

## “SUPERSTITION”

*In this passage, the writer explores how superstition can both help and hinder us.*

Tennis players are a funny bunch. Have you noticed how they always ask for three balls instead of two; how they bounce the ball the same number of times before serving, as if any deviation from their routine might bring the world collapsing on their heads?

But the superstitions and rituals so beloved by the world's top players are not confined **5** to the court. They take even more bizarre twists when the poor dears get home after their matches. Goran Ivanisevic got it into his head that if he won a match he had to repeat everything he did the previous day, such as eating the same food at the same restaurant, talking to the same people and watching the same TV programmes. One year this meant that he had to watch Teletubbies every morning during his Wimbledon **10** campaign. “Sometimes it got very boring,” he said.

Could it be that these multifarious superstitions tell us something of deeper importance not only about humanity but about other species on the planet?

The answer, I think, is to be found in the world of pigeons. Yes, really. These feathered fellows, you see, are the tennis players of the bird world. Don't take my word for it: **15** that was the opinion of B. F. Skinner, the man widely regarded as the father of modern psychology.

Skinner's view was based on a groundbreaking experiment that he carried out in 1947 in which he placed some hungry pigeons in a cage attached to an automatic mechanism that delivered food “at regular intervals with no reference whatsoever to the bird's **20** behaviour”. He discovered that the pigeons associated the delivery of the food with whatever chance actions they happened to be performing at the moment it was first delivered. So what did the pigeons do? They kept performing the same actions, even though they had no effect whatsoever on the release of food.

I know, I know. This is nothing compared with the weird behaviour that goes on **25** at Wimbledon, but do you see the connection? The pigeons were acting as if they could influence the mechanism delivering the Trill in just the same way that Ivanisevic thought that he could influence the outcome of his next match by watching Teletubbies. To put it a tad formally, they both witnessed a random connection between a particular kind of behaviour and a desired outcome, and then (wrongly) inferred that one caused **30** the other.

But did Ivanisevic really believe that his superstitions were effective or was he just having us on? Well, let's hear from the man himself – this is what he said when asked if he had ever abandoned a ritual when it stopped working: “I didn't. They do work. I won Wimbledon.” So, he really did believe. And what of the pigeons? They were, **35** unfortunately, unavailable for interview.

Superstitious behaviour emerged quite early in evolutionary history. What is certain is that it is widespread, particularly within homo sapiens. More than half of Americans admitted to being superstitious in a recent poll, and it is not just silly and gullible types either. At Harvard University, students frequently rub the foot of the statue of John **40** Harvard for good luck.

Even cricketers, perhaps the brightest and most sensible sportsmen of all (well, that's what they tell us), are not immune to superstition. Jack Russell, the former England wicketkeeper, was among the most notorious, refusing to change his hat or wicketkeeping pads throughout his career, even though they became threadbare and smelly, something **45** that really got up the noses of his team-mates.

But this raises another, deeper question: why do so many of us maintain rituals of various kinds when they have no real connection with the desired outcome? Or, to put it another way, why is superstitious behaviour so widespread, not just within our species but beyond, when it seems to confer no tangible benefits? It's here that things get really **50** interesting (and just a little complex). And, as with most interesting things, the answer is to be found in deep evolutionary history.

Imagine a caveman going to pick some berries from some bushes near his rocky abode. He hears some rustling in the bushes and wrongly infers that there is a lion lurking in there and scarpers. He even gets a little superstitious about those bushes and gives them **55** a wide berth in future. Is this superstition a problem to our caveman? Well, not if there are plenty of other berry-bearing bushes from which to get his five-a-day.

But suppose that there really is a lion living in those bushes. The caveman's behaviour now looks not only sensible but life-saving. So, a tendency to perceive connections that do not actually exist can confer huge evolutionary benefits, providing a cocoon of safety **60** in a turbulent and dangerous world. The only proviso (according to some devilishly complicated mathematics known as game theory) is this: your superstitions must not impose too much of a burden on those occasions when they are without foundation.

And this is almost precisely what superstitions look like in the modern world. Some believe in horoscopes, but few allow them to dictate their behaviour; some like to wear **65** the same lucky shoes to every job interview, but it is not as if wearing a different pair would improve their chances of success; some like to bounce the ball precisely seven times before serving at tennis, but although they are wrong to suppose that this ball-bouncing is implicated in their success, it does not harm their prospects (even if it irritates those of us watching).

**70** It is only when a superstition begins to compromise our deeper goals and aspirations that we have moved along the spectrum of irrationality far enough to risk a diagnosis of obsessive compulsive disorder. Take Kolo Touré, the former Arsenal defender, who insists on being the last player to leave the dressing room after the half-time break. No real problem, you might think, except that when William Gallas, his team-mate, was **75** injured and needed treatment at half-time during a match, Touré stayed in the dressing room until Gallas had been treated, forcing Arsenal to start the second half with only nine players.

When a superstition that is supposed to help you actually hinders you, it is probably time to kick the ritual into touch. With a rabbit's foot, obviously.

**Matthew Syed, in *The Times***

**QUESTIONS**

**1. Look at lines 1–3.**

Explain **in your own words** what is meant by tennis players being a “funny bunch”. **1**

**2. Look at lines 4-6.**

With reference to the writer’s word choice, show fully how he reveals his attitude to “top players”. **2**

**3.** Explain any way in which the sentence in lines 11 and 12 helps to provide a link between ideas at this point in the passage. **2**

**4. Look at line 15.**

Explain **in your own words** why the writer can feel confident about using B. F. Skinner to support his claims about pigeons. **1**

**5. Look at line 17.**

Explain how effective you find the writer’s use of the image “groundbreaking” to refer to Skinner’s experiment. **2**

**6. Look at lines 24–30.**

(a) Explain fully and **in your own words** what “the connection” was. **3**

(b) Identify the writer’s tone. **1**

(c) Explain with reference to his use of language how successful you think he has been in achieving this tone. **4**

**7. Look at line 59.**

Explain in your own words what the “huge evolutionary benefits” of superstitions are. **2**

**8. Look at lines 63–71**, where the writer examines the nature of superstition nowadays.

(a) Explain in your own words the points the writer makes. **2**

(b) Show fully how examples of the writer’s use of such features of language as sentence structure or imagery helps to convey his ideas effectively. **4**

**9. Look at the passage as a whole.**

What is the writer’s attitude towards superstitions? Show fully how the writer conveys this attitude throughout the article. **2**

**10. Look at lines 78-79.**

How effective do you find any aspect of the final paragraph as a conclusion to the passage? Your answer might deal with such features such as word choice or tone. **4**

**(30)**