

JUST 'BANTER'...

Can an ethnic slur ever be dismissed as just 'banter'? What if the person who the 'banter' was directed at receives and accepts an apology? Does that make the 'slur' acceptable? These questions were at the heart of the recent situation between international rugby players Samson Lee and Joe Marler.

Joe Marler was heard to call Samson Lee a 'Gypsy boy' during a game, and in further analysis of the video footage he is alleged to have also said, 'get back to your caravan'. Afterwards, he apologised to Samson Lee who accepted his apology and said he believed it was 'intended as banter'.

Six Nations Rugby (the tournament organiser of the RBS Six Nations Championship) decided not to discipline Marler because the comment was made 'in the heat of the moment'. Why it believed this would mitigate the offensive nature of what was said is confusing. However, World Rugby, rugby's world governing body, did not agree and decided to take action on the grounds that Marler's behaviour contravened Regulation 20 of the World Rugby Handbook, section c) which states, '*acts or statements that are, or conduct that is, discriminatory by reason of religion, race, sex, sexual orientation, disability, colour or national or ethnic origins*'¹

Why did Six Nations decide not to discipline Marler – despite Rugby Football Union's five core values being 'Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship'? I believe because it's a slur that is easily minimised; it was only Gypsies. Would the comment have been dismissed as a 'heat of the moment' piece of banter had the racial slur been made about any other ethnic minority?

World Rugby is to be applauded for taking further action when Six Nations did not. Samson Lee seems to have pushed through this situation and moved on. However, many other Gypsies still struggle to be accepted in areas where traditionally Gypsies are not found in great numbers such as universities and colleges, corporate workplaces, the police force, the legal profession, various sports and the Arts. In these areas there can often be an underlying sentiment that we should 'get back to our caravans'; that we don't belong.

Gypsies are the most underprivileged ethnic minority group in Britain². Any behaviour that pushes us down, or makes things harder for us to succeed needs to be addressed in the most forceful way. We belong wherever our achievements take us, and ethnic slurs should not be minimised because the damage they do is immense.

I believe one day ethnic slurs against Gypsies will be treated with the gravity and consistency they deserve, but until then every instance of an ethnic slur, or a stereotype or any other attempt to discriminate against us and push us 'back to our caravans' should be vigorously confronted.

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¹ World Rugby Handbook <http://www.worldrugby.org/documents/handbook>

² See EHRC report 'Is Britain Fairer' <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/about-us/our-work/key-projects/britain-fairer-0>