Chatter up!

Is the chatter heard on youth baseball and softball fields simply a harmless ritual of the game or unsportsmanlike behavior intended to distract opposing hitters?
Visit just about any youth baseball and softball game across the country and you’ll likely hear this familiar chorus, or one similar to it. To some, this type of chatter is just as much a part of the game as bubblegum and batting gloves. To others, it is the ultimate sign of immaturity, disrespect and poor sportsmanship.

By Adam Shilling
Chatter is a ritualistic aspect of baseball that is often accepted at the youth level, but is frowned upon as children progress onto competitive leagues. Baseball chatter falls on both sides of the fence. Some describe it as a verbal challenge – or taunt – intended to distract an opposing team or disrupt a player’s concentration while at the plate; and others point to it as a form of a team cheer intended to positively motivate a teammate, or help keep the kids’ interest and concentration fully on the game. Chatter is delivered in many forms, ranging from individual chanting of repetitive phrases to teams reciting organized songs and cheers in unison.

Although considered a harmless tradition in some communities, many youth baseball leagues are taking action to ban the practice that they consider to be unsportsmanlike behavior. As millions of children take the field this summer the question surrounding many programs is this: Is baseball chatter a display of poor sportsmanship or are those who are looking to eliminate it from the game simply robbing kids of a playful aspect of youth baseball?

Cheering vs. jeering
Chatter is often taught to children at the early levels of youth baseball as a mechanism to keep young minds in the game. With a game like baseball, where there is plenty of downtime, many children have the tendency to become “dandelion pickers” while out in the field. Chatter can be a useful way to keep them engaged and involved in the game, even when the ball isn’t being hit their way.

“I think chatter in baseball is a great thing as long as it’s directed in a positive way to your own team and not used as a way to try and distract your opponent,” said Don Edlin, owner of QCBaseball.com, a resource for baseball coaching tips. “Chatter can help keep players in the game and is a great way to show support for your teammates.”

But many baseball enthusiasts agree that a fine line exists between what is harmless baseball chatter and what is an unsportsmanlike attempt to taunt and distract an opponent. Some feel chatter is only appropriate when done so positively in a way that is meant to encourage teammates, such as a shortstop encouraging his pitcher by saying, “here we go Johnny, strike ’em out.”

“As long as the comments are positive and directed at encouraging your teammates and not to belittle your opponent it’s fine,” said Dan Clouser, president of the Berkshire Baseball Club, a wood bat league based in Berkshire, Pa. “Any type of comment degrading your opponent is unacceptable.”

Unfortunately, chatter is often directed toward the opposing team in a negative fashion, which can create anxiety in many children. For example, chanting something like “easy out, easy out,” when a lesser-skilled batter is at the plate can present a significant emotional distraction. Such behavior can easily be construed as unsportsmanlike. When chatter is intended to embarrass another child it has ceased to fulfill its intended purpose – to keep youngsters engaged and interested in the game.

“We encourage players to talk and ‘chatter’ to keep them involved in the game as long as it is encouraging their own team and not directed at the other team in any way, shape or form,” Clouser said. “It always has to be positive.”

The most common types of baseball chatter are playful phrases or chants that come from fielders, such as, “Hey batter, swing batter,” or “three up, three down, here we go now.”

However, some teams engage in organized team songs or cheers while in the dugout that taunt opposing players. Team
SUBMIT YOUR NOMINATIONS FOR THIS YEAR’S COACH AND PARENT OF THE YEAR AWARDS

NOMINATE THOSE SPECIAL INDIVIDUALS TODAY AT NAYS.ORG

Do you have a coach or parent in your program who consistently goes above and beyond in their duties and is truly special? If so, now is your chance to show your appreciation by nominating him or her for either the Coach of the Year or the Parent of the Year.

This year’s awards will be presented at the annual Youth Sports Congress in Orlando, Fla. on Dec. 2-5, the signature event of the National Alliance for Youth Sports. Winners receive round trip flight and accommodations for them and a guest to Orlando for the awards ceremony, a plaque, recognition on the National Alliance for Youth Sports’ Web site, in its SportingKid magazine and through local media in the winner’s city, as well as several other prizes.

Don’t delay, nominate that special individual today! The deadline for submitting nominations is Sept. 1.

