https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2018.1432677
Sledging in Sport – playful banter, or mean-spirited insults? A study of sledging’s place in play.

Sledging, or ‘trash talk’ or ‘chirping’, as it's known in other parts of the world, has long been part of competitive sport. Often described as ‘gamesmanship’, quick witted athletes have provided numerous examples of spontaneous, creative and humorous banter as part of the play contest. Furthermore, it has largely been an accepted part of sport with some athletes even celebrated for their ability to distract opponents with well-timed barbs or relentless, ongoing sledges.

However, more recent times have seen the issue of sledging, and its place in sport, debated with many athletes, fans and academics arguing that sledging has moved outside the notion of ‘sportsmanship’ and gone beyond light hearted, good natured banter. They argue it is now characterized as hurtful, insulting, offensive and intimidating - a tactic that has moved beyond fair play and, in many instances, no longer acceptable.

This paper seeks to explore this issue in greater depth. In particular, this paper seeks to ask, ‘is sledging part of play, or is it a characteristic of play's corruption?’ In doing so, the notion of sledging, play and its corruption, will be explored in depth with examples used to illuminate the changing nature of both concepts.

The argument proceeds by adopting a conception of play, grounded in the work of Johan Huizinga. While there have been significant developments in play theory since Huizinga wrote his most famous study of play, *Homo Ludens*, in 1938, the core aspects of his definition have continued relevance. Indeed, as will be outlined later in the paper, Huizinga’s key characteristics of play have been embraced and adopted by more modern play theorists. As such, the argument of sledging as play, or as a characteristic of its corruption, is made broadly within Huizinga’s conception of play.

The insights of academics and scholars will be drawn on, as will the insights of surveyed sports fans and amateur athletes to highlight their views on sledging and its place in modern sport. By
doing so, sledging's role in sport and its most dominant characteristics, according to those who watch professional sport and play at the community level, will be illuminated.

**Sledging in Australian Sport:**

There is some debate about when the exact term 'sledging' was first used in the Australian sporting landscape. Some, such as former Australian Cricket Captain, Ian Chappell, have suggested the use of sledging originated at the Adelaide Oval in the summer of 1963-1964 or 1964-1965 (Seal, 1999, 141). He claims that after swearing in the presence of a woman, a cricketer was said to have reacted 'like a sledgehammer.' Thus, delivering verbal barbs towards an opponent became known as 'sledging.'

The BBC's Pat Murphy also believes the term originated in the mid 1960's. Murphy recounted that when New South Wales opening bowler, Grahame Corling, came into bat, the fielding team, who had heard that his wife was having an affair with a teammate of Corling's, welcomed him to the crease by singing 'When a Man Loves a Woman,' by singer, Percy Sledge (BBC, 2009).

The term 'sledging' was first used in Australian newspapers in the 1970's (O’Reilly, 1979). Regardless of the term’s exact origins, it's widely accepted that it originated in cricket, and that the practice of banter or teasing is as old as the game itself. In his biography of W.G. Grace, Rae (1998) noted that Grace, and his brother, E.M., were known to be 'noisy and boisterous' throughout their careers, with W.G. admitting that they would 'chaff' (i.e. tease) opponents, which he believed to be a part of the ‘gamesmanship’ of the contest. It is likely, just as it is today, that this banter and 'chaff' was designed to gain an advantage over their opponent. The notion of verbally insulting, or even intimidating an opponent to gain a competitive advantage is a prevailing theme of more modern studies and definitions of the term.

In their study of sledging in cricket, Joseph and Cramer (2001, 237) define the term as 'the practice whereby players seek to gain an advantage by insulting or verbally intimidating the batter.' Likewise, Dixon (2007, 96), when discussing the term as 'trash talking' in North American sport, states that 'trash talking' is 'the North American term for verbal barbs directed at
opponents during a sporting event in order to gain a competitive edge’. Lecturer in Sport Psychology, Lisa Martin (2013), notes that sledging is often referred to as 'a form of psychological warfare, where the aim is to break the concentration of an opposing player or, at the very least, instil enough doubt in his or her mind to create a mental distraction or a physiological change’.

The Oxford Dictionary (2017) defines the term as 'insulting or boastful speech intended to demoralize, intimidate or humiliate someone, especially an opponent in an athletic contest.’ As such, it appears that sledging is widely accepted amongst scholars as a skill or tactic used to distract an opponent, or to gain an advantage over them, by verbally insulting, intimidating or even humiliating them. When studying and expounding the theory of ‘gamesmanship’, Stephen Potter (1962) humorously described ‘gamesmanship’ as the act of winning games without actually cheating, which included a range of tactics, such as sledging or banter. However, it should be noted that Potter’s study was written in a deliberately comical and humorous manner, with Potter suggesting one should first and foremost be a good sportsman.

