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More than Bullshit: Trash Talk and Other Psychological Tests of Sporting Excellence

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ABSTRACT

Sporting excellence is a function of physical, cognitive and psychological capacities: its standard requires demonstration of superlative physical and strategic skills and the performance of these skills under pressure. However, despite the widespread acceptance of this idea there has been little exploration of what counts as a legitimate test of the psychological dimension. What work has been done has tended to focus on the practice of trash talking and whether the pressure that trash talking exerts is conducive to sporting objectives. However, not only do we believe that the philosophical work on trash talking is misguided, but also its conclusions have not been used to elucidate the legitimacy of other psychological pressures that occur in sport. In this paper we address this first lacuna by providing a more nuanced exploration of trash talking than exists in the philosophical literature, with the aim of addressing the second lacuna by suggesting a framework by which to evaluate other forms of psychological pressure that arise in sport. Briefly, our claim is that not all forms of trash talking that derail an opponent degrade, and that recipients of trash talking have both epistemic and social responsibilities in how they respond to trash talking. Moreover, these epistemic and social responsibilities can be extrapolated to evaluate the legitimacy of other forms of psychological pressure in sport, with forms that turn out to preclude broader social ends being morally illegitimate, and forms that do not preclude social ends yet facilitate meaningful challenges being legitimate tests of sporting excellence.

KEYWORDS

Trash talk; excellence; psychological pressure; bullshit; mental toughness

Introduction

As is well accepted, sporting excellence is a function of physical, cognitive and psychological capacities: its standard requires demonstration of superlative physical and strategic skills and the performance of these skills under pressure. Accordingly, sporting excellence obtains only when these capacities are properly tested as per the lusory goals¹ of each particular pursuit. However, despite the widespread acceptance of this idea, it remains an outstanding question which forms of psychological pressure are legitimate tests of sporting excellence. Usually, psychological pressure is understood to

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be exerted by such phenomena as an opponent's strong performance or the need to perform publicly or in high-stakes situations.² That these forms of pressure are legitimate tests of excellence can be seen by considering competitors who fail to perform on big occasions or who fold in the face of opponents' strong performances: competitors who are unable to overcome such challenges cannot be said to achieve sporting excellence in the manner of those who face them successfully. However, it is also apparent that failures to overcome some forms of psychological pressure do not constitute a failure of excellence. For example, an athlete who loses focus in a game upon learning of the death of his child cannot be said to have fallen short of the standards of sporting excellence, since withstanding such pressure cannot properly be said to be constitutive of those standards. This seems enough to demonstrate that some forms of psychological pressure are legitimate tests of excellence while other forms are not.

Of the many practices that exert psychological pressure which may facilitate or detract from the pursuit of sporting excellence, the most commonly discussed is trash talking. However, though a literature has developed on the ethics of trash talking, those discussions which aim to provide normative assessments of the practice have suffered from a paucity of distinctions and have not been extrapolated to evaluate other forms of psychological pressure. In this paper, we thus offer what we believe is a more nuanced evaluation of the normativity of trash talking, with an eye to exploring the legitimacy of psychological pressure as a general function of sporting excellence.

Pressure and Trash Talk

To begin, a brief precis on the notion of psychological pressure and of the philosophical literature on trash talking is helpful. Psychological pressure is generally associated with anxiety about performance (Joseph and Cramer 2011, 238), and hence psychological excellence in responding to pressure can be understood as coping with anxiety well. Psychologists speak of coping with pressure in a number of different ways – hardiness, resilience, and grit are common notions (Arthur et al. 2015, 233) – but one concept particularly applicable to trash talking is 'mental toughness'.³ Hardy et al. speak of mental toughness as 'the ability of some people to continue to strive toward and achieve their goals in psychological circumstances where others "fall by the wayside" and fail', defining it as a '(dispositional) construct that allows individuals to deal with obstacles, distractions, pressure, and adversity from a wide range of stressors' (2014, 69). Accordingly, psychological pressure is understood here as the result of stressors posing challenges to performing well, which in turn give the opportunity to demonstrate excellence *qua* mental toughness in resisting performance anxiety.

