



Jul 07, 2015 00:00 BST

COMMENT: The Ashes: sledging is ‘OK as long as you realise where the line is’

On the eve of The Ashes, [Dr Paul Davis](#), Senior Lecturer and Research Lead for [Sport Coaching and Psychology](#) at Northumbria University writes for The Conversation on how cricketers ‘sledge’ to get under the skin of opposing teams.

Once again the Ashes are upon us – and once again the focus is on the on-field relations between the two teams. After a superbly exciting (and all-too short) early season tour by Brendan McCullum’s New Zealand team, which thrilled packed crowds with aggressive, positive cricket played in a spirit of

mutual respect, England is preparing to meet the “Old Enemy” – Australia. The early signs are that the old antagonism that has marked Ashes series over the years will not take long to bubble to the surface.

The Australian tour party arrived in England a fortnight ago, and captain Michael Clarke was interviewed about his team’s approach to this on-field aggression. He said:

It’s how we play our best and it’s a big part of the Australian way, but you also need to keep in mind that there is a line you can’t cross. Both teams might ‘headbutt’ that line but I am confident we will not overstep the mark, and that the series will be played in the right spirit. Both teams will play hard.

Where, one is tempted to ask, does issuing a threat of deliberately inflicting physical injury on an opponent sit – as Clarke did in the most recent Ashes series when he told England’s pace bowler James Anderson to “get ready for a broken f***** arm” – sit on that line?

What is sledging?

Sledging is a form of gamesmanship that usually takes the form of verbal exchanges between competitors (the equivalent to North American “trash talking”); it’s intended to distract opponents and present irrelevant cues that interfere with their concentration. Such verbal exchanges can get inside an opponent’s head and play with their emotions so that they can’t keep their focus on the next delivery. Put simply, it can put a player off their game.

Of course, there is sledging and then there is sledging. The annals of cricket history are littered with lyrical exchanges that provide a shorthand for the competitive, almost gladiatorial relationship between two individuals representing two teams.

Among the more famous sledges is the exchange between Australian Rod Marsh and England’s Ian Botham (known to be mates who would share a beer together). Marsh greeted Botham with a cheery quip: “So how’s your wife and my kids?” Botham replied: “Wife’s fine but the kids are retarded.” This was – remember – in a different era and sensitivities were not what they are now, particularly in the middle of a cricket pitch.



[Watch video on YouTube here](#)

This exchange between Australian spin ace Shane Warne and South African batsman Daryl Cullinan regularly makes the best sledges lists: Warne: “I’ve been waiting for two years to have another go at you.” Cullinan: “Looks like you spent it eating.”

Then there is this episode from English county cricket which is regularly cited as the best of all time. Greg Thomas had been bowling at West Indian batsman Viv Richards, who kept playing and missing. Said Thomas: “It’s red, it’s round, it weighs about five ounces and you are supposed to hit it.” Viv Richards promptly hit the next delivery back over Thomas’ head for six, saying: “You know what it looks like man, now go and fetch it!”

But does it work?

We recently interviewed a group of top-level cricketers from England’s county championship league as part of research exploring emotionally intense interactions between competitors: four top-order batsmen, six bowlers, a wicketkeeper and an all-rounder – roughly the make-up of a cricket XI with a 12th man thrown in.

All the participating athletes were required to have at least two years playing experience at the elite (professional) level to allow them to have played in a significant number of competitive matches and as a result to have experienced a range of emotion-inducing interactions with competitors.

The athletes participating in the study were from a range of countries including Australia, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago and the UK. They were interviewed individually at their training ground and the questions were grouped into sections exploring general emotions experienced in cricket, specific situations in which sledging and emotional interactions with competitors occurred, and their perspective on the utility of sledging as well as their responses to it.

We analysed the interviews using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count software which quantifies the use of specific words relating to sentence structure as well as cognitive processes and emotions.

Breaking concentration (and arms)

Sledging had a number of objectives; specifically, to disrupt concentration and induce anxiety through intimidation.

Disrupt concentration: This strategy was explained similarly by multiple participants:

As a bowler, if you see a guy that is in form and in a routine you almost want to say more, to then try and upset their rhythm ... It's all about trying to draw the batsmen outside of their own little bubble and give them something else to think about ... to make them think about something differently.

Or, as another member of the fielding team suggested, sledging tactics are often used to influence underlying aspects of performance: "He's in the zone; I do it to take his mind off what he's doing and concentrate on other things which will leave things unnoticed in his technique."

Intimidation of the batsman: Members of the fielding team also provided verbal encouragement, audible to the batsman and bowler, to promote aggressive play: "They'll say like: 'smash his face ... hit him in the throat ... and hit him in the head ... let's see if he likes it round the nose, let him smell it.'"

It could be a direct threat from bowler to batsman: "I'm going to take your head off, I'm gonna break your arm, I'm gonna hit you somewhere' you know."

A cheeky smile

Batsmen suggested that they use the aggression to improve their performance including specific aspects related to motivation and attention. For example, one batsman suggested that: “Personally it spurs me on, it makes me more determined to prove them wrong and beat them.”

Similarly, another batsman outlined how being the target of aggressive play can increase concentration: “I just get a heightened sense of awareness; I’m a lot more switched on, a lot more focused.”

Responses can vary widely and may include mental skills intending to generate a relaxation response through the use of visualisation, self-talk or re-focusing routines between deliveries, “It’s called gardening, when you take your guard and repair some of the pitch... slow the tempo, get your breathing right... check the field... commence play when you’re ready.” Some batsmen take the direct approach, confronting aggressive play and the bowler: “If the batsman is willing to puff his chest out and walk back down the wicket ... then the bowler is always going to have to back down.”

Alternatively, one batsman suggested that resisting the aggressive play with humour to demonstrate that it is not having the desired effect can also be an effective strategy to diffuse the situation: “I would just walk down and give him a smile or come back and give him a cheeky smile.”

Three players said there was a fine line between sledging and abuse: “If it’s all kind-hearted and nothing personal then I think it’s OK and can benefit the game,” said one. Another responded: “To bring your home life into your cricket is unacceptable ... as long as it’s just cricket based then what goes on the pitch stays on the pitch really.”

Keeping it clean and avoiding personal insults seems to be where the tipping point is: “Once you start getting personal with someone then you start pushing the boundaries and go over the line a bit.”

Michael Clarke appears to understand this well. In an interview with cricket.com.au he said he regretted the incident. “And when I say I regret it, I regret the language I used and I regret that I said it over the stump mic,” he said. “The last thing I want is for boys and girls watching cricket to be going

and playing club cricket and saying things like that to opposition players. I think it's unacceptable that the Australian cricket captain is setting that example."

And when boundaries are crossed ... well, "it's just not cricket."

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original](#) article.

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