

superstitions, rituals, & pre-lift routines

**PATHWAYS
TO
FREEDOM
OR
SHORTCUTS
TO
SLAVERY?**

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You don't have to look very far to see them. In fact, they're so numerous and so obvious it's almost impossible not to notice them and wonder, "Why do they always do that?" I am referring to the ritualistic and downright superstitious habits of athletes before and during competition. Why did hockey legend Wayne Gretzky wear only one side of his jersey tucked in? And why did he rub baby powder on his stick before every game? Why did Michael Jordan wear University of North Carolina shorts underneath his Chicago Bulls uniform? And why did Olympic champion

Bonnie Blair munch down a peanut butter and jelly sandwich prior to every race? Didn't she have access to the very best in sports nutrition? Don't think that the iron game is any different, with its athletes always competing in a certain t-shirt, having a lucky doll, or being able to train only with plates of the same brand on the bar. And don't even think about suggesting to these athletes that what they're doing has no basis in scientific fact—that they're just slaves to useless superstition. You'll be hip-checked, stuffed, and iced down in less time than it takes a twelve-year-old Little Leaguer to pull on a pair of "lucky socks." The main point, however, is that these superstitions don't do diddly to enhance performance. But I know what does and I'll show you what it is and how to put it to work.

KNOW YOUR TERMS

Since the terms *superstition*, *ritual*, and *routine* are often confused and used interchangeably, let's start by defining them precisely and discussing their important points. This'll help you separate what's useful, what can enhance performance, and what's a waste of time.

Superstition

Webster's Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary defines *superstition* as "any belief or attitude that is inconsistent with the known laws of science or with what is generally considered in the particular society as true and rational." Certainly, science and rationality would argue that Michael Jordan's UNC shorts do nothing for his ability to shoot and score. The same could be said for any of the good luck charms and talismans that can be seen in the lockers of major league athletes or for the "lucky ties" that certain coaches insist on wearing on game day. The essential point for you to understand is that a superstition is the belief that something outside of your control exerts a positive influence on your performance. If you insist on bringing a certain item

A SUPERSTITION IS THE BELIEF THAT SOMETHING OUTSIDE OF YOUR CONTROL EXERTS A POSITIVE INFLUENCE ON YOUR PERFORMANCE — "OUTSIDE OF YOUR CONTROL" IS THE OPERATIVE PHRASE.



IT'S UNLIKELY THAT THIS STUFFED ANIMAL STUFFED PLATES ON THE BAR OF THIS LIFTER AT THE IPF WOMEN'S WORLDS IN RIESA, GERMANY.

with you to the gym, or wearing a certain piece of clothing in competition, or having someone present (or absent) on game day, with the thought that this will enhance your performance, then you're being superstitious. On the surface, this is neither good nor bad. But you need to understand that you're placing a part of your success in the hands of something or someone that you can't control and that you're therefore not entirely in control of your performance. Take a moment and consider this question honestly: As competition approaches, do you allow your confidence, your belief in yourself, your sense of readiness to be influenced by *anything* outside yourself? If your honest answer to this is in any way affirmative, the next question you want to ask is whether that's the way you really want it. Do you really want to place *any* part of your performance and your success under the control of an outside force or external object? This choice is always yours to make, so choose wisely.

Ritual

Going once again to the dictionary, you can define a *ritual* as "a set form or system of rites" (a rite is a formal act, observance, or procedure). An athlete's ritual, then, would be a formal series of deliberate actions undertaken as part of the preparation for competition. Doing a series of warm-up exercises in a precise sequence or location, packing your gym bag in a specific way, and habitually donning your training or competition uniform in a certain pre-set sequence are examples of rituals.

The essential point of this definition is that rituals are those self-initiated actions undertaken prior to competition that aid in establishing a sense of control and certainty. Unlike superstitions, these rituals require no special objects to be present and involve no external forces. They're therefore under your control, something that you decide on doing



TEAM USA AT THE IPF WOMEN'S WORLDS HAD ITS OWN VERSION OF LUCKY SOCKS.

for a specific reason.

The importance of your control over a ritual cannot be overstated. You can generally benefit from having a ritualized procedure to follow as you prepare to train or compete; it begins the process of focusing attention and allows you to feel a sense of being in control over your minute-by-minute actions. This is especially important in those competitive environments where crowd noise, blaring music, and other stimuli can distract you. Again, the choice of what you will do and think is up to you and under your control. And because you're in control of what you decide to do, you're setting yourself up for a peak performance. So choose wisely.

