

Jun-2007

## "She's got nothing!": A Researcher's Journey to the Study of "Trash Talking" in Sport

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### Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Maura (2007). "She's got nothing!": A Researcher's Journey to the Study of "Trash Talking" in Sport. *Bridgewater Review*, 26(1), 28-30.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol26/iss1/11](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol26/iss1/11)

# “She’s got nothing!”

## A Researcher’s Journey to the Study of “Trash Talking” in Sport

Maura Rosenthal

*You are a 12-year old who just joined your town’s recreational basketball league. Even though your team just lost its first game 25–14, you enjoyed the first two practices and the game itself. As you cross the gym towards your parents, you see your teammates laughing and pointing towards you and hear them say, “You suck at playing basketball, you’re the worst player on our team, and it’s your fault we lost.”*

*Your coach assigned you to cover the opponents’ best player—you are to stick to her “like glue.” In the second half, she gets frustrated and as you line up to defend an inbound pass, she turns to you and says, “Get your fat ass off of me.”*

Participation in sport is clearly not the only way for children to be physically active. Such participation, however, is the most common introduction to physical activity for children in the U.S. Because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 30–45 million children participate each year, youth sport is certainly a worthy area of study. I had the privilege of enjoying a post-Title IX childhood. I have participated in sport recreationally and competitively since the fourth grade. For me, youth sport was an important forum for learning; it was an arena in which I learned to be a leader and to interact as a member of a group. Sport participation can make for wonderful experiences in which children find joy and lifelong pleasure in physical activity. But participation in youth sport can also have the opposite result by producing a negative experience for children that colors sport and other physical activity and brands it as something to be avoided. Part of this negative experience may be caused by the practice of taunting or trash talking in sport.

I first became interested in trash talking in sport through research leading to my dissertation, *Body Culture of Women’s Recreational Ice Hockey*, at the University of Minnesota. Through a participant observation, in which I was able to use my own physical experiences as an ice hockey player and my keen sociological eye, I found that verbal communication was important to both the organization of the team and the competitions themselves. “Body talk” in the locker room and “banter” on the ice were the most



striking types of verbal communication recorded in my field notes during the season. Discussions of body functions, smells and the stench of hockey equipment were elements of what I called “body talk” in the locker room. Anyone who has ever ventured into an ice hockey locker room knows the sensory overload of



sweaty bodies, wet leather, and peeling rubber floors. The Comet Sisters, the fictitious name of the team I played for and studied, spent their pre- and post- game time in the locker room joking about topics ranging from pregnancy and urination to how to best air out hockey pads at home. Much of my dissertation analysis focused on the connections between this body talk and how adult women experience the game of ice hockey. The second important type of verbal communication was on-ice banter. I found trash talking on the ice that threatened and sometimes led to physical violence, *and* I found lighthearted taunting among opponents about who will buy beer after the game. I wondered, in my recently published article, “Harmless banter or serious trash talk? Aggression and intimidation in women’s recreational ice hockey,” how some trash talking could be humorous and some could contain threats against opponents.

When I further investigated this topic in a 2004 study of collegiate men’s and women’s ice hockey, I realized the potential of this topic to yield some very ugly and disturbing parts of sport. In the words of one of the young men in my focus group, “I don’t think we [he and his teammates] ever have a conversation without having something to do with something dirty or swearing”; another said “so, the dirtier the better, more shocking.” The primary difference between my previous results

regarding female recreational players and this study of male and female players at the college level is the language the players report using and hearing on the ice is more offensive, sexist, heterosexist and racist. I should point out, that some of the on-ice banter is done in jest, e.g. asking an opponent “did you bring the varsity tonight?” Much of what the players reported would be inappropriate to include in this article, however the major themes of the trash talking revolved around dominance, intimidation, and name-calling. Men and women in this sample use trash talk slightly differently with men trying to assert dominance over opponents in their language, e.g. “you are a b\*\*\*\* and should play for the girls’ team” while women are responding to physical aggression of opponents, e.g. “get off me you bitch!” In a focus group interview with the college players, I was struck by the idea that players learn how to trash talk from older players. I began to think about at what age young children might learn *how* to taunt opponents, and the larger issue, which is that children are often learning this behavior *through* sport participation. What does this say about the potential for sport to provide



both positive and negative experiences for children? Existing research by David Conroy (2001) and his colleagues at Penn State clearly demonstrates that the more years children spend in sport, the more they find acts of physical aggression to be acceptable sport behaviors.

However, research has not considered whether the same would be true for instances of verbal aggression.

