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Selected Aspects of the Pre- and Post-Match Rituals of Female Football Players

ABSTRACT

Rituals are an interdisciplinary subject. They can carry many meanings and have different values for the person who performs them or believes in superstitions associated with them. Rituals are mysterious and intriguing, and thus more interesting as an area of scientific study. Observation of the sports community shows that ritualization applies not only to the ceremony itself, but also to the behavior and performance of individual players, especially during the pre-match period. This awareness prompted research and discussion on the place/role of rituals in the mental and physical preparation of athletes.

The study included 62 female football players playing in Polish league competitions. They completed a questionnaire called "Rituals in Sport." The aim of the study was to learn about the ritualized practices of players and their teams. The survey questions also concerned the subjectively felt relationship between rituals and the expected outcome of the match, among other things. The analysis of our findings confirmed that the female footballers' pre- and post-match practices are ritualized. The scope, diversity, and multiplicity of meanings of the rituals performed by individual players reveal the significance of this interdisciplinary phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: rituals, sports, football, sports psychology, mental preparation

STRESZCZENIE

Wybrane aspekty rytuałów okołostartowych piłkarek

Rytuały to zagadnienie interdyscyplinarne. To zjawisko, które może nieść wiele znaczeń i mieć różną wartość dla osoby, która je wykonuje albo wierzy w związane z nimi przesady. Rytuały są tajemnicze i intrygujące, a przez to tym ciekawsze dla próby poznania naukowego.

Obserwacja środowiska sportowego pozwala stwierdzić, że rytualizacja dotyczy nie tylko samej ceremonii, ale też funkcjonowania poszczególnych zawodników – zwłaszcza w okresie okołostartowym. To skłoniło do podjęcia badań, a także dyskusji nad miejscem/rolą rytuałów w przygotowaniu mentalnym i fizycznym sportowców.

Do udziału w badaniach zaproszono 62 piłkarki nożne biorące udział w rozgrywkach polskich lig. Wypełniły one kwestionariusz ankiety RwS – „Rytuały w Sporcie”. Celem badań było poznanie okołostartowych zachowań rytualnych zawodniczek i ich drużyn. Pytania dotyczyły m.in. również subiektywnie odczuwanego związku rytuałów ze spodziewanym wynikiem sportowym. Analizy wyników badań własnych potwierdziły istnienie rytualizacji okołostartowego funkcjonowania piłkarek. Zakres, różnorodność i wielość znaczeń rytuałów realizowanych przez poszczególne zawodniczki/drużyny podkreśla znaczący wymiar tego interdyscyplinarnego fenomenu.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: rytuały, sport, piłka nożna, psychologia sportu, przygotowanie mentalne

Sport, or more broadly—physical activity—is an interesting area for research. Carrying out a proper analysis of such complex phenomena, concepts, and issues requires an interdisciplinary perspective. In discussing research methods in sport psychology, we must mention the need to design precise diagnostic tools, but also the need to cooperate with representatives of other sciences, and to use the achievements of those sciences (including medicine, biochemistry, physiology, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, or cultural studies). An example of such an “interdisciplinary” phenomenon that requires examination (and is interesting from the point of view of the theory and practice of sport psychology) are rituals performed by athletes.

Rituals are an inseparable element of every culture, an element which is only understood by a particular social group. They are relatively persistent behaviors which are repeated under certain circumstances, and in the history of societies they are most often associated with the religious/spiritual sphere. Today, rituals are increasingly secular. For those who perform them, they carry a particular importance, both individual and social. They inspire a sense of inner strength and social cohesion and they strengthen integration. Owing to their uniqueness and complexity, the issue of rituals is studied by representatives of various sciences. Rituals are not only interdisciplinary, but also universal: they are a natural element of each community’s life, regardless of the variety of ritualized practices or of their place and time (Maisonneuve, 1995; Gajda, 2004; Labbate, 2011; Mazurkiewicz, 2011a). This also applies to sports. Some disciplines with a long history and traditions have deeply-rooted rituals. Every sports show is

perceived as a spectacle. Symbolic ceremonies, defined by specific rules, acquire a ritualistic function—just like all athletes' careers. Athletes, as individuals and/or as a team, exhibit a wide spectrum of ritualized behavior that take on special significance prior to the start of the game. Sometimes, they also have a religious import.

Such rituals holistically affect the physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects of sport. First of all, rituals reduce tension and fear, which is important for many players. For many, they are an anxiety valve, a buffer against stress and a sense of helplessness. The world of sport is defined by changeability, unpredictability, and emotionality. It happens that scores in sports sometimes depend not only on the players themselves, on their skills, but on luck, coincidence, and chance. Repeated rituals are therefore an element that can restore the closest thing to a sense of security and stability. When used by a team, they contribute to a sense of cohesion. They restore or build a sense of control, though one that is often illusory. In reality, there is no causal relationship between the performance of the ritual and the result of a particular action (Maisonneuve, 1995; Lipoński, 2004; Burke, 2006; Schippers et al., 2006; Rudski et al., 2007; Brevers et al., 2011, as cited in Womack, 1992; Maranise, 2013; Rutkowska et al., 2016).

