

# ENQUIRE WITHIN

**Question:** *During the World Cup last July, we saw many examples of players who, when starting their game or coming on to the field of play, cross themselves, pluck some turf and kiss it, and various other strange activities. Are these actions religious or superstitious?*

**Answer:** Well, sportsmen and sportswomen are notoriously superstitious. I must confess to a sense of distaste when I see them using Christian actions, like making the sign of the cross, as they jog on to the field of play. These gestures have little or nothing to do with faith, but they may be related to religious superstitions which have crept into the life of Christians from time to time.

Tennis star Jelena Dokic (pictured) wears the same tennis gear throughout the tournament and says she knows many other players that do the same. Presumably, they know a quick way to a good launderette!



Danielle Masters, the golfer, likes to kiss the golf ball and make sign of the Cross before teeing off.

The German national team refused to stay on the 13th floor of a hotel prior to their matches in Euro 2004.

Gary Linekar, the former England international, admits that if he had a run of bad form he had his hair cut to put things right.

John Terry, the England footballer, has revealed his amazing list of superstitions which he believes are behind his success. The Chelsea captain keeps to a strictly controlled routine before every game - sitting in the same seat on the team bus, listening to the same CD and parking in the same spot in the car park. And he has also worn the same lucky pair of shin-pads for the past ten years.

So why do they do it?

Richard Lustberg, a sports psychologist based in New York, said athletes develop superstitions or rituals as a “coping mechanism” to deal with the pressure to succeed.

“Athletes begin to believe, and want to believe, that their particular routine is enhancing their performance,”

I can understand that and sympathise. Pressure to succeed can be deeply corroding within and so people naturally seek protection through rituals and superstitions.

In the ancient world, superstitious actions may have been taken to protect men and women from different types of pressures- pressures concerning crops and weather and the possibility of sustaining life at all. It may be that this is how the first human attempts to deal with and understand our environment started, paving the way to what we now understand to be our faith in God.

However, although faith in a loving God may have started its long and tortuous journey among such strange activities, we may safely say that it has outgrown them completely and is of a different order.

It is quite out of order for a football player to cross himself in the belief that his prayer will influence God to intervene on behalf of his side to win a match, or for him to score a goal. The obvious reason for this is that players on the other side are doing exactly the same and asking God to intervene on their behalf.

This is the trivialising of God and is unacceptable.

Sport is about human endeavour and should be undertaken in a spirit of fair play and honesty. Religion is not part of the team’s back-up squad, and where it is perceived to be by those concerned, it will tend to be divisive and create social and religious barriers.

Neil Richardson