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Trash Talk Experiences of College Athletes

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Abstract

While there has been considerable controversy about trash talk in sport, there have been very few empirical studies of this phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to investigate the trash talk experiences of collegiate athletes. Surveys were completed by 414 male and female NCAA Division I and Division III athletes. Athletes responded to questions about how frequently they used trash talk, how frequently they were the targets of trash talk, the content of the trash talk, their motivations for trash talking, who taught them how to trash talk, and circumstances would influence their use of trash talk. On average, athletes reported using and being targeted with trash talk in about one third of competitions. Their reported reasons for trash talking were to motivate themselves and hinder the performance of opponents, and they were most likely to attempt to do this by belittling the skill and toughness of their opponents. Athletes reported that coaches who discourage the use of trash talk and officials who penalize trash talk only slightly decrease the behavior. There was a consistent tendency for males to report more trash talk than females and for Division I athletes to report more than Division III athletes. Authors conclude that there is a normative rule favoring trash talk among collegiate athletes.

Trash Talk Experiences of College Athletes

The championship game of the 2006 soccer World Cup tournament was marred by an ugly incident. In the waning minutes of regulation time, Zinedine Zidane, a star player from the French national team, head butted Marco Matterazzi of the Italian team, knocking him to the ground. Zidane was given a red card and removed from the game. Zidane's excuse for his behavior was that Materazzi had engaged in an unacceptable form of trash talk, insulting Zidane's mother and sister. Zidane was subsequently not available for the game deciding shootout, and his team lost the championship (Donald, 2006). This incident debunks two of the classic myths about trash talk, that it is all in good fun and never really leads to violence, and that it never really affects the outcome of competitions.

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Trash talk is defined as "insulting or boastful speech intended to demoralize, intimidate, or humiliate someone, especially an opponent in an athletic contest" (*New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd Ed., 2005). Two things are notable about this definition. First, it is revealing that, even in a general reference source, the close association between trash talk and sport is highlighted. Second, as defined here, trash talk is behavior that is not compatible with the traditional ideal in sport that competitors respect their opponents. Specifically trash talk violates NCAA bylaw 2.4 (The Principles

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of Sportsmanship and Ethical Conduct), which states that student athletes "should adhere to such fundamental values as respect, fairness, civility, honesty and responsibility." (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 1996).

Some observers (Rudd & Stoll, 1998; Staffo, 1996) believe that trash talk has increased in frequency and has become a problem in contemporary sport. In reality, it may be that athletes have always intentionally used psychologically damaging strategies to defeat their opponents. Nearly 50 years ago Potter (1962) wrote humorously about the uses of gamesmanship, which he defined as "the art of winning games without actually cheating" (p. 15). Potter described strategies, not specifically prohibited by the rules, that a competitor could use to get an advantage, and many of these techniques involved making comments to opponents to unnerve or distract them. Trash talk as we know it today certainly was practiced in professional sports as far back as the 1930's, and such stars as Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and Babe Didrikson Zaharias were noted practitioners (Saunders, 2004). However, some commentators believe that trash talk became more wide spread and mean-spirited in the 1980's (LoConto & Roth, 2005), and by the 1990's trash talk had become so pervasive that sports writers and other began to express concern. In previewing the 1992-93 NCAA basketball season,

Taylor (1992) described the vicious content of trash talk among college basketball players and pointed out that, while some coaches were adamantly opposed to such behavior, other coaches felt it was just “part of the game”. Bruning (1994) described the poor sportsmanship that he observed among players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) and suggested that team management and league officials did little to control the behavior. He also criticized the theory that trash talk in the NBA was primarily a reflection of the “street culture” of black players from the inner city. In an article entitled “Trash talk; Can it”, Staffo (1996) called upon coaches to institute a hierarchy of increasingly severe penalties for athletes who persisted in trash talk, culminating in removal from the team. Further, he suggested that coaches needed the support of owners, athletic directors, university presidents, and boards of directors in order to enforce such consequences.