In sport, the conditions of performing well vary depending on the skill sets of each sport as well as the circumstances of their execution. While the permutations of these conditions are too innumerable to mention, the question of how athletes' focus can be compromised by pressure is theorized in the psychology of sport via two central models of attention.⁴ According to the 'self-focus' model, an athlete's performance is compromised by undue attention to the motor components of well-learned skills, as 'paralysis by analysis' leads to a failure to execute what should be reliable procedural actions.⁵ On the 'distraction' model, by contrast, athletes find their performance disrupted when they focus on factors irrelevant to the contest and fail to attend to

important task-related cues; in essence, they suffer from cognitive overload.⁶ On each of these models the compromised performance results from failure to resist the pressure caused by the stressor, either in terms of not maintaining confidence in one's abilities and resisting performance anxiety, or in terms of not being able to maintain one's focus on the relevant task at hand. The question to be discussed as such is what forms of pressure are appropriate to sporting excellence? When does mental toughness constitute sporting excellence, and when is it extraneous to sporting objectives?

Trash talking is one stressor whose legitimacy has been questioned as form of psychological pressure. Also known as sledging, a commonly accepted account of trash talking defines it as 'verbal insults and intimidation, designed to gain a competitive advantage' (Dixon 2007, 97). This advantage obtains when the mental state of another competitor is affected or compromised and poorer performance results.⁷ Trash talking as such can be seen as a species of gamesmanship,⁸ which imposes stressors on athletes and generally occurs between competitors, though may also take place between competitors and third parties.

According to one prominent position in the literature, trash talking is inappropriate as a test of sporting excellence because the pressure it exerts is both morally dubious and unrelated to proper sporting objectives.⁹ On this interpretation, the goal of trash talking is to morally degrade the target or to engender feelings of moral degradation; it is successful when its target feels so morally offended as to lose focus on the lusory end of the game. Accordingly, trash talking is claimed wrong whether successful or not because the trash talker's intention fails to respect the target as an end in herself. Moreover, the *prima facie* wrongness of this intention cannot be justified by greater goods thereby enabled (such as elevated levels of performance by the focused athlete), because either no greater goods actually obtain (elevated levels are not in fact achieved, or are not worth the costs they impose) or because those that do obtain are not properly demonstrative of sporting excellence.

This position has its detractors of course. Some argue that the permissibility of trash talking is simply a matter of considering what each sport's organizing body decides.¹⁰ Others more specifically claim that trash talking is a strategic skill consented to by participants as per the social contract of competitive sport.¹¹ In each case, the claim is that trash talking must be understood contextually, as intended to disrupt focus but not necessarily meant literally or seriously.

One of the problems with all these positions however is that they seem to neglect how multifarious trash talking can be. Indeed, many of these normative discussions have tended to conceptualize trash talking in too singular a fashion, ignoring the different ways it can exert psychological pressure and passing over distinctions that demand more nuanced evaluation of the practice considered as a whole. To avoid this, and thus to make possible a more sophisticated treatment of the issue, it is helpful to enumerate a variety of different forms of trash talking. Trash talking can take the form of:

- (1) Insulting one's opponent's performance on the day (e.g. mocking the opponent's mistakes in the current game);
- (2) Insulting one's opponent's general sporting abilities (e.g. mocking the opponent's weaknesses or previous losses);

- (3) Questioning one's opponent's sporting integrity (e.g. making allegations about steroid-use or other illicit performance enhancement);
- (4) Bragging about one's own abilities to undermine one's opponent's confidence (e.g. praising one's own performance to make the opponent doubt their own);
- (5) Insulting one's opponent's non-sporting characteristics (e.g. insulting someone's sexual orientation or calling them racial epithets);
- (6) Mocking one's opponent's non-sporting losses (e.g. making light of or mocking the opponent's personal tragedies);
- (7) Insulting one's opponent's family members or other intimates (e.g. making fun of a family member's marginal status or actual or contrived improprieties);
- (8) Goading an opponent to do something strategically inadvisable (e.g. encouraging one's opponent to play aggressively when playing defensively is more prudent);
or
- (9) Offering condescending advice about how to play the game (e.g. telling one's opponent how to perform basic technique or employ basic strategy).¹²

Though not intended to be exhaustive, this list shows how differently trash talking can occur yet all to the end of gaining a competitive advantage. More specifically, the list makes clear that different forms of trash talking can exert different forms of psychological pressure, which if not resisted by their targets cause anxiety in different ways. For instance, should 1, 2, 4 or 9 be successful then anxiety would likely be caused by drawing undue attention to the performance of procedural skills; 3, 5, 6, 7 or 8 on the other hand are more likely to cause anxiety through cognitive overload and distracting attention from the sporting task at hand. Moreover, in addition to causing anxiety differently, these different stressors seem also to demand different forms of evaluation. Bragging about one's own ability for example does not exert pressure through moral degradation, and so should not be evaluated in the same way as should be ridiculing one's opponent's religious beliefs. Accordingly, to argue that all trash talking illegitimately tests sporting excellence because it aims at moral degradation is clearly misguided: many forms do not.¹³ But it is also misguided to think that all forms of trash talking can be evaluated solely within the sporting arena and as having no meaning beyond it. Indeed, those who argue that trash talking can be evaluated fully within the province of sport err in ignoring sport's social context and the fact that its practices, including trash talking, have moral consequences outside of sport.

