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In the winner-take-all world of MMA, some fighters feel they bring an extra edge to their game by being **VERY SUPERSTITIOUS.**

For the past several years, Andre Vinicius “Benkie” Aurnheimer, the strength and conditioning coach of American Top Team, has fired up a cigar after a Jeff Monson fight. Like many of the fighters he coaches, Benkie is a firm believer in the power and practice of superstition. His takes the form of buying a premium cigar each time an ATT fighter steps into the ring, showing it to the fighter, then stowing it in his pocket. If the fighter wins, Benkie smokes half for himself and half for the gods to ensure that the fight’s good energy carries over to the next one. Should the fighter get his head handed to him, Benkie snaps the cigar in half and throws it away.





black cats. “Growing up in Brazil, everyone said they’re bad luck, so I always avoided them and still do,” he says. Pride fighter Quinton Jackson is wary of his signature chain getting tainted before a fight. “I don’t like to wear it if it has touched the ground. I’ve done it, but I didn’t like it.” Dean “The Boogeyman” Lister believes heavily in the possibility of his words coming back to bite him. “I never say what I’m going to do to an opponent, like ‘I’m going to put an ass whooping on him big time,’ because that invites failure. I always just say, ‘We’ll see.’”

A SUPERSTITION IS THE IRRATIONAL belief that future events are influenced by specific behaviors, without having a causal relationship. Superstitions are based on general, culturally variable beliefs in a supernatural reality. Many common superstitions have their basis in religion. Spells, curses, voodoo and animal sacrifice all stem from a basic fear of an unknown higher power and a desire not to anger it. Historical events also become transmuted into modern-day myths. The belief that Friday the 13th bodes evil dates back to October 13, 1307, when the Grand Master of the Knights Templars Jacques DeMolay was arrested for church heresy; seven years later he was burned at the stake.

From the earliest days of armed conflict, opposing forces have embraced superstitions to secure victory. Roman legionnaires feared that the loss of their most prized possession, a banner depicting a golden eagle,

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ATHLETES, EVEN MORE THAN CIGAR-smoking coaches, will do whatever it takes to get into the winner’s circle, no matter how quirky they may seem in getting there. The point where sport and superstition collide can be a twilight zone of personality, paranoia and neurosis. Former Detroit Tigers pitcher Mark Fidrych talked to the baseball before facing batters. Former Ottawa Senators forward Bruce Gardiner dipped his hockey stick into a toilet before hitting the ice. And Jacksonville Jaguars defensive tackle John Henderson—all 6-foot-7, 325 pounds of him—gets his face slapped by a ballsy assistant trainer before each game.

The MMA world is in no way immune to such rituals. ATT standout Wilson Gouveia shies away from

could lead to the entire legion being disbanded. American Indian tribes inundated their warriors with a shaman’s blessing before entering battle, and Japanese samurai were required to perform a laundry list of pre- and post-battle rituals.

And for many of today’s MMA fighters, popular superstitions such as walking under a ladder, breaking a mirror and the fear of the number 13 are believed to affect the outcome of a match more than skill or the law of averages.

“An athlete’s superstitions are almost always derived from a positive connection between an event and a win,” says Richard Lustberg, PhD, a noted New York sports psychologist who has worked with professional and amateur athletes for more than 17 years.

“It’s an association of something an athlete did just before a good performance that gets reinforced intermittently. It doesn’t have to work every time, just enough to keep him believing in the cause and effect of the event.”

Superstitions abound in combat sports. The ancient art of Japanese sumo is saturated with tradition, especially concerning the ring-entrance ritual. Of the two dominant styles, *Unryu* (defensive) and *Shiranui* (offensive), it is believed that *yokozumas* (grand masters) who use the *Shiranui* style do not last long, a superstition promulgated by the losing record of wrestlers who’ve adopted it.

The Ram Muay, a lengthy dance involving a series of movements performed to music before every Muay Thai match, is believed to protect the fighter and lead him to victory. During the dance, the fighter determines in which nostril his breath is flowing more freely. Then he takes his first step over a stair with the foot of that side for good luck. He also pays homage to his trainer and school, aspiring to make his dance unique and cleanse the ring of ill-natured spirits.

