

**Running Head: Trash Talking**

**Trash Talking and Good Times on the Softball Field**

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Abstract

Trash talking can be found in virtually all American sport environments. It is viewed by many as a tool to achieve athletic success. Trash talking *can* be a harmless form of verbal jousting. However, there comes a point at which trash talking serves as motivation for violence inside of the sport setting and outside of it as well. In this paper, the trash talking associated with a softball injury resulting in a player losing three teeth is recounted. The incident demonstrates how trash talk can cause emotions to run high and make the sport environment contentious. Trash talk combined with the injury created a hostile environment which could have fostered further violence. Those involved in sport are asked to consider the harmful effect trash talking may have upon individuals and society. Coaches must avoid the use of trash talk as a means of motivating their athletes. They must convey to athletes that degrading, belittling and demeaning comments do not foster tolerance and peace, but instead promote intolerance, inequality, strife and ultimately violence.

Keywords:

Trash Talk, Injury, Violence, Performance

### Trash Talking and Good Times on the Softball Field

In the sports arena trash talk is utilized in an effort to gain any and every competitive edge through verbal motivation and intimidation (Smith, 2001, ¶11). Some athletes utilize trash talk in an effort to get an opponent's mind off of the game (Eveslage and Delaney, 1998). Others trash talk in order to motivate or "pump themselves up" (Garber, 2006). Because of its reputed positive impact upon performance and ultimately success, "Trash talk and callous disregard for feelings is applauded and endorsed" (Massie, 2006, ¶1).

Trash talk includes insults and taunts concerning a player's skills. It also includes personal attacks (Dixon, 2007). In a recent *Utah Statesman* column entitled "Trash Talking 101," David Baker (2007) provided trash talking guidance to those who might be uninitiated to its nuances.

- Use sarcasm such as, "I did not mean to burn you so bad. Are you OK?" (¶ 4)
- Apologize to your opponent for looking so good. An example: "I'll send a hand-written apology for making you look so bad in front of your mother." (¶ 6)
- Use insulting "your momma" jokes such as, "Your momma's so dumb she makes Paris Hilton look like Stephen Hawking." (¶ 7)
- Utilize profanity as it really has a huge positive effect upon your trash talking.
- Pick distinctive physical characteristics of an individual and make fun of them.

One can ridicule, for example, things such as ugly or obtuse facial features.<sup>1</sup>

Eveslage, S. and Delaney, K. (1998) demonstrated that trash talk is a form of insult-talk and argued that it has long been a part of the traditionally masculine sport culture. In

their study, trash talking on the court was viewed as an extension of the verbal activities their subjects engaged in off of the court. Verbal put downs and taunts on and off the court were often utilized to establish an individual's place in the social group's hierarchy, his masculinity and honor.

Some believe expressed concern over trash talk, taunting and celebratory activity has racist motivations. Simons (2003) argued that sanctions imposed as a response to trash talking and other behaviors commonly associated with African American culture “represent white male mainstream society's response to the threat to white masculinity represented by black athletic superiority and by African-American athletes' assertion of the right to define the meaning of their own behavior” (p. 5).

Certainly African Americans are not the only ethnic or racial group to employ trash talking as a tool. Consider Larry Bird. The hall of fame member was not only one of the best players of all time but he was also renowned for his trash talking (Phillip, 1995). Eastern Europeans engage in athletic-related trash talk (Eveslage & Delaney). Australian cricket teams utilized trash talk and referred to it as 'sledging' (Dixon, 2007). Trash talking seems to have no racial or cultural bounds. Concern over trash talk is not limited to the confines of America's borders nor is it focused upon any single racial or ethnic group.

Trash talking is contrary to sporting behavior, or sportsmanship, the conception of which was established and perpetuated by white males of wealth and privilege (Guttman, 1978). Trash talking behavior is proscribed in codified rules of sport because it is deemed to be unsportsmanlike. Never-the-less, trash talk can be heard on courts and

fields throughout the United States. The common use of trash talk has been identified as a sign of civilization's decline (Bruning, 1994).

Eveslage and Delaney (1998) observed that insult talk taking place between their subjects had rules that each individual understood and adhered to. Team mates knew when to stop insults and what topics were too hot to touch. On the court, subjects were observed to say anything they could to get their opponents' mind off of the game in their trash talking encounters. No specific boundaries were noted.