Research cited in the literature on the subject suggests that women are more superstitious than men. Their ritualized practices tend to be different than those of men, and the meaning bestowed on them takes on a different nuance (McGinnis et al., 2009; Brevers et al., 2011). Bearing in mind the particular challenges of women's sport, and the challenges faced by players—especially those who practice sports stereotypically perceived as male disciplines—it is worth undertaking an analysis of ritualized behavior, for example, in a group of female football players. Football (soccer) is associated with patterns of male behavior. During sports training, stereotypical images of femininity must therefore be confronted with the requirement of being aggressive, strong, and resilient. For some women and girls, this becomes a major challenge; it is often so challenging that they cannot cope with it and give up sports altogether (Guillet et al., 2006; Jeanes, 2011; Stirling et al., 2011). Nevertheless, women's football is popular and many woman and young girls play it professionally (Bergier, 2006). We need interdisciplinary research to better understand the unique nature of women's sports, especially in the area stereotypically perceived as male disciplines. This will facilitate professionalization and improve the quality of training, from the perspective of both the players and the coaches. One of these interesting aspects is the issue of rituals. Hence, the purpose of this study was to analyze selected aspects of ritualized behavior among female football players in Polish leagues.

Material and method

A group of 62 football players aged 15–27 years ($M = 19.94$ years, $SD = 3.58$), with 1–12 years' professional experience ($M = 4.98$ years, $SD = 2.90$) took part in the study. They were players of Polish league teams from various divisions (premier league: 15 people, 1st league: 5, 2nd league: 33, and 3rd league: 9). The study group included 10 female football players who were called up to the Polish national team.

During the study, each player filled out a questionnaire, which was called “Rituals in Sport” and was developed for the purposes of this study. The tool allowed us to gather information on ritual behavior connected with female football players' matches. The analysis covered the occurrence and type of individual and team ritualized practices before, during, and after the game, the origin of the ritual, the consequences of performing/failing to perform the ritual, and the subjectively felt relationship between the ritual and the final score of the match (probability of success/failure).

It is worth noting that the actual research was preceded by a pilot study, also carried out among female footballers. The subjects were familiarized with rituals performed by various athletes. Afterwards, they were asked to list their pre-match rituals regarding clothing, sound, taste, smell, appearance, gestures, and others. These categories were isolated based on our observations of the sports community and an analysis of media reports and literature on the subject. The results obtained during the pilot study confirmed the existence of this phenomenon among football players and provided valuable insights which were useful in the construction of an appropriate research tool: the “Rituals in Sport” survey questionnaire. First of all, we extended and specified the time range of possible ritualized behaviors. The final version of the tool, therefore, encompasses the entire time period prior to and during the start as well as prior to, during, and after the match: 12 hours before, immediately before, during, immediately after, and up to 12 hours afterwards.

Table 1

Summary of pilot study results with categorized responses

Category	Examples (original spelling)
Food	<p>I eat spinach and sunny-side-up eggs before a match.</p> <p>I always have to drink Pepsi before a match.</p> <p>I drink a glass of magnesium about 12 hours before a match.</p> <p>My lunch before a match must be a pasta dish.</p> <p>I drink coffee before the team gathers for a match.</p> <p>I drink energy drinks.</p> <p>I eat a “3bit” bar.</p> <p>I always have scrambled eggs for breakfast on the day of a match.</p> <p>For breakfast, I eat a roll, jam, and a banana.</p> <p>I eat chocolate.</p>
Behaviors	<p>I always kneel on my right knee before entering the field.</p> <p>When entering the field, I pick a piece of grass, put it in my socks, kneel on my right knee, and cross myself.</p> <p>The day before a match I try to go to church, pray for the match and health for everyone.</p> <p>I enter the field last.</p> <p>I always imagine before the match how it might go.</p> <p>I never go back to my room when I forget something!!</p> <p>When I enter the field, I pick some grass, cross myself, and put the grass inside my shirt.</p> <p>I always think about a loved one before entering the field.</p> <p>When going to a game I take the same seat on the bus.</p> <p>Whenever I enter the field I cross myself 3 times.</p> <p>When I enter the field I cross myself.</p> <p>After greeting the opposing team, we don’t make a shout in the middle of the field, the eleven of us, but we go to the bench and the whole team together with the coaches and only then do we make the shout.</p> <p>A shout before entering the field and on the field before the whistle:</p> <p>I high-five the coach.</p> <p>I always do warm-ups with the same person.</p> <p>A trusted person must have my silver ring.</p> <p>I always cross myself and high-five all the girls before entering the field and the group shout is very important.</p>
Appearance	<p>I shave my legs before a match.</p> <p>I put make-up on my eyes.</p> <p>I do my hair in a bun.</p> <p>I fix my hair.</p>

Clothing	I do my hair so that it doesn't bother me. I never put on match shirts for the warm-up. I carry a medallion in my socks. I always put on the left sock and the left shoe first. I always have the same jersey number. I wear a lucky t-shirt underneath. I always tie my football shoes twice. I have to wear leg warmers. I never put on my shin pads in the locker room. I always wear my favorite T-shirt. I don't go to the match without a hair band. Always the same undershirt. I never wash my shoes after winning a match. I always put on the same underwear. I always put on the right shoe first.
Music	I listen to reggae music on match day. hip hop music, clubbing, reggae. I listen to the song by Mezo-Prayer. I listen to music from the "Team of Champions" album.
Smell	Before the match, I spray myself with Adidas perfume (never another one). I use my "match" perfume. Perfume immediately after going to the locker room after the warm-up.