There was also criticism from more scholarly circles. Rudd and Stoll (1998) suggested that the traditional code of sportsmanship had been replaced among young athletes by an “in your face” style of competition. These authors described programs available to educate young athletes about sportsmanship, and they concluded that those programs were doomed to fail. The reason for this, they stated, was that the programs consisted primarily of

mere exhortations to be sportsmanlike and oversimplified interventions with weak rewards and punishments. They argued that these oversimplified approaches did nothing to improve the basic moral reasoning of the athletes, which they felt would be the key to successful programs. Even more recently, Dixon (2007) has argued that trash talk is morally indefensible. He analyzed a number of arguments defending trash talk and found them all flawed. For example, Dixon criticized the common argument that trash talk is just harmless verbal play and does not really disrespect the opponent, pointing out that athletes themselves measure the effectiveness of their trash talk by its ability to offend the opponent.

However, at a time when most commentators in the popular press and in academic circles were critical of trash talk, some social scientists promoted an entirely different interpretation of this behavior. Simons (2003) argued that racial bias is responsible for the negative perceptions of trash talk. He claimed that trash talk was exhibited primarily by African Americans and that trash talk is an expression of African American male cultural values for "expressiveness, performance orientation, and individuality" (p. 11). He believed that trash talk is misinterpreted as an expression of disrespect. Instead, Simons described trash talk as a natural extension of the African American oral tradition called "signifying", which

is a game-like oral ritual using boastful, humorous, insulting, and provocative comments in an atmosphere of friendly competition. Simon claimed that, as a form of signifying, trash talk helps the players to motivate themselves and enjoy the game, and he proposed that the belief that trash talk is frequently associated with violence is unfounded. Jabari Mahiri of the University of California-Berkeley, agreed with Simons. He proposed that trash talk provides African American athletes an opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency in the culturally significant oral activity of signifying (Phillip, 1995). Mahiri likened trash talk to certain skills in basketball, such as dunking and dribbling behind the back, that were prohibited in the past, but have become part of the game because they were made popular by the influence of African American athletes. He claimed that there are recognized boundaries to trash talk, that concerns about violence arising from trash talk are exaggerated, and that, if outsiders didn't interfere, trash talk would be self-managing.

There is evidence, however, that trash talk can sometimes lead to violence and have significant consequences, and the incident at the World Cup finals involving Zidane and Materazzi is a dramatic and significant example. There is even evidence that trash talk during competition can lead to negative consequences outside the field of play. In March 2007, two

National Football League (NFL) players were involved in a fight outside a Las Vegas casino. Jerry Porter, of the Miami Dolphins, and Levi Jones, of the Cincinnati Bengals had a history of trash talking one another during the football season. When they met at a blackjack table at the Palms Casino, more insults were traded. Porter punched Jones, and the police issued a summons to Porter for battery (Trash talking, 2007).

Because of growing concerns, some influential sport governing bodies have made an effort to control trash talk. The National Federation of State High School Associations ((NFHS) has developed programs to promote citizenship. As part of this initiative, NFHS rule books, which regulate high school sports, prohibit taunting opponents. For example, Rule 12, Section 8, Article 3 of the Soccer Rules Book indicates that players, coaches, or bench personnel should be disqualified (given a red card) for taunting (National Federation of High School Associations, 2008). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has made a major effort to promote sportsmanship, partially in response to concerns about trash talk. In 1997 the NCAA developed a Committee on Sportsmanship and Ethical Conduct and inaugurated annual Sportsmanship Awards for athletes. Further, the rule books that the NCAA publishes to regulate each sport have specific prohibitions for trash talk. For example, the rules for football include a

section on Unsportsmanlike Acts. Rule 1 in this section specifies that "No player, coach, substitute, or other person subject to the rules shall use abusive, threatening, or obscene language or gestures, or engage in such acts that provoke ill will or are demeaning to an opponent, to game officials, or to the image of the game…(NCAA, 2007a, 122). The rule then specifically prohibits "taunting, baiting, and ridiculing an opponent verbally" (NCAA, 2007a, 123). A fifteen yard penalty is assessed for such behavior. The rule also states that players shall be ejected from the game for flagrant or repeated violations. In soccer the NCAA rule book indicates that a player who "Engages in other acts of unsporting conduct, including taunting, baiting, illegal substitution or ridiculing another player, bench personnel, or officials" (NCAAb, 2007, 79) should be given a caution. Two such incidents lead to ejection. Further the rule book specifies that any player who "Engages in hostile or abusive language or harassment that refers to race, religion, sex, sexual orientation or national origin, or other abusive, threatening or obscene language, behavior, or conduct" (NCAAb, 2007,80) shall be ejected from the game.