It is argued here that on and off the field or court in which competition occurs, many trash talkers cannot know what "buttons" to avoid pushing. They cannot know when a subject is too hot to touch. Individuals cannot always know when trash talk becomes too personal and too painful.

There may be a line trash talkers should not cross during their verbal jousting but the line is not clearly demarcated; it is relative. For example, three-time Pro Bowl football player, Bryan Cox stated, "Yeah, I'd cross the line. I mean, what line? If I can say something to get you to the point where you're about to fight or where you do fight so be it" (Smith, 2001, ¶ 37). When the undefined line is crossed, the potential for violence is increased. At times, violence erupts.

Authors have argued that a relationship between trash talk and violence cannot be demonstrated. Simons (2003) pointed out that in the athletic setting, "There is no evidence that trash talking is responsible for *most* fights" (p.13). Kochman (1981) observed that African American social conventions "hold that angry verbal disputes, even those involving insults and threats, can be maintained... at the verbal level without violence *necessarily* resulting" (p.48). Neither Simons nor Kochman could state trash

talking does not result in physical violence. The words *most* and *necessarily* have been intentionally italicized in order to highlight the fact that no one can state with certainty that a relationship between trash talk and violence does not exist.

Vince Dooley, former University of Georgia football coach and athletic director, professed (Phillip, 1995):

I think there should be a new definition for what is trash talk. I think there are a number of definitions for what it is, and there is some confusion. I can understand the silly little mind games that players use to psyche out each other. But what is taking place today has no business in sports. The language is nasty, crude and vulgar. (¶ 20)

There is, you see, a darker side to trash talking. Comments associated with trash talking can be perceived as threatening, degrading and belittling. Language used in trash talk can be harsh and has the potential to result in harmed feelings, wounded pride and the desire for retaliatory physical violence. It can serve to create a rift or divide between individuals; it is divisive. When obscenities are included, trash talk is vulgar and debased. An individual's honor may be assaulted through trash talk. *There comes a point at which even those who engage in trash talking with regularity find such harsh and divisive language no longer funny.* It then serves as grounds for violence.

Assistant NBA Commissioner Rod Thorn had the following to say about the evolution of trash talking over five decades:

When I played in the 1960s, it used to be a sort of a light-hearted thing among two players. Fans around the court were not even aware of it, but trash-talking or teasing has become much more personal... It has become put-downs and attempts

to embarrass another athlete... It was getting to a point where trash-talking was causing fights because of the embarrassment players felt. People were reacting physically rather than verbally. (Phillip, 1995, ¶ 14 – 15)

Aicinena (2007) witnessed fist fights and other violent acts in slow pitch softball and youth soccer contests that he believed were a consequence of trash talking. Mythical lines were crossed. Disparaging words were said about the race of opposing players. Cursing and taunting were heard. Trash talk was rampant on the fields, in the dugouts and on the sidelines. Harsh and divisive language escalated in its frequency and comments became ever-more personal and degrading. Intentional acts of violence erupted.

A trash talking encounter led Zinedine Zidane to head butt Marco Materazzi during the 2006 Soccer World Cup Final (Dixon, 2007). On the world's biggest sporting stage, trash talk led who was arguably the world's greatest player to engage in a retaliatory act of violence. Athletic events are a contest of skill and are characterized by emotions often escalated by the will to win. Can the use of trash talking in competitive events be likened to throwing gasoline upon a fire?

Below, the situation surrounding an injury taking place during a college softball game is recounted. Quotes were gleaned from written statements obtained from individuals present at the game in which the injury took place.<sup>2,3</sup> Trash talking made what might have been viewed as an unfortunate accident seem to have been an intentional act of violence. Additional trash talk issued after the injury made players and spectators angry and the potential for additional violence was increased.

## **The Injury**

Kathy was hit in the face by a thrown softball between the top and bottom of the first inning in the second game of a double-header. It was the second double header involving the same teams over a two day period.

Kathy did not see who threw the ball and had no opportunity to avoid the contact. She was in a position of vulnerability. Five witnesses including one of the umpires saw the second baseman of the opposing team throw the ball striking Kathy.