The "Rituals in Sport" questionnaire consists of 17 items. The first questions concern opinions on rituals performed—generally—in the sports community. The following items refer to the female footballers' own rituals. They are designed for people who declare having/performing rituals. The next questions refer to the type of rituals and the time they are performed. Answers are presented in the table with five or more pre- and post-match periods. The next items regard the specifics of the rituals, the usefulness of performing them, the possible consequences of not performing the rituals, and the frequency and origin/genesis of the rituals. We also included questions asking the players to rate (on a 0%–100% scale) the probability of success vs. failure in the event of performing/not performing a ritual. The questionnaire also contains an item that allows for the diagnosis of the durability of rituals and the factors which would affect a change in rituals. The last question regards the intensity of the need/urge to perform a ritual (on a scale of 0–10; where 0 means "completely unnecessary" and 10 means "very necessary"). In our research, the "Rituals in Sport" questionnaire was accompanied by a metric form.

This paper presents a fragment of research material collected through the "Rituals in Sport" survey.

Results

The first stage of the analysis was to verify which of the surveyed athletes admitted to having their own—individual and/or team—ritual. Then, the different types of rituals were analyzed in separate time periods: before, during, and after the match.

Out of the 62 footballers, 50 reported having individual rituals, while 43 follow team rituals. There are 8 players in the study group who did not report having any individual or team rituals.

Analyses of the respondents' answers are presented below, first regarding individual rituals, then team rituals.

Figure 1

Individual Rituals Performed by Players 12 Hours Before Games

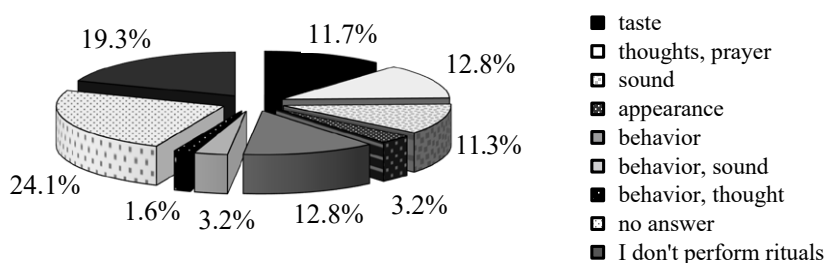


Figure 1 presents individual rituals performed by players up to 12 hours before a game. Nearly 13% of the respondents admitted to thinking about rivalry, the course of the upcoming match, their successes, concentration, ideas, and prayers. Eight girls/young women have their own routine pre-match practices (“behaviors” category; for example watching a game on TV, going to church,¹ getting enough sleep, washing their shoes, and avoiding alcohol²). Two women combine behavior with sound (packing their things or playing with the ball while listening to music), and another respondent combines behavior with thoughts (rest with prayer). One in ten female football players declared that they have sound-related rituals (listening to motivational or relaxing music). The same number of subjects perform taste-related rituals (controlling their diet or making sure to

1 Going to church was classified in a different category than prayer. It was assumed that what is important to the players may be not only prayer, but also the place and atmosphere of the church.

2 When discussing research results and collected data, specific examples of the respondents' answers are cited in parentheses in order to create a given category of responses.

eat light). Two women indicated routine practices related to their appearance (washing their hair or shaving). Nearly a quarter of those surveyed did not respond to this question. Figure 1 also includes the group of players who do not have individual rituals (12 people, or nearly 20% of the study group).

Figure 2

Individual Rituals Performed by Players Immediately Before Games

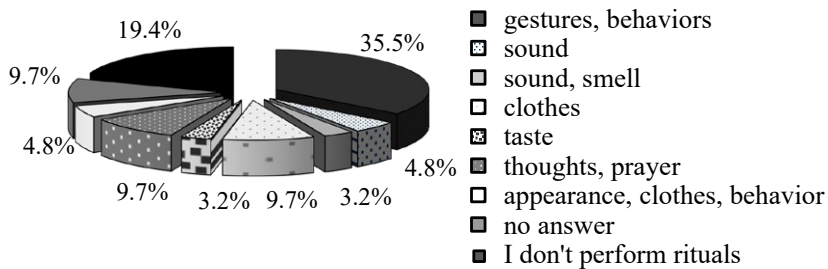


Figure 2 presents the respondents' answers regarding individual rituals performed immediately before a match. Nearly 40% of the subjects (N = 23) perform rituals related to gestures or behavior (mainly crossing oneself when walking onto the field, entering the stadium in a specific order, in a single file, or starting with the right foot). Six players admit to performing rituals connected with clothing (putting on the same or favorite T-shirt, shoes, or underwear). The same number of respondents say that prior to a game they devote themselves to prayers or thoughts about the course of the match, preparations, and goals. Three women combine attention to appearance or clothing with specific behavior (chewing gum, fixing one's hair, putting on a specific piece of clothing, or making the sign of the cross). Two players indicated activities related to eating a particular dish or snack immediately before the match. One in ten respondents did not answer the question about ritualized behavior.