Therefore, given the definition of ‘sledging’ or ‘trash talk’ is generally characterized by negative connotations, is sledging fair? Is it a part of play? Or does it detract from the play contest and sit outside the spirit of play?

Martin (2013) states that it is 'etched into the fabric of sporting culture,' and that 'it appears that players accept sledging as part of their game.' However, Dixon (2007, 96), has argued that 'trash talk' is 'morally indefensible.' He writes:

'Attempts to justify trash talking as a strategic ploy that implies no disrespect are disingenuous in view of the fact that its effectiveness depends on opponents' being offended by it.'

Dixon (2007, 100) goes on to claim that we should judge sporting actions as we do any other context in society. However, in a study of the negative perception of trash talking amongst African American athletes, Simons (2003) argued that trash talking is actually an extension of
the African American tradition called 'signifying', which is a game-like oral ritual using boastful, humorous, insulting and provocative comments in an atmosphere of friendly competition. Simons argued that trash talk could be creative, spontaneous, witty, humorous and fun. These characteristics align to notions of play, where sledging can indeed be playful. However, other scholars, such as LoConto and Roth (2005, 215) believe that as the sporting field has become more professional and serious, sledging has become more widespread and ‘mean-spirited.’ This is supported through the research of Rainey and Granito (2010, 288) who surveyed over 400 American college athletes and found there was a ‘somewhat greater presence of trash talk among Division 1 athletes’ compared to the athletes participating in the lower level, Division 3.

As such, what started as an extension of play, sledging may have now come to reflect the corruption of play, characterized by the increased seriousness of play and the consequences of the play contest's outcome. To further illuminate this idea, it is first necessary to understand the notions of play and its changing characteristics.

**Play and its Corruption:**


Four characteristics define play for Huizinga (1950, 8):

1. Play is free, in fact, it is freedom
2. Play is not ordinary or real
3. Play is secluded and limited
4. Play ‘creates order, is order’

He goes on to define the play element as:
A free activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life, as being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space and according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It creates the formation of social groupings, which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means (Huizinga 1950, 13).

For Huizinga, the notions of fun, enjoyment, and freedom underpin the key characteristics of play (Huizinga 1950, 2): Play must be fun, free and voluntary, spontaneous, and separate from the ordinary and real. In its most autonomous sense, play creates, encourages, and stimulates meaningful relationships. While play can be serious when engaged in the ‘play contest’, when players are no longer having fun or enjoying themselves while playing or no longer feel free, they have ceased to play. Importantly for Huizinga, play should be free, with participants engaging in play voluntarily. They should not have to pay to play, nor should they receive financial reward for playing. When play participants are no longer free and if they are paid to play, the play element has been corrupted. However, the notion of ‘freedom’ in relation to play also relates to players being unrestricted and uninhibited when playing, where nothing is holding them back from having fun or being their most spontaneous, creative or skilful self.

While Huizinga’s study of play in *Homo Ludens* is considered one of the classical studies of play, it is impossible to ignore the fact that it was written seventy-nine years ago. Indeed, more recent play theorists may consider Huizinga’s observations as out dated. Since *Homo Ludens* was published in 1938, many theorists have expanded upon Huizinga’s observations to develop their own play definitions. Certainly when studying the multitude of play theories presented by a wide range of theorists, it becomes clear that while some theorists deviate significantly from Huizinga’s characteristics of play, many don’t. In fact, over seventy-nine years, Huizinga’s key characteristics of play have endured and strongly resonate in many modern studies of play.
Many theorists go to great lengths to illuminate the ambiguous nature of the play element. In her essay, *What is Play? In search of a Universal Definition*, Gwen Gordon (2008) writes:

“The ambiguous, variable and paradoxical nature of the play concept is so widely accepted, that most play theorists consider the search for a universal definition to be pure folly…There are few subjects that have been poked and prodded by as many disciplines as play has. And, like the famous blind men describing their limited section of the elephant, each elephant has come to a different conclusion about the nature of play.”

Other theorists such as Caillois, Hans, Millar and Sutton-Smith\(^1\) have critiqued Huizinga’s study of play and utilised Homo Ludens as a starting point to further develop the play concept and introduce notions of play forms, games and rhetoric, however, most play theorists appear united in believing that play has a number of fundamental characteristics at the core of its existence – in any form and across any discipline. Furthermore, these fundamental characteristics arise in Huizinga’s study of play and are particularly significant in understanding what Huizinga believed was the corruption of play.