Three teeth were knocked from Kathy's mouth and onto the infield dirt. The teeth were recovered and oral surgery was performed to place them back into the sockets which were also fractured. Six other teeth were loosened and were wired together in hope of saving them. There was soft tissue damage in the form of lacerations to her lips requiring stitches.

## **Players Have Been Previously Hit by Errant Throws**

It is common for softball teams to huddle near their dugout to talk as opponents engage in between-inning fielding and throwing activity. It is not unusual to see players hit by thrown balls between innings. It happens infrequently, but often enough for a reasonable person to accept that could happen on occasion. When talking to his team between innings, Kathy's coach makes a point to do so closer to home plate than most coaches in an effort to prevent his players from being struck with errant throws.

## **Where was Kathy When She Was Hit?**

*Figure 1* indicates where Kathy was standing when injured. A similar diagram was placed upon forms used to obtain statements from individuals present at the time of the



injury. Fifteen individuals present agreed that the diagram correctly indicated the place in which Kathy was standing when the injury occurred. The head coach, who was standing next to Kathy when she was injured, stated, “The diagram that was drawn is pretty accurate as to Kathy’s location when hit.”

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**Insert Figure 1 about here**

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### **Trash Talk Before the Injury**

In advance of the injury to Kathy, comments of a threatening, degrading, and unsporting nature were made. The opponents yelled from the dug out, “Hit it to 3<sup>rd</sup>, she’s no good.” At other times, after making plays in the field, they yelled, “Its okay she’ll get hers.” In the first inning of game two Kathy tagged the opposing second baseman on a close play at third. Kathy recalled, “She yelled... that I pushed her [off of the bag and] again her team said, ‘She’ll get hers.’” Throughout the games played between the two teams in Friday’s double header and the double header played on the day of her injury, Kathy received numerous taunts and put-downs. She was especially bothered by them on the day she was injured. It should be noted that the opposing team’s coaches and players in a written statement accused Kathy’s team of engaging in trash talk throughout the weekend’s contests as well.

Kathy shared the trash talk directed toward her with spectators and team mates between game one and game two, in advance of the injury. The visiting players’ comment, “She’ll get hers,” could have simply been considered trash talking of an intimidating nature had not an injury occurred. However, once an injury occurred, those

who had been informed of trash talk directed toward Kathy immediately assumed the injury was intentionally caused.

Those who had not been aware of the trash talking stated that the injury was an accident, including all three umpires working the game. After all, accidents happen. Further, those not on the field or within ear-shot of players are often unable to hear them and are frequently unaware that any verbal activity is going on. Without evidence to the contrary, no one would have wanted to believe that such a severe injury could have been caused intentionally.

### **Harsh and Divisive Comments Made After the Injury**

Immediately after the injury to Kathy, her mother vociferously accused the second baseman of having caused the injury intentionally. She demanded that the umpires remove her from the game. She moreover accused the second baseman of assault and exhorted that she should be arrested.

No arrest was made as there was no *clear* evidence to indicate that the injury was intentionally caused.<sup>4</sup> It was not as though a player attacked another with a bat, which is an action that could unequivocally have been deemed to be intentional. Errant throws happen.

Comments and non-verbal behaviors made after the injury created an even more volatile environment. Eight witnesses stated that they saw the opposing team's second baseman and shortstop laugh immediately after the injury took place. The second baseman, who threw the ball causing the injury, spewed more trash talk, "Couldn't we just move her out of the way to keep playing? She sucks anyway."

The opposing team's head coach hollered, "Get her off the field so we can finish this game." The callousness and lack of concern conveyed through the coach's comments made the home team's players, coaches and spectators angrier.

Some of the home team's fans who were aware of the trash talking verbally expressed their displeasure over the apparent intentional act of violence. The opposing team's head coach yelled at the crowd in response to their verbal assaults, "Get over it!" As Kathy passed the visitor's dugout on the way to the oral surgeon's office, the players in the dugout laughed at her.

No apology was made by players or coaches of the opposing team. A little over a week after the incident, their Athletic Director, who was informed of the incident, emailed an apology on behalf of his University. The apology was for the lack of concern demonstrated by the coaches and players.

### **Was Kathy Intentionally Hit?**

When asked if he believed Kathy's injury was intentionally caused, her coach shared his belief:

I have been asked if I thought the incident was deliberate and I do not know. I don't like to think that a player would intentionally injure an opposing player, but the play was not indicative of the player's performance all weekend. The second baseman did not make wild throws, but instead played as a college level infielder normally plays."