Given this, how ought we to think about trash talking? Trash talking that aims to derail through degradation seems clearly problematic and should not be sanctioned as a legitimate test of sporting excellence. But equally clear, the meaning of trash talk is contextual to its practice, such that speech that is problematic outside of sport may not be so within it: promising to 'destroy' someone on the pitch, for example, should not have them calling the police. Determining whether trash talk should be sanctioned as contributing to sporting excellence thus requires two tasks: first, determining the moral bounds of its practice, bearing in mind that its meaning must be understood within context; and second, of those forms of trash talking which are morally considerable, developing a framework for determining which forms (if any) exert legitimate pressure and are conducive to sporting excellence.

The Moral Bounds of Trash Talk

Turning to the first task – determining the moral bounds of trash talking – it is helpful to consider how the meaning of trash talk is modulated by its context. Because trash talk is often not meant seriously, and because participants are aware of this, the usual norms that govern speech and are cause for its censure may not always apply.¹⁴ To illustrate this, it is useful to consider parallels between trash talk and Harry Frankfurt's treatment of 'bullshit'. As we will see, Frankfurt's analysis will allow us to categorize trash talk as bullshit or non-bullshit, with harmful and non-harmful variants of both. On the basis of this categorization, we will be able to adjudicate when trash talk should be sanctioned as morally considerable, and then provide a framework by which to determine when those permissible forms offer legitimate tests of sporting excellence.

According to Frankfurt, bullshit is speech that aims to convince, but at the same time is unconcerned with truth. It is not the same as lying since it need not be false, and because unlike the liar the bullshitter does not seek to misrepresent what is true; indeed, he pays no attention to truth or falsity and has no concern with whether he is describing reality correctly. Instead, he 'picks [things] out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose' whatever that may be (2005, 56).

How then ought we to respond to bullshit? In general, our epistemic obligation is to evaluate others' speech in terms of what it is reasonable to believe. This requires consideration of the speaker's epistemic standing, their motives, their circumstances, the coherence of their claims with other accepted beliefs, and so on. In the case of bullshit, however, since the bullshitter is not concerned with truth, there is little reason to put any stock in his claims and no reason to attempt to rebut him: arguments after all are grounded in truth and thus at cross-purposes to the bullshitter's end. The appropriate response to bullshit is thus to understand it as frivolous and to dismiss it as unworthy of any serious consideration.

This is relevant to sport because some trash talkers attempt to derail their opponents without concern for truth: they bullshit. Consider for example the trash talker who, despite having no standing to make claims about her opponent, nevertheless proclaims her own abilities superior (4 on the list) or denounces her opponent's weaknesses in general (2 on the list). In such cases the trash talker has no credibility, and if it is reasonable for the recipient of the trash talk to know this – perhaps because she also lacks grounds to make claims of their comparative abilities – then following Frankfurt's analysis, she is under an epistemic obligation to dismiss the trash talk as bullshit.

This is especially so because sport is a context in which bullshit frequently occurs: there is particular reason for competitors to anticipate it, and so particular obligation for them not to fall prey to it.¹⁵ If targets of bullshitting trash talk are thus derailed by it, then *ceteris paribus* they are culpably derailed: by being 'thrown off their game' when they should not have been – that is by failing to display reasonable levels of mental toughness – they have lost the opportunity to demonstrate their physical and strategic abilities, and can be considered to have failed in sporting excellence.

