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Baseball, Magic, and Performance

by A-J. McKechnie

Culture is the basic understandings, values and world views which fundamentally structure our perceptions and experience in life. It is very hard to imagine being different from what we are. It is harder still because our cultural rules are largely unconscious among members of a society. It is with this in mind, that I thought it might be *fun* to reveal some of our culture by examining behaviour around sports.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the particular magical character of behaviour and performance connected with the process of playing the game of baseball and how the team, which constitutes that set of individuals who co-operate and act to win the game, operates. I'm only going to examine major league baseball but I'm sure anyone who plays a team sport will be able to identify their own special magic as we go along.

I will concern myself with three levels of behaviour: (1) the *individual* and his performance; (2) the *full set of participants* and the interaction as a whole; and (3) the emergent *team impression* which arises regardless of the first two levels of fact. Examining these three areas will help to demonstrate the high degree of performance and public behaviour exhibited in baseball.

Among the participants, social relations of a highly complicated structure prevail making it virtually impossible to examine behaviour exhibited in professional baseball without looking at the interrelated magical component of the sport. Rife with the magic of rituals, taboos and fetishes, players (and fans) engage in the emotional play between hope and fear; where certainty and reliability give way to chance. Bronislaw Malinowski states,

We find magic wherever the elements of chance and accident, and the emotional play between hope and fear have a wide and extensive range ... magic [is] a "practical art" that [meets] specific individual needs (1954:88).

Goffman (1959) uses the term "performance team" or, in short, "team" to refer to any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine (79). Behaviour and performance are interdependent social actions which the actor uses to bestow

meaning. It is expected that the actor's actions will be understood by the other participants in the performance and are meant as an effort to communicate. Accordingly, Goffman (80) states that while a team-performance is in progress, any member of the team has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct. [Baseball fans all know the batter must never look at the umpire to demonstrate his disapproval. The batter can stand at the plate and swear and refer to the stupidity of the call—but addressing the umpire directly almost certainly means he is out of the game!] Each teammate is forced to rely on the conduct and behaviour of his fellows, and they, in turn, are forced to rely on him. There is therefore, a bond of reciprocal dependence linking teammates to one another. When members of a team have different formal statuses and rank in a social establishment, which is often the case, then we can see that the mutual dependence created by membership in the team is likely to cut across structural and social cleavages in the establishment and thus provide a source of cohesion for the establishment.

It is also apparent that members of a team who must co-operate to maintain a given definition of the situation before the audience, will hardly be in a position to maintain that particular impression before one another. Accomplices in the maintenance of a particular appearance of things, they are forced to define one another as persons "in the know" (82-83). An example of such a behaviour can be demonstrated in the following story:—A player for the Atlanta Braves broke his leg during the regular season and, although he was not able to play, he attended the games. The players began to touch his leg cast before and during the game. During a particularly important game that would take the team to the pennant championship, the cast became a focal point for all the players "good vibes". The team won that game and much of their success was attributed to the "lucky qualities" of the player's cast. The team made it to the World Series, the player's leg mended and the cast was removed. However, the magical powers with which the cast was imbued by the players and its link to the team's successful performance on the field became interconnected. Hence, the player with the mended leg brought his discarded cast to every game and

fitting it over his now healed leg, players continued to touch it and rub it for good luck before and during the World Series games.

Teammates, then, in proportion to the frequency with which they act as a team and the number of matters that fall within impressional protectiveness, tend to be bound by rights of what might be called familiarity—which may constitute a kind of intimacy without warmth—need not be something of an organic kind, slowly developing over time, but rather a formal relationship that is automatically extended and received as soon as the individual takes a place on the team. [This also holds true when we examine trades or free-agency status—players who have been extremely close during the year may find themselves playing against each other the following year.]

Anthony Wallace (1966) also offers some insights into behaviour and the ritual of magic which can have applied to baseball. The high degree of chance involved in the game of baseball, and the solitary actions of the players, like the hitter and the pitcher, creates strong anxiety related to the accuracy and consistency of the performance of their tasks:

Ritual may be defined as stereotyped communication, solitary or interpersonal, which reduces anxiety, prepares the organism to act, and (in social rituals) coordinates the preparation for action among several organisms...(Wallace 1966: 236).

The rituals that baseball players employ appear to fulfill Wallace's explanation of reducing anxiety while preparing the player to act, and of course to be imbued with the qualities necessary to "win".

George Gmelch (1982) (in keeping with Malinowski's thinking) suggests that the baseball players resort to magic when they want to ensure that things go their own way (394). The use of magic in game performance results in "on the field" behaviour that is curious but acceptable: understood by both the audience and the other players alike.

There are three essentials of baseball—hitting, pitching and fielding. Hitting and pitching involve a high degree of chance; while fielding is viewed as less reliant upon ritual and has a much greater degree of accuracy. Fielders often have almost complete control over the outcome of a ball that comes their way. The average fielding percentage or success rate of .975 compared to a .245 average success rate for hitters reflects the degree of certainty in this part of the game (Encyclopedia Britannica 1988). However, regardless of the certainty, fielders often engage in extraordinary performances to win games. In 1992, Devon White (Toronto Blue Jays) made a miraculous fly catch at

the wall in center field that rivals a similar performance by Willy Mays (New York Giants) in the 1955 All Star Game. White's behaviour inspired enthusiasm and confidence, spurring the Blue Jays on to a much needed win.