In a similar vein, Jerry Trump reported:

Keep in mind the 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman made perfect catches and throws throughout both games. [The throw striking Kathy] was nowhere near the 1<sup>st</sup> baseman. I saw no deed or actions from either team before hand that would lead me to believe it was intentional. However, seeing as how horrible a throw it supposedly was by a good player at this level, makes you wonder.

### **Additional Violence Could Have Occurred in Response to Trash Talk**

Assume that no threats were made and that no trash talking took place before the injury. Assume that the second baseman did not state after the injury, “She sucks anyway.” In other words, pretend that no harsh and divisive words or actions were uttered or made. It would have been more likely to accept that the injury may have been simply an accident.

Unfortunately trash talking contributed to the perception by many that the injury was intentionally caused. It resulted in the fans developing a mob mentality. Trash talking created an unwholesome environment that could quite easily have degenerated further through additional violence. The security officer on duty at the time of the injury stated in his report to the Chief of Police that he was required to take action in order to prevent angry fans from going onto the field.

Was there a possibility that additional violence could have occurred? Here is how the opponent’s head coach felt immediately after the injury:

At this point, the [other team’s] players were yelling obscenities to my players, pointing fingers and were behaving in a threatening manner... I did not think it was an appropriate time for me to make an apology when they were very angry.

My own assistant felt they were behaving in a threatening manner and urged me not to approach [their huddle] in fear for my own safety...

The opponent's first baseman shared the feelings she had immediately after the injury,

After all of this I didn't really know what was going to happen and with the other team and their fans yelling at us and walking toward us like they were going to start a fight. I got scared to be on the field much less finish the game.

### **Can Coaches Control Trash Talking?**

Emotions often run high in the heat of competition. If coaches allow players to engage in the use of harsh and divisive language (trash talk) before, during and/or after competition, emotions can be expected to become inflamed from time to time. In such cases, it is argued here that physical assaults become more likely through reactive violence.

It is unfortunate that many coaches use trash talk in an effort to motivate players (Eveslage and Delaney, 1998; Simons, 2003). For example, one of my high school coaches said to a player after he shied away from a hard hit ground ball, "What's wrong with you boy? Do you squat to pee?" Other coaches publicly questioned team mates' masculinity and commitment when they failed to perform as expected. Coaches who use trash talk to motivate their players cannot expect athletes to look at the use of trash talk as something negative.

Unfortunately, many coaches accept that trash talking will simply continue to be a part of sports. For example, the opposing team's head coach lamented, "If I could control my players' moves then I would and we would have no errors, more base hits and more wins, but ultimately I and every coach has only so much control."

Coaches are notorious for trying to control the behavior of their athletes in order to maximize the potential for victory. They restrict social activities, prohibit the use of alcohol and drugs, demand punctuality and regular attendance at practice, tell athletes how to dress on trips and even tell athletes when to go to bed. How is it possible that what is said on the courts and fields cannot be controlled? If coaches view trash talk as an effective tool for athletic success, many would feel as though they would be handicapping their team by prohibiting its use.

### **Trash Talk and a Peaceful Society**

Though a trash talker may make comments to get an opponent's mind off of performance, to pump him or herself up, or simply for amusement, one cannot control how another person will respond. The use of trash talk can ultimately lead to discord, conflict and violence on the field. It also leads to violence off of the field. For example, Levi Jones was attacked after a trash talking encounter with NFL foe, Joey Porter, outside a Las Vegas Casino (Trash Talking Leads to Scrap, 2007).

There was a time in history in which duels to the death occurred when an individual's honor was assaulted (Peterson, 2007). Honor is often attacked during sport-related trash talking exchanges (Eveslage and Delaney, 1998). In current times, trash talkers may place their lives in danger.

Vanderbilt football player Kwane Doster was shot to death following a trash-talking encounter taking place between his friends and another group of individuals over whose show car was the best. Tampa Police Department spokesman, Joe Durkin observed, "There was no indication they knew each other," Durkin said. "It's something so trivial, that trash talk goes on all the time. Then someone pulls out a gun — inconceivable"

(Vandy Player Killed, ¶ 8). Is being killed after a trash talking encounter really inconceivable?