However, sanctioning bullshit as a morally legitimate practice needs to be mitigated by the fact that bullshit can sometimes cause real harms, even when recognized as bullshit.¹⁶ Consider for example an athlete trash talking about an opponent's relative who is a victim in a criminal sexual assault case (7 on the list). The trash talker

may know of the case generally but not its details, yet make claims about the relative deserving the assault because of their promiscuity. This trash talk is bullshit but trades on serious harms that exist outside of sport, namely belittling a loved one's abuse and perpetuating destructive narratives about sexual assault. Indeed, and as Duncan points out, 'it's not difficult to believe those who [are] sledged about their race, gender or family related issues [are] negatively impacted by this in the aftermath of the play contest' (2018, 12).¹⁷

In such a case, simple dismissal of the trash talk as bullshit seems insufficient. Indeed, though the meaning of trash talk must surely be understood in context – it may not be meant seriously but only for the purposes of derailing – its meaning must not be thought exhausted by that context.¹⁸ After all, though sport may be a practice in which the norms governing other forms of activity do not apply, it is surely not fully isolated from other practices we engage in.¹⁹ To see this more clearly it is helpful to consider that sport may license action that is otherwise proscribed, but faces limits in how it may do this. For example, ice hockey may allow body checking which is not allowed at the train station, but it does not allow checks to the head. These limits issue from broader social values such as those regarding what risks or harms can be legitimately consented to.²⁰ Thus, though sport has some license to determine its own activities, those activities are nevertheless subject to evaluation as they bear on broader values. Insofar as trash talk thus causes harms, whether bullshit or not it deserves condemnation. In turn, this condemnation requires not legitimating harmful trash talk in general as a test of sporting excellence, on pain of licensing action only to condemn it.²¹

This overlap between sport and other social practices entails that participants are responsible for ensuring that behaviour in sport does not breach important values outside of it: it is important that 'at the game's conclusion, relationships and lives will continue much as before' (Bredemeier and Shields 2001, 261). In the case of trash talk, the difficulty of course lies in knowing when speech is harmful and knowing when it is not. In some cases making this judgement will be straightforward, such as in the example above involving sexual assault which seems clearly to trade on, and cause or perpetuate harms. Yet by way of contrast, if an athlete were to tell an opponent 'I'll make you wish you'd never been born', it is not reasonable to interpret this as a threat to the opponent's life, nor as trading on or causing harms. As such it is a form of speech that should be sanctioned as morally acceptable.

Of course, intermediary cases about which there will be reasonable disagreement will abound. The 2006 World Cup final offers a case in point, when Zinedine Zidane head-butted Marco Materazzi after Materazzi allegedly insulted Zidane's sister (a case of 7 on the list). Was this a case of sporting failure by Zidane, falling to legitimate psychological pressure exerted by evident bullshit he should have ignored? Or, were the insults serious enough that expecting Zidane to resist their distraction would have been unreasonable? Materazzi himself would seem to judge it a sporting failure, given his claim that mothers have 'holy status' and are thus off limits, with the insinuation that sisters are fair game.²² Of course, there is every reason to think Materazzi wrong on this – at least in terms of thinking there were no harms at all. But the point is that the moral acceptability of some trash talk will remain controversial, just as some speech outside of sport blurs lines between harm and offense and is subject to continual negotiation.²³

Notwithstanding reasonable disagreement, however, the claim remains that when boundaries are crossed and trash talk causes harms, distraction and poor performance are understandable, and failure to demonstrate sporting excellence is exculpated, though proportionately to the severity of the harms involved. For instance, if harms are minimal and psychological collapse is total – the person completely loses concentration after a minor slight – then the athlete is culpable for the excessive response and to that extent does indeed fail.

Thus far the discussion has focused on non-harmful bullshit, which we claim poses a morally acceptable psychological test to athletes, and on harmful forms of bullshit and non-bullshit trash talk which cannot be morally sanctioned. What remains to be discussed is truthful trash talking which is harmless. Such trash talk, we suggest, can also be sanctioned as a form of psychological pressure that functions as a morally legitimate test of sporting excellence.

As an illustrative example we can turn to any number of instances involving the NBA's Larry Bird who was notorious for his truthful trash talking on the court.²⁴ When confronted with Bird's trash talk about his superior abilities (4 on the list), opponents had to face and overcome their comparative lack of skill in striving for sporting excellence. This required of them great strategy combined with physical ability, but also faith that their abilities and preparation for the competition would allow them to meet Bird's challenge. Of course, exhibiting mental toughness in the face of such pressure was no small feat; but not only was such pressure legitimate to sporting ends as imposing a certain salience about what the contest involved – any anxiety resulting would be due to understanding the facts of the contest – reckoning with that salience and meeting the challenge could in fact elevate performance in a way that may not have occurred without Bird's taunting.

