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Random Samples

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SUMO NON BONUM



CREDIT: FRANCK ROBICHON/EPA/CORBIS

Rugby players call it scrumpox. Now sumo wrestlers are being plagued with their own version of the aptly named herpes gladiatorum.

It's a nasty strain of the herpes simplex virus that usually causes cold sores that are confined to the lips. But it spreads all over wrestlers, taking advantage of abrasions on faces, necks, arms, and legs to generate grotesque rashes of sores and blisters. Once acquired, the virus hides in nerve cells and periodically comes back to spread afresh.

Kazuo Yanagi, a virologist at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases in Tokyo, realized that sumo wrestlers, who live and train communally in sumo stables, were "a good group to study from an epidemiological point of view." Yanagi and colleagues studied serum samples collected from sumo wrestlers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a spike in infections appeared and one wrestler died. In the October issue of the *Journal of General Virology*, they report that a particularly virulent strain, BgK_L, entered the sumo community and quickly displaced a weaker strain, more readily infecting large parts of the body.

William Ruyechan, a virologist at the University at Buffalo in New York state, says the work shows how herpes can have drastic effects in certain subgroups. Yanagi believes but can't confirm that the virus is still circulating in the sumo community. "Information concerning diseases among sumo wrestlers is not released to outsiders," he says.

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BUSTLING IN THE DEEPS

Surprises still lurk in the deep. Last week, a school of snailfish was filmed for the first time at the record depth of 7700 meters in the Pacific Ocean's Japan Trench. The video shows the highly active, sociable fishes swarming over shrimps attracted by bait the scientists had deployed. It's one result of a 2-week expedition by a British-Japanese team working from the research ship *Hakuho-Maru*.



CREDIT: JAPAN AGENCY FOR MARINE-EARTH SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Deep-sea fish were thought to be mostly slow-moving, solitary species. But the busy snailfish, which are up to 23 cm long, belie that stereotype despite living in nearly freezing waters, under extreme pressure, and in total darkness. "What is really interesting is how many of them were rapidly attracted to bait and how active they seem," says oceanographer Jeffrey Drazen of the University of Hawaii, Honolulu, who was surprised to see the snailfish snapping at the large shrimps, which are themselves fish-eaters. The team operated a specially designed camera that took 5 hours to reach the bottom of the ocean and worked for 2 days in the high-pressure environment, offering a novel view of the deep-sea ecosystem at work.

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THE (B)AYES HAVE IT

In the winner-take-all world of politics, candidates know that even a modest lead in the polls can spell almost certain victory. Sheldon Jacobson, an operations research specialist at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and colleagues, including a group of students, have attempted to quantify that insight for the current United States presidential election, putting their predictions for the Electoral College on a Web site, election08.cs.uiuc.edu.



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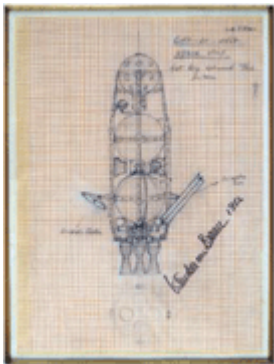
Using a statistical method known as Bayesian estimation, they combined an analysis of results from the 2004 Bush-versus-Kerry contest with current state-by-state polls for Obama versus McCain to produce probabilities for each candidate of carrying each state. They then converted the estimates into a probability distribution for the total number of Electoral College votes a candidate might receive.

In Indiana, for example, polls as of 4 October gave McCain a slight 2.5% lead. But given that Bush carried Indiana in 2004 by 20.7%, a Bayesian calculation indicates McCain's chance of winning the state's 11 Electoral College votes at about 87%.

Most states are now in the bag for one candidate or the other; only a handful are truly in Bayesian play. Current calculations give McCain no chance of victory. "However," Jacobson cautions, "if the polls move, then so will our forecasts."

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A MAN'S REACH ...



CREDIT: BONHAMS

This spaceship, designed for humans orbiting the moon, sprang from the fertile mind of pioneering rocket scientist Wernher von Braun in 1952, 16 years before Apollo 8 made the trip for real.

It's one of a collection of drawings, diagrams, and letters to be auctioned off this month for an estimated \$15,000 to \$20,000 at Bonhams in New York City. Von Braun created the materials in the course of writing a series of articles for *Collier's* magazine titled "Man Will Conquer Space Soon!" that ran from 1952 to 1954.

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