Nearly 70% of the surveyed players declared that they do not perform any rituals during matches (most of them do admit to having individual rituals). Five players have rituals related to clothing (underwear, a personal top underneath the team jersey, the same number, or an armband). Three subjects' rituals entail caring about their appearance (fixing one's hair pins or styling one's hair). Five female footballers perform gestures (mainly the sign of the cross—for example, after a goal is scored—or touching the goalpost just before defending a penalty kick). The same number of players perform rituals in the category of "thoughts" (discipline control, focus, or composure). Almost 5% admit to complex rituals

combining specific behaviors, appropriate clothing (chewing gum, wearing an armband, making victory gestures, or putting on one’s favorite jewelry—even if disallowed by the regulations), and focus.

Figure 3
Individual Rituals Performed by Players During Games

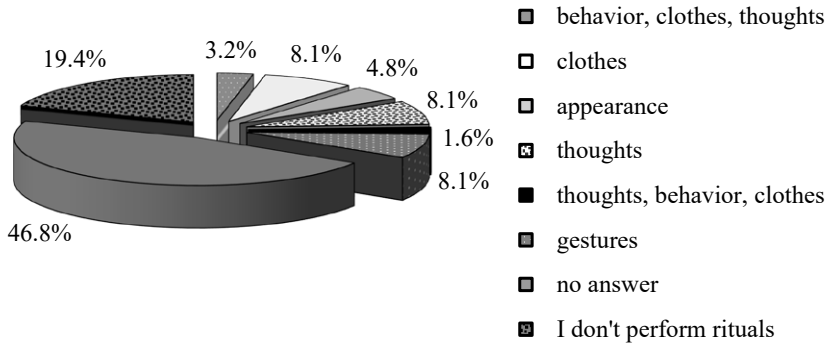


Figure 4
Individual Rituals Performed by Players Immediately After Games

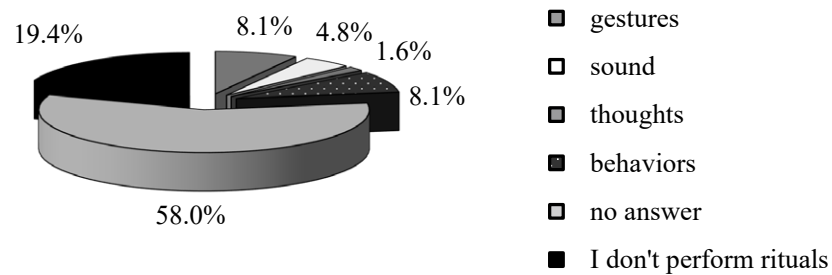


Figure 4 presents statements regarding behavior immediately after games. Most of the respondents (nearly 63% of whom declared following individual rituals and less than 20% of whom do not perform individual rituals at all) do not enact rituals after matches. The remainder includes subjects with rituals focused on specific behaviors (N = 5; ice-cold shower, cooling one’s legs, taking a bath, or going out for a beer) and gestures (N = 5; performing the sign of the cross or shaking hands with other players). Three players listen to music (in Figure 4 their answers are classified under “sound”). One footballer analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the performance and wonders what could be improved after the match (“thoughts” category).

Figure 5

Individual Rituals Performed by Players 12 Hours After Games

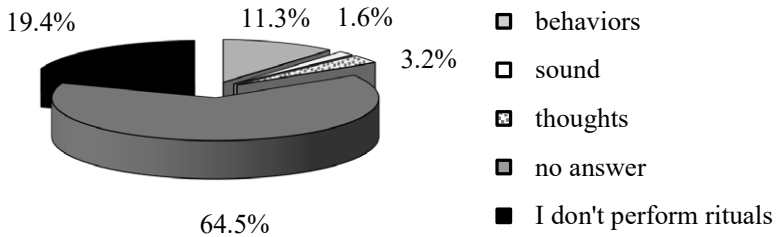


Figure 5 presents the opinions of the respondents regarding individual rituals performed up to 12 hours after a match. Nearly 80% of them do not follow such rituals. One in ten respondents has a certain behavior (rest, recuperation, going to the swimming pool, sleeping or going to sleep early, and socializing). One player reported resting while listening to music, and two others have routine thoughts (analyzing mistakes).

Similarly to the results on individual rituals, the survey findings on team rituals are presented below. The following analyses also include a group of 19 players (nearly 31% of the entire study group) who do not have or do not perform team rituals.

During the 12 hours preceding a match, 11 players perform team rituals (Fig. 6). Those who enact specific behaviors rest, make sure to sleep longer, avoid alcohol, and talk to other players from the team through a social networking site (“motivate/mobilize”). Two listen to music as part of team rituals, and a further two players avoid shaving/depilation.

