



SPARTAN SPORTS

Superstition alters cognition

Athletes' superstitions from personal and psychological perspectives

By Joey Hamer

Sports Editor

People say "practice makes perfect," but some believe there is possibly an alternative option for an athlete to reach his or her potential. The secret lies within several GBN athletes: a superstition.

Senior Jenna Wallis has been superstitious ever since her early years as a gymnast.

"When I was a gymnast, I always had to listen to Macy Gray's 'I Try' [before every meet], and ever since then I've always had something—some superstition," Wallis said.

After Wallis retired from gymnastics and pursued basketball and volleyball, she did not discontinue her routines.

During her volleyball season this year, Wallis forced her team to sit in the exact same order before every game. During warm-ups, she also had a routine with junior Allie Schwall and senior Abby Brandell.

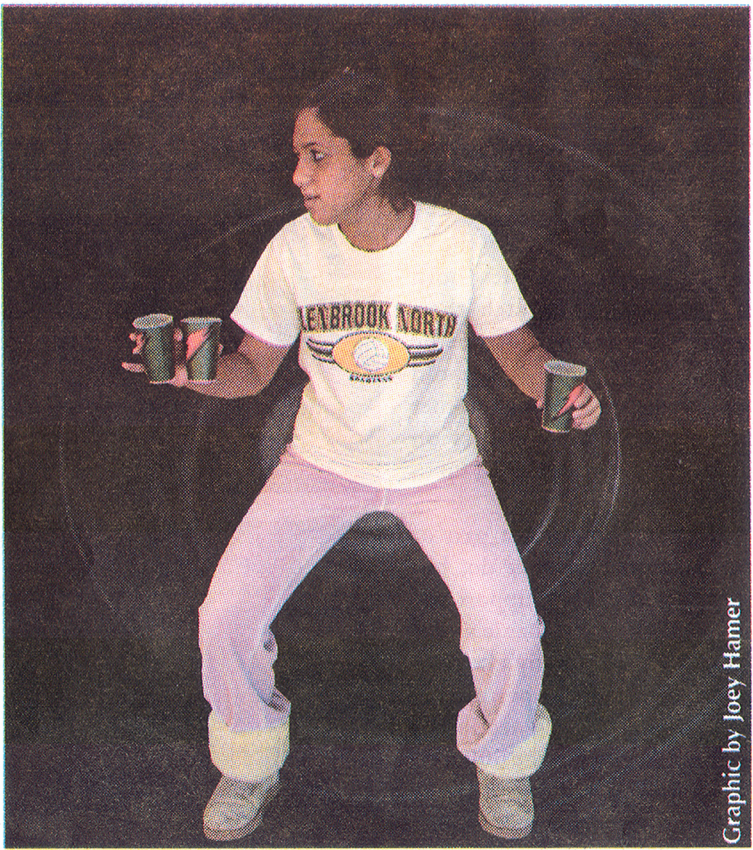
"Before every game, I would get water for Allie and Abby and carry two cups in my right hand, one in the left," Wallis said.

Senior Danny Kirby has also been superstitious throughout his four high school football seasons. He wore a GBN summer basketball camp T-shirt under his uniform during every single high school game.

"I've had this shirt since fifth grade...and it's tiny," Kirby said. "I had to cut the sleeves off so I could fit into it."

According to Dr. Jeffrey Fishbein, a licensed clinical and sports psychologist, superstitions are choices athletes make to improve their game.

"Athletes create superstitions because they will use any mechanism possible to enhance their performance,"



Graphic by Joey Hamer

Jenna Wallis carries two cups in her right hand and one cup in her left before every volleyball match. Wallis has been superstitious throughout high school, especially in her athletic competitions.

Fishbein said. "We see that on a more significant scale with illegal substances, steroids, and we see it on a more realistic level like on the amount of time they spend working out, training and improving their skills. I feel superstition is another dynamic at play that can help [athletes] achieve what they are looking to achieve."

Wallis's superstitions involve other people's participation while Kirby's superstition only includes himself. Senior Stephan Hoffman, who chews gum before every basketball game, is similar to Kirby in this sense. According to Fishbein, there is a difference between the two, but they are both used for the same purpose.

"One would be defined as internal and the other external,"

Fishbein said. "From the purest psychology perspective, part of it is due to compulsion. I'm not saying it's a disorder because disorders interfere with our lives, but when you are asking a group of people to sit a certain way, you are trying to establish a sense of comfort, which is what both the internal and external superstitions achieve for the athlete."

When asked whether her superstitions were effective, Wallis replied with some uncertainty.

"It's one of those things that is mental," Wallis said. "I think I did well because of it and in reality it may not be true, but in my mind I feel like I did better."

Fishbein said that as long as a superstition does not interfere

with performance on the field and life outside of the sport, he has no problems with it.

"What a superstition does in my opinion is it changes one's belief system," Fishbein said. "Because I have a superstition and that superstition alters my perception of how I am going to do, that's possibly enhancing my performance. The changed behavior impacts the thought process which impacts performance."

According to Kirby, he did not necessarily feel he had to wear the shirt every game, but after wearing it for so long, he continued to do so. In this sense, he wore it not out of compulsion, but only to satisfy his superstitious needs.

"If I wouldn't wear it one day, I'm sure I would have felt something missing in my game and it probably would have affected my game in a negative way," Kirby said.

According to Fishbein, if a superstition begins to affect your life, you may need clinical treatment.

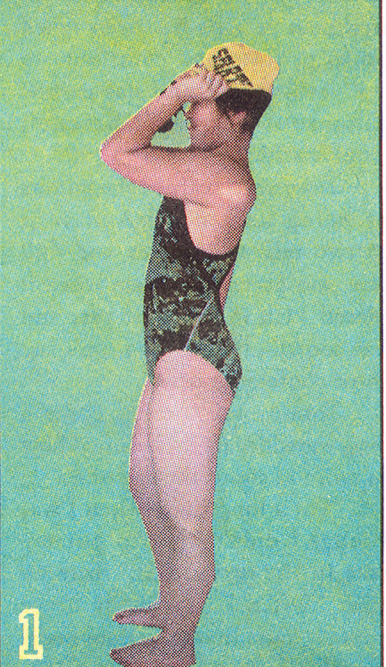
"I treated a minor league baseball player who believed he had a superstition but it was in fact an obsessive compulsive condition," Fishbein said. "Before every game, this pitcher would have to run out to center field and touch the wall, and if he didn't, he would feel like something very, very bad would happen within the game and in his life outside of the game...I ended up having to treat him for OCD."

In order to diagnose a patient, Fishbein noted that what an athlete believes to be a superstition could possibly be a ritual, compulsion or a routine.

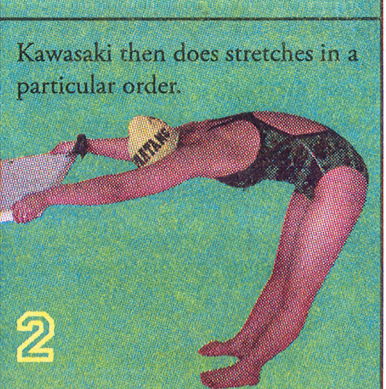
For some superstitious athletes, it is very meaningful and important to continue their superstitious acts. Wallis feels a sense of pride in her actions.

"My coaches and teammates joke about my superstitions, but I never stop doing them," Wallis said. "Win or lose, I won't stop."

THREE STEPS OF ONE SUPERSTITION



1 Sophomore Jill Kawasaki always prepares for her race by putting on her swim cap first, followed by her goggles.



2 Kawasaki then does stretches in a particular order.



3 After loosening up her body while on the starting block, Kawasaki immediately looks into the distance focusing on where she will dive in and visualizing her race.

Don't think you are superstitious? Maybe you possess one of these:

Compulsion: An irresistible impulse to act, regardless of the rationality of the motivation

Ex: If a football player doesn't listen to a song before a game (his superstition), he will feel his performance will suffer

Ritual: A detailed method of procedure faithfully or regularly followed

Ex: A tennis player visualizes what his or her serve should look like before every serve

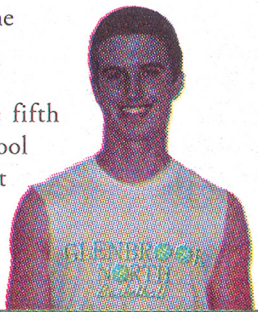
Routine: When an athlete intentionally prepares for a certain event or task using meaningful actions

Ex: Dribbling before a basketball game to enhance your comfort with the ball

Name: Danny Kirby

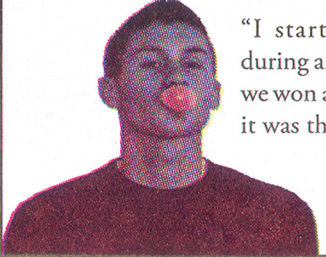
Superstition: Wears same shirt under football uniform every game

"I've had this shirt since fifth grade, and every high school football game I've worn it under my pads."



Name: Stephan Hoffman

Superstition: Chews gum before basketball games



"I started [chewing gum] during an off-season game and we won and I thought, 'Maybe it was the gum.'"

Fast facts on professional athletes

* Wade Boggs, a former MLB player, would leap over the 3rd base line in order to get to his position. Once there, he would search for three pebbles in the dirt and toss them off the field. After the inning, Boggs would run to the dugout and step on the 3rd base line, rather than leap over it.

* Turk Wendell, a former MLB pitcher, would chew four sticks of licorice while he pitched on the mound, and right after each inning he would brush his teeth.

* Former NHL goalie Pelle Lindbergh would drink a Swedish beverage called Pripps between periods. He would only sip it if there were exactly two ice cubes in the cup.

Compiled by Joey Hamer
Facts from www.cbc.ca, www.tbo.com

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