



Reflections of a River Rat:

Sport's language of love -- talking junk

By Jim Holleran

Call it needling, gamesmanship, even trash talking. Guys have been talking junk since Naismith raised his first peach basket.

I have been listening to derogatory sports comments since I was slightly taller than the average waterboy, toting equipment and pails around North Country athletic fields. I probably wasn't supposed to hear things nor repeat them, but I heard them – too often.

My father, then Morristown football, basketball and baseball coach, would say something in passing to a colleague such as “Wipe the s*** off their shoes, we’ll play anybody.” So when I dropped my first s*** bomb, he wasn’t happy. He shot me a death stare and told me to clean it up. But I never told him from whom I learned it.

By my reckoning, I have heard trash talk since about age 9, for 55 years. Talking junk doesn’t faze me. But I have developed a deep appreciation for a good line.

When a guy stands too long over a tee shot, he’ll hear: “Hurry up before your shoes go out of style.”

When a guy can't hit his jumpshot, a wag will say it resembles a trolley: “Clang, clang, clang.”

And the age jokes are the easiest: “Hey Jim, do you remember where you were when Lincoln was shot?”

The wisecracker-in-chief from my morning basketball game held a summa cum laude degree in hurling barbs. Lockhart left our game for the sunny climes of Florida, but his insults endured.

If your defense was suspect, you’d hear: “You couldn’t guard a statue.”

If the laces in your sneakers became untied, he’d offer: “For guys your age, they make Velcro.”

He was quick, but when our friend McNelis played, they would work you over in tandem – Dumb and Dumber. The morning I walked onto the court, wearing my jersey from the first Morristown-Hammond Alumni Game, they resembled amateur night at the Hollywood Improv. The jersey bore the game logo on the front, and the back had my nameplate and a giant 75, for the year I graduated from high school.



Mike McNelis, center, and Randy Lockhart are the masters of the one-line barbs.

“Hey Holleran,” fired Lockhart. “What’s that number? Your age?”

“It’s gotta be,” called McNelis. “It’s too high to be his IQ.”

I got nailed this week by a former athletic director. He spotted me and my golf partner warming up in the drizzling rain at our season-ending golf league tournament. Our cart was parked in the closest spot at the driving range when he drove up and announced, “Oh, is that handicapped parking?” Boom. The battle was joined.

“Save your divots,” I chirped. “At your rate, you might need a hairpiece.”

Guys don’t mean any harm, most of the time. They just want to get off a good line and show they are quickwitted.

I can vividly recall the veteran columnist at an Ohio State football game who was saddled with an inept intern one day on press row. She knew nothing about football and little about journalism, and had no assignment. She peppered him with questions throughout the game. When asked how she was performing, he offered: “She couldn’t spell cat if I spotted her the ‘C’ and the ‘T.’ ”



College football also provided one of my favorite lines when Southern Cal became the first fully integrated football team to play at Alabama in 1970. George Wallace was spewing his segregationist hate as

Alabama governor and police were regularly using dogs to quell protests. USC’s Sam “Bam” Cunningham, who died at 71 last week, led an all-black backfield that routed the all-white Crimson Tide 42-21. The game was known for hastening the integration of football in the South, but they should give a game ball to the reporter who wrote (paraphrased): “Sam Cunningham integrated the Alabama endzone twice in the first half as the USC Trojans routed the Alabama Crimson Tide 42-21 yesterday.”

Newsrooms were always a fertile ground for great lines. A former Rochester sports editor, Rudy Martzke, was known for rising at 6 a.m. and calling sportswriters at 7 to talk about their story organization. Rudy was constantly riding one writer, who often would file his second-edition story at 1 a.m., then stop at a pub or head home to settle into sleep at 3 or 4 a.m. When the phone rang at 7 on Easter Sunday, Frank snapped. “For Christsakes, Rudy, they didn’t even get the Lord up this early on Easter Sunday.”

Perhaps my all-time favorite line percolated from the son of a former Morristown baseball player, Michael Spilman. During a July Fourth kickball game along the St. Lawrence River, Michael's then eighth-grade son Benjamin flexed his small, wiry biceps and blurted, "Check out this gun show."

His younger brother Nathan never missed a beat. "Those would be squirt guns."

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