



Discriminatory Language: When does it go too far?



“Chirping and trash-talk are a normal part of any competitive sport..... right?”

Aaaaahhhh... Good ol’ chirping. Chirping is as much a part of the game of hockey as the Zamboni. It starts in youth hockey and goes all the way up to the pros; in fact, any online search for chirping will provide video clips of NHL stars chirping each other, officials and fans that provide hours of entertainment. Chirping can be a useful strategy, resulting in taking an opponent off their game, resulting in a loss of concentration.

However, chirping regularly goes too far. A vast majority of reports to USA Hockey involve chirping (or trash-talk), that cross the lines of respect and tolerance for diversity within the sport. Chirping goes too far when it is personally aimed at demeaning or otherwise causing pain or trauma to someone, whether verbal or emotional, primarily based on their gender, sexual orientation, social or economic status, or ethnic or racial background.

When is it discrimination? Distinguishing between language that is just plain mean or rude and actual discrimination can be difficult. Unlike bullying and harassment which have other defined characteristics (such as physical actions or a pattern of repeated behavior over time), chirping can escalate from strategy to the danger zone in seconds – you never know when you’re going to go too far and cause someone else great pain or offense, or to snap. ***In this way, chirping, when it is viewed as discrimination, can create an unsafe playing environment.*** When the result is that someone feels targeted, less safe, demeaned, vulnerable, compromised or nervous, chirping has crossed the line.

What does USA Hockey say about discriminatory language?

- The following behaviors actually violate USA Hockey rule section 601, and can result in penalties ranging from minor to major, including suspension, depending on the severity:
 - A minor penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct shall be assessed to any player who **taunts or incites** an opponent.
 - A misconduct penalty shall be assessed to any player who **persists in such conduct** and any further dispute by the same player shall result in a game misconduct penalty being assessed.
 - A bench minor penalty shall be assessed to any team who’s players or team officials commit the following actions while on the player’s bench:
 - Using obscene, profane or abusive language to any person.
 - Using threatening or abusive language or gestures directed at an opponent.
 - A misconduct penalty shall be assessed to any player who commits the following actions:
 - Using obscene, profane or abusive language to any person anywhere in the rink before, during or after the game.
 - A game misconduct penalty shall be assessed to any player or team official who is guilty of the following actions:
 - Uses an obscene gesture anywhere in the rink before, during or after the game.
 - Uses language that is offensive, hateful or discriminatory in nature anywhere in the rink before, during or after the game.



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- A match penalty shall be assessed to any player or team official who commits the following actions:
 - Behaving in any manner that is critically detrimental to the conducting of the game, including spitting at an opponent, spectator, game or team official, or verbally threatening a Game Official, opposing Team Official or opposing player with physical harm.

A Quick Guide:

Rude = accidentally saying or doing something hurtful.

Mean = saying or doing something to hurt a person on purpose, once or maybe twice.

Inciting = abusive language, violent or threatening language, meant to result in anger or an angry response.

Discrimination = language that is discriminatory in any way based on someone's ethnicity or race, economic status, gender or sexual orientation, or handicap.

Key Take-Aways:

- Trash-talk on the ice (chirping, banter, etc.) is going to happen; when it turns to taunting, bullying, intimidation or harassment it is not OK.
- "Getting under someone's skin" has a limit. It is not OK, ever, to use abusive language, violent or threatening language, or language that is discriminatory in any way (ethnic or racial slurs, economic status, gender or sexual orientation, or handicap).
- When a player wants to leave the game or the sport due to verbal attacks, abusive language, taunting, harassment or bullying, that is not OK.
- Players should be guided as to how and when, and to what level, chirping is effective and appropriate. Sadly, the Internet – and many role models in this and other sports – are not a good resource for this education. Players should be guided to show the same respect for teammates and opponents that they want shown to them. This is important to maintain a safe and fair playing environment, and a safe, discrimination-free environment is a right for all USA Hockey participants.