

Be aware of your human weaknesses

When we place bets we should all be aware of how, as human beings, we are not really genetically programmed to make accurate predictions.

Let me try to demonstrate this to you by using a well known test.

I will give you an example of a question I would like you to answer, talk you through the logic of how I arrive at my answer and then let you loose on 10 further questions.

The question is this. How far is it in km from Rome to Paris by road?

There is, of course, a tiny chance that you may **know** the correct answer to this question. However, what I would like you to do is say this: "I am 90% sure that the distance from Paris to Rome is between x km and y km".