Consequently, my latest research project attempts to answer the following general questions: Do young athletes find trash talking to be acceptable sport behavior? Do youth find trash talking “cool” or useful in getting opponents “off their game?” As I designed my next research project, two things happened to convince me that this was a timely and important area of study: a proliferation of very public sports brawls in the



professional sports ranks, and recognition by both the public and the research community that bullying and taunting are enormous problems in middle and high schools. Not only did the NBA Detroit Piston’s brawl headline most major print, televised and web media outlets,

but it drew the public’s attention to violence in sport much the same way the McSorley-Brashear slash did in the NHL a few years prior. The Columbine shootings and other such violent acts in schools alerted teachers and parents to the dangers of bullying and teasing in schools. Wessler and de Andrade’s (2006) article “Slurs stereotypes and student interventions” includes data on the severe impact of harassment and bullying on the 10–16% of middle and high school students who report being victims of taunting and bullying.

Discussion with one of my Movement Arts colleagues, Karen Pagnano, led me to understand that the work I was doing with young athletes and verbal aggression sounded “a lot like bullying.” Review of the education and sport literature revealed little attention to verbal harassment in sport and even less on the traditionally understudied girls and women in sport. My graduate school advisor’s constant question “Maura, what will be your unique contribution to the literature?” was still ringing in my ears after 6 or 7 years. Here was my chance to make my “unique contribution” to the discipline.

In the summer of 2005, I conducted part one of an exploratory study focusing on the sport behaviors of girls, aged 10–14 who were participating in a basketball skills camp in central Vermont. These fourth through eighth graders had from one year to nine years participation in sports ranging from basketball, dance, ice hockey, and skiing, to softball, soccer, swimming and horseback riding. I continued data collection in February 2007 with varsity female basketball players at the high school level for part two of the study. Ranging in age from 14–18, these athletes generally had 10 years’ experience in basketball and some years of experience in a variety of other sports including soccer, tennis, volleyball, and field hockey. Data came from four urban or suburban schools in Eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

The results from a simple study such as this were revealing, if not totally surprising. Quantitatively, the elementary school aged girls found the trash talking behaviors significantly less acceptable than the high school aged girls. In youth sport, high school sport, college sport, and professional sport, the high school aged girls found retaliating verbally or taunting opponents to be “Never OK” or “Seldom OK” dependant on the situation.

The girls in all age groups were able to fill the available spaces in answer to the open-ended questions about trash talk they have heard used in their basketball experience. This is an interesting finding because if the younger girls believe it is “Never OK” or “Seldom OK” to use trash talking, who is making all these trash-talking statements in the context of the game, and to whom are they directed? I surmise that the girls have been taught or told not to use verbally aggressive behaviors in basketball, but that in actuality during games, practices and tournaments, trash talking is so common that these lessons are forgotten or ignored. Secondly, we know from sociologist Nan Stein’s (1999) book *Classrooms and courtrooms: facing sexual harassment in K-12 schools*, verbally aggressive behaviors are common in middle and high schools, so it is not surprising that they show up on the basketball court.

The trash talking phrases the girls used or heard used were grouped thematically into a “you suck” category and a “name calling” category. The “you suck” category contained at least 30 different iterations of the phrase ranging from “you suck” and “you suck, grow more before you play again” to “your team sucks” and “you suck at playing basketball, you’re the worst player on our team, it’s your fault we lost.” Similarly, name-calling ranged from “retard, ugly, show off and jerk” to insults over body size such as “look at that fat girl” to racially-motivated phrases like “walk your black ass off the court.” Other phrases included interesting references to popular basketball culture “You ain’t Jordan,” and “ballin.” I wrote the fictitious stories at the beginning of the article using phrases that the girls in the study reported.

Another interesting result that I have also seen in collegiate and recreational women ice hockey players were trash talk fragments aimed at body size. Calling each other fat has power even among 10-year-old girls: “look at that fat girl,” “go by her, she’s fat.” When and how do girls become obsessed with body size and their peers’ body sizes? What are the pressures on these basketball players—are they similar to what we might find in gymnasts or figure skaters? The literature on aggressive behavior among adolescent girls provides insight on this issue. Girls likely get a body size obsession from older girls. According to a recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2000) study on “Tweens,” i.e. boys and girls aged 9–13; show that 11- and 12-year olds say they

worry about being fat. In fact, 22% of children surveyed mention being afraid of being fat.

How does this trash talking influence or affect the girls and boys who participate in sport? Might trash talking contribute to children dropping out of sport? What is the role of the coach in managing behavior and in creating a positive learning environment on his/her team and in competition? Challenging my students, many of whom will be physical education teachers, coaches, and sport and recreation managers, with these questions is one important way I see my research informing my teaching. Like me, many of my students have had positive experiences in sport. However, unlike me, they have not considered how some parts of the sport ethic serve to exclude, alienate, and even violate those involved. As a professor, it is my duty to encourage students to critically analyze sport so they may be better prepared professionals. Access, inclusion, and a positive learning environment are what will keep children and adults in sport, fitness, and wellness programs. It is our collective responsibility to work diligently towards ensuring our programs welcome participants in, not scare them away from, physical activity.

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