Figure 6

Team Rituals Performed by Players 12 Hours Before Games

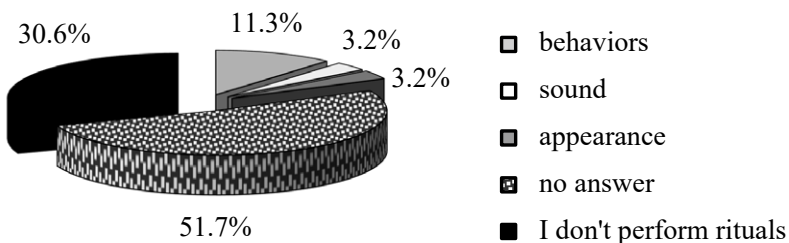


Figure 7

Team Rituals Performed by Players Immediately Before Games

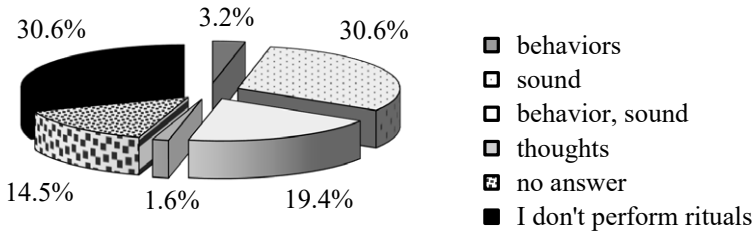
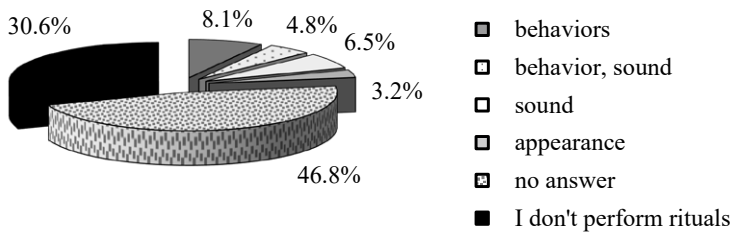


Figure 7 presents the players' declarations regarding their performance of team-specific rituals which take place immediately before the game. Almost one-third of respondents perform rituals related to sound (a team shout is one of the most popular rituals, and listening to music is also mentioned). Rituals related to both sound and behavior are also relatively common (nearly 20%). This category includes arranging the team in a circle and shouting, hi-fiving each other and using other motivational slogans, shouting as a team in specific places (on the sideline and on the field), picking grass from the turf, and crossing themselves. Two players mentioned team-specific behavior (conversing together, warm-ups, or a specific, pre-arranged entrance onto the pitch). One player listed focus as a team ritual.

Figure 8

Team Rituals Performed by Players During Games

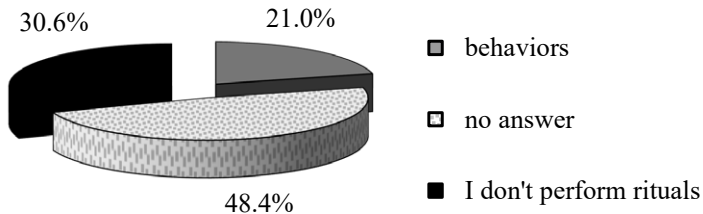


During matches, players with team rituals relatively most often (nearly 10% of the respondents) engage in team behavior such as conversation, motivating each other, or specific jumps/starts. Three players combine such behavior with sound (including shouts and high-fives). The answers of four subjects were included into the "sound" category (cheers), and two other respondents' answers are in the "appearance" category (for example, wearing identical armbands).

The examined players who perform team rituals immediately after games (Fig. 9) perform only characteristic behaviors. The answers included bathing, exchanging thanks, shaking hands, hugging, dancing joyfully, silence after losing a match, and going out for a beer.

Figure 9

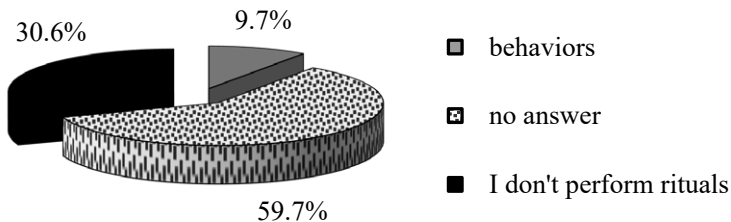
Team Rituals Performed by Players Immediately After Games



One in ten respondents admits that they engage in team-specific behavior up to 12 hours after the end of games (Fig. 10). This category includes sum-up meetings with the coach, resting together, recuperating, going to the swimming pool, celebrating together after a victory, and social gatherings.

Figure 10

Team Rituals Performed by Players 12 Hours After Games



Another issue that was analyzed was the origin of these rituals (Fig. 11). Nearly half of the respondents claimed that they created the rituals themselves. Ten players do what the rest of the team do; eight of them helped establish the details of the ritual. Among the respondents, one in ten women indicated that they had been inspired by other athletes. Nine subjects do not know the origin of their rituals. One player claims that the origin of her rituals is a combination of her and the team's influence (in Figure 11, the category marked as "other").

