

'Trash talk' really can put players off their game

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The 1986 NBA All-Star game in Dallas had the first three-point shooting contest, when eight all-stars were selected for the competition. Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics, who was known as a trash talker, walked into

the locker room as one of the competitors and asked, "Which one of you guys is going to finish second?" He won the contest that night and then finished the season leading the league in three-point shooting, making 42.3 percent of his tries.

The purpose of trash talk during competition is to cause a loss of focus by elevating emotion to the point of distracting an opponent and decreasing their performance. Yet few studies have been done to determine whether trash talk does affect competitive performance.

"We always think of sports as being very physical games but they are absolutely mental games," says Karen C.P. McDermott '19 Ph.D., whose recent doctoral dissertation in communications is one of the first studies to statistically show the specific effects of trash talk on competitive performance.

"Plenty of coaches will tell you to 'get your head in the game' because having that mental edge and being mentally focused is incredibly important, especially in sports that require hand-eye coordination. There's always that mental component and trash talk is another form of offense that athletes have to play defense against."

From baseball catchers jawing at batters awaiting fast balls and Muhammad Ali's aggrandized bragging and taunts toward his opponents in the boxing ring to NFL linebackers taunting runners just tackled and NBA players exchanging rude comments after a thunderous dunk, trash talk has been part of competitive sports from neighborhood playgrounds to professional arenas.

McDermott's study, "Emotional manipulation and cognitive distraction as strategy: The effects of verbal insults on motivation and performance in a competitive setting," used the racing video game competition "Mario Kart" as the test model and found that the ability of trash talk to

negatively affect the game performance of a competitor was confirmed.

The game was played under controlled conditions by 200 men and women ages 18 to 35, with some hearing verbally aggressive insults and some who did not during their competition.

She says while observing the video [game](#) competition, she found both auditory and cognitive distraction but it was specifically the cognitive distraction that was affecting competitors' motivation to perform, affecting their ability to focus on their task. She also found that players were feeling both anger and shame.

"I had originally conceived anger and shame to be two opposite reactions; that people would either feel one or the other strongly; that if you felt angry it was going to motivate you more," McDermott says. "What I found actually is that anger and shame were related to each other. People didn't feel one or the other, they tended to feel both. In many cases what happened was that people felt shame more strongly and it made them angry. That affected their performance. I hadn't expected that."

A former high school volleyball player who competed in leagues and tournaments regularly for many years, McDermott says there is little scientific inquiry into why trash talk is used and how it affects its intended target. As she began to look into it and the research done on it, she did not find previous research in part because "trash talk" is a slang word rather than a scientific word.

"You have to find the actual terms people are using like 'competitive incivility,' which is one of the polite terms," she says. "But even using some of the more euphemistic terms for it, I wasn't finding many studies. It wasn't until 2018 when I started my study that I started finding more researchers putting out work on trash talk."

She notes that while sports psychology is used to assist athletes when they perform, it primarily focuses on self-actualizing, or visualizing a successful outcome in competition rather than preparing for verbal attacks.

"We practice defensive skills all the time on the courts but you don't practice defensive mental drills," McDermott says. "Part of the reason I think they don't do that is because there hasn't been enough study about trash talk to be able to formulate a defense against it. The study I did is one of the first that attempted to map out the cognitive and emotional processes that a person will actually feel while being the target of trash talk."

McDermott says the study provides the first step toward a more nuanced and expanded exploration of the emotional and psychological effects of [trash](#) talk as a component in a competitive context.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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