The most common, agreed upon fundamental characteristics of play are: play must be fun; play must be free and voluntary; play must be spontaneous; play must be separate from the ordinary and real. While Huizinga’s exact terms may not be universal amongst all play theorists they are reflective in most notable works.

In her classic work, *The Psychology of Play*, Susanna Millar (1968, 21) writes that at the core of play is “an attitude of throwing off constraint.” Whether the ‘constraint’ is emotional, social or physical, once one breaks free of the constraints of real and ordinary work and plays within an autonomous play field, they can be spontaneous, instinctive, and, importantly, free. Most works on play characterise it as being separate to the ordinary and real through the meta message of

---

\(^1\) For a more in depth analysis of play theorists and their critique of Huizinga see: Caillois, R., The Definition of Play and The Classification of Games, in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, Salen, K., and Zimmerman, E., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, 2006


“this is play,” (Bateson, 1972, 177) generally meaning that play indicates a shift to a new, separate and autonomous field with its own rules and procedures.

Furthermore, when individuals are able to throw off the constraints and burdens of real life, they are able to leave behind their real life roles, responsibilities and limitations and fully embrace the autonomous play environment. Because they are unrestricted or uninhibited, the individual is free to be spontaneous and give their full self when playing.

As Viola Spolin (1963, 11) writes:

“In spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitation for the student to transcend himself or herself – he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure and face all dangers unafraid…Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure.”

**The importance of play:**

According to Huizinga, when we play, we not only reveal our true, whole, authentic self, we also form our strongest, most genuine and authentic relationships. Therefore, while game plans, set plays, structures and a range of tactics that increasingly characterise professional sport means a player’s ability to play with complete freedom and unrestricted spontaneity is significantly marginalised, the play ideal, towards which even professional sports players should strive, should not be lost.

The ‘play ideal’ is that play is fun, free and separate from ordinary and real life. It is freedom. Furthermore, play is creative and often spontaneous and, as play is separate to ordinary and real life, players are ‘only playing’, thus the consequences of play beyond the play contest is minimal (Huizinga, 1950, 203). These characteristics of play are of fundamental importance in play stimulating relationships. If we are free we are able to act without restraint and break off the
shackles, uninhibited by life’s restrictions. By knowing that the outcome of play is relatively inconsequential, we feel unburdened, further intensifying our spontaneity, creativity, fun and freedom. While playing we are able to express our individuality and unique personality, thus revealing our real self, unguarded and uninhibited. Furthermore, play should enable citizens to engage in a common and enjoyed activity and games should encourage those playing to work together, towards a common goal or pursuit. This ensures the connections formed while playing games are strong, real and authentic.

The importance of play in enabling citizens to be ‘free’ to form positive, genuine relationships was highlighted by Donald Winnicott (1974) in his book, ‘Playing and Reality.’ In many ways, Winnicott’s insight in psychoanalysis confirms the insights of Huizinga – a cultural historian. An English paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Winnicott related the play element to psychoanalysis to argue that a patient cannot be completely open, honest or their whole self if they are not able to play.

According to Winnicott (1974, 74), “It is in playing, and only playing, that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”

Thus, it is through the autonomy of play, that a patient can get to know his or her environment, trust the environment and develop trust for others within the environment, enabling them to be completely open, honest and share their whole personality – and in doing so form real and genuine relationships with fellow ‘players.’ From these relationships they can even form communities and culture. As Winnicott (1974, 75) notes, there was a “direct development from transitional phenomena to playing; and from playing to shared playing; and from this to cultural experience.”

However, once the patient’s environment is compromised or restricted, so too is the freedom of the patient and their ability to communicate. As a result, they cannot be as open or as creative and the bond, trust and connection between patient and doctor has been harmed. In a broader
context, it is only when we are free to play and be our whole selves that we can form true relationships (1974, 75).

Therefore, if play is corrupted, something of this process is lost. If play becomes more serious, if it loses its autonomy and the consequences or impacts of play transcend the play field into other parts of their life, we are further restricted when playing. Indeed, we are more guarded, careful and less expressive. We are less free. As a result, the quality of the relationships we form and our ability to express our individuality is compromised.

The ethics of sport, that even professional sport cannot relinquish, has deep roots in play. Thus, even in professional sports and serious amateur sport where a range of tactics have been introduced in the pursuit of victory, it is vitally important to strive towards maintaining at least some sense of play. Indeed, the ‘play ideal’ should be used to guide the direction of sport and to determine which new tactics are accepted and incorporated into various games, and which are rejected – deemed unfair, unsportsmanlike and outside the spirit of play.