This last point about meeting the challenge posed by truthful trash talk offers interesting segue to explore the second issue of concern about trash talking, namely the question of which of its forms (if any) conduce to sporting excellence. The question is important because although trash talking that is non-harmful may be morally acceptable, it need not be laudable on a sporting standard. How then are we to adjudicate those morally legitimate forms of trash talk in terms of sporting excellence, and how can we use this to think about psychological pressure more generally in sport?

Athletic Excellence and Psychological Tests: Sketching a Normative Framework

As stated earlier, excellence in sport is achieved by facing and overcoming anxiety-inducing tests which require one to demonstrate superlative skills and abilities. Accordingly, competitors who want to demonstrate excellence should seek out opponents who can present them with meaningful challenges. To see this, consider the Canadian Women's ice hockey team which defeated Slovakia at the 2010 Olympics by a score of 18–0. The Canadians won, but faced no serious tests of their physical or strategic abilities; they certainly had no occasion to demonstrate their skills under pressure, and because of this could achieve or demonstrate little excellence. Moreover, the Canadians trash talking the opposition in this situation would surely have been inappropriate. Even if it did not trade on harms, the additional psychological

pressure heaped on the opponent would have conduced neither to their excellence nor to the Canadians'; any trash talk here would have been completely gratuitous.

However, if excellence requires facing and overcoming serious challenges, then non-harmful trash talk is non-gratuitous when it either helps to set the condition of these challenges or helps one to overcome them. Accordingly, if trash talking helps to 'pump oneself up' to demonstrate better one's skills and abilities, then it can be said to be deployed to the end of excellence.²⁵ Similarly, if trash talking helps to improve an opponent's performance by increasing their focus or otherwise elevating their play, then it helps set a greater challenge against which to prove oneself and again is conducive to the achievement of excellence.²⁶ Indeed, Larry Bird's trash talking may not only have helped him to focus on his game, but by challenging the opponent to play better it may actually have helped Bird in turn perform to higher levels.²⁷

Of course, all this presumes that excellence and not simply victory is one's end in sport. Victory after all can be achieved without excellence, as in the example of Canada's ice hockey team, or as occurs when one trash talks an opponent with a particularly fragile ego to purposefully avoid facing their otherwise considerable talents and thereby testing one's mental toughness. Moreover, this approach presumes a certain practical wisdom in the employment of trash talk to the end of sporting excellence. After all, knowing how to trash talk to build up oneself may be reasonably straightforward, but trash talking to build up one's opponent is more challenging, requiring not only knowing when to trash talk, but also how and to what extent. Because of this, not all trash talkers trash talk well, even when doing so in a morally permissible manner. Indeed, on this model trash talking well requires experience and sensitivity to one's circumstances, and thus may prove more difficult at lower than more elite levels of competition, where players have more experience than amateurs, and circumstances may be easier to read given reasonable presumptions about more elevated levels of mental toughness and psychological commitment.²⁸

Our claim is thus that morally sanctioned trash talk must be evaluated in terms of how it conduces to sporting excellence, either by helping to set challenges or by helping to overcome them: legitimate trash talk conduces to these ends, while trash talk that does not is gratuitous and to be avoided. Returning to the Materazzi-Zidane incident above, though it might be suggested this was a case of successful gamesmanship by Materazzi, having skilfully employed bullshit to upset Zidane's concentration, our framework suggests otherwise.²⁹ Indeed, presuming for the sake of argument that Materazzi's trash talking was morally justified, it was nevertheless sportingly unjustified if it was intended to make Zidane play worse. (On the other hand, if it was intended by Materazzi to help himself play better, and not expected to affect Zidane in the way that it did given his years of experience competing at the highest level, then the trash talk was justified and it was Zidane who failed in mental toughness.)

If the framework sketched here works, how can it apply to other instances where competitors face psychological challenges? As further illustration of its possibilities, we consider two cases of 'third party' involvement: locker room designs and spectator cheering. The first case offers an example that fails to meet the moral standards for psychological pressure, while the second case offers two examples which both pass the moral standard, but respectively fail and pass the sporting standard of conducing to sporting excellence.