Routine

Let's go to the dictionary for the third (and last!) time. A *routine* is defined as "a regular, more or less unvarying procedure." Applying this definition to competition, with a twist of sport psychology, a

routine is a consistent mental vehicle or path that channels your mind directly to the task at hand. Think of a routine as the final piece of your total preparation, the last few steps you take to bring all your energy together, much the same as the countdown for the space shuttle brings together months of training and preparation to produce enough focused energy to lift the spaceship off the pad and push it beyond the reach of gravity. I'm choosing the "liftoff" analogy deliberately because that's precisely what the power athlete must do: focus sufficient energy to temporarily overcome gravity. Just how do you focus your mind to produce that energy when you need it? Establish a routine!

LOCK IT IN

A routine is simply a sequence of several steps that progressively narrows your focus down to a single point—that one thought or feeling you want to have as you approach the loaded bar, step onto the mat, get set in the starting blocks. Those steps can be any combination of sights, sounds, feelings, and actions that bring your mind to that single point. The sights can be pictures in the mind's eye of your desired technique or approach. The sounds are the phrases that you say to yourself in order to make yourself feel great—"Now it's my turn," "Piece of cake!" "Drop the hammer now!" The feelings are sensations of the correct execution and/or the specific emotion that you want to feel as you execute. Lastly, the actions are the small movements that unlock tension and the breathing that allows you to perform smoothly under pressure.

DEVELOP YOUR ROUTINE

Since there's basically no sport that doesn't incorporate strength training, let's look at developing a routine for that. Whether you're a strength athlete or an athlete of any other sport, when you approach the bar you need to be able to give it your all in order to reap all the benefits. So to develop an effective routine for lifting, start by answering the question, "When does the lift start?" One point that's central to any discussion of mental preparation for lifting is to set a definite time at which you become a competitor. Perhaps this time begins when you arrive at the gym, perhaps it begins when you're fully dressed to train or compete. Whatever time you choose, when that moment comes, you're now a competitive lifter—you're here for a purpose, you're excited and ready to go all out, and you'll let nothing and no one stop you from having fun doing what you love. Choosing your moment of transformation, that point when you become a competitor, is where your lifting begins.

Having made the mental transition to competitor, you can use a pre-lift routine to channel or funnel your thoughts before each lift, in order to give yourself the best possible chance of success each time. Your pre-lift routine begins at a precise moment before each lift when you make a further transition from being a competitor to being the competitor who makes this lift. Just as the baseball player can use the moment he selects his bat or helmet from the rack to "become a hitter," in lifting you can use a specific moment—taping your wrists, rebuckling your belt, chalking up—to start the process of making this lift. From that point, all your thoughts are focused on this lift and everything going through your mind is positive—no doubts.

STEP 1

Do two or three key things to keep yourself focused (you don't have to do all the moves listed here—just

pick a couple that are right for you):

Prepare your body: stretch, loosen, and breathe deeply to prepare your body for battle. Thorough attention here means every part will be ready once you're under (or over) the bar.

Replay your plan for when you get to the bar: in your imagination "feel" your stance and your grip just the way you want them and feel the bar moving in response to your perfect form.

Pretend you're at the bar: while other competitors are lifting, imagine yourself in their place and feel yourself smoking the lift.

Use your breath: breathe long and deeply to relax yourself or short and shallow to fire yourself up, depending on where you are right now compared to your ideal state.

Raise your posture up to display total confidence.

As you walk to the bar, repeat mentally, "With every step my focus gets stronger."

STEP 2

Now, at the bar, comes the moment of truth. This is where everything will either come together or be wasted if you allow yourself to

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doubt, fear, or worry. Attend to the following to channel your mind toward success:

Combine a deep powerful breath with a simple cue word or phrase such as “Get it!” or “Right now!” or “Explode!”

As you rub the chalk on your hands, think of massaging power into yourself. Take your stance or starting position the same way each time. For example, at the squat rack, position your left hand first, then your right hand, then step under with your left foot followed by your right foot, get tight, unrack, step out once, right foot first, then the left. Make each movement decisive and confident. The exact sequence of these positioning movements is up to you—what matters is that you do them the same way each time with total conviction.

