

Superstitious players love their routines but whether they help or hinder performance is up for debate. CHRIS NORTHEY reports on the strange goings-on of the world's top players.

A RITUALISTIC APPROACH

Fate, destiny, fortune and of course luck. These four foes have been the cause of arguments since time began. They were there in Greek times on top of Mount Olympus as locals apparently dodged lightning bolts by waving branches of laurel leaves and other good luck charms in the air. And they are causing the same debate on tennis courts around the world today.

While many doubt the benefits that rituals, luck or superstition will play in actual performance you have to wonder whether there are times when a player is competing with fortune on his side. Did Lukas Rosol, for example, have a proverbial four leaf clover in his pocket as he stunned world No. 2 Rafael Nadal at Wimbledon?

That said, players stepping onto a stage such as Centre Court at Wimbledon or Rod Laver Arena at the Australian Open clearly needs more than luck alone as they battle highly credentialed opponents before emotional crowds in the game's most high-profile settings.

According to Daniel Dymond, a performance psychologist at the Performance and Sports Psychology Clinic in Melbourne, "superstitious behaviour among sports athletes comes from the mind creating associations and links with perceived successes." In other words with links that are not really there.

Dymond calls this "the evolution of the problem solving mind." And more often than not these patterns of behaviour or routines develop in early childhood, when a certain action brings about a positive result.

That said, if you look closely you will see some strange behaviour and unusual good luck charms on tennis courts that wouldn't look out of place in Ancient Greece or Rome.

Let's consider some of the bizarre and peculiar habits orchestrated by some of today's top tennis stars.

Balls

They're round, yellow, fluffy and are often the centre of a tennis player's suspicious mind. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga is said to examine lots of different balls before choosing one to serve with. Maybe this is similar to choosing a die or a pack of cards when at the casino. One just feels right. France's Richard Gasquet is also well-known for hunting down his "lucky ball" everytime he wins a point with it. On occasions during a match, when winning points have been a little bit on the elusive side, he has been known to search through piles of discarded balls for the one which brought him luck the first time.

This type of behaviour with balls is far from typical to the male players. The diminutive Dominika Cibulkova of

Slovakia and conqueror of world No. 1 Victoria Azarenka at this year's French Open admits she smells new balls before serving. She says she finds the smell comforting and that she has done it for as long as she can remember. Well, she certainly caused a stink when she beat the top seed in the fourth round.

Jacqui Louder, a sports psychologist at the Olympic Park Sports Medical Centre in Melbourne says "these habits and behaviour patterns can help players with confidence and provide comfort in pressure situations such as serving for a match, trying to break an opponent's serve or to keep concentration in a long match." But what if a tennis player's habit or routine with tennis balls adversely affects their opponent?

Switzerland's Patty Schnyder became so frustrated with her Spanish opponent, Conchita Martinez, in the semi-finals of the Family Circle Cup in 2004 that she

purposely tucked the so-called "lucky ball" in her pocket so her adversary could not find it.

When behaviour begins to be obsessive, as in believing there is one ball which has the power to produce winning shot after winning shot, then as both performance sports psychologists Louder and Dymond agree, it is unhealthy and needs to be more clinically assessed, instilling into players that it is their ability and talent that wins a game – not some magical ball from the gods.

Even so, balls can be a ritualistic part of a player's routine. Novak Djokovic is renowned for bouncing the ball for up to 10 times before serving. He once bounced the ball 25 times before letting rip. (Hopefully, after all that, he served an ace!)

Whether tennis players engage in this behaviour as a form of meditative preparation or as a thinly-veiled attempt to distract their opponents, has long been one of the major challenges for sports psychologists.

In fact American sports psychologist Jim Loehr conducted research into what players do to kill time and calm their nerves between points. His findings indicated that a player's focus can easily wane in the non-playing moments of a match and that a ritual to maintain focus can be vital to a player's success. He calls this a player's "countdown to launch."

So bouncing the ball a few times before serving might seem reasonable and understandable behaviour, but when the bounce breaks into double figures, then maybe it's going a little too far in trying to control the outcome of a match.

Hair

Facial and the hair on top of players' heads has been a favourite on-court ritual for many years. Who can forget Bjorn Borg's "Samsonesque" beard growing in the lead up to Wimbledon



Jo-Wilfried Tsonga carefully examines balls before serving with them.

Superstitions of the stars

Novak Djokovic

The Serbian's superstitions extend beyond his ball-bouncing antics; Djokovic also refuses to use the same shower twice in a row and is said to be fastidious about having his dog, Pierre, accompany him at tournaments, which he believes is intrinsic to victory.

