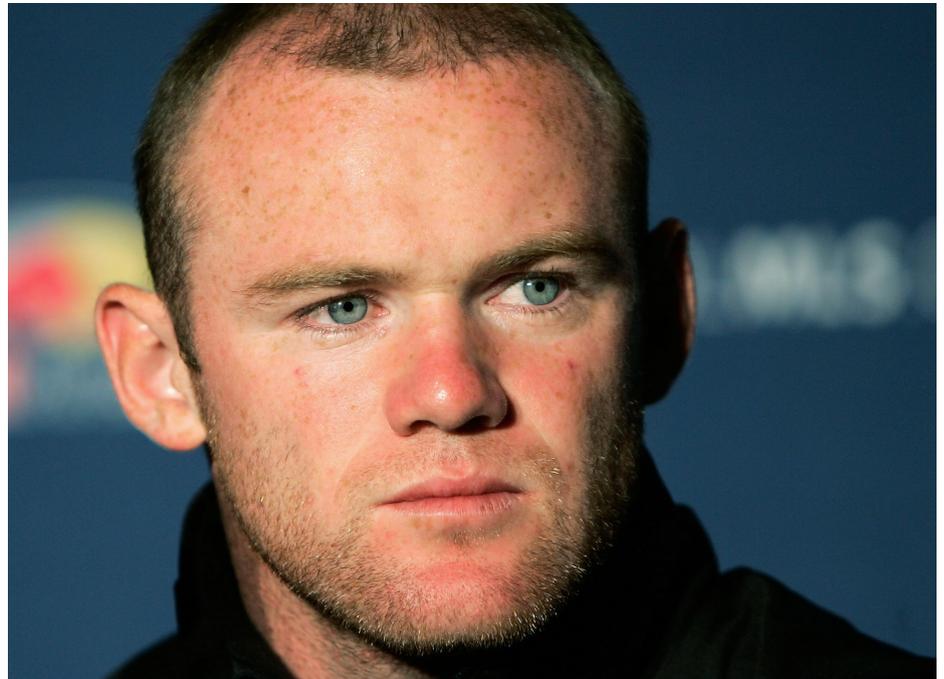


'Magical thinking' piles pressure on England hero

As England prepare to take on Ukraine in tonight's crucial match, fans put their faith in talismanic striker Wayne Rooney. Is this hero worship a symptom of so-called 'magical thinking?'



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Wayne Rooney furrows his brow under the weight of national expectation © Getty Images

Even as Wayne Rooney drifted off to sleep last night, he was furiously concentrating on his last-minute preparation for today's crunch match with Ukraine.

Before retiring to his hotel room, Rooney had gone to the England kitman to ask which colours both teams would be playing in. Armed with this knowledge, he spent the evening 'visualising' himself in a white England kit, scoring spectacular goals against Ukraine.

It is a ritual that England's star striker has practised before every big game since he was a teenager. And tonight's game is one of his biggest yet: to secure qualification from their Euro 2012 group, England need at least a draw. With Rooney returning from a two-match ban for violent conduct, a heavy weight of expectation bears down upon him.

Just as Rooney keeps faith in his own imagination, fans and the media treat talismanic players like him almost as though they have supernatural pow-

ers. One paper called Rooney a 'saviour,' while Alan Shearer – a former tabloid hero himself – predicted that Rooney could 'spark the Lions' charge.'

What do Rooney's fantasies and his fans' hero-worship have in common? Each is a kind of 'magical thinking': a belief that a treasured object or ritual has unique, mystical influences on important events.

Footballers are notoriously prone to magical thinking. Paul Gascoigne used to switch the dressing room light on and off ten times before every match; John Terry wore the same 'special' shin pads for a decade. Cristiano Ronaldo has a lucky haircut before every match, while Gary Lineker used to get one only after matches in which he failed to score.

Even those who are most devoted to these superstitions usually admit that they are irrational. Yet according to a new book* by psychologist Matthew Hutson, magical thinking is wired into our brains.

However zealously we preach reason, he points out, everybody has their

superstitions. Renowned atheist Richard Dawkins, for instance, treats the bird specimens collected by his Victorian hero Charles Darwin like holy relics.

THE POWER OF FAITH

Sticklers for logic treat magical thinking with contempt. If Rooney wants good results, they say, he ought to look at the facts: he should analyse his statistics and those of his opponents, work out where he can improve and work on it. There is no need for magic: just simple, rational intelligence.

But as Matthew Hutson points out, there are benefits to being irrational. Humans need to feel like there is more to their life than facts and statistics; athletes above all. Success is about confidence and faith as much as logic, he says. Denying this part of our psychology will never help anyone.

* *Seven Laws of Magical Thinking*, by Matthew Hutson, published by the Hudson Street Press, April 2012

Q & A

Q Does this mean I should stop trying to be reasonable?

A Well, not entirely – but perhaps we should be a little less quick to dismiss superstitious habits: they may be serving an important purpose.

Q And what would that be?

A Studies show that giving someone a 'lucky charm' (with no real powers at all) can improve their performance in mental challenges by 35%. Why? Magical thinking makes us feel we are in control of events, making us more confident and relaxed. Being too realistic might even harm our well being.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'All of us create our own miracles.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► 'Magical thinking' piles pressure on England hero

WORD WATCH

Talismanic – A talisman was originally an Ancient Greek amulet or other object imbued by magic with special powers. Nowadays, anything treated as though it has magical or extraordinary properties can be described as 'talismanic.'

Lions – English sports teams are often nicknamed 'Lions' because of the three lions on their badge. The symbol was first used as long

ago as 1198, by Richard I, and has been associated with the English royal family ever since.

Richard Dawkins – Biologist Richard Dawkins is the probably most famous of the 'new atheists,' a controversial group of thinkers who argue that believing in God is irrational and outdated.

Charles Darwin – Charles Darwin, the father of the theory of evolution, struggled with his faith throughout his life. His family were devout, but his scientific

research led him to doubt the authority of God. Some say that he converted back to Christianity on his deathbed – though others claim that this is a fabrication.

Holy relics – Relics, literally 'remains,' are objects that are believed to have come from a divine source. Some Catholics, for instance, go on long journeys to visit the remains of saints or of the cross to which Jesus is nailed. These objects' origins are supposed to make them extremely holy.

YOU DECIDE

1. If you were a professional sportsman, would you have a pre-match ritual? What might it be, and why?

2. Is it okay to lie to yourself if it makes you happier and more confident?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design a lucky charm that would make you feel calm in a high-pressure situation. What is it inspired by, and what features give it particular meaning for you?

2. Write an article about Wayne Rooney in the style of a tabloid newspaper, praising him as the saviour of the English football team.

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 **NOTES**