Figure 11
Origins of the Rituals

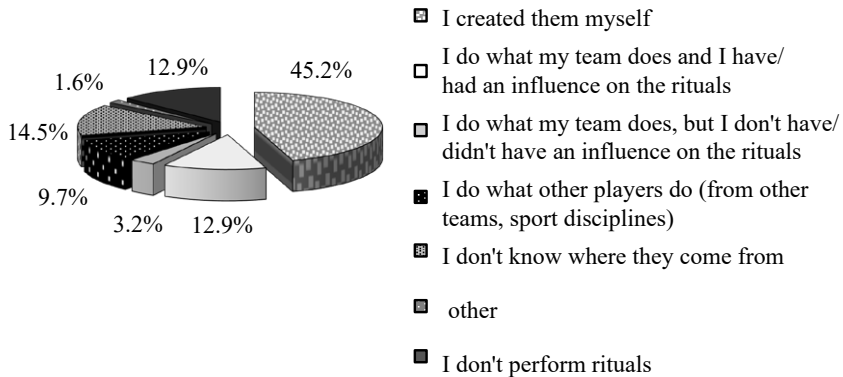
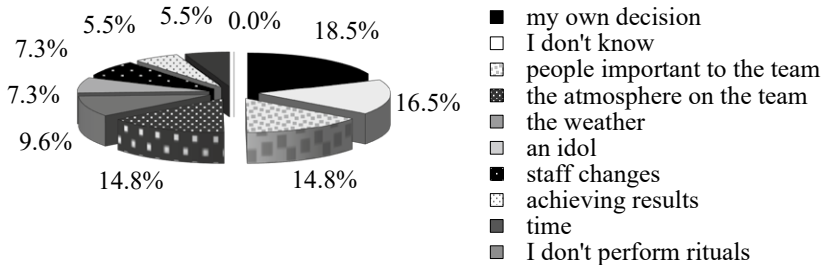


Figure 12 presents the factors which may affect possible changes to existing rituals. Relatively speaking, the highest number of players indicated that any change to the existing rituals depends solely on them.

Figure 12
Factors which may induce possible changes to rituals



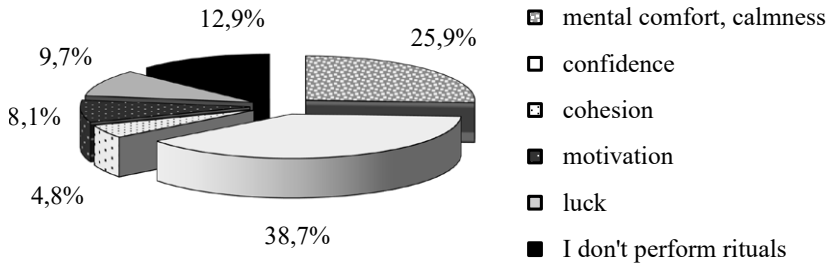
The players also mentioned the importance of the team as an element that impacts changes in the pre-match routine. According to eight players, people who are important to the team (the coach or the captain) can also significantly impact changes to team or individual rituals. The same number of women reported a substantial impact of the atmosphere in the team (conflicts). The respondents also mentioned the impact of idols they admire, personnel changes that led to new rituals or to the end of existing rituals.

The female athletes were asked about the consequences of performing the rituals and their answers were categorized (Fig. 13). In the case of

seven respondents who submitted complex answers, the first answer was included in the analysis, and assumed to be the main one. According to the subjects, the use of rituals translates primarily into higher self-confidence (a sense of readiness, faith in one's own abilities, and confidence in being well-prepared—mentally prepared as well). It also provides psychological comfort and peace. Within this category, the following answers were given: calmness, inner quiet, distraction from everyday matters, focus, a sense of security and happiness, improved mood translating into a better attitude on the pitch, and an awareness of doing something more likely to make the match a success. For one-tenth of the players, performing a ritual is linked with success on the field: it brings luck, guarantees better performance, increases the chances of winning, and provides a belief in success. Five players treat the ritualized practice as a kind of motivator. In their opinion, the ritual motivates and readies them to fight—also in moments which are more difficult for the player. Three football players can discern positive consequences from implementing rituals for team cohesion. In their opinion, rituals strengthen the sense of unity within the team and provide a sense of support.

Figure 13

Consequences of Performing the Rituals

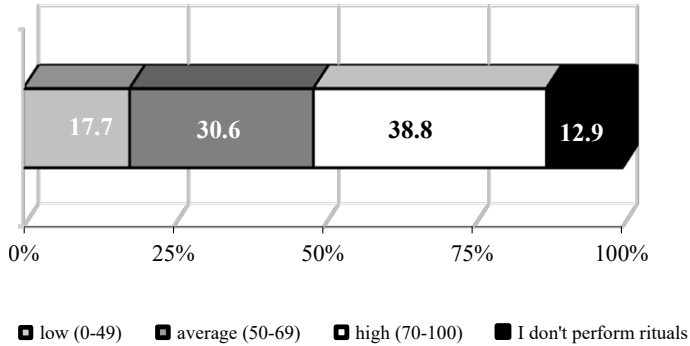


The respondents indicated the probability of success after completing rituals on a 100-point scale. The average value of their answers was 56.28 (SD = 29.63). The distribution of all indications was categorized (Fig. 14). The individual values chosen by the players were classified into three categories according to their similarity to the distribution of results on a 10-point scale.