**From Play to Sport:**

In reality sport is no longer play. It is not free, indeed, for professional athletes, it is now their work. Play can be, and generally is, serious. It’s restricted by a range of tactics, game plans, set plays and player roles. It is measured and analysed and the consequences of the play contest are significant both commercially and socially and stretch well beyond the play contest.

In the final chapter of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga concluded that never, to that point in history, had an age taken itself with more seriousness. He believed that culture had ceased to be played – instead, it was imposed from the top and sold to consumers as an item of entertainment (1950, 206).

The notion of the play element losing its freedom is best understood by analysing its influence beyond the sporting field. For Huizinga, no matter how intense, passionate or serious the play contest is, its importance in real life is minimal. As Huizinga notes (1950, 49), ‘The contest is
largely devoid of purpose – that the action begins and ends in itself and the outcome does not contribute to necessary life processes of the group.’ Fundamental to this characteristic of play is that the players are acting autonomously from the roles, responsibilities and power they may have in other aspects of their lives. However, when play loses its autonomy, when the significance of play stretches beyond the conclusion of the contest and empowers participants beyond the play field, then it is no longer ‘play’; it is ‘false play’ (Huizinga 1950, 206).

Huizinga identifies the corruption of play with increasing structure, control and restriction with an obsessive emphasis on winning or ‘being the best.’ These characteristics have flourished at the expense of freedom, creativity, spontaneity and flair. Huizinga believes that over the course of the centuries we have transformed play from its free, creative self, first, into sport and, ultimately, into business. Huizinga (1950, 74) traced the origins of this transformation to the Roman Empire. The Romans found they could organize play and use it as a tool to entertain thousands of spectators who packed stadiums such as the Colosseum.

The notion of organised sport as we know it today, a recognizable and structured organisation, is a far more recent phenomenon, emerging in Britain during early industrialization (Rowe 2004, 11). According to Huizinga (1950, 13) the ruling class used play to distract the proletariat from their subordinated and ‘dull existence.’ In doing so they transformed play from a spontaneous activity, adopting a more organised structured model. Huizinga (1950, 196) noted that play was transformed from an item of ‘occasional amusement to a system of organised clubs and matches.’ Play, in this instance has been influenced by market forces – it was now a tool, used as a secondary purpose – to distract the masses, provide workers with an escape and ensure they remained fit and healthy.

Importantly, Huizinga stressed that as play became more structured and organised, it has also become more serious, “Ever since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, games, in the guise of sport, have been taken more and more seriously” (1950, 196). Huizinga argues that this is largely, if not solely, because the play element had lost its autonomy to the economic market and was therefore ‘used’ for a secondary purpose – to make money; to distract the masses; to keep labourers fit and healthy; to provide them with an escape. It was used as a tool and owned by the
Culture Industry. It was serious. It was a business and as such, something of the pure play quality had been lost.

Huizinga (1950, 204) writes:

“The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play spirit; it is lacking its spontaneity and carelessness. For the professional, playing is no longer just play. It is also work.”

Christopher Lasch (1980) supported this notion in *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. He claimed that all types of leisure time and play forms have been corrupted by money and the necessary calculations, prudence, analysis and efficiency that defines the business world. As with most business functions, play is restricted by structure, analysis and a desire to succeed or not to fail (Lasch 1980, 74).

Thus, play lost its autonomy and became a commodity, the crowds becoming its consumers. Influenced by economics and, more specifically money, play lost its carefree, spontaneous, creative nature and became more and more organised and structured throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. As this commodification continued, play also became more serious. While this is more obvious at the elite, professional level of sport, it is also an increasingly prevalent characteristic of grassroots, community and amateur sports.

Play, in its modern form, it is the primary means by which the participants within the sport field can accumulate various forms of capital. At many levels of sport, playing well, indeed winning, leads to a range of commercially advantageous outcomes – higher gate receipts from crowd attendances, more members, richer sponsorship deals – which ensures the success, or even survival of the club. Likewise, for individual players, winning can bring higher salaries and sponsorship deals, or, for the amateur, more recognition, adulation, respect and other forms of social, and even economic capital in the sporting community and beyond. Thus, play is carefully managed, analysed and scrutinised and includes a range of tools and tactics adopted by coaches and players to gain a competitive advantage against their opponents. This can lead to play being more strategic and managed and less spontaneous and free; more serious and less fun.
One such tactic used by teams and individual athletes to gain a competitive advantage is sledging. This kind of sledging – pre meditated, designed to distract, or to even hurt their opponent – would be considered a corrupted version of the fun, spontaneous, creative, ‘off the cuff’ banter previously associated with ‘play.’