There has been little empirical research about trash talk. Searches of the relevant data bases reveal very few studies of any type that examine the nature, incidence, development, functions, or consequences of trash talk.

One of the few available studies was a survey by Greer & Jarc (2006). These authors administered a questionnaire about ethical issues in sport to over 5,000 high school athletes participating in 14 sports. The questionnaire contained 3 items that dealt directly with trash talk. Results from this study indicated that 42% of boys and 22% of girls felt it was proper to taunt or jeer opponents from the bench, and 42% of boys and 18% of girls felt it was acceptable to trash talk a defender after they had scored upon him or her. In terms of specific behavior, 29% of boys and 41% of girls admitted that they had used racial slurs during competition at least once.

In a very different approach, Eveslage and Delaney (1998) conducted an observational study of one boys' high school basketball team. They observed the 11 members of this team for one competitive season and recorded field notes immediately after each practice and game. Based on their observations, these authors concluded that trash talk is one type of a broader and long-recognized form of discourse called "insult talk". They described insult talk as abusive speech that is used to establish social hierarchies, is frequently sexist and homophobic, and forces its targets to defend their masculinity and honor. Research has demonstrated that insult talk is common in male dominated contexts, such as corporate offices (Cohn, 1993), shop floors (Collinson, 1995), and fraternities (Boswell and Spade,

1996). Eveslage and Delaney conclude that it is best to conceptualize trash talk in sport as an extension of insult talk from other settings, not as an isolated form of speech copied from professional athletes or derived strictly from inner city culture.

These few studies provide little insight about trash talk, and it is clear that many questions remain. For example, data about the frequency of trash talk are very limited, and it is unclear how trash talk varies across gender, level of competition, and type of sport. Also, no studies have examined the actual content of trash, the reason athletes engage in trash talk, and the roles that other important groups (teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, fans) play in the development of trash talk. A thorough examination of these issues will ultimately require a variety of research methodologies and involve participants playing a variety of roles in competitive sports, but because so little is known about trash talk, basic descriptive studies are required. The present study was meant to begin the process of answering basic questions about trash talk. The purpose of the study was to explore these issues by surveying college athletes about their experiences with trash talk. The survey examined their experiences using trash talk, being the target of trash talk, the purposes and content of the trash talk, circumstances that affect the use of trash talk, and the role of others in learning to use trash

talk. Because so few data were available to suggest hypotheses, none were stated.

Method

Participants

Participants were 414 college athletes (249 males and 165 females) from two universities in a large Midwestern city. One of the universities offered Division I NCAA sports (*n* = 209) and the other Division III (*n* = 205). The mean age of the participants was 19.74 years, and they had played their sport an average of 10.77 years. Among the 382 participants who responded to the question about racial heritage, there were: 348 Caucasian, 24 African American, 8 Spanish, and 2 Asian athletes. Athletes from the Division I university represented the sports of baseball, softball, men's and women's basketball, men's soccer, men's and women's swimming, women's cross country, men's and women's golf, and men's and women's fencing, and wrestling. Athletes from the Division III school represented the sports of football, wrestling, baseball, softball, men's and women's basketball, men's and women's soccer, men's and women's swimming, men's and women's rugby, volleyball, men's and women's cross country, men's and women's lacrosse, men's and women's golf, field hockey, and women's skiing. The number of participants representing each sport varied

widely, ranging from 1 (Division III men's lacrosse) to 42 (Division III football). No data were collected with respect to the scholarship status of the Division I athletes. All athletes were paid $3 for their participation. Participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 1992), and the research procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of both universities.

Measures

Because no standard measures existed for surveying athletes about their trash talk experiences, a questionnaire was developed for this study. Demographic items on the questionnaire included items about age, gender, and race. Participants were also asked to identify their primary sport (with an explanation that all subsequent questions would be in reference to that sport) and how many years they had played that sport. Participants were asked, to the best of their memory, at what age they had first been the target of trash talk and at what age they had first directed trash talk at others. The participants were then asked to estimate, for the prior year of competition, what percentage of time: 1) they been the target of trash talk by opposing players, coaches, and fans; 2) they targeted opposing players, coaches, and fans with trash talk; 3) their own teammates and coaches engaged in trash