The pitcher is the player who is least able to control the outcome of his own efforts. A good pitch may be hit for a bloop single, while his worst pitch may be hit directly to one of his fielders for an out. He may limit the opposition to a single hit and lose, or he may give up a dozen hits and win. It is not unusual for pitchers to perform well and lose or to perform poorly and win. In brief, the pitcher, regardless of how well he performs, is reliant upon the proficiency of his teammates, the inefficiency of the opposition and the supernatural—luck.

Hitting is also a chancy affair. It is clear that skill is required to hit the ball hard and on the line. Once the ball is hit, however, chance plays a large role in determining where it will go—into a waiting glove or into an open field.

Ritual

Baseball rituals are almost infinitely various, and they usually grow out of exceptionally good performances. When a player does well, he cannot really attribute his success to skill alone. He plays with the same amount of skill each night whether he gets four hits or goes hitless. Because of this diversity in play, the player seeks greater control over his performance, attributing his inconsistent performance to some form of behaviour or a particular food that he ate. Getting several easy hits in a game leads the player to believe that something that he did shifted his luck. It may have been a new shirt he wore to the ballpark, or the fact that he drank orange juice before the game. A major league ball player once described his belief in the myth that eating certain food gives the ball "eyes", that is, a ball seeks the gaps between fielders. Fred Caviglia, a Kansas City minor league pitcher, explains that everything you do is important to winning. "I eat the same foods, and wear the same clothes if I'm on a winning streak...you can't ever tell what's going to make the difference between winning and losing" (Gmelch 1982).

Rituals may differ in complexity from athlete to athlete but there are several common components that are used by the team. Base tagging is one of the most popular rituals when leaving and returning to the dugout each inning. Tagging second base on the way to the outfield is habitual with some players. When one player was asked if he ever failed to tag the base he replied: "Never! I wouldn't dare, it would destroy my confidence to hit" (396).

Clothing is considered crucial to both hitters and pitchers. Nearly all players wear the same uniform and undergarments each day when

playing well, and some even wear the same street clothes. The New York Giants (1954), during a sixteen game winning streak wore the same clothes and refused to allow them to be cleaned for fear that their good fortune might be washed away. A batter will always have a ritual performance when stepping up to the plate to bat. How he steps into the batter's box, the number of times he swings the bat, or taps home plate with the bat is strictly observed during each performance at the plate. Pat Borders, catcher with the Toronto Blue Jays explained in 1992 that he started chewing tobacco again to ensure that they "got to the World Series".

Taboos

Taboos are as varied as rituals and range from traditional to personal. Traditional taboos include ignoring the pitcher when he is on a no-hit winning streak. No one on the team will communicate with the pitcher for fear that they might jinx his perfect game.

We've all heard that major league athletes are encouraged as a team to refrain from sexual activity before the "big game" because it might break their concentration or "sap their strength". In the 1992 Winter Olympics, Karen Lee-Gartner challenged this age old taboo by announcing publicly that she attributed her big ski win to the fact that she and her husband did engage in sex right before the big race.

Individual taboos by a player may include not donning the ball cap until the game begins or refusing to wear a certain uniform number. Rickey Henderson is rumored to have paid Darnell Coles \$25 000 for the number 24 when he became a Jay! Honus Wagner, a member of Baseball's Hall of Fame, believed that each bat was good for only one hundred hits and no more. Regardless of the quality of the bat, he would discard it after its one hundredth hit (Gmelch: 1992).

Fetishes

Fetishes include a wide assortment of objects: old baseballs, coins, protective cups, crucifixes and old bats. Ordinary objects are given power in similar fashion to taboos and rituals. The player, during a particularly hot batting or pitching streak credits some unusual object (often a new possession) with this good fortune. The fictional character ex-baseball player Sam Malone on the television series "Cheers" was renowned for carrying a lucky bottle cap, hailing from his baseball days, years after his career was finished. The objects often become fetishes for the player. Fetishes are taken so seriously that fellow players will not touch them for fear of offending the owner.

Fans—that is dedicated fans—have many

rituals, taboos and fetishes of their own. During one of the 1992 pennant series, my husband seriously debated not attending one particular game because in the previous three games he had attended, the team had gone winless and he feared he might jinx the team.

In conclusion, the character of behaviour and performance is clearly demonstrated in the game through the players' reliance on magic. I have attempted to show how the individual player's behaviour impacts him personally, through certain rituals such as food consumption; how the team is affected through the taboo on sex before a big game; and the emergent impressions and reactions of the team, which are demonstrated by the members' serious respect for each others' fetishes. Magic plays a far-reaching role in the game of baseball. The complexity and variety of magic that is incorporated depends on the performance of the individual player.

The month of March heralds the return of baseball players to spring training. For the players who produce the thrills and chills, and the fans who follow the game of *baseball*, March is a new beginning. A new season underway, last year forgotten, and every one turns their hopes and dreams to capturing this year's pennant, and with it new magical formulas for winning.

Baseball fans and players understand and expect the team and individual players to utilise magic, as well as to have and exhibit rituals fetishes and taboos. Magic is as much a part of winning as skill! After all, it would be a shame to lose the biggest game of the season simply because someone forgot to bring their lucky rabbit foot!

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