Nearly 40% of the surveyed players assess the probability of success after a pre-match ritual as “high” (one-tenth of the subjects indicated the maximum—100 points). Approximately 30% of the players rated the relationship between ritual and success as “low” or did not notice one at all (seven women marked the lowest score—0 points).

Figure 14

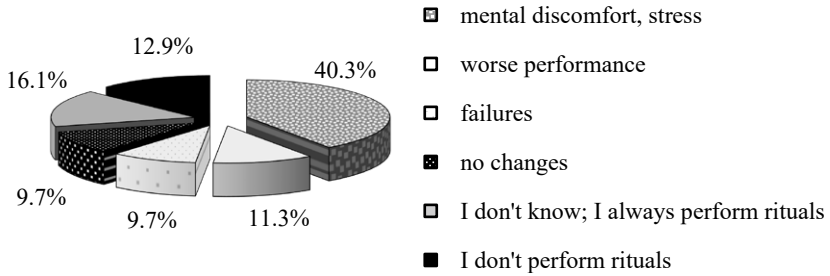
Subjectively Felt Likelihood of Success Associated with Performing a Ritual



One in ten female players participating in the research was of the opinion that there are no consequences of not performing a ritual (Fig. 15). For over 40% of the respondents, the failure to perform a ritual is associated with an increase in mental discomfort and/or feelings of stress. In the same category of responses, players also mention fear (before the game), anxiety, nervousness, indecision, dissatisfaction, depression, loss of concentration, malaise, loss of confidence, and feeling lost. One player wrote that “she is not herself.” Another respondent reported is that in such circumstances she gets the impression that something remains undone and then feels “not fully in the game.” Approximately 10% of the athletes studied links the non-performance of a ritual with a worse game (“I play badly,” “the game does not go like it should”). A comparable number of players think that failure to perform a ritual is related to the results on the field: defeat or failure. Six respondents do not see any negative consequences. Over 15% of the women say that ritual behavior is permanently built into their pre-match routine, and therefore this problem does not concern them. It is worth adding that in the case of two footballers who provided multiple answers, the first (main) statement was included in the analysis.

Figure 15

Consequences of Not Performing a Ritual

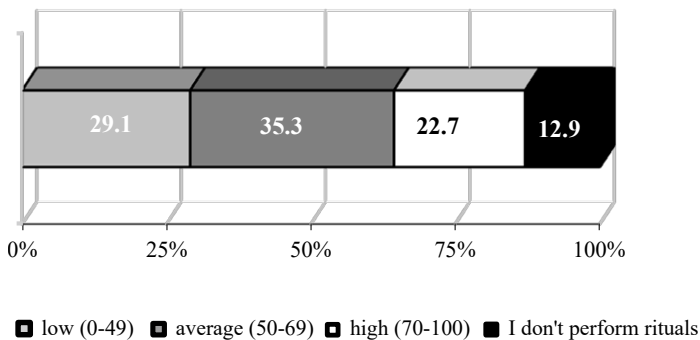


As with the procedure presented in Figure 14, we carried out an analysis of the subjectively estimated probability of losing a game in the event of a failure to perform a ritual. The average value of all answers was 48.46 (SD = 30.99).

Approximately 30% of the respondents rated the relationship between a game which was lost and a failure to perform a ritual as low (seven players selected 0 points: they do not see such a relationship). Over 20% are convinced of the impact of not performing a ritual on failure in sport. Five players indicated 100 points, thus assessing this relationship as very high.

Figure 16

Subjectively Felt Likelihood of Losing a Game Associated with Performing a Ritual



Discussion

The authors are aware of the many aspects and complexity of the issues presented in this study. This research is an analysis of a section of the problem which intends to draw the attention of the sports community (especially of coaches and sport psychologists) to the importance of rituals. The authors aim to inspire discussion on the quality, content, and desirability of rituals performed by athletes. So far, this topic, especially in the Polish literature on the subject, has been addressed rather incidentally. Meanwhile, sports rituals require a thorough interdisciplinary analysis. It seems that in sports psychology there are currently no clear theories or practical guidelines regarding such practices. It is believed that religious rituals in particular can be of vital importance in the process of psychological counseling, psychotherapy, or even life-coaching (Maranise, 2013). The link between ritual and the religious sphere brings another conclusion and grounds for further research. Which rituals can have a beneficial effect? How can they be verified? At the same time, this highlights the need to take into account the spiritual side when working with a player.

Our findings allow us to conclude that performing rituals is common among footballers. Among the 62 players in the study, only 8 do not perform any rituals. This is in accordance with the research cited in the literature; in a group of Belgian athletes, over three-fourths perform specific ritual behaviors (Brevers et al., 2011). Our subjects most often use both individual and team rituals immediately before the game. Relatively often, individual rituals are performed 12 hours before a match. It is worth noting that as the amount of time before or after a match increases, the frequency of rituals decreases.