talk; and 4) trash talk had a negative effect on their performance. Participants were then asked, when they did use trash talk, what percentage of the time did they do it for the purpose of : 1) psyching themselves up, psyching out their opponent, intimidating their opponent, and hindering the performance of their opponent; and 2) what percentage of the time when they engaged in trash talk did they do so by “getting ugly” (swearing/calling names), by commenting on the sexuality or sexual orientation of the opponent, by belittling the skill/athleticism of their opponent, and by belittling the courage/toughness of their opponent. Participants then rated on a Likert type scale (from 1 = greatly decrease to 7 = greatly increase) how a list game circumstances would influence the likelihood that they would engage in trash talk. These circumstances included items such as: the opponent is an important rival, officials have penalized trash talk in the past, your teammates do a lot of trash talking, your coaches actively discourage trash talk, and the game is a “blow out” in your favor. Finally, participants were asked to rate on a five point scale (0 to 4 = no role, small role, some role, large role, most important) how large a role parents, siblings, coaches, teammates, opponents, professional athletes, and fans played in teaching them how to use trash talk.

Procedures

Data were collected from the Division I athletes at a meeting attended by most of the varsity athletes of the university. Investigators read the assembled athletes a definition of trash talk and the informed consent statement, which described the steps used to insure the confidentiality of their responses and indicated that participants provided their informed consent by handing in the questionnaire. Questionnaires and envelopes containing the $3 were passed out together, and questionnaires were returned in unmarked envelopes. Data were collected from the Division III athletes in two ways. An invitation to participate, including the informed consent statement, was emailed to all upper class athletes on the Athletic Department's roster. Those who chose to participate emailed their completed questionnaire back to the principal investigator, providing an address to which their $3 was mailed. About 10% of the Division III athletes were freshmen enrolled in Introductory Psychology classes. They completed the questionnaire, with the same informed consent statement, in small groups, and they received research participation credit for their psychology course rather than the $ 3.

Results

Before examining possible gender, level of competition, and sport differences in trash talk experiences, data were analyzed for the entire sample.

Using Trash Talk and Being the Target of Trash Talk

Across the entire sample, the mean age for first being targeted with trash talk was 11.10 (*SD* = 3.22) years, and the mean age for using trash talk was 11.80 (*SD* = 3.95) years. In the prior year of competition, respondents indicated that, on average, they had been targeted with trash talk by opposing players in 35.3%, coaches in 16.4%, and fans in 30.6% of games. They admitted to having targeted opposing players with trash talk in 29.7%, coaches in 14.5%, and fans in 16.9 % of games. Participants indicated that their teammates used trash talk in 50.9% of games and their coaches in 20.4% of games. Participants reported that being targeted with trash talk hindered their performance on average in 17.3 % of competitions.

Reasons for Using Trash Talk and Content of Trash Talk

Across the entire sample, on average the respondents indicated that, when they used trash talk, they did it to psych up themselves 37.4%, psych out their opponents 37.1% , intimidate their opponents 32.6 %, and to hinder their opponents' performance 33.1% of the time. They also indicated that

they engaged in trash talk by “getting ugly (swearing and calling names) 32.1 % , commenting on sexuality or sexual orientation 19.7% , belittling the skill/athleticism of their opponent 35.2%, and belittling the toughness or courage of their opponent 31.8% of the time.

Circumstances that Would Affect the Use of Trash Talk

On the 7-point Likert type scale used to assess the effects that different game circumstances might have on the use of trash talk, the middle point of 4 was labeled “no effect”. Scores of 1-3 were labeled greatly decrease, decrease, and slightly decrease, and scores of 5-7 were labeled slightly increase, increase, and greatly increase. Mean scores for most of the circumstances clustered very close to four, and only three circumstances elicited mean responses suggesting slight influences. Having an opponent who is an important rival elicited a mean response of 5.40 (SD = 1.59), indicating that this would slightly increase the likelihood that the athletes would use trash talk. The mean score for the effect of coaches discouraging the use of trash talk was 2.96 (SD = 1.49), and the mean score for effect of officials penalizing earlier episodes of trash talk was 3.20 (SD = 1.47), both indicating that these circumstances would slightly decrease the likelihood of using trash talk.

Who Played a Role in Teaching the Athletes How to Trash Talk?