**The spirit of play:**

While sport can be seen as ‘corrupted play’, it is vitally important that all sports, both at the professional and amateur level, aim at maintaining some sense of fair play and sportsmanship by enabling and encouraging players to contest in a way that at least reflects the key characteristics of play. Importantly, the play tactics incorporated by teams and individual players must be fair and uphold notions of sportsmanship, for if sport is unfair or unsportsmanlike, play will be further corrupted as the play characteristics of fun and freedom will likely be diminished.

Thus, the ‘spirit of play’, based on ‘fair play’ and ‘sportsmanship’ should be used as a moral compass for professional and serious amateur sport, to guide it and help distinguish between the tactics that will be embraced and those that will be rejected (Loland, 2002, xiii-xiv). By doing so, play characteristics of fun, freedom and even some sense of autonomy will be maintained.

It is not realistic to believe players in organised sports can be completely free and autonomous, for they are expected to carry out instructions, conform to team rules, game plans, set play and tactics. Yet even then, they must be allowed to carry out their duties with some level of autonomy, flair and creativity. Within the team’s game plan and set plays there must be the freedom to be somewhat creative, and where the consequences transcend the play contest, rules should be put in place to ensure that the implications of play are as positive or inconsequential as possible. This will help ensure players still feel relatively unburdened, unrestrained, free and able to have fun – all key characteristics of play.
Importantly, by maintaining some sense of play, players will be able to (although not fully) express their creative, individual self and form stronger relationships than in an environment where fun, freedom, spontaneity and autonomy had been completely diminished.

**Is sledging play, or corrupted play?**

Given Huizinga's definition of play and his observations of play's corruption, it is appropriate to ask if sledging is part of play, or if it is reflective of its corruption? Is sledging reflective of Huizinga's key play characteristics of being fun, spontaneous and creative? Is it reflective of play being autonomous from the ordinary and real? And does it uphold the notion that play is free, in fact, that it is freedom.

If sledging is representative of an increased seriousness of sport that now incorporates tools and tactics, even mean-spirited ones, to inhibit the fun and freedom of the opposition in order to gain a competitive advantage, then it would appear sledging is far more reflective of play's corruption than play itself. Likewise, if the impact of sledging is felt beyond the play contest, which Huizinga claims can indeed be serious, then this further characterises the corruption of play as it is no longer separate to the ordinary and real.

What happens on the field no longer stays on the field. Instead it transcends into the athlete's life. There is evidence to suggest that sledging detracts from the fun of the play contest and the freedom of the athlete subjected to sledging, and that the consequences of sledging can go beyond the play contest to what Huizinga describes as 'ordinary' and 'real' life.

One such example of this occurred at a blackjack table at the Palms Casino in Las Vegas. National Football League (NFL) players Jerry Porter, of the Miami Dolphins, and Levi Jones, of the Cincinnati Bengals, were known to 'trash talk' each other during the football season. However, the on field verbal barbs recommenced when they met at a blackjack table where they traded insults before Potter punched Jones, leading to police issuing the Dolphins player a summons for battery (Rainey and Granito, 2010, 282).
More recently, in the sport of tennis, Australian Nick Kyrgios, disgruntled after losing the first set in his match against Stan Wawrinka at the Montreal Masters, told the Swiss player that Kyrgios's countryman, Thanasi Kokkinakis, 'banged your girlfriend, sorry to tell you that mate.' Highlighting that the old notion of 'what happens on the field, stays on the field' was no longer an obeyed unwritten rule of sport, Wawrinka expressed his anger after the match by tweeting 'So disappointing to see a fellow athlete colleague be so disrespectful in a way I could never even imagine' (Ikonomou, 2016).

Similarly, in 2017, in the Australian Football League (AFL), Carlton Captain, Marc Murphy, was subjected to sledges about his wife by a number of St Kilda players. Murphy issued a statement via his own social media channels in the days after the match, expressing his disappointment, stating the nature of the sledges had offended both he and his wife (ABC, 2017).

These sledges, and, in particular, the reactions of those who had been sledged, suggests that the impact of sledging does indeed go beyond the play field, transcending into the athletes 'real' life. As discussed, this further erodes the spirit of play in professional sport as players may be more guarded, carrying the burden of the contest’s implications beyond the play contest itself. Also, where the sledge is hurtful or offensive, it reduces the spirit of play in sport in that the fun of the play contest is further compromised. Given that ‘fun’ and ‘freedom of expression’ is vital to the process of developing strong relationships, this, too, is harmed.