Below is an eye witness' recounting of how trash talk served as a killer's motivation for murder (Hanner, Wilson & O' Donnel, 2002):

He said he had to do what he had to do, [because] the boy kept disrespecting him. Everything he was saying out of his mouth was disrespectful. I told him he could have whipped the boy's ass or something ... (¶ 163)

Be advised: "whipping the ass" of someone who disrespected another with trash talk may not be enough to settle the score. Those who cross the nondescript line demarcating what trash talk is acceptable may not walk back whether the disrespectful comments are made on the field, court or the streets.

Simons (2003) argued that concern expressed over trash talk and other forms of "disrespectful" behavior such as taunting and celebratory activities was hypocritical because sportsmanship and specifically the qualities of humility and respect are not valued in other areas of American society such as business, politics, the media or entertainment. "The US is a celebrity society where greed and the end justifying the means rule in the same arena that sports exist" (p. 9).

The existence of current social conventions such as disrespect and arrogance reflected in trash talk do not make them ideals to strive for. Social conventions are created and sustained by individuals over time. Individuals choose to perpetuate the current state of affairs or act to change them by means of their personal influence and

span of control. Individuals may independently act to make the world a more peaceful place or one in which conflict shall increase and intensify.

Trash talk does not make the world a more peaceful or a safer place. When used as a tool for personal success or as a means of motivating others, it fosters divisiveness and insensitivity. It can result in frustration and anger. It is mean-spirited. It motivates people, at times, to engage in reactive violence. Rather than being a positive force in sport, trash talk is a negative aspect of it. In a word, trash talking is immoral (Dixon, 2007).

Is calling the use of trash talking “immoral” demonstrating insensitivity to the values and norms of some groups? Is such a judgment immoral in and of itself? Simon (2003) argued:

...all those who maintain that we should avoid making moral judgments about the behavior of others, particularly about the morality of other cultures, out of concern and respect for the differences among peoples, are themselves making a moral judgment. Rather than avoiding ethical judgment, they are committing one. (p. 20)

Whether or not a coach, parent or athlete believes that codified standards of sporting behavior should be valued and adhered to in sport is not the question posed in this paper. The question is, as trash talk can lead to violent behavior, should it be prohibited in the sport setting on moral grounds?

It is up to those in positions of influence such as educators, coaches and parents to provide more nurturing alternatives to trash talk within the structure of organized sports before participants can appreciate what all of the fuss over trash talking is about (Eveslage and Delaney, 1998). Coaches must avoid the use of trash talk as a means of



motivating their athletes. They must point out how degrading and demeaning comments, whether made inside or outside of the sport context, foster intolerance, inequality and strife. Words can hurt and inflame. They can dishonor others. They can lead to violence.

Some will, of course, disagree. For example, Jabari Mahiri sees nothing wrong with trash talking. He argued, "If writers stop making an issue, it will manage itself" (Phillip, 1995, ¶ 37). Perhaps Kathy's teeth could have been saved without the assistance of a surgeon.

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### **Author Notes**

1. In certain venues I have had volleyball players incensed by trash talking comments that attacked their weight and facial features. General banter is not often distracting. Personal attacks were quite offensive and hurtful. For example, they made fun of one player who was overweight. She was called a hippo, horse and cow throughout the match. The opposing crowd made animal noises as she went to serve. It was interesting to see how her teammates were also incensed over the comments. The comments did distract my players from their performance. The verbal assaults also wounded the young woman.

2. I was present when the injury took place and was unaware of the comments that were made before the injury. I was on the field right after the injury and heard many of the comments recounted by the witnesses.

3. The use of the quotes in this article was approved by the University's Human Subjects Review Board. The quotes were collected to be used in a report of the incident to the Schools' athletic conference. The information included in the report was available through the Public Records Act. Names were changed in order to protect the anonymity of the individuals involved in the event.

4. There was actually a police investigation of the incident. One officer stated that he had to stop a near riot. The County Attorney's office asked for a report for review. Since throws do get away from players, it would be very difficult to prove criminal intent. There would always be a reasonable doubt that the injury was caused intentionally. A civil case might have had reasonable chance of success as the jury would simply have to believe that the preponderance of the evidence demonstrated that the injury had been intentionally caused.

Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Position of Kathy when she was hit.