Once in position, pick out a focal point. Repeat a final cue word or phrase that makes you feel powerful. Using this cue here will prevent unwanted thoughts from coming in by chance.

Naturally, it's important to experiment and play with these suggestions in practice situations before relying on them in competition. You could write out your pre-lift routine and even record it onto audiotape. However you choose to “routinize” your thoughts and actions, take the time to practice your routine, to rehearse both “becoming a competitor” and “making this lift,” so that you can simply and easily follow it in any situation.

THE ESSENTIAL POINT IS THAT RITUALS ARE SELF-INITIATED ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO COMPETITION THAT AID IN ESTABLISHING A SENSE OF CONTROL AND CERTAINTY.

All great athletes use routines consisting of these elements before each serve, at bat, foul shot, or play from scrimmage in order to lock themselves into single-minded focus. If you were to videotape these athletes, you would see that their pre-performance routines don't vary much at all, either in overall length or in terms of what the athlete does each time. These unique routines are like a fingerprint, a unique stamp or symbol for each performer. They're used for the simple reason that they make you feel like you've already achieved success, and the single most important determinant of success or failure is how you feel right before you perform. A routine, then, will help you feel totally prepared and focused exactly when you need to be on. With a solid routine, your mind is anchored to a process, making your performance become more automatic and hence more “Zone”-like.

Since you're asking (and I know you are), how does a routine accomplish this? First, it diverts your attention away from irrelevant stimuli, because by consciously putting your attention on something, or on a series of somethings, it prevents your attention from being grabbed by something else. Second, a routine allows you to focus your attention on the process of doing what you want to do and away from the outcome or product. It helps you stay in the



JUMPING THREE TIMES AND HER VERSION OF MR. ROBOTO MAKE UP SIOUX-Z HARTWIG'S PRE-LIFT ROUTINE, WHICH HAS HELPED HER RACK UP EIGHT WINS AT NATIONALS AND A BRONZE AT THE 2002 IPF WORLDS.

present moment and not get caught up in worrying or fantasizing about what might happen.

LEARNING FROM DUMBO

One of Walt Disney's animated classics is *Dumbo*, a story about an elephant who could fly. There's a lesson in this movie for every athlete and every performer, a lesson directly related to this discussion of superstition, ritual, and routine. In the movie, Dumbo finds that he can fly by flapping his ears like wings, but he can't believe that such a thing is really possible. Like many of us, Dumbo allows his self-doubts and fears to prevent his talents and abilities from coming through. Luckily for Dumbo, his quick-thinking buddy, Timothy the mouse, snatches up a loose feather and explains that it's this "magic" feather that makes Dumbo fly. So Dumbo happily soars, until he suddenly loses his grip on this feather in the middle of his debut


aerobic performance in the circus. Having lost his "magic," Dumbo *thinks* he can't possibly fly and plummets toward the ground. Timothy leaves his perch in Dumbo's collar, climbs over Dumbo's head as they hurtle toward the ground, looks Dumbo squarely in the eyes, and shouts, "You don't need the feather! You never did! It was always you, but you wouldn't believe it! YOU CAN FLY!" Dumbo gets the message, realizes that *he* is the magic, and in the nick of time pulls out of the dive to become a flying legend of the circus.

Apparently, a lot of athletes haven't yet learned the lesson of Dumbo and are still

searching for some source of magic. These athletes will fixate on some lucky charm or superstition, becoming slaves to a ritual for its own sake instead of realizing that it's they who give the ritual its meaning and significance. They look endlessly into the newest training techniques, the latest nutritional supplements, and the most state-of-the-art-equipment, believing that something "out there" will magically transform them into champions. Advertisers, knowing that athletes and wanna-be athletes alike are engaged in this search, will proclaim, as Nike did, that "it's gotta be the shoes."

At some point these athletes will either settle for mediocrity, never realizing their true potential, or come to grips with the fact that the only place they'll ever find real "magic" is deep inside and that the only way they'll ever own this magic is to take responsibility for their thoughts and emotions.

THIN LINE TO VICTORY

They'll throw away superstition, use rituals sparingly as a way of getting a sense of control (always realizing that it's they who make the ritual work and not the other way around), and last, they'll nail down a routine that channels their power into their performance and liberates all the talent they have. When you take this step, the alchemy of human development can begin, and the magic of your performance can emerge. 

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