

TALKING SUPERSTITION



The moment that is most intense : that of victory. Is there one single object that can be counted on to reach such heights of happiness ?

By F.K. Mathys

For most people, happiness represents not just a problem, but generally the problem in life. The practice of a sport is only a very small part of this happiness as through the pursuit of this physical activity, a person achieves a heightening of awareness which gives him moments and hours of pleasure. But even here the moments of happiness are sharply differentiated.

LUCKY CHARMS IN SPORT

Winners in a competition have reached an unbounded happiness, others at least a slight feeling of contentment. Unbeaten champions are true soldiers of fortune. And so happiness is always inner radiance, riches in the heart, gaiety in the soul. Yet there are many who spend their lives in quest of happiness and never attain it. It is therefore not surprising that sport in its present form, totally a product of the enlightened new age, should possess countless superstitious accessories in the form of mascots. Just to practise a sport is no longer enough to make you happy. No, driven on by records, everyone continually tries to achieve the best, and here a little bit of luck is involved, too.

It is impossible not to smile when you see what peculiar things and ideas sports people cling to in order to bring them luck. Mostly it is the fairly big stars about whom we learn, from a reporter's indiscretion, that they have a weakness for a little mascot. Generally it is not easy to make practising athletes say something about their "weaknesses" since they do not want to profane their lucky charms, believing that while these are surrounded by secrecy they will lose less of their power. The folklore researcher knows from many other cases that the wearer of an amulet "does not want to invoke the luck". As a result, many lucky charms look from the outside like pieces of jewellery or on the other hand like eccentricities, and we know very little about the luck charms which are sewn into clothes. No, superstition has not died out even in our age, in fact all levels of society are more or less slaves of it, the poor and the rich, the clever and the stupid. In American high schools it was found that out of 100 students, 85 were superstitious. Surveys have shown that it is not just runners who own all kinds of lucky bags and "winner's rings", but that other athletes, as well, sometimes carry charms to bring them luck. That is most apparent amongst footballers who often place a teddy bear - named after the American president Theodor Roosevelt - on top of their goal or attach one to a goal post. But on many occasions boxers too will enter the ring

only with a lucky charm, be it a lock of hair from a loved one or a hair from the muzzle of a wild cat.

These keys to good luck can take many forms, from the simple necklace and bracelet which has been given to a person by someone who is anxious about him, to bracelets made from elephant hair, and with racing drivers and pilots, even horse-shoes and live animals. Many drivers have a little mascot (the name of this little doll derives from the Provençal "mascotte" - little witch) hanging in the rear window of their cars, and pretend it is there for fun and because it is fashionable, yet believe that this thing will keep their car free of bad luck. The little idols are usually kept secret, and as long ago as 1510 the doctor

Necklace, bracelet, the keys to success can take the most varied forms.



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The Games have their mascot — lucky charm or mark of recognition?



and philosopher Agrippa von Nettesheim said: "I want to say first of all that everything divine abhors publicity, and that which is unholy loves secrecy. Therefore every magic experiment shuns openness and seeks to hide itself; through keeping silent it is strengthened, by being talked about it is destroyed, or at least no complete effect is produced. Any magic effect suffers damage as a result; it is badly affected by talkative and unbelieving souls."

For many athletes this luck-bringing superstition is to be found not in an object, but in some kind of special treatment given to their sports equipment beforehand. Before every flight he made, the French pilot Michelin would walk slowly around his machine three times; the presence of a

lover, a chimney sweep, or any other living thing as a symbol of good luck at the start of a competition is often important. When we have something difficult to do, we all ask our friends: "keep your fingers crossed!" On the other hand, the boxer Samson Körner once said that meeting good friends on the day of a match always brought him bad luck, and after making this statement he avoided all his friends on such days. Another sportsman used to spit three times on the ground in front of him before a competition. For matches abroad, ice-hockey and football teams often take a live animal with them, a cat, dog, a little monkey, a bird or even a piglet, and the Russian flier Babuschkin always carried a small tortoise in his pocket. But for every fight, Hans Breitensträter, the former German heavyweight champion, had hidden

under his clothing a small bouquet which his grandmother had given his grandfather before he went off to the 1870 war. Canadian ice-hockey players used to insist on having blades of straw as talismans, and they all carried one with them. A well-known racing driver used even to hold a raw potato in his hand if he wanted to win. Items of clothing belonging to former winners are sought-after talismans. Even female athletes, especially handball players, who are quick to turn up their noses at their superstitious colleagues of the «stronger» sex, are not prevented by vanity from wearing those shorts in which they won their first victory.

There is plenty more to say about lucky charms in sport, from taking along a favourite newspaper, or various coins and medals, to the hare's foot which Sonja Henie always carried; much about the ways in which this or that athlete chose one object or another to be a talisman. But it is certain, however, that all these little items help to increase the self-confidence and inner certainty of the person concerned, and without which some performances would perhaps not be achieved. And finally, modern sport has in this way retained its ancient connection with the ritual practice of physical exercise.

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Some people swear by it, others don't. The great Sonja Henie always wore a rabbit's foot.