Athletes were asked to indicate how much of a role different people in their lives had played in teaching them how to trash talk. The percentage of athletes responding no role, small role, moderate role, large role, and most important role for seven possible teachers are displayed in Table 1. A fairly clear pattern emerges for those who did and didn't play a role in teaching these athletes to trash talk. The athletes reported that parents, siblings, and coaches played minor roles, with the combined "small role/no role" categories accounting for 81%, 71%, and 68% for parents, siblings, and coaches respectively. In addition, 60% of respondents indicated that professional athletes play a "small role" or "no role at all" in their learning to trash talk. In contrast, two groups stand out as the major contributors. Teammates and opponents were identified by the athletes as the primary models who taught them how to trash talk. These two groups dominated the "most important" category. Not all athletes indicated a "most important" teacher, but of 314 who did, teammates were identified as most important by 36% and opponents by 27%. Furthermore, 62% of participants indicated that teammates played either a large role or the most important role, and

56% indicated that opponents played either a large role or the most important role.

Examining the Role of Gender and Level of Competition

To determine if experiences with trash talk were different for male and female athletes and for those in Division I and Division III programs, a two-way (Gender by Level of Competition) MANOVA was performed on responses by all participants to the 51 items in the questionnaire. This analysis indicated that there were significant main effects for Gender, F (51, 360) = 5.62, $p < .001$ and for Level of Competition, F (51, 360) = 6.05, $p < .001$. However, the fact that not all sports were represented for males and females and at both levels of competition meant that the two-way interaction could not be analyzed for the full sample. A MANOVA was then conducted to analyze the Gender by Level of Competition interaction for only those sports with both men's and women's teams at both levels of competition. These included the sports of baseball/softball, men's and women's golf, men's and women's swimming, and men's and women's basketball (n = 189). This revealed that the interaction was not significant, F (51, 135) = 1.40, $p > .05$.

One-way ANOVAs were conducted to follow-up on the finding that the multivariate *F's* for gender and level of competition were significant.

Because there were so many measures (51), the univarite *F's* were assessed at an alpha level <.001.

Gender Differences. Gender differences were assessed only for those sports in which both males and females participated. In this sample those were baseball/softball, basketball, swimming, golf, soccer, track and field, rowing, tennis, rugby, cross country, fencing, and lacrosse. These analyses were based on 261 participants (126 males and 135 females). Ten significant differences were revealed, and these are listed in Table 2. The pattern of results is quite consistent. Male athletes reported being targeted by trash talk younger and using trash talk younger than female athletes. Male athletes also reported using trash talk against opposing players, coaches and fans more frequently and being target by trash talk by opposing players, coaches, and fans more frequently than female athletes.

Level of Competition Differences. Level of competition differences was assessed only for those sports that both the Division I and Division III universities had teams. These were baseball, softball, men's basketball, women's basketball, men's soccer, men's swimming, women's swimming, and wrestling. These analyses were based on 238 participants (87 Division III and 151 Division I). Ten significant differences were revealed, and these are listed in Table 3. Again, there is a fairly clear pattern in these results,

which suggests a somewhat greater presence of trash talk among Division I athletes. The Division I players reported first using trash talk and being target by trash talk significantly younger than the Division III players. Division I players reported engaging in more trash talk and receiving more trash talk from opposing coaches and engaging in more trash talk with opposing fans. Division I players reported more trash talk by their own coaches, and they reported that, when they trash talked, they were more likely to comment on the sexuality/sexual orientation of their opponents than did Division III players. Finally, the responses of Division III athletes indicated that they would be more likely than Division I athletes to curtail their trash talked under three circumstances: when officials penalize trash talk; when their coaches discourage trash talk; and when they were "blowing out" their opponent.

Examining the Role of Sport Differences

Sport differences were assessed for only those sports that were represented in the sample at both levels of competition and by both men and women. The sports for this analysis were baseball/softball, basketball, swimming, and golf, and the analysis was based on 189 participants. First a one-way MANOVA (Sport) was conducted for the collection of 51 items. This revealed a significant main multivariate main effect for Sport, *F* (51,