Rafael Nadal

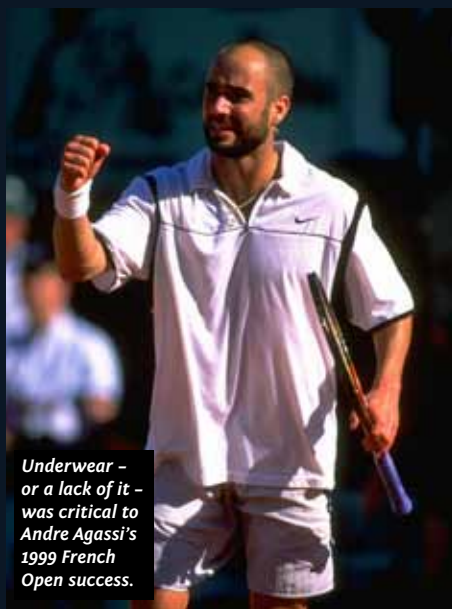
Among the Spaniard's extreme rituals is an insistence that his water bottles (there's always two, with one chilled and one placed at room temperature) be placed with the labels facing a certain way. There's also a particular placement for his socks and rituals about when and how often he'll use a towel during a game.

Andy Murray

Despite more than a million followers, it's rare to find Andy Murray on Twitter these days. The Scot abstained from the social media site after losing the semi-finals of the 2011 US Open and it proved a wise move, with the Scot amassing a 35-6 match record, including 17 straight wins, during his non-Tweeting period.



Rafael Nadal is particular about his water bottles.



Underwear – or a lack of it – was critical to Andre Agassi's 1999 French Open success.



Maria Sharapova won't walk on lines between points.

and beyond, emulated but not perfected by Britain's Andy Murray in last year's grass-court championships. James Blake refuses to shave if he's on a winning streak. Painful to watch and probably even more painful to do was Ivan Lendl's pre-serving routine of rubbing and pulling bristles out of his eyebrows. Ouch! A less agonising habit is when Maria Sharapova tucks imaginary strands of hair behind her ears before serving. Roger Federer is also guilty of tucking hair away, but instead of behind his ears, it is under his headband.

Clothes

Ever since the borrowing of something blue, old or new at weddings, clothes have said to be wrapped in superstition but tennis players have taken this to extremes at times. Andre Agassi famously revealed in his autobiography *Open*, that he didn't wear underpants throughout his 1999 French Open campaign (it clearly worked – the American won); Serena Williams has apparently worn the same pair of socks at tournaments to further her progress as well as having to tie her shoelaces a certain way; Martina Navaratilova wore the same

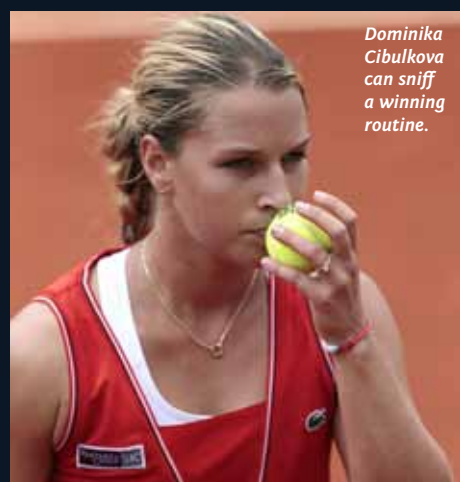
pair of earrings after a win; Rafael Nadal is rumoured to have his socks no more than 15 cm up his shins; and even Australia's Roy Emerson admitted to relying on a pair of lucky shorts.

Food

Eating the same breakfast or in the same restaurant each night are the dietary decisions that players like Blake, Goran Ivanisevic and Kim Clijsters often make to maintain a winning streak at tournaments. At one event, Ivanisevic went one further and even sat at the same table and ordered the same meal from the menu each night. But did these food routines work? Until they got knocked out, they did.

Hands and Feet

Then there are the tappers, such as Nicolas Kiefer, who tap the lines on a court for luck before returning serve; the skippers like John McEnroe and Martina Hingis who never stepped on the tramlines when walking back to serve; and finally the hoppers like Marion Bartoli and her famous bunny hop at the start of every service action. When these players lost was it because they had accidentally



Dominika Cibulkova can sniff a winning routine.

stepped on a line, forgotten to tap or hop? Perhaps we will never know.

Despite all these weird and wacky habits and routines, though, the fact remains that in tennis and in any sport, you win some and you lose some. And although, luck can and sometimes does play a part, talent according to all sports psychologists is what makes the real difference. No matter what clothes you wear or what angle your water bottles are placed at, the luck of tennis is all in the mind. ■

Maria Sharapova

Maria Sharapova's strange shuffling between points comes from a refusal to walk on the lines on court. More bizarre though was an Olympic superstition – after TV personality Chelsea Handler was a guest in her player box during her first round victory, Sharapova insisted she attend every match afterwards!

Serena Williams

Despite her natural aggression, Serena Williams believes that victory often comes down to painstaking routines, including the use of shower sandals, tying her shoelaces a certain way and bouncing the ball five times before her first serve and twice before her second.

The biggest superstition of all ...

Is refusing to be superstitious. "I am not superstitious!" Novak Djokovic once snapped. "I have routines, I call them routines." Sam Stosur took a stand after her routines became extreme. "Everything had to be the same ... it was enough to drive you around the bend, so I stopped and now I don't have any superstitions."