Religious rituals (prayers or crossing oneself) are popular among the respondents. There are also behaviors that can be interpreted as an element of psychological preparation which ensures individual control of tension (relaxation, mobilization, focus, and ideas). Unfortunately, these are not common (prevailing) strategies. The rituals used are behavioral and/or cognitive. In many cases, their relationship with superstitions and folk beliefs should be emphasized. The responses to questions about the consequences of performing or failing to perform a ritual, as well as the relationship between the ritual and the probability of a particular outcome in sport, seem to confirm this. It is important that the players associate the fact of performing or failing to performing a ritual with a specific psychological aspect/condition/characteristic of performance (relaxation, comfort, stress, coherence, or motivation).

There are suggestions in the literature that the higher the subjectively perceived value of rituals is, the younger and the more involved the player

is, but also that there is a negative correlation with their assessment of their competences/preparation, and a direct correlation with the strength of the opponent they must confront. However, the mediating variable is the increase of tension. The loss of a sense of control, generating more tension, strengthens the need to do something that will restore the feeling of being in charge of the situation. By performing a specific ritual, a player may have the (irrational) belief that they are doing something that will to some extent increase the likelihood of achieving the intended result. The ritual acts like a placebo, boosting the effectiveness of action, and for some athletes it even becomes a strategy for coping with stress (Van Raalte et al., 1991; Foster et al., 2006; Schippers et al., 2006; Rudski et al., 2007; Brevers et al., 2011; Rutkowska et al., 2016). This justifies an interpretation of the rituals as a specific (alternative) part of physical and mental preparation for sports competition (Brevers et al., 2011).

Relying only on the irrational relationship between ritual and success, magical thinking, or referring only to subjective feelings related to the performance or non-performance of a ritual can, unfortunately, have disastrous consequences (e.g., in situations where a player destroys or loses a favorite piece of clothing), especially at the level of sports training. This is not tantamount to questioning the legitimacy of creating a pre-match routine. The field of modern sports psychology is so broad that simple rituals should not constitute an essential element of mental preparation. Whereas ritualized relaxation training, imagination training, concentration-boosting exercises, or elements of the pre-match routine (such as the preparation of equipment and health behaviors) fit into the standards of such preparation, a number of football players' behaviors described in our analysis are rather a substitute for such procedures (disallowed jewelry, additional clothing items, or specific snacks). This especially applies to those rituals which are not only up to the player to perform. These can rather be a supportive, short-term intervention strategy.

The players' statements on the consequences of performing or failing to perform a ritual can also be read as a projection, which suggests the need for specific psychosocial competences, and an intuitive understanding of one's own needs and/or weaknesses. For a sports psychologist and trainer, a detailed scrutiny of these opinions may be one of many guidelines enabling a better diagnosis of a player's training needs and a more precise adjustment of their mental training program.

It seems advisable that simple rituals, which can, as it were, supplement deficits in psychological preparation, give way over time (for example, during work with a sports psychologist) to proper, mature attitudes and behaviors expected from an athlete, to thoughts and emotions which are conducive to a successful sports career, and to knowledge about oneself,

one's abilities as a player, and as a person. According to this interpretation of the content of rituals, the importance that players attribute to them can become a valuable starting point for further work on mental preparation among athletes.

According to our findings, it can be seen that one in ten female footballers claims that her rituals are inspired or borrowed from other players, including those who practice other disciplines (than football). The literature contains reports which reveal that many players (even from childhood) duplicate and adopt as their own the ritual behavior of sport stars—both contemporary and those from the past (Mazurkiewicz, 2011b). Perhaps, therefore, it is worth conducting a more thorough study of this phenomenon, taking more into account the issue of the origin of rituals.

Another issue requiring in-depth analysis is the comparison of the ritualized practices of men and women, sports students, highly qualified players, and representatives of individual and team sports. In the context of our considerations and the resulting doubts, it seems valuable to conduct research on rituals encompassing a diagnosis of individual determinants of rituals—especially the players' psychosocial resources. Analyses of the conclusions and data of such studies, in particular an analysis of the relationship between rituals and selected psychological variables will allow the formulation of guidelines for both the athletes themselves and for sports coaches and psychologists.

Conclusions

Rituals are an interesting, often intriguing and even magical side of sport competitions. They are basically a permanent element of every ceremony. It is also an important element of the players' functioning. The ritualization of their behavior is visible throughout one's entire sports career, but especially during the pre-match period. Some rituals fit into the standards of mental preparation. Others are a signal for an individual or a team which triggers specific mental states, as they provide a specific sense of security or control over the situation. The results of this study show only a fraction of the story of ritual in women's football. The universality and variety of the rituals performed, the meaning bestowed on them, the consequences that the players associate with them, and finally their origin are only selected aspects that are worth subjecting to in-depth interdisciplinary examination. This study is a voice in the discussion on the place and meaning of rituals in the mental preparation of athletes. It is also an attempt to draw attention to the need to learn about such complex issues which are relevant from the perspective of sports psychology and require the use of theory and practice from other sciences.

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