137) = 2.29, $p < .001$. One-way ANOVAs were then conducted to follow up on the significant multivariate effect. Only three significant differences were revealed. There were significant differences among the sports in the percentage of competitions when the athletes targeted opponents with trash talk, $F(3, 185) = 4.80$, $p = .003$, Eta squared = .06. Follow-up analyses revealed that basketball players targeted opponents with trash talk more frequently (34.53% of competitions) than either swimmers (11.91%, $p<.01$) or golfers (19.74%, $p<.05$). There were significant differences among the four sports in the percentage of competitions when the participants were targeted with trash talk by fans, $F(3, 185) = 10.05$, $p< .001$, Eta squared = .14. Follow-up analysis with Tukey's HSD indicated that both baseball/softball and basketball players were targeted by fans more frequently (37.90 % and 41.32 %) than both swimmers and golfers (13.33% and 19.74%), all $p< .01$. Finally, there were significant differences among the four sports in the effect that playing an important rival would have on the likelihood that the athletes would use trash talk, $F(3,185) = 10.37$, $p<.001$, Eta squared = .14. Follow-up analysis revealed that playing an important rival would tend to increase the likelihood that both baseball/softball and basketball players would use trash talk (5.62 and 5.68 respectively), but

would have no or little effect for swimmers and golfers (4.00 and 4.82 respectively), all p's < .02.

Discussion

The results of this survey of a modest sized sample of collegiate athletes suggest a number of tentative conclusions. First, in examining the data for the entire sample, the results indicate that a considerable amount of trash talk is occurring, despite the fact that this behavior is explicitly prohibited by the formal rules of competition. On average, participants reported that they had been targeted with trash talk in about 35% of contests and that they engaged in trash talk in about 30% of contests. These percentages are consistent with a pattern in the results. Athletes reported that all other groups (opponents, opposing coaches, and opposing fans) target them with trash talk more than they trash talk those other groups. Also, the reported mean age of first being targeted by trash talk was younger than the reported mean age of first using trash talk. In fact, an examination of individual responses reveals that only 15 of the 414 athletes reported that they used trash talk first before they were the target of trash talk. Thus, the athletes responded in a manner that suggests that they may rationalize their trash talking because they believe they were the victims first and because they believe opponents engage in more trash talk than they do.

When they do engage in trash talk, the athletes in this sample reported that they are likely to “get ugly,” belittle their opponents’ skill, or belittle their courage and toughness in about a third of all competitions. They reported that they are less likely to sexually harass their opponents, but even this form of trash talk was reported in 20% of contests. Together these data present a picture of considerable unpleasantness in collegiate sport, and an important question is why such behavior occurs. The athletes’ reasons for all this incivility are evenly distributed among the four choices provided by the survey. They reported that they trash talk to motivate themselves, to “psych out” and intimidate opponents, and to impair their opponents’ performance. This suggests that the ultimate motivation for trash talk is to gain a competitive advantage. Athletes know from personal experience that trash talk can have an impact on performance, because they indicated that trash talk had hindered their own performance in 17% of their competitions. When asked to evaluate the influence that different circumstances have on their use of trash talk, the athletes responded in way that suggests that this behavior is relatively impervious to influences. The importance of the game, the quality of the opponent, the closeness of the score, the location of the game, and the behavior of their teammates were rated as having no effect. Only three circumstances were rated as being slight influences. The

participants indicated that playing an important rival would slightly increase their use of trash talk, and prior penalties by officials and active discouragement for trash talk by their coaches would slightly decrease the likelihood.

What all these data suggest together is that, by the time athletes are in college competition, trash talk is a well-established practice. It is implemented with fairly consistent set of strategies (name-calling, belittling, and sexual harassment), serves a supporting set of motives (pump myself up/impair opponents' performance), and has attained a level of normative acceptance (the rules of the sport, penalties by officials, and disapproval by coaches can only minimally deter it). This general pattern of behavior has been observed before in sports. Silva (1981) discussed the distinction between the constitutive rules of sport and normative rules. Constitutive rules are the official rules outlined in a sport's rules book that the competitors agree to play by. Normative rules are unofficial standards reflecting the preferences and attitudes of the competitors. These standards violate the constitutive rules and are actively passed on from generation of athletes to the next. For example, both Silva (1984) and Smith (1980) suggested there is a normative rule among players in ice hockey that requires players to fight under certain circumstances. The expectation to fight is

passed on by older players and by to fledgling players, even though fighting violates the constitutive rules of ice hockey. Based on the data from the current survey, it appears that there are also normative rules among athletes for trash talk. The suggestion that trash talk has become normative behavior among collegiate athletes is further supported by the data about how athletes learn to use trash talk. While parents, siblings, coaches, and even professional athletes were ascribed only a small role, it was teammates and opponents who were reported to have large roles and the most important role in teaching the participants how to trash talk.