The Normative Framework and Other Psychological Tests

Turning to the first case, we consider locker room designs for an example of a form of psychological pressure that trades on harms and thus should not be employed as a test of mental toughness. The University of Iowa is notorious for having decorated its football visitors' locker rooms pink, in stark contrast to the rest of the University's sporting facilities which are decorated mostly in white. Designed in the 1970s, the locker rooms have been labelled the relic of a 'childish...and destructive culture', intended to upset the preparations of male athletes by confronting them with a colour considered feminine and 'sissy' (Tilly 2014, 4). Though the locker rooms do have their defenders – some claim them decorated for pink's calming effect, and not because of the colour's gender associations – there is ample reason to believe that the facilities were designed to insult male athletes on the basis of presumptions about female weakness and timidity.³⁰ Since presumptions such as these perpetuate damaging narratives about women, and also damage men by reinforcing misplaced notions of masculinity, attempting to gain advantage by contriving such stressors should be rejected as morally wrong.

Considering at more length the second case of spectator cheering, spectators often impose psychological pressure on competitors, and as such are subject to moral and sporting critique in how they do this. We have already seen reasons to reject spectator jeering which trades on harms; but if spectators are concerned to see their favourites achieve excellence, then according to our framework they ought also to regulate and restrain their non-harmful trash talk in ways that are conducive to this end. For example, if spectators create such an intimidating atmosphere that the opposition collapses and presents no challenge for their favourite to overcome, then this sort of engagement is sportingly inappropriate and spectators ought to refrain from such behaviour.

Such unsalutary behaviour might be demonstrated by Major League Baseball's wild-card playoff game between the Cincinnati Reds and Pittsburgh Pirates in 2013. Johnny Cueto, pitcher for the Reds, was at the mound in the second inning with one out and the Pirates leading 1–0. Between pitches, Pittsburgh's fans, hoping to rattle Cueto, chanted a mocking variation of his name. Before throwing his next pitch and to the roar of the crowd, Cueto dropped the ball and had to step off the mound to retrieve it. On his very next pitch he gave up a home-run, and after continued poor performance was replaced in the fourth inning. Of course, whether Cueto's pitching was affected by the crowd's involvement is difficult to know, though many baseball fans certainly think it was.³¹ Regardless, if their chanting did indeed cause Cueto to underperform due to anxiety, then fans may well have prevented their team from demonstrating excellence against the best the opposition had to offer. Correspondingly, the Pirates' win may not have had the sporting value it might otherwise have had, with the result that the crowd imposing this form of pressure was morally acceptable but sportingly inappropriate.³²

On the other hand, it is also the case that spectator involvement may conduce to sporting excellence by helping a favourite play better yet not in a manner detrimental to the overall contest. Consider for example Andy Murray's performance in the men's tennis final against Roger Federer in the 2012 London Olympics. Murray, the home favourite, was cheered on by the crowd to defeat the world No. 1 in straight sets. The victory was particularly impressive for Murray: it was his first major title after losing four Grand Slam finals (three of them against Federer), at a venue where Federer generally

excels, after having recently lost to Federer in 4 sets at the previous Wimbledon finals.³³ Speaking after the match, Murray admitted how the crowd's cheering encouraged him, yet Federer by contrast seemed unaffected by the home support. Indeed, in the Wimbledon final only one month before, he had confronted similar home support for Murray, yet not only seemed impervious to it (receiving it as if it was for him before the match), but played exceptionally well and decisively won despite a strong start from Murray.³⁴

Our argument through these examples is that crowd support can be sportingly laudable, though not if it serves to undermine a contest's competitiveness. Of course, how to adjudicate collective activity to this end may be tricky, and obviously achievement of excellence is not always the primary objective of a raucous crowd. Still, it cannot be said that excellence is never in the interest of even the most partisan fan, since most spectators recognize the value of competitive games and generally prefer triumph over worthy and challenging opponents. As such, though perhaps initially counter-intuitive, it is not unreasonable for fans to object to crowd interference which creates stressors that prevent the opposition from excelling both physically and cognitively. Fans need not want this for the opposition's sake, of course, but they should want the opposition to perform well in order for their own team to demonstrate superiority and excellence.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper has been to investigate the conditions under which psychological pressure conduces to sporting excellence. To this end we discussed the legitimacy of one type of pressure – trash talking – and extrapolated our evaluation of that particular stressor to elucidate other forms of pressure that arise within sport.

By making connections between trash talking and bullshit, and recognizing the hermeneutical complications of sport – namely that speech in sport has its own conventions, but is nevertheless subject to values outside its context – we have argued for the moral conditions of trash talking's permissibility, and the conditions under which it is morally unacceptable. From this basis we have further argued that morally permissible trash talking is legitimate to the end of sporting excellence when it helps to set or overcome challenges which in turn heighten physical or strategic performance.

