



MICHIGAN

Shielding yourself from Trash Talk and other Negativity



“Man often becomes what he believes himself to be. If I keep on saying to myself that I cannot do a certain thing, it is possible that I may end by really becoming incapable of doing it. On the contrary, if I shall have the belief that I can do it, I shall surely acquire the capacity to do it, even if I may not have it at the beginning.” ~ Mahatma Ghandi

Hi Wolverines,

How many times have you stepped into competition and heard something that you just couldn't shake? Your opponent was talking trash or the fans were screaming insults. Sometimes, you were able to ignore it and other times you couldn't let it go. So, how does trash talk or fan taunts effect us?

The answer lies not in the content of what was said, but by the context of which you placed it, and whether or not you allowed it to interrupt your thought processes. In order for trash talk to be effective, the receiver must choose to believe the comment. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “No one can insult you without your permission.” Her statement applies here. No one can get in your head without your permission. The only way someone else's comment can have an impact is if you choose to believe it. For example, if someone called you a “kangaroo,”you would laugh them off the field because you know you are not a kangaroo. However, if

someone criticizes you, like most people, you will assess the accuracy of the insult. I am often fascinated how an athlete will consider the insult from a stranger over what they already know to be true about themselves. So, the next time someone yells “you suck” you ultimately have two choices:

- 1) waste time assessing how accurate the comment is or
- 2) recognize that “you suck” is about as correct as being called a “kangaroo.”

This is a great example of the power of trash talk, but more importantly, the power of belief. We've all heard stories of cancer survivors who simply believed they had more to live for, even when they were deemed terminal, and somehow outlived the expectations of doctors by 1,2, or even 5 years. The same type of belief and thought processes can play a powerful role

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in sports. When your opponent tries to get into your head, they're playing on the strength of faith and belief. If they can make you question yourself and your training, they've won and this will affect the outcome of your sport and any series of events in which you doubt yourself. The same holds true for what you say to your opponent. And if you are able to ignore the trash talk you can continue to perform at a high level.

If you're able to ignore the insults, it's incredible what your mind is capable of orchestrating without conscious thought. Take for example swinging at a fastball in baseball. If the ball is thrown at roughly 90 miles an hour, it will cross the plate

from the pitcher's release point in 0.3 seconds. Conscious awareness of what is going on takes roughly half a second – meaning that the pitch is too fast for batters to consciously “know” what is happening. Yet, most pitchers don't dare to only throw fastballs, because a batter can anticipate the pitch which would nullify the advantage of throwing the ball faster than 90 mph. In other words, if the batter knows it is coming he can initiate his swing before the ball is released from the pitcher's hand. The second that you allow your mind to focus on something else, like trash talk, your mind's capacity to initiate these complex motor acts – in this case, a swing – becomes limited which ultimately leads to a greater chance of failure or striking out.

If you can ignore trash talk, the same way you ignore crowd noise or other distractions, you will be in control which will likely produce better results.

Here are a few simple, effective tools you can use to combat the trash talk and fan taunts.

1 Think positively

Research has shown people who believe in their abilities will outperform people who don't. To help your positivity, remember how much you have practiced; how much time you have spent in the weight room; how much time you have invested in perfecting your skills.

2 Focus on your performance routine

Tune out the crowd, tune out the opponent. Focus on getting yourself prepared and getting into your comfort zone. Doing so will drown out everything else until it's just background noise.

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3 Put the insult in context

Remember, the fans aren't experts about your sport and your opponents want you to be distracted. Their goal is to get in your way. Remind yourself of these things, and recognize that if you focus on what they are saying then you are allowing them to be effective rather than allowing yourself to be effective. Once you realize it's just to cause problems for you, put it away and play your game.

4 Keep your cool

Trash talk is meant to throw you off your game and to get you upset. Research has shown that fine motor control and coordinate are less effective when angry. So, take a deep breath and let it go. Keep your cool and keep playing.

5 Let your game do the talking

The opponent might try to beat you with words, but let your performance speak for itself. Sir Alex Ferguson, the manager for Manchester United, once said "you can't escape the playing field." It is true. At the end of the day, your actions will speak louder than any comments they can make about your actions.



This sport psych news edition was written by Scott Goldman, Ph.D. and Alex Auerbach, sport psychology intern.

• Ultimately, much of the battle with trash talk boils down to being the bigger person and maintaining your integrity and respect for the game. Remembering to respect your opponent, yourself, your teammates, and the game will help you to block out the trash talk and enjoy the opportunity and competition at hand.

• If you would like some help controlling your reaction to trash talk; if you would like to feel more confident; if you would like to discuss other techniques for anxiety; if you would like to meet and discuss other benefits of sport and clinical psychology; or if you are feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, stressed out, frustrated, worried, sad, or lacking confidence, please contact Barb Donlan at (734)647-9656 or ask your athletic trainer to schedule an appointment with one of the Performance Psychology Team Staff . We look forward to working with you.

Scott Goldman, Ph.D. *Director of Performance Psychology*