Gender, Level of Competition, and Sport Differences

The data do suggest that a number of variables may influence the use of trash talk. In examining the role of gender, there were indications that trash talk is more prominent in this sample among male athletes. Males reported that trash talk began younger in their lives than did females, and males reported significantly greater frequencies of both using and being targeted by trash talk than did females. Male athletes even reported that their teammates and coaches used trash talk more frequently than females athletes did for their teammates and coaches. Without the use of other methodologies, such as observational studies of male and female athletes during competition, it’s impossible to know if this gender difference is real.

It may be that female athletes are less willing to admit to such behavior out of a sense of decorum, or that male athletes have a tendency to over-report their trash talk out of a sense braggadocio. There are no data that trace the development of trash talk across history for either male or female athletes, so it is even possible that female athletes, with their shorter history of athletic competition, are still catching up with males and might ultimately trash talk just as much.

There were also a number of measures that suggest that trash talk is more prominent among NCAA Division I athletes than among Division III athletes. Division I athletes reported that trash talk began younger in their lives than did Division III athletes. By large margins, Division I athletes reported more trash talk by their own and opposing coaches than did Division III athletes. They also reported directing trash talk at opposing fans and at opposing coaches more frequently than Division III athletes. Division I athletes were almost four times as likely to sexually harass opponents as Division III athletes. Finally, Division I athletes reported that penalties by officials for trash talk, discouragement of trash talk by coaches, and "blowing out" an opponent were all significantly less likely to decrease their use of trash talk trash talk than did Division III athletes. If these divisional differences prove to be reliable, one possible explanation is that there is

more pressure to win in Division I sports and that the more frequent use of trash talk emerges under that greater pressure. However, it is also possible that participation in Division I and Division III sports only influences athletes to respond differently to questions about trash talk as a way of maintaining different images about the nature of their competition. Division III athletes may feel more of a need to represent an image of sportsmanship, and Division I athletes may feel more of a need to represent an image of fierce competition. Only more objective research methodologies, such as observational studies, will establish whether the divisional difference found in this study actually exist or are a result of self-report biases.

While the data of this study revealed few differences in trash talk among different sports, this may be due to the small number and variety of sports that were compared. Because of the distribution of sports across level of competition and across gender, it was possible to compare only four sports: baseball/softball, basketball, swimming, and golf. Among this combination of sports, there were only three significant differences: 1) Basketball players reported targeting their opponents with trash talk significantly more often than did swimmers and golfers, 2) baseball/softball and basketball players reported higher rates of trash talk by their fans than golfers and swimmers did by their fans, and 3) Baseball/softball and

basketball players reported that playing an important rival would increase the likelihood they would use trash talk, while such a circumstance would have no effect for swimmers and actually slightly decrease the likelihood of trash talk among golfers. There is a pattern among these differences, for they are all between basketball and baseball/softball on one hand and golf and swimming on the other. These differences may reflect different subcultures in the two sets of sports. Both golf and swimming have often been labeled “country-club” sports, while basketball and baseball/softball are commonly considered sports of the masses. These different sport cultures have historically been associated with different behavioral expectations. For example, “heckling” opposing players is a time-honored tradition in baseball. In contrast, golfers are expected to be polite, and even silent at times. These different norms for behavior may explain the sport differences in the rate of trash talk. It’s also true that, while all four sports are played on teams, the actual play in baseball/softball and basketball is much more interactive than it is in swimming and golf. It may be that there is something about the interactive nature of basketball and baseball/softball that creates an environment where trash talk is more likely to occur.

Conclusions

The results of this survey suggest that athletes begin to use trash talk in pre-adolescence, that athletes learn to trash talk primarily from their teammates and opponents, that trash talk is quite common among collegiate athletes, and that experiences with trash talk may vary in some respects by gender, level of competition, and sport. Together the results suggest that trash talk is normative behavior among collegiate athletes and is guided by normative rules. Furthermore, even if it is true that the oral traditions of signifying in Black culture or insult talk from male dominated settings are the roots of trash talk in sport, it is clear from the results of this study that trash talk has developed well beyond those origins. Very few of the surveyed athletes in the current study are minorities, and the trash talk is common among both the female and male participants. While it's likely that athletes engage in trash talk for a variety of reasons, they frequently do it to gain a competitive advantage, and it is appropriate to be concerned about the implications and consequences of such a strategy.

