

# Rituals, Fetishes and Taboos: Notes on The Magic of Baseball

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Sports historians who chronicle team sports like major league baseball can profitably make use of insights from related disciplines such as sociology and anthropology. Indeed, one's insights as a historian can be sharpened by such social science honed concepts as world views, rituals, fetishes, and taboos. Given the ubiquity of these patterns of human behavior, efforts at describing, classifying and understanding their impacts should enable one to better "know" the people who use them. In organized sports these patterned behaviors function to give a player a feeling of control over his "jockular" destiny by persuading him of his ability to manipulate those natural and supernatural forces that his world view teaches him are the causes and effects of life's experiences.

This presentation examines the role played by **rituals** (defined as repetitive and stylized behavior patterns, employed by individuals and groups at regular times), **fetishes** (defined as any object or symbol that receives zealous and unquestioning devotion. and **taboos** (defined as forbidden and excluded objects, persons, acts, words and thoughts that one perceives to threaten the welfare of an individual or group) in major sports with particular emphasis on major league baseball. In a high risk sport like major league baseball where most batters fail to deliver 75% of the time and where unpredictability is rife in other sectors, it is not surprising to find performers relying heavily on rituals, fetishes and taboos, either as magical devices or as magical forms linked to religious or scientific world views.

In developing the topic rituals in major league baseball such as pre-game, game, and post game rites are introduced and classed. In developing the fetish phenomenon examples such as player bat and glove and equipment fetishes, fan fetishes, statistical fetishes, and the presence of the Commissioner as a sort of fetish king are vouchsafed. In developing the taboo dimension, major league baseball's forbidden people, forbidden acts, forbidden words are stressed. Also included was a specific taboo on "**schadenfrude**" - a delicious word defined as taking inordinate and overt delight at an opponent's failings.

And lest we forget that in our lordly role as sports historians that we are also human and prone to using all these devices in our own work, these concepts are also tied to some of the dimensions of our historical enterprise. In making a shared issue of these foibles, we can better face the challenges of our historical endeavors.