

# **Why people love to delude themselves with sports rituals and superstitions**

December 2 2016, by Keis Ohtsuka

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William. Credit: Flickr/John, CC BY-SA

What do [Lebron James](#), a [lucky coin](#) and a [smelly goat](#) have in common? They are all part of a rich tradition of sports superstitions.

Both athletes and fans alike have looked towards these superstitions, rituals and curses for explanations about failures and successes. What is the science behind the belief that external forces can affect the outcome of a game?

As a psychologist who conducts research into [superstition](#) and gambling-related cultural beliefs, I have studied many theories, rituals, and quirks inherent in our ideas about [winning and losing](#).

I've interviewed gamblers about [their worldviews](#) and found their personal beliefs about luck and winning can be explained by the illusion of control, the gambler's fallacy, and beliefs in luck and supernatural force.

## **The end of a curse**

The [Chicago Cubs](#) won baseball's [World Series](#) this year for the first time since 1908. The 108-year-old drought was the longest in American professional sports.

When it comes to sports superstitions, the Cubs had arguably the richest and most colourful collection of [curses](#). The best known of these is the [Curse of the Billy Goat](#).

The curse was allegedly cast during the 1945 World Series by fan Billy Sianis after he was ejected from the Cub's Wrigley Field homeground in Chicago because others complained about the smell of his pet goat. The Cubs would not reach the World Series again for more than [70 years](#).

Our attempts to control the most uncontrollable of events are reflected in

the work of cultural anthropologist, [Bronislaw Malinowski](#).

## Rituals and superstitions

Malinowski found that Melanesia's Trobriand Islanders used rituals and superstitions to gain imaginary control over events that had uncertain outcomes, but did not use rituals at other times.

Trobriand Islanders practised rituals to soothe the gods of the ocean and pray for a bountiful catch before venturing out to rough waters beyond the safety of the coral reefs, for example, but performed no rituals or prayers for when fishing in bountiful tide pools where their results were guaranteed.

In baseball, players have direct control over the game, to some extent, by choosing certain plays or strategies. Yet player rituals and superstitions are common, including tugging uniform sleeves in a certain way, tapping the home plate three times, kissing a religious necklace, or touching the brim of a helmet.

American anthropologist [George Gmelch](#), a minor league baseball player in his younger days, was intrigued by these [superstitions](#).

He found most relate to the unpredictable and difficult skill of batting and pitching compared with the relatively easier skill of accurately catching and throwing a ball. Like the Trobriand Islanders and their fishing, players' were using rituals to try and control uncertain outcomes.

## The fans

Sports fans also participate in [superstitions](#) and rituals in an attempt to control the outcome of a game.

In [evolutionary terms](#), humans have perfected the skills of gathering and processing information in order to find regular patterns that help them predict the future outcome of events.

This thinking process has become so natural that sometimes [sports fans](#) watching a game at home forget that their superstitious actions in front of the TV – what beer they drink, or where they are seated – cannot possibly affect a game's result.

We know that the outcome is unpredictable, if not entirely random, but we cannot help trying to influence the results by adopting some superstitious behaviour or rituals with our actions. This is a cognitive mechanism that reduces our anxiety and focuses us on the game.

Superstitions and rituals help create a sense of imaginary control over a game's unpredictable outcome.

Fans of a winning team won't change their behaviour or rituals for fear of disturbing the winning momentum, while those supporting a struggling team may change those viewing habits in hopes of influencing their team's results. Sports fans, just like gamblers, believe in illusion of control.

This illusion of control – or an inflated confidence in our ability to win – increases without us realising it. For example, many fans learn as much as they can about the team they support, such as batting statistics of players, a coach's history, and so on.

This extra knowledge leads us to overestimate our ability to predict an [outcome](#). The extra effort we invest in the activity of being a sports fan is a primary form of illusion of control.

A secondary illusion of control enlists supernatural sources of power or

intervention such as gods, spirits, or luck to supplement our own perceived power.

## Fall for the fallacy

The [gambler's fallacy](#), or mistakenly seeing causal connections between the past and the future performance of largely random events, can also be common among sports fans. It is the same belief gamblers have when they presume after five heads on a coin toss, the next flip is more likely to be tails.

We tend to think the future chance of our favourite team winning a game is greatly affected by their previous history of winning or losing when, in reality, the results of the game could be determined by many different and unrelated factors. Even when our favourite team has a losing streak, we cannot easily abandon it.

Cognitive dissonance – a mismatch between the emotional investment and disappointment – is resolved by changing the way we think. While we acknowledge our team did not win, we rationalise all was not completely lost.

We say the results would have been much worse if we had not cheered for them, for example. Or that a losing game was not that boring after all. Then we look for hopeful signs for next season, and seek social support of our fellow fans to reaffirm our resolve.

As for the Chicago Cubs and their curse, many wonder what finally became of Billy "Goat" Sianis? He apparently tried to remove his curse before he died in 1970 but the Cubs' fortune did not reverse until this year.

And now the Cubs' unlucky streak may have passed on to the team they

defeated. [The Cleveland Indians](#), who last won a World Series in 1948, now hold the inglorious honour of having baseball's longest title drought.

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