down my box of Japanese musical charms. The metal balls chimed with melodious tunes as I rotated them in my hands. I had been observing this fetish not particularly because I believed the charms "embody 'supernatural' power" (353), but rather to induce a tranquil state of mind. I performed this ritual every night before a game to help soothe my nerves and encourage sleep.

When I arose that morning, I began my game-day routine in hope of gaining some control over the "risk and uncertainty" (349) that is a part of softball. After kissing the Yankees baseball on my dresser, I ate my

usual blueberry bagel and drank one half of a Raspberry Snapple Iced Tea. I then took a shower to unwind in the steam and clear my mind of any doubts. As I put on my uniform, I was careful to wear only my left stirrup. This fetish served the practical purpose of reminding me not to stride too far in the batter's box. On the bus, the atmosphere was one of nervous excitement and quiet preparation as we rode to the field in Spencer. Once we stepped out onto the field, I felt very small, and momentarily forgot that I had been playing the sport since the age of seven. I did not begin to settle down until I was doing throwing progressions. Going through the familiar repetition of throwing without thinking eased my nerves. Our infield warm-ups were smooth and comfortable because we kept to the routine we had been practicing all season. I was beginning to feel at ease, but that was before I saw her.

The pitcher sauntered to her circle, chomping on a large wad of chewing gum and flipping her ponytail in an arrogant manner. I was amazed by the speed of her windup. To throw off the hitter's timing, she paused at mid arch, right before she rapidly flicked her wrist and hurtled the ball toward the plate. The ball wobbled, dipped, curved, and somehow dropped into the catcher's mitt. My grip on "The Purple Avenger," my faithful bat, tightened as I timed her up. The first two of my teammates had lost the battle between pitcher and hitter, despite putting up valiant fights. I was next. The umpire called "Batter up" and I approached the plate. With my right foot, I dug a niche and glared at my nemesis. After checking the signs from my coach, I habitually swung "The Avenger" through my strike zone twice. Time seemed to have no relativity. I was completely focused on seeing the ball, and the rotation of the seams. The pitch was low and inside, and the ball seemed to grow to the size of a watermelon. When I swung, I felt all the pent-up apprehension release behind my bat, and I somehow propelled the ball high into left field. I ran down the first base line and was elated to see the ball go over the outfielder's head. I was in shock, along with the rest of my team.

No one expected a freshman to perform the way I had. The ritual I followed helped me to get "in the zone" and focus. Once a hitter is focused, the level of vision heightens and the ball seems to float in the air, waiting to be clobbered. I also believe that ritual helps players concentrate when in the field. I had a routine with other infielders that involved jumping over the third-base line and slapping gloves while in mid air. We took this act seriously, and if for one inning we neglected it, I felt nervous and ill prepared in the field. Gmelch points out, "Unlike hitting and pitching, a fielder has almost complete control over the outcome of his performance" (356). I have not found this generalization to be

absolutely true. Although the fielder definitely has more control than both hitter and pitcher, chance plays a major role in the outcome of a play. There is always the possibility of the ball hitting a rock and taking a bad bounce or another player missing the throw to first base, and then there are natural factors like the wind and sun.

Invariably there are things in life that we cannot control, no matter how hard we try. Rituals are a way of increasing our command while creating a comfort zone. Luck comes along once in a while causing people to become aware of the circumstances it shows up under. Ever since the IAC Championship game, my bat, "The Purple Avenger," has held a special place in my heart. During periods of doubt, when I am in a slump, I recall that one mighty swing fortune allowed me to have and gain courage from the memory. Although my superstitions may change over time, "The Avenger" remains a constant symbol of the possibilities that are out there. Everyone has a destiny in life, and ritualistic habits create a greater sense of control in a situation where no one can be absolutely certain (356-357). Routines provide people with a chance to influence fate and embrace luck.

Work Cited

Gmelch, George. "Baseball Magic." *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*. McCurdy, David M., & Spradley, J. Boston: Macalester, 2003.