

Facts & Arguments

SOCIAL STUDIES

A DAILY MISCELLANY OF INFORMATION BY MICHAEL KESTERTON

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Slinging trash

Trash talk, the sports practice of boasting and insulting one's foes on the basketball court or in the field, has a long history, writes Jason Silverman in Psychology Today. "One well-known athlete, a young man named David, was able to use a verbal attack to his benefit in a battle with a heavily armed foe. 'I will strike you down and cut off your head,' David proclaims to his much larger enemy, Goliath, in the first chapter of the biblical book of Samuel. And the rest is trash-talking history."



Fighting boredom

"People assume that the opposite of boredom is excitement, so parents take their children to a theme park," says Richard Ralley of Edge Hill University in Britain, who is researching boredom. "Similarly, the information contained on the Internet was what everyone expected to relieve people's boredom. But quite obviously what people want is social interactivity - so parents would be better off taking their children on a picnic than to a theme park. And with the Internet, people want to engage with each other - that's where the blogs and the chat rooms came in. The other stuff is seen as nerdy now."

Hope of the future

The witty remarks of young people, which will no doubt keep Your Morning Smile alive for many more years, are surprisingly common, Globe readers will be relieved to know. Some recent gleanings from news services:

"Why did the tap dancer retire? He kept falling into the sink."

"What do you get if you cross a crocodile with a rose? I don't know but I wouldn't try smelling it."

"Can you use green, pink and yellow in the same sentence?" "Yes, when the phone goes green, green, green, I pink it up and say 'Yellow?'"

Gorillas at home

"More known for aggressive displays of chest-beating, loud roaring and other macho displays, gorillas have been found to be surprisingly delicate, especially at meal times," reports The Daily Telegraph. "Researchers found they use giant leaves as napkins to clean their fingers and faces after eating messy food. Trackers working for the Zoological Society of London in West Africa, saw several [western lowland] gorillas do the same routine."

'So, set 'em up, Joe'

Putting feelings into words makes sadness and anger less intense, U.S. brain researchers said last week, in a finding that explains why talking to a therapist - or even a sympathetic bartender - often makes people feel better. They said talking about negative feelings activates a part of the brain responsible for impulse control, reports Reuters. "This region of the brain seems to be involved in putting on the brakes," said University of California researcher Matthew Lieberman, whose study appears in the journal Psychological Science. He and colleagues scanned the brains of 30 people who were shown pictures of faces expressing strong emotions and were asked to categorize the feelings in words. What scientists found is that when people attached a word such as angry to an angry-looking face, the response in the amygdala portion of the brain that handles fear, panic and other emotions decreased. What lit up instead was the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, part of the brain that controls impulses.

'Fish are jumpin' '

This month, a woman was knocked unconscious by a leaping fish while boating on the Suwannee River in Florida. Tara Spears, 32, was struck by a sturgeon. Earlier this year, a jumping sturgeon severely injured a 50-year-old woman on the same waterway. She suffered a ruptured spleen and had three fingers reattached by surgeons, but still lost her little left finger and a tooth. Such encounters have become fairly common on the Suwannee, which is heavily used by boaters and fish, and the authorities have posted warning signs. The sturgeon is a prehistoric-looking creature with hard plates on its back and a length of up to eight feet. A surgeon is a medical practitioner, rarely more than six feet long, qualified to knock people out and treat their injuries with incisions and manipulation.

How to taste wine

Some tips for beginners:

Slurp the stuff. "Regarding 'palate,' " writes psychologist Pam Spurr in Britain's Daily Express, experts "chew" wine and then "slurp" - the noise they make while releasing more aromas."

Keep your clothes on. Fifty-odd wineries in New York state's Finger Lakes wine region are banding together to guard against rowdy tour groups, reports The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle. Out-of-control wine-tasting groups will get a yellow card (warning) or a red card (ban, for repeat offenders). "Swearing and annoying behaviour towards staff members and other visitors is the most common form of disruptive conduct.... More extreme examples cited by [wineries] and touring services include someone jumping into a pond, public urination and people running naked through the vineyards."

Thought du jour

"Ennui has made more gamblers than avarice, more drunkards than thirst, and perhaps as many suicides as despair."

- C. C. Colton (1780-1832)

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