Furthermore, the nature of these somewhat 'mean-spirited' sledges also indicates that the role of sledging may have changed as sport, at least at the professional level, has become more serious. The benefits of winning and being 'the best' now include recognition and power beyond the sport field. It now encompasses and includes celebrity status and adulation, but also financial benefits in the form of increased salaries and even lucrative sponsorship deals. As such, tactics have been introduced into sports to gain a competitive advantage over the opposition. One such tactic is sledging, where some teams and individuals have been known to prepare to deliberately sledge their opponents with pre meditated and planned verbal insults, designed to degrade and humiliate their opponent with the intention of upsetting them, distracting them or putting them off their game.
Indeed, former English cricketer, Jimmy Anderson, described sledging as a 'skill' that he considered a 'key element of his own game.' He saw sledging as a 'one of the weapons at his disposal' to gain an edge over his opponents (Martin, 2013). As such, many, such as LoConto and Roth (2005, 220) believe the nature and purpose of sledging became more widespread and mean-spirited in the 1980's as sport became more professionalized and the benefits of winning began to lead to increased forms of power in other fields of society.

While pinpointing what is 'mean-spirited' and what is not may depend on an individual’s own interpretation, in reality it seems that some examples of mean-spirited sledges are easy to identify. It is difficult to find the creativity, fun or humour, for example, in former Australian Cricket Captain, Michael Clarke’s sledge to Jimmy Anderson, when he told Anderson to 'get ready for a broken fucking arm' (Jackson, 2013). Likewise, it's difficult to associate former St Kilda ruck-man, Peter Everitt's racial abuse of Melbourne's Scott Chisholm, an indigenous Australian, as 'play' when he called him a 'black c....' (Ikonomou, 2016).

Furthermore, if play is free, as Huizinga states it is, is an athlete's ability to freely play compromised if they are subjected to verbal barbs and insults that are designed to humiliate? In their study of sledging in cricket, Joseph and Cramer (2011, 237) conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 elite English batsmen to illuminate the impacts of being sledged. They found that the effects of sledging were negative, most notably altering the perception of the self and the state of mind, decreasing their batting ability and leading to over arousal. These findings suggest that those who are sledged are not as free to play with spontaneity and instinct because they are now required to deal with a tactic - one that challenges their focus or even mental strength.

This is reflective of the corruption of play - no longer is the athlete able to play with complete freedom, nor would many who are sledged be having 'fun' while playing. Furthermore, the themes and topics of the sledges cited above centre upon violence, injury, racism and derogatory commentary of spouses. In the context of heated, competitive sport, these hardly reflect fun, funny or playful banter. While it is true that tactics are part of all sport, when they are
deliberately mean spirited or hurtful, the ‘spirit of play’ is further corrupted because it erodes the ‘fun’ of playing.

However, that's not to say that all sledging sits outside the realms of play. In some circumstances sledging can be playful, creative, spontaneous and 'off the cuff,' designed to induce laughter rather than to distract, insult or offend. This can be considered banter in the spirit of play. Indeed it may even add to the fun of playing.

For example, in an English county game of cricket bowler, Greg Thomas, sledged West Indian great, Viv Richards, after Richards played and missed several balls in a row. Thomas informed Richards the ball was 'red, round and weighs about five ounces, in case you were wondering.' Richards hit the next ball out of the ground for six, into the nearby River Taff. Turning back to Thomas he said, 'Greg, you know what it looks like, now go find it' (Charles, 2003).

This humorous, good natured banter stands in contrast to the crass insults centred on topics of broken arms, racial taunts and alleged infidelity. On face value the exchange between Thomas and Richards is funny, good natured, spontaneous, creative, 'off the cuff' and playful. It did not appear to be pre meditated or designed to distract, hurt, intimidate or even humiliate. It was, perhaps, more reflective of old fashioned ‘gamesmanship’ than a verbal barb aimed at gaining a competitive advantage.

While this type of banter suggests sledging can be playful, the reality is that the distinction between what is playful, creative and fun from what is hurtful, insulting and humiliating may well be in the eye of the beholder. Therefore, to gain an insight into whether society considers sledging to be part of play, or indeed if it is playful, it is appropriate to consider what sports fans and participants of amateur sport believe to be appropriate in relation to sledging in sport.

**Research Insights:**

As part of a broader research project about sledging in sport, 207 sports fans and amateur sportsmen and women were surveyed. While the survey responses produced wide ranging,
diverse insights, not all of them will be discussed in this paper. Rather, the research insights most relevant to the scope of this paper will be highlighted and discussed. As the sample size of respondents is relatively small, the research findings cannot draw definitive conclusions, however, they do provide interesting insights into how society views the issue of sledging in sport. Furthermore, the responses of the sports fans and participants who took part in the survey help illuminate if sledging is considered a part of play or, more generally, if it is now considered a by-product of play's corruption.