To obtain forms or additional information:
- Visit www.nays.org to submit a nomination. For coaches, click on Coaches on the left hand side and then Coach of the Year; and for parents click on Parents on the left hand side, then Parent of the Year, and scroll to the bottom of the page.
- Call (800) 729-2057
- Email us at nays@nays.org
cheers, such as “pitcher in a whole, ten feet deep, can’t get out cause he’s got big feet” or “3-2, whatcha gonna do, walk him walk him,” tend to have a much more negative connotation and are more likely to be viewed as poor sportsmanship.

“Organized team chatter, such as singing or some sort of choreographed chant, is unacceptable and displays poor sportsmanship because generally even if it is something being said to encourage your team, the whole idea of choreographing it is designed to present a distraction to the other team,” Clouser said. “Individual chatter is fine as long as they’re staying positive toward their teammates.”

Even most chatter advocates agree that the practice is appropriate only to a certain degree.

“Some chatter is okay, but sometimes it gets to a point when it is distracting to the young players and takes away from the joy of the game, said Carla Stone, recreation director for the town of Limon (Colo.). “Cheering for your teammates is better than against your opponent.”

Administrators and league officials need to determine guidelines for what they consider to be appropriate forms of chatter and make sure that those policies are adequately communicated to coaches, players and parents. What falls in the appropriate category may vary between communities, depending on the program emphasis and philosophy.

“I think chatter should be allowed and it’s really up to the leagues to put procedures and rules in place to make sure

When it comes to allowing chatter, leagues don’t necessarily have to take an all or nothing approach.

By the numbers

Percentage of respondents who said that chants of “Hey batter, batter...swing” to opposing hitters is poor sportsmanship. To view the complete survey results, or to cast your vote, visit www.nays.org.
that it’s done in a positive way,” Edlin said. “Many leagues already do a great job of this. The other aspect is continued education of coaches about proper behavior by them and by their team. For me, it’s really simple: I want to have the type of team that other teams like to play. You’re simply not going to be one of those teams if you choose to have your team talk in a negative way to their opponent.”

**Striking out inappropriate chatter**

When it comes to allowing chatter, leagues don’t necessarily have to take an all or nothing approach. Some leagues simply implement rules to prevent any negative or taunting type of comments while still allowing chatter – if it’s delivered in a positive fashion.

“In the City of Gaithersburg (Md.) all taunting, trash talking or negative comments are banned from youth sporting events,” said Dave Ludington, recreation program specialist for the City of Gaithersburg. “We are a “Character Counts!” city and as such we encourage all players and spectators to keep their comments positive.”

Two years ago the Knothole Youth Baseball Club of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky made headlines across the country for being one of the first communities to publicly ban chatter from their leagues. In a special aired on ESPN’s Outside the Lines, league president Dave Epplen said the no chatter rule was put into effect following an incident involving players and parents where chatter and trash talking got out of hand.

“We didn’t want Knothole to get a bad name for anything,” Epplen said in an interview with the Cincinnati Enquirer. “If you’re saying, ‘swing batter,’ and this poor little kid is swinging at everything, he feels bad and maybe he turns to the catcher and gets mad.”

Honest to gosh, I didn’t have any trouble doing this.”

Epplen’s justification for the ban is based on Major League Baseball rule 4.06(a)(1) and (2) which states: No manager, player, substitute, coach, trainer or batboy shall at any time, whether from the bench, the coach's box or on the playing field, or elsewhere incite, or try to incite, by word or sign a demonstration by spectator or use language which will in any manner refer to or reflect upon opposing players, an umpire, or any spectator.

Although this rule can be interpreted as referring to chatter, the specific word is never mentioned in the rule book.

“If it’s not acceptable to do when you’re 18 to 35 years old, then why would it be okay to do when you’re 10-years-old?” asked an anonymous poster on www.pitching.com regarding the topic.

Many parents and coaches responded to the Knothole Baseball Club’s decision unfavorably, calling it an extreme form of political correctness that is sheltering today’s youth.

“Another age-old tradition being challenged,” Speer said. “I played baseball as a youngster, through high school and college, and even played semi professional ball while in the Air Force. In all that time, never have I witnessed a batter being influenced by the chatter of an opponent in swinging at a pitch.”

As another summer rolls in millions of children will once again don colorful uniforms and participate in baseball and softball programs around the country. During the season many players will step to the plate to face pitchers while accompanied by a chorus of chatter from the opposing team, and the debate whether this is simply a part of the game – or a part of the game that should be removed – will rage on.