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Simple to elaborate: Cards won't give up their pregame rituals

by [Connie Midey](#) - Jan. 27, 2009 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

Hours before the underdog Arizona Cardinals beat the Philadelphia Eagles to advance to the [Super Bowl](#), Cards right guard Deuce Lutui breakfasted on a Wetzel's Pretzel.

Based on the results, he may well dine on a pregame pretzel again Sunday.

"I had church before the game, and I was running low on time," he said last week after practice in Tempe. "So, I just grabbed whatever was on the table, and it was a Wetzel's Pretzel from the mall the night before. . . . And we won. I think I might start doing that before all our games."

Lutui is not really a superstitious man, but the synchronicity of eating the day-old pretzel and winning the Jan. 18 game struck him.

Thus is born a sports superstition, a ritual or routine that imparts the sense that there is a cause-and-effect relationship within the athlete's power to control. Ignore it and you risk a loss or an embarrassing fumble on the field.

Athletes, baseball players especially, are known for heeding superstitions. Boston Red Sox third baseman Wade Boggs ate chicken before every game and took 150 ground balls (never 149 or 151) during practice. Phoenix Suns guard Kyle Macy pulled up his socks and bounced the basketball three times before every free throw.

Football players aren't as superstitious as other athletes, said former Cards player Ron Wolfley, now the team's radio analyst.

That's because superstition is seen as the playground of doubt, "and football players don't typically doubt themselves," Wolfley said. "You have to think you're the biggest, baddest player on the field when you step out there."

Still, Cards defensive ends [Antonio Smith](#) and Calais Campbell wouldn't dream of skipping their pregame prayers.

"I don't want to take the chance," Campbell said. "I put all the parts of my uniform on the same way - left leg, right leg, knee pads - and I always run down to our corner of the end zone and say a prayer before the game."

A natural trait

Belief in the power of such rituals is an evolved trait, grounded in humans' tendencies to find meaningful patterns in random events and to look for confirmation of what they already believe, said Michael Shermer, author of *Why People Believe Weird Things*.

That's not necessarily a bad thing.

"It's not that football players and fans are ignorant because they fall for this," said Shermer, a *Scientific American* columnist and the founding publisher of *Skeptical* magazine. "By nature, all of us do it. Football fans wearing their hat backwards (to ensure a win) are really no different from stock-market analysts fiddling with their charts.

"That's how our brains are designed to work. You notice those really meaningful connections and ignore all the ones that weren't meaningful."

The team's rituals

On the few occasions when Smith missed his other pregame ritual, listening to a mix of music in a specific order, he felt out of sync and his play suffered.

"It's a mood thing," he said.

He arrives at the locker room listening to gospel music. Next, his play list moves to R&B tunes to relax him as he dresses.

"Then, it's reggae to get rhythmic and get my steps right," Smith said. "And last, hip-hop for getting amped up and ready to play. I never had a good game when I didn't do this."

Without his elaborate rituals, Cards safety Matt Ware said the game wouldn't go well.

His routine always must proceed like this: Cut off six pieces of surgical tape, four long and two short. Get two H-shaped bandages, plus four Blist-O-Ban blister bandages for his toes and feet. Go back to the locker and tape up. Grab a Gatorade and drop a cramp-fighting fizzy electrolyte tablet into it.

There's more, including warming up with defensive-backs coach Teryl Austin. The eye black goes on only after Ware is totally dressed.

"I've been doing this for five years," he said, "and I can't ever be late because it takes me a lot of time. But, if I didn't do it, I would feel like when you rush out of the house and you know you missed something."

Ware's long-standing rituals make Lutui's new one look easy. Unless, that is, the right guard forgot to pick up a pretzel before taking off for Sunday's game in Tampa, where the nearest Wetzel's Pretzels is about 85 miles away.

Fans have rituals, too

Fans of the Cardinals believe victory rests on their shoulders, too.

On the morning of the NFC title game, Mike Banks was freaking out. His [Larry Fitzgerald](#) jersey, the one Banks was wearing each time the Cards won this season, was dirty. He rushed to wash it, then took a different route from his Phoenix home to the stadium to avoid construction.

Suddenly, he started to worry. He didn't want his change in routine to jinx the game. Yes, he said, superstitions are mostly for fun. They make you feel like you've done your part, win or lose.

"But if you don't follow your ritual and (the Cardinals) lose," Banks said, "you feel responsible, like somehow you upset the cosmos."

His sister, Debbie McDonald, with whom he shares season tickets, makes Banks close his eyes when the Cards kick a crucial field goal. That superstition began years ago, when he covered his eyes for a Charles Barkley free throw, which the [Suns player](#) made.

"But don't tell her," Banks said. "I actually peek."

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