While some, such as Dixon (2007, 96) have acknowledged that sledging is often considered to be a part of sport's culture, it would appear that this is not the case in grass roots, amateur sports or in the eyes of fans of professional sport. Of those surveyed, just over a third (36%) said they had been sledged, suggesting that while sledging is certainly not unusual, it is also not overly common. Supporting this claim is the fact only 17% admitted to sledging an opponent while playing sport, with 42% of those who had sledged claiming they later regretted it, not believing their verbal barbs to be part of the ‘spirit of sport’.

When responding to the statement, ‘to what extent do you agree that sledging is a natural part of sport’, over half (55%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that it is. Just over one in five respondents (21%) agreed or strongly agreed that it is. Over half (51%) did not distinguish between sledging in sport from 'real' life, seeing them as the same thing.

Further supporting the notion that sledging is not considered a part of play is the fact that 61% claimed that none of a range of topics presented to them, including race, gender, religion, sexuality, occupation, physical appearance and on field performance were acceptable topics to sledge about.2

The survey results highlighting why the respondents sledged also supported the notion that sledging reflects the corruption of play. While 30% claimed they sledged because they thought

2 The range of ‘sledging topics’ presented to the survey respondents included: race, gender, sexuality, religion, political allegiance, mental health issues, issues about family members/relatives, physical features (e.g. weight, height, hair colour etc.), disability/health issues, income/wealth, on-field performance, occupation and issues relating to the game (e.g. the score, team colours, mascot etc.)
their sledge was funny, 41% stated they sledged with the aim of distracting their opponent from the contest, while 27% said they wanted to gain a mental advantage over their opponent. One in ten respondents (10%) who admitted to sledging said they did so to hurt their opponent’s feelings. Of those who had sledged an opponent, the most common topics were sledges about on field performance (36%) (e.g. ‘you haven’t had a kick today’; ‘you’ve really let the team down today’; ‘you’re the worst footballer I’ve ever seen’), issues relating to the game (33%) (e.g. ‘look at the scoreboard’, barbs about team colours, mascots etc.), and the physical features of their opponents (26%) (height, weight, hair colour etc.). Race (21%) and gender (19%) were the next most common topics.

Similarly, for those who had been sledged, the most frequent topic of the verbal barb directed towards them was their on-field performance (39%) and issues relating to the game (20%). Race (21%) and gender (19%) were the next most common. Almost half (45%) were offended by the sledges directed towards them.

**Interpreting the research results:**

The research insights are significant for this study for many reasons. Firstly, they highlight that while sledging is not an uncommon practice in sport, it is not necessarily common to the point where most people have been sledged. Indeed, the majority of those surveyed for this study had not been sledged, nor had they sledged themselves. The statistics highlighting that more than half of the surveyed respondents don’t believe sledging to be a natural part of sport further supports the notion that sledging is not an overtly common part of sport. Furthermore, it also suggests fans and grassroots participants don't believe it should have a common place in the sporting contest. Indeed a majority of respondents claimed that none of the topics presented to them were appropriate to sledge about in a sporting contest. This suggests sledging is not considered an appropriate part of sport.

Secondly, Huizinga claimed that play, in its purest form, is free, spontaneous, creative and fun and that it is separate to ordinary and real life. Play could indeed be serious, but the
consequences of the play contest should be largely inconsequential once the players have stopped playing. When it is corrupted it is serious and organized, with tactics aimed at reducing the freedom and flair of the opposition.

The research insights suggest sledging is now more reflective of play's corruption than of play itself. Indeed it appears sledging is a tool, designed to distract, hurt or even to gain a mental advantage over an opponent, effectively reducing the fun and freedom of play for those who have been sledged. Furthermore, the fact that almost half of the survey respondents were offended by sledges directed towards them suggests the impacts of the play contest, and the sledge, had reduced the fun and freedom of play, and extended beyond play to the ordinary and the real. Indeed, it's not difficult to believe those who were sledged about their race, gender or family related issues were negatively impacted by this in the aftermath of the play contest.

Likewise, in today's society, these topics appear more 'serious' than 'playful', reflecting the more serious nature of organized, professional sport at the expense of Huizinga's notion of play. This is further supported by the fact over half of all respondents did not see a difference between sledging during sport and sledging in other parts of life. These respondents clearly don't see sport as separate to the ordinary and real, nor do they appear to believe in the old Australian notion of 'what happens on the play field, stays on the play field.' Rather, as sport has become more organised and professionalized, they are likely to believe that sport is, for some, work, and for others, an opportunity to gain social, cultural, symbolic and even economic capital. Therefore, how could sport be considered different from other fields of society?