However, all conclusions must be considered to be tentative, as there were limitations in both the sample and surveying process in this study. While the sample size is large enough to provide considerable statistical power, the sample is demographically quite narrow. Participants were

obtained from universities less than 10 miles apart, and racial minorities were underrepresented. Two important women's teams were entirely absent when the Division I athletes were surveyed (volleyball and soccer), and the Division I university does not field a football team. Together these absences reduced the representativeness of the sample and limited the evaluation of gender, level of competition, and sport differences. It is also true that the questionnaires were administered in one large group to the Division I athletes and individually and in small groups to the Division III athletes. It is possible that these procedural differences may have influenced responses. Finally, there are the inherent limitations of self-report data. Because the behaviors in question are officially proscribed, a number of response biases, including under-reporting the behavior, may have influenced the data.

Future research on trash talk could take a number of directions. Clearly, surveys of larger and more representative samples of athletes are necessary to evaluate the reliability and generality of the current findings. Surveys of high school and younger athletes will be necessary to assess trash talk in those populations, and the use of longitudinal designs to examine the development of trash talk could be very valuable. Though they have their own limitations, observational studies will help better establish the incidence of trash talk, its content, and the circumstances that influence its use. It will

be easier to observe some sports than others, but with appropriate ethical safeguards and with the use of audio recording technology, it should be possible to gather reliable observational data from many sports competitions. The use of more controlled, laboratory-based competitions, or even computer simulations, might serve to examine how individuals learn to trash talk and how trash talk develops and during competitions. Clearly, trash talk is a fascinating, and often troubling, aspect of contemporary sport that warrants further empirical investigation.

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Table 1

Importance of the Role, in Percentages, that Different People Played in Teaching Athletes to Trash Talk

Importance of Role	Most Important	Large	Moderate	Small	No role
Parents	5	6	8	18	63
Siblings	3	13	16	20	48
Coaches	4	10	15	27	44
Teammates	27	35	19	7	12
Opponents	20	36	22	8	14
Professional Athletes	6	12	22	23	37
Fans	9	19	22	21	29

Table 2

Significant Univariate Gender Differences: Means, (Standard Deviations), and Eta Squares. All significant at $p < .001$.

Item	Men	Women	Eta Squared
Age first targeted by trash talk	10.29 (3.22)	11.89 (2.88)	.08
Age first using trash talk	11.10 (3.76)	12.76 (3.00)	.08
% games trash talked by players	35.40 (27.67)	21.40 (21.55)	.10
% games trash talked by coaches	19.68 (22.02)	11.38 (15.26)	.07
% games trash talked by fans	37.07 (29.96)	20.52 (20.85)	.10
% games trash talking other players	32.46 (27.12)	15.74 (21.84)	.12
% games trash talking coaches	20.48 (26.35	7.11 (15.00)	.10
% games trash talking fans	23.73 (26.0)	8.35 (15.88)	.14
% games teammates trash talked	51.35 (30.66)	34.00 (29.73)	.06
% games coaches trash talked	23.42 (24.20)	12.67 (17.29)	.07

Table 3

Significant Univariate Level of Competition Differences: Means, (Standard Deviations), and Eta Squares. All significant at $p < .001$.

Item	Div. I	Div. III	Eta Squared
Age first targeted by trash talk	10.39 (3.21)	11.62 (2.55)	.02
Age first using trash talk	10.73 (3.56)	13.10 (3.35)	.05
% of games trash talked by opposing coach	26.27 (24.36)	8.74 (12.37)	.11
% of games trash talking opposing coach	25.53 (28.66)	7.36 14.74)	.11
% of games trash talking opposing fans	27.79 (28.55)	10.39 (18.33)	.03
% of games own coach uses trash talk	25.83 (24.48)	13.22 (16.46)	.06
when trash talking, % of time commenting on sexuality or sexual orientation	31.46 (29.04)	8.16 (16.60)	.11
effect on trash talk of officials penalizing it	3.60 (1.57)	2.69 (1.34)	.07
effect on trash talk of coach discouraging it	3.38 (1.63)	2.59 (1.35)	.05
effect on trash talk of “blowing out” opponent	3.77 (1.73)	2.76 (1.75)	.05