This argument for the legitimacy of trash talking has enabled us to draw conclusions about other forms of psychological pressure in sport and their normative and sporting merits. Indeed, by extending our considerations to locker room design and spectator cheering, we have argued that psychological stressors in general should be evaluated first by whether they are morally legitimate, and subsequently by whether they set the stage for sporting excellence by raising the level of a contest's competitiveness. Extrapolating from these examples, our framework should be applicable to a wide range of stressors in sport, from the manner in which coaches call out underperforming players, to how media draw athletes' attention to the gravity of upcoming contests.

Of course, how compelling one finds our framework will depend on one's acceptance of its foundations. One of these is that excellence is not reducible to victory, and that victory is of secondary importance to achieving excellence. More controversial, though perhaps more interesting, is the idea that achieving excellence in sport should not entail failing, or necessitate breaching, important values outside of it. This premise is more

systemic, and points to a wider view of sport as continuous with other forms of life in which we engage. Though we believe of course there are good reasons to find this view compelling – as argued for above – it nevertheless requires more investigation in terms of how to think about sport's importance relative to life's other activities, and how to understand the extent to which sport is independent of external values and to what extent it is subject to them. Indeed, these investigations will affect what one thinks about our framework and the specifics of how one believes it should apply.

To see the manner in which this wider view is undertheorized, consider briefly the question of how to think about athletes who display mental toughness when confronted with stressors whose pressures seem unreasonable to withstand. For example, consider again the athlete who learns of her child's death, yet this time imagine she maintains her focus and continues her game in superlative fashion. In this situation it seems fair to ask whether she exemplifies psychological and sporting excellence, or is deficient in terms of other values at hand. Indeed, one might wonder whether her performance is to be admired but not expected (i.e. is supererogatory), or rather proceeds from a moral insensibility and is thus not deserving of laudation. One might of course be inclined to say that the evaluation goes both ways – it is not admirable morally but it is admirable sportingly – but if the presumption is that sporting excellence is informed or bound by broader values, then any answer demands deeper analysis in this light. It demands knowing for instance whether sporting excellence is a morally infused concept, so that moral failure through sport precludes sporting excellence, though perhaps not excellence in sport's physical activities. Of course, these particular considerations are beyond the scope of this paper, but the opportunity for their investigation is laid by our framework.

Notes

1. A lusory goal is an objective that arises within the context of the rules of the sport being played; a pre-lusory goal is 'an achievable state of affairs' (Suits 2005, 40) that can arise outside that context. Thus, a lusory goal of soccer is to 'score a goal', while the pre-lusory goal is to ensure that the soccer ball cross a specific line on a field.
2. Other forms of psychological pressure in sport include: others relying upon one to perform well; having to perform at high levels for prolonged periods of time; withstanding the play of a particularly aggressive opponent; reacting to the unexpected failure of one's preparation; and maintaining performance despite recent failures. For an extended account see Hardy, Bell, and Beatty (2014).
3. Mental toughness has been seen as significant in areas outside of the sporting context including military training (Arthur et al. 2015) and leadership studies (Jones 2004).
4. Beilock and Carr (2001); Oudejans et al. (2011).
5. The term 'paralysis by analysis' comes from Sian Beilock, as referenced by Papineau (2017, 11). This model might help to account for 'the yips', viz., when an athlete fails to perform well because she focuses too singularly on the technique involved.
6. Though the self-focus model and the distraction model appear to be competing alternatives, Beilock and Carr (2001, 701) suggest they may have different domains of applicability which could make them complementary rather than mutually exclusive.
7. Summers (2007, 75: fn. 2); Joseph and Cramer (2011, 237).
8. Howe (2004, 13).
9. Dixon (2007, 2008, 2018). See also Feezell (2008, 36) and Morris (2012, 50).
10. See Kershner (2015, 2018)).