Having started out as a Muay Thai boxer, Kit Cope carries its rituals into the MMA ring. Cope insists on stepping over the top ring rope instead of going through them because he believes his energy is stored predominantly in his head, and stepping through the ring ropes may cause it to wash off. “I also don’t take too many chances leading up to a fight,” he admits. “Even if it’s as simple as a video game, I don’t want to lose at anything because I don’t want to carry failure into the ring.”

“Superstitions, at the heart, are emotionally stabi-

reality check

While numerous fighters believe in the power of the unknown, many have no faith at all in rituals, traditions or luck, and rely solely on hard training and their own skill to win the day. Dan Henderson, Rashad Evans, Urijah Faber, Ivan Salaverry, Jeremy Horn and Frank Trigg are a few who don’t believe that intangible forces influence their game. Pride fighter Josh Barnett also eschews superstition, but says, “I believe in the energy of the people around you, and I think it carries over into a fight. If you have people in your corner who believe in you, then that positive energy will be with you in the ring.”

lizing,” agrees Lustberg. “They provide confidence; they provide assurance. They help an athlete get into his game mentally.”

ARGUABLY THE KINGS OF ODDBALL ATHLETES are baseball players, probably because the game has so much downtime built into it and the season lasts so long, giving players plenty of time to worship in the voodoo church of unexplainable phenomena. In a 2005 CBC Sports Online poll, seven of the top 10 most superstitious athletes of all time came from MLB, including champion ritualist Wade Boggs.

For home games, the Hall of Famer left his house at exactly 1:47 p.m., took exactly 150 balls for infield practice at 4:37, entered the batting cage at 5:17, and ran wind sprints at 7:17. Before each at bat, he wrote the Hebrew word *Chai* (meaning life) into the dirt of the batter’s box. In the field, Boggs always found three rocks or pebbles and tossed them away. Between

