



STICKS AND STONES

TAKING TRASH TALK TOO FAR

BY: ANDREW SCHOFF

Trash talk, also known as chirping, exists in all levels of sport. Whether it's in the stands from fans or on the field among players, trash talk has become an integral part of competitive sport. Trash talkers say it is all part of the game, getting into the opponent's head to gain a mental edge, while others believe it to be a problem.

Trash talking often starts before game time.

"In volleyball last year, even before a game happened a guy went up to a player and trash talked him, the officials heard it and carded the player before the game even started," says Jim Bialek, executive chair of the Ontario Colleges Athletic Association (OCAA) policies and procedures committee.

A player of the 2012 Humber College women's basketball team says she once heard an athlete say to another player, "you're shit. I don't even know how you made the team, you can't even dribble."

Even the athletes' family members are not spared from the verbal attacks.

"I can't remember the quote itself but I just remember him saying something about my mom,"

says a player of the 2012 George Brown men's soccer team.

The purpose of trash talking in sports is to taunt an opposing player into losing his or her focus. A strategic trash talker can prove to be an effective member of any team. For example, in the hockey world, a player with a big mouth can lure an opposing player into taking a penalty or starting a fight, and could remove him from the game.

In a 2007 NHL incident, infamous agitator Sean Avery was fined \$2,500 for a pre-game tilt with Toronto Maple Leafs tough guy Darcy Tucker. Avery and Tucker came to blows over an alleged remark made by Avery during warm-up towards Leafs forward Jason Blake, regarding his recent cancer diagnosis.

"Players have refined their talents on the court to find specific ways to get under a player's skin, to take them out of the game," says Dr. Jonathan F.

Katz, a clinical sport psychologist who has worked with the New York Rangers organization.

"Anything that distracts you from your performance in the field of play reduces your likelihood of being able to maximize your performance," says Katz.

Farhan Baig, a member of the Toronto Association of Basketball Officials who refs OCAA games, thinks that trash talking is dangerous to player safety.

"Some people might say that that's just the nature of the game where there is competitiveness, but I think it's not part of

the game," says Baig.

"It's going to be compromising player safety and so that is something that we take very seriously," he says. "I don't think that Player A punches Player B out of the blue, I think something happened in

HOMOPHOBIC TRASH TALK IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED. PHOTO BY DONA BOULOS
PHOTO ILLUSTRATION (RIGHT) BY SARAH LENNOX.

"LIKE ANY ATHLETE IN COLLEGE SPORTS I WAS EXPOSED TO THE PRETTY STANDARD USE OF WHAT WE CALL 'CASUAL HOMOPHOBIA', THE USE OF WORDS LIKE 'FAG' AND 'HOMO',"
GOLDSTEIN

the first quarter, then the second quarter, things were missed, then it compounds and then you get a punch. We want to put an end to it, we want them to be professional on the court, off the court, part of that is just playing the game,” explains Baig.

Classic chirps like “I got trophies bigger than you” or “I’ve seen better hands on a digital clock” are one thing. But when the trash talking turns into racist or homophobic hate speech it becomes a serious issue.

“I think that’s even worse than normal trash-talking. That’s a personal attack and goes against the whole constitution,” says Baig.

It is a growing and often overlooked issue in sports culture, which only now is gaining attention thanks to big-name sports people like Toronto Maple Leafs GM Brian Burke, who are beginning to give the issue a voice.

In the OCAA, the way trash talk is handled or punished is completely up to the discretion of the referee officiating the games, says Bialek.

“The officials are the ones that will deal directly with any trash talking. It’s for them to deal with. It doesn’t go into anybody else’s hands but them,” he says.

Referees have a number of ways to discipline athletes who use abusive language, and can eject a player from a game as a last resort.

“They can assign any penalty, in volleyball, if they trash talk across the net, like anything it will probably be a warning then they will take a point away, loss of ball; basketball, it could be a technical; soccer, it could be a yellow card so within the confines of a game the officials are the ones to deal with that,” Bialek explains.

Still, there is nothing in the OCAA rulebooks that directly refers to trash talking. The 2012-2013 OCAA Code of Ethics states, “THAT members avoid any intimidation or harassment of the opponent” and “THAT members avoid any blatant humiliation of the opponent.”

“If you play sports or if you work for an organization you see the homophobia,” says Brian Kitts, co-founder of You Can Play, an organization dedicated to fighting homophobia in sports.

After meeting Brian Burke at a University of Denver hockey game, Kitts and Burke, along with Glen Whitman—who runs an elite gay hockey team based in Colorado—decided to jump start the You Can Play project which fights for gay rights in the sports realm.

“We went out for beer and realized that we had some of the same ideas and decided that we would go ahead and put this together,” says Kitts. “I think that whether you are gay or straight - sometimes you know that things aren’t right and especially if you are gay. Glen and I knew that this is something that could help people who care about sports.”

Kitts has been around sports his entire life and has worked with the Colorado Avalanche and Denver Nuggets organizations for more than ten years.

“It’s just one of those things, that whether you’re a fan, or whether you’re a player and whether you are gay or straight, it starts to really sort of rub you the wrong way,” he says.

One of YCP’s primary goals is to rid sports of homophobic trash talk.

“Human nature wants to find ways to cut people down sometimes, but I think there is another side of human nature that wants to lift people up and so I think what we are doing is asking people to recognize talent and recognize skill rather than tearing someone down,” says Kitts.

The issue is personal for Andrew Goldstein, a college and professional lacrosse goaltender, who is

recognized as the first team-sport professional athlete to be openly gay. In 2003, Goldstein became open about his sexuality to his team.

“Like any athlete in college sports I was exposed to the pretty standard use of what we call ‘casual homophobia’, the use of words like ‘fag’ and ‘homo’,” says Goldstein.

Goldstein has played lacrosse at both the college and professional levels. He was a two-time All-American at Dartmouth College and played professionally for the Long Island Lizards of Major League Lacrosse.

Athletes know that trash talking, from both opponents and fans, is all part of the game. Any athlete competing at a high level knows how to block it out and avoid letting it shift their focus. But when the words shift from harmless schoolyard taunts to flat out hate speech, it is hard to simply ignore them.

“As a human being those words are like a dagger to your heart,” explains Goldstein.

“They are words that make you feel incredibly alone and make you feel like the world is against you and that people don’t respect who you are fundamentally as a person. It is incredibly hurtful,” he says.

“Until people are made aware of it, they continue to use these words, phrases and terms that seemingly mean nothing to them, but mean everything to that one or two closeted gay teammates, that they don’t know about.”

Goldstein and Kitts agree that the problem is not homophobia, but ignorance ingrained in sports culture.

“It’s just one of those cultural things. Some people pick on people because of their race, and some people do it because they perceive their sexuality as a negative thing and a lot of times it’s not that they don’t mean it but they have never been corrected,” says Kitts.

Kitts says that players rarely get talked to about the language they use during games. “They have never been told; ‘look, you calling a kid a fag has the potential to hold him back if he is.’”

Baig says, nipping it in the bud is the best way to rid trash talking of all forms, be it homophobic or otherwise, from the game.

“I don’t think there is any room in the game for trash-talking.”

For the OCAA, Baig says putting an end to trash talk requires a multi-level solution.

“It is not just the officials that are responsible, but I think it’s the players and coaches that are responsible,” he says.