11. See Summers (2007).
12. Some of these are also mentioned by LoConto and Roth (2005). 9 on the list is discussed by Papineau (2017, 76). Notice also that different forms of trash talking may occur in conjunction with each other, as when one encourages someone to remember better technique (9 on the list) as a way to redress their previous failures (2 on the list).
13. As Joseph and Cramer recognize, 'In most cases, sledging is not [a] foul-mouthed tirade of abusive language... Most of the time it is quite the opposite [...] and rarely carries a destructive purpose' (2011, 238). See also the motivations for trash talking amongst university athletes reported by Rainey and Granito (2010) and by LoConto and Roth (2005).
14. Kavussanu and Ring's study of students' response to antisocial behaviour in sport supports this (2016).
15. The frequency of trash talk will be relative to different sports and different levels of competitive engagement. Different forms of trash talk may also be more common in some sports than others.
16. That bullshit in general can have harmful consequences seems evident enough. Consider for example the political speech of Donald Trump which for all appearances is bullshit, but which nevertheless has impact on those who hear it (e.g. his speech demeaning Mexicans and Muslims or his failure to condemn white supremacists). See Shear and Haberman (2017), or Watkins and Phillip (2018).
17. Dixon echoes this sentiment: 'The psychological damage caused by repeated insults based on such characteristics as race, sexual orientation, and sexual identity can itself significantly reduce people's desire and ability to act in ways that further their life plans' (2018, 215).
18. It is for this reason that Summers falls short when he says that 'content and intent are often opposed, and it is the intent behind sledging that should be considered when evaluating whether or not it is disrespectful' (2007, 73). Summers fails to recognize that agents can be culpably negligent for the unintended harms caused by their actions.
19. See Bredemeier and Shields (2001, 258) who discuss this notion in terms of 'moral bracketing'.
20. Consider for example how knife fighting remains illegal no matter the consent of those who might participate in it.
21. Of course, some athletes might be able to overcome such harms and perform superlatively nonetheless: consider for example Jackie Robinson's achievements, or more recently Jon Obi Mikel's performances at the 2018 FIFA World Cup despite his father's recent kidnapping (Hytner 2018). Cases like this might be considered particularly exemplary, however one should not be expected to overcome such pressure in order to be considered excellent in sport.
22. Wallace (2006) and Spiegel (2006).
23. It is worth noting that this negotiation will likely be culturally variable, with interesting consequences for international or inter-cultural sport. For instance, see Holtgraves and Dulin who observe that because linguistic frameworks vary across culture, and because those same frameworks are the source of meaning, there is bound to be misunderstandings in international contests (1994); see also Simons (2003) for a discussion of cultural differences within American sport; and Renfrew and Snyder (2016) for a discussion of the Suarez-Evra incident and possible inter-cultural differences in the use and meaning of racial terms.
24. See for example Schwartz (2018).
25. Dixon argues that trash talk intended only to motivate oneself is still wrong insofar as it displays 'moral callousness', 'disregard for opponents' feelings', and 'moral negligence' in failing to realize that some may be upset by it (2018, 212). But this fails to recognize the modulation of meaning by context, and also the fact that it is possible to be wrongly upset if one fails in one's epistemic judgement of the situation: hyper-sensitivity is a vice as much as insensitivity.
26. For empirical evidence of this possibility see Joseph and Cramer's study (2011, 246). LoConto and Roth (2005) also report that trash talk as it is actually employed by athletes

conforms to both of these uses. This point offers response to Dixon's claim that trash talking is unrelated or extraneous to proper sporting objectives (Dixon 2007, 102–103; 2008, 90).

27. On this point we are therefore completely opposed to Dixon who believes all trash talking reduces opponents to mere means (2018, 215), but are similar to Howe, who observes that 'the criterion we need to apply...in attempting to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate forms of gamesmanship is whether the practice *improves both* participants or not' (2004, 221). Our position is also similar to Summers, who says that trash talking is a skill that 'should be engaged in in order to make sure that one is getting the challenge one deserves' (2007, 71–2). Yet, unlike Summers who sees this as an imperative, we conceive trash talk as a permissible option, though perhaps one that should not be employed if the circumstances are inapposite.
28. Duncan's research (2018) may be seen to support this in suggesting that trash talking is more frequent at less competitive levels.
29. We thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this interpretation.
30. See for instance UI Chief Diversity Officer Georgina Dodge, and Head Coach Hayden Fry who came up with the design in 1979, for claims of the calming effect. Fry himself autobiographically admits, however, that he chose the colour in part because of it being 'a sissy colour' associated with 'girls' (Tilly 2014). As such this form of pressure could be seen as a variation of 5 on the list.
31. Greco (2015).
32. An alternative example might be seen in the Martina Hingis and Steffi Graf 1999 French Open Final. After challenging the umpire's line call the crowd turned on Hingis, and was by all appearances instrumental in not only her defeat but ultimate psychological breakdown after the match.
33. Moss (2012).
34. Briggs (2012).

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