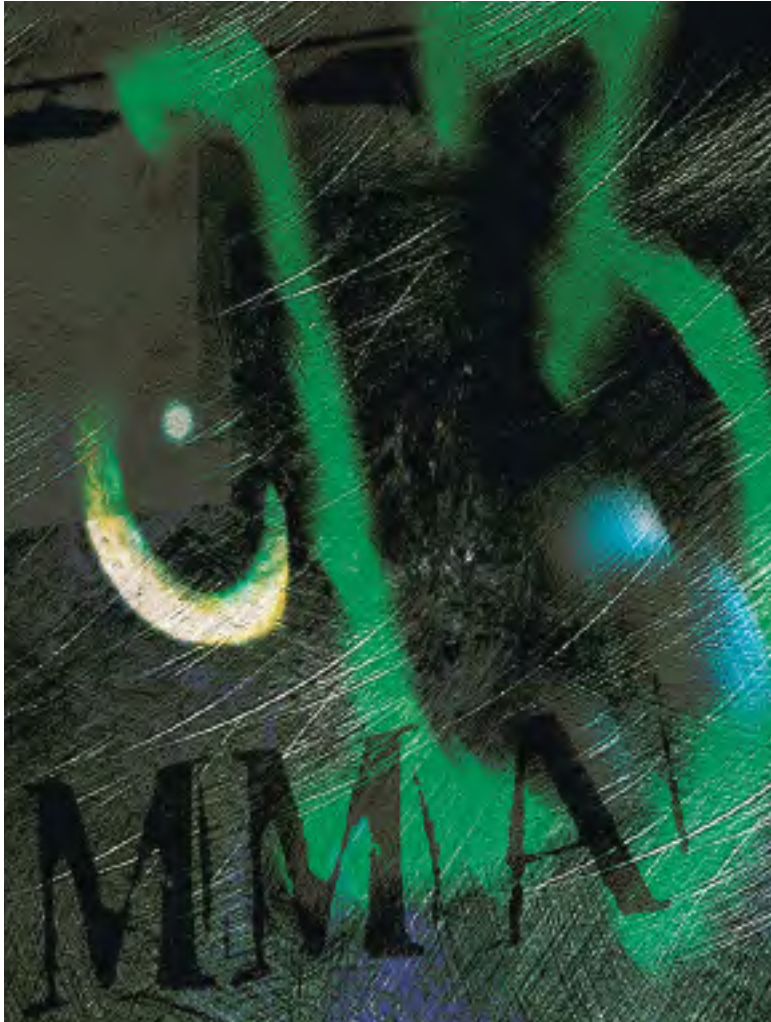
courting karma

SOME ATHLETES AND FANS FROM OTHER SPORTS MAKE THE RITUALS OF MMA FIGHTERS LOOK POSITIVELY SANE AND SCIENTIFIC. HERE ARE JUST A FEW HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE WEIRD WORLD OF SPORTS.

■ ■ During the 1952 NHL playoffs, brothers Pete and Jerry Cusimano lobbed an eight-legged cephalopod onto the ice at Detroit’s Olympia Stadium. Each tentacle of the octopus was symbolic of a win in the playoffs. At the time, the NHL boasted only six teams, and eight victories (two best-of-seven series) were needed to win the Stanley Cup. The Red Wings swept the series that year, and the octopus has remained the team’s good-luck charm ever since.

■ ■ Raymond Domenech, coach of the French soccer team that made it to the 2006 World Cup finals, reads tarot cards to learn about players’ personalities, is wary of having too many Leos on his team and doesn’t like Scorpios on the field at all. But he may want to rethink his astrology: His team lost in the finals without talented Scorpio Robert Pires.

■ ■ One of the most superstitious groups of sportsmen on the planet are fishermen, who follow a liturgy of rites to ensure that fish stay interested in their lures. *On the Water* magazine publisher Chris Megan admits to a few. “I can’t stand catching a fish on first cast and can never have any new clothes on. I can’t crack a beer until I have landed my first fish or at least six hours have gone by with no luck. Then I have to break the curse that has been put on our boat by cracking a beer.”



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pitches, he had a habit of swiping the dirt in front of him with his left foot, tapping his glove two or three times and adjusting his cap. He also ate chicken on every game day.

So who’s the Wade Boggs of MMA? Oleg Taktarov. The winner of UFC 6 followed a litany of superstitions before entering the Octagon. “I would refrain from having sex and stay away from smokers for three weeks before a fight,” admits The Russian Bear. “I had to watch ‘Rambo’ for good luck, I had a complicated way of tying my sambo belt, and before each fight I would walk outside, look to the sky and admit something personal for good energy. But what I really hated was being touched. I even slapped a guy once for touching me before a fight.”

Even outside the fighting arena, Taktarov follows strict guidelines to ward off negative energy. “If I’m driving down the freeway and see something horrible, like an accident, I tap my left shoulder three times,” he says. What’s at the heart of Taktarov’s superstitions? “I feel there’s a higher energy that everyone has

to communicate with. My rituals remind me that I’m just a speck of sand in the universe.”

“Ultimate Fighter, Season 2” alum Keith Jardine has a different take on superstition. “I was born on Halloween, so I always grew up thinking the traditional bad-luck omens that scared other people were actually good luck for me. I embrace those things instead of being scared by them.”

ALTHOUGH ROUTINES ARE GEARED

toward the same goals as superstitions, the two should not be confused. Breaking a routine can throw a fighter off, but usually isn’t enough to tempt intervention by irate sports gods. Since as far back as he can remember, Dennis Hallman executes a side-to-side stretch before each fight. “I don’t know why, but I always do it.”

“At the heart of everything an athlete does is comfort,” says Lustberg. “A routine, a superstition, a favorite piece of equipment all lead to getting into the comfort zone mentally.”

While other fighters change their gear regularly, Randy Couture admits he kept the same equipment all through his years as a wrestler. “I had the same plastics to cut weight in all through college—the same headgear, cup, everything. I always went through the same warm-up routine to get my heart rate up. It was just a comfort level I liked to achieve before fighting.”

Even the king of MMA superstitions had routines. “I never wore protective equipment. I never wore a mouthpiece or cup. I just felt that it got in the way,” admits Taktarov. The Nevada State Athletic Commission might want to have a word with you about that, Oleg. 🤖