However, it should be noted that there is also some evidence to suggest that sledging can still be playful and, therefore, reflective of play’s spirit. The research highlights that one of the most common forms of sledging (33%) centred upon more trivial, less serious topics such as game or team related matters (team colours, team mascot etc.), while 36% sledged about their opponent's sporting ability or on-field performance. While it's not known how playful or, indeed, how mean-spirited the tone or exact contents of the sledges were, these seemingly more inconsequential topics appear less personal and more comparable to ‘play’ than sledges
about more socially serious topics such as race, religion and gender. Furthermore, 30% of survey respondents said the purpose of their sledge was to be funny, not to be mean-spirited or hurtful.

Nevertheless, overall the research findings suggest that sledging does, in many instances, compromise the vital play characteristics of fun and freedom, that it is increasingly used as a tool and tactic to gain a competitive advantage rather than simply being creative, playful banter and that its impact is felt beyond the play contest in ordinary, real, life. Thus, it appears that for most, sledging in sport merely serves to erode and diminish the spirit of play, compromising the fun of play, the freedom of the player to fully express themselves with unrestraint, while transcending the play contest. By further corrupting play, sledging compromises the ability of players to form strong relationships with fellow players.

**Conclusion:**

By utilising Huizinga’s observations and key characteristics of play and its corruption to analyse the role and influence of sledging in sport, it appears that while sledging can still be playful, in many instances it is not. For it to be a genuine part of play it should be spontaneous, creative, light-hearted and fun. Furthermore, it should not detract from the fun or freedom of play for both those sledging and those being sledged.

Once a verbal barb becomes pre-meditated, serious or offensive to the athlete being sledged it is no longer play as it has compromised the fun of the contest. Likewise, once it is used as a tool or tactic to distract, offend or hurt an opponent in order to gain a competitive advantage, it is also no longer playful as it corrupts the freedom of play for the athlete being sledged. Huizinga believed that play must be both fun and free. In fact, he described play as ‘freedom.’

Huizinga also claimed that play is separate from real or ordinary life, that while the play contest could be utterly absorbing and serious, it should be serious only during the play contest and the impact of the play outcome should be minimal in other parts of the player’s life. However, when a sledge is of a serious nature, insulting, hurtful or about a player’s family, the consequence and
impact of the sledge transcends the play contest to other parts of the player’s life. Several examples throughout the paper highlighted this occurring.

Furthermore, it appears society is less accepting of sledging in sport, seeing it as serious, hurtful and a tool to gain a competitive advantage which stands in opposition to the spirit of play.

For sledging to become a more accepted, legitimate part of play, sporting bodies must encourage players to develop a code of conduct or set of behaviours deemed appropriate for the sporting contest. These types of codes of conducts and similar regulations are particularly important in many amateur and children’s sporting competitions in defining the expectations of players in upholding fairness, sportsmanship and thus, maintaining a sense of the ‘spirit of play.’

The code of conduct must include a range of topics that, according to play participants, are fair to use in the form of creative, spontaneous banter, as well as those that are considered unacceptable. Furthermore, breaching the code of conduct should result in a penalty to the offender who deliberately corrupts the spirit of play by aiming to hurt or offend. This will help ensure the spirit of the game is respected and upheld.

By doing so, insulting, intimidating, hurtful verbal abuse will be replaced with more creative, light-hearted verbal banter. Thus, sledging will take on characteristics that are more reflective of fun and freedom and therefore be a legitimate part of play. If this can be done, players will be able to play with some sense of fun and freedom, knowing that the verbal exchanges between players will either make the contest more fun, or not transcend the play contest in a negative manner.

Importantly, while sport is not play, it can still reflect play’s most fundamental characteristics. Players can still play with fairness and sportsmanship in the spirit of play, exhibiting a sense of fun and freedom and to an extent, be able to leave the seriousness of the play contest on the field. Because of play’s importance in enabling individuals to freely express themselves and therefore form strong, authentic relationships, it is vitally important that all sports, both at professional and amateur level, strive to encourage its participants to contest their sports in the spirit of play.
Therefore, players who sledge should aim to be funny, creative, spontaneous and playful, rather than hurtful, serious, insulting, degrading and offensive. By doing so, sledging can remain part of sport, carried out in the spirit of play, and rather than corrupting the play characteristics of fun, freedom and spontaneity, it can indeed help uphold them.
References:


