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News

Preserving winning ways: Pens fans resort to magic

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By Dennis B. Roddy, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In the realm of good hockey juju, Lowell Murray might qualify for the title of Penguins Team Witch Doctor.

There are the game-day rituals:

"I always wear the same jersey. I always wear the same hat to every game. There's a bunch of us that sit up in D-6. All of us are growing playoff beards."

Watching from his home in suburban Washington, Pa., he always uses the same chair. On days he drives back to Pittsburgh for the games, he always arrives early. He once went beerless when his lucky beer stand inside Mellon Arena was closed.

There's the jersey:

It's a Georges Laraque Number 27 from last season. A word to anyone contemplating seats in section D-6: Mr. Murray doesn't wash it unless the Pens lose a game. By season's end, he might be able to whistle to the thing and it'll come running.

"You'd think I'd be old enough to know that what I do has no bearing on what happens on the ice," said Mr. Murray. "But no."

But no.

When it comes to sports, rational men and women -- the people who program our computers, run our courtrooms, teach our children -- descend into the occult, with black-and-gold amulets, ready to raise pitchfork and torch at the nearest fool to trespass on the forbidden.

Consider the fate of a disc jockey outside Mellon Arena on Sunday. For fans unable to secure tickets to the sanctum sanctorum, the Penguins have a huge LED screen outside for the groundlings.

As the Pens pulled ahead 2-0 in the second period, the poor man, unschooled in taboos, began talking about how the Pens would next take on the Philadelphia Flyers.

Some in the crowd shouted him to silence.

"He almost cost us the game," complained Jim Southworth, who took his family from their home in Ross to watch the proceedings on the big screen.

Nearly cost us the game? By mentioning the next team up?

"Whimsical thoughts? Yeah," conceded Mr. Southworth, a lawyer who made the otherwise rational decision of moving to a town with an NHL franchise.

Welcome to a plane of thought so rarefied that ordinary people spend hours fretting over which shirt to wear and the New York Yankees will dig through 4 feet of concrete in a hallway at their new stadium to remove a Red Sox jersey planted there by a curse-weaving construction worker, and then contemplate prosecution.

Anthropologists and psychologists have studied the issue inside and out and reached a conclusion that sometimes people just believe weird things.

"The more uncertain an activity, the greater the possibility for superstitious thought," said Michael Shermer, a California magazine publisher and author of the book "Why People Believe Weird Things."

Mr. Shermer, publisher of Skeptic magazine, says people seek some sort of control, a sense of participation, a system by which they can believe they played a role in an event in which they had none.

"They say, 'Our team won!' " said Mr. Shermer. "Our team? Excuse me, you didn't have anything to do with it."

It's a control issue, says Stuart Vyse, a professor of psychology at Connecticut College and the author of "Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition."

"They have no control over the outcome. They must sit and watch. The rituals and superstition and lucky charms they summon are a way of feeling like they're doing something to get control over the outcome," said Mr. Vyse.

Maybe they don't have control. But just in case, Justin Kelly, a Mt. Lebanon native now attending law school in Birmingham, Ala., tries to keep the karmic connection fresh.

"Now, I do wash my clothes, but I tend to wear the same thing for every game," he said. There's the black Malkin jersey when the Pens are playing at home. There's the blue throwback jersey with Sidney Crosby's name for the Pens' away games.

Not that he's willing to overdo it.

"The biggest concern I have with the whole superstition stuff is you can kind of drive yourself nuts," said Mr. Kelly.

"You think, 'Well, I sat on this side of the couch and I ate this on this day and the Penguins won.' You can kind of consume your life."

What could clothes have to do with it?

Phillips Stevens, a professor of anthropology at the State University of New York at Buffalo, has studied superstitions and rituals for years. When it comes to invoking the powers and principalities of the thin air, clothes make the moment.

"They were part of the totality of cosmological connections that were fortuitous on that day. If I can reconstruct just something from that successful day, then I can help myself," said Mr. Stevens.

He knows, because in high school he set a swim record. For every competition afterward, he wore the same set of clothes he'd donned the day of his record breaker.

George Gmelch knows this strangeness from the inside. He is an anthropologist. Before that, he played first base for the Detroit Tigers minor league team.

"I had a taboo against eating pancakes because I had struck out three times in a game and then three weeks after having pancakes again I struck out three times again," said Mr. Gmelch.

A year after leaving baseball he went to college, where he took an anthropology course and learned of researcher Bronislaw Malinowski's writings about the Trobriand Islanders of the South Pacific.

Mr. Malinowski noticed that the island's fishermen, when fishing in the relatively safe lagoon, used few superstitious rituals. In open sea, where the risk was greater, rituals were practiced left and right.

"We resort to ritual superstition fetishes and stuff in situations of chance and uncertainty," Mr. Gmelch concluded. "I realized these guys were doing the same thing we were doing in baseball."

His study, recently republished as "Inside Pitch: Life in Professional Baseball," points out that the greater the uncertainty, the more superstition is displayed. In the field, where success rates are at the 80 percent to 90 percent level, very few lucky charms are brandished. At bat, where one hit out of three is a great day, people wear lucky gloves, use lucky bats, tap their cleats the same way each time.

As for the unfortunate DJ who spoke the dreaded Philadelphia word before the Pens had locked up their series with the Rangers:

"There are taboos all over the world about talking about something potentially sensitive," said Mr. Stevens. "There is a universal belief that words can make things happen -- this power of blessing and the power of curse."

And nobody wants a curse. Certainly not the Pens who, if they defeat the Flyers could go on to challenge either the [deleted by superstitious editor] or the [removed by worried copy desk] in the biggest quest of all -- the [just being careful here] Cup.

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of this article.

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