Battle of the Titans

We hate to brag .... OK, no, we don't. This month, the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reports that Science and Nature sweep the rankings of the "hottest journals of the millennium (so far)."

Among "high-impact" journals, Science sits at the top of six categories of highly cited papers from January 1999 to August 2004, and Nature claimed the top spot in the other five, according to ISI's citation analysis (ScienceWatch, January/February 2005).

Several categories were almost too close to call. In molecular biology and genetics, for example, Science averaged 78 cites per paper from 773 published papers and Nature 77 for 931 papers. The two are neck and neck on cites per paper in physics, space science, neuroscience, chemistry, and immunology. Also ranking high in every field but space science is the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The Mind of the Terrorist

The U.S. government has awarded $12 million to the University of Maryland, College Park, to set up a center for behavioral and social research on terrorism—what its director Gary LaFree calls "the social science equivalent of the Manhattan Project."

The center is the fourth in a network of "centers of excellence" devoted to various aspects of terrorism funded by the Department of Homeland Security. LaFree, a criminologist, says this one will study how terrorist groups form and recruit, what motivates them, and how they pick their targets. It will pull together teams from around the country to investigate areas that have received little attention in the past. "We need more than studies of the small number who become terrorists" and must explore the "pyramid" of which they are the tip, says LaFree.

Jerrold Post, head of the political psychology program at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., says the center faces a "very important challenge." He says many people fail to realize that "most terrorists are perfectly psychologically normal." Brian Jenkins, an expert on terrorists at Rand Corp. in Santa Monica, California, adds that "9/11 caused us to modify our conceptions about suicide [terrorists]."

Looking Into King Tut

Sounds like an episode of CSI: Ancient Egypt—forensic detectives want to reopen the case of King Tut's death. A 1968 x-ray of Egypt's most famous mummy, King Tutankhamen, revealed a bone chip protruding into his skull. To some researchers, that suggested the boy-king may have been fatally struck in the head when he died in his late teens, some 3000 years ago. But the damage may have also been the result of a fall or an accident at the time of mummification.

Now 3D images from a computed tomography (CT) scan are expected to clear up the mystery. This month Egyptian archaeologists led by Zahi Hawass, secretary general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, put a wooden box containing King Tut's remains into a portable CT scanner capable of resolving details as small as 0.5 mm. Results from the analysis of 1700 pictures are due soon.

A Call to Verse

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
I come to pluck your berries hard and crude
And with forced fingers rude

Attempt to celebrate Einstein's wonderful year.
A telescope prize and competition here†
Compels a poem—in February due.
It need not be great; it need not even rhyme.
Limerick, haiku, sestina—all that's clear
Is that if you are a poet, you
Should compose an ode about energy, space, or time
To mark the centenary of Albert's year.
Who knows? Perhaps you'll be laurel-girt,
Or perhaps you'll get a big Bronx cheer.‡

* Educated readers will of course recognize the first four lines from Milton's Lycidas.
† By the British Association for the Advance-
ment of Science, at www.the-ba.net/universe.
Competitors are divided into five age groups, including adults.
‡ Poem by Charles Seife.
Moving target. Can the science of visual perception help win pro basketball games? Maybe, say the Dallas Mavericks, but it’s not worth the trouble.

In three of the team’s games this season, employees of the NBA team attempted to coordinate crowd behavior to distract the other team’s players when they shot free throws. Acting on cue, supporters in the stands waved balloons in sync rather than randomly, creating the appearance of a moving background. Contrasted with the harmless blur produced by random waving—in which the movements of individual balloons cancel one another out—this effect was expected to make the shot more difficult.

The project was a success, says Daniel Engber, a neuroscientist-turned-writer who suggested the idea to Mavericks’ owner Mark Cuban (inset) and later wrote about it in the online magazine Slate (slate.msn.com/id/2111939). Overall, Engber claims, Mavericks’ opponents were 8% less accurate at the line during the three games—all victories—than the league average.

Despite that success, Cuban decided not to stick with the strategy. “It’s impossible to control 500 people sitting behind the basket,” he told Science in an e-mail.

AWARDS

Wolf Prizes. A researcher who studies matter at its coldest has won one of the hottest prizes in physics. Daniel Kleppner, a physicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, will receive the $100,000 Wolf Prize for his work on the hydrogen maser, Rydberg atoms, and the Bose-Einstein condensate.

Gregory A. Margulis of Yale University and Sergei P. Novikov of the University of Maryland, College Park, share $100,000 as co-winners of the Wolf mathematics prize. The selection panel cites Margulis for his “monumental contributions to algebra” and Novikov for “the introduction of algebraic-geometric methods.”

Got any tips for this page? E-mail people@aaas.org

DEATHS

Heart of Africa. Africa got into Bob Carsky’s blood early on. Now colleagues and friends of the agronomist, who died last fall in an air raid during the protracted civil war in Côte d’Ivoire, are trying to make sure his passion lives on.

Carsky first came to Africa with the Peace Corps, teaching science in Benin. Returning after earning a Ph.D. in agriculture from Cornell, he spent most of 15 years at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in West Africa. “He was willing to tackle tough and intransigent problems such as improving the soil fertility regimes of root crops,” says colleague Dyno Keatinge, now with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics in Hyderabad, India. “This was a good man.”

Last year, Carsky joined the Africa Rice Center, which was moving back to its scientific headquarters outside Bouaké, in war-torn Côte d’Ivoire. On 6 November, however, Carsky, 49, was killed while taking shelter in a French school when rebels bombed the city.

Those who knew him are hoping to endow an African exchange program at Cornell, as well as a charitable program in Benin, where Carsky had worked with IITA. “He always gravitated toward helping people,” says childhood friend Kevin Hopkins, a surgeon in Corpus Christi, Texas.

POLITICS

She’s game. Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright played the president this month in a simulated global smallpox outbreak arranged by the Center for Biosecurity at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. The exercise, called Atlantic Storm, found that some European nations did not have adequate vaccine supplies to counter a terrorist attack by an Al Qaeda splinter group on Istanbul, Frankfurt, and Rotterdam. During the game, Albright warned that the U.S. public might resist attempts to share the U.S. stockpile with European countries that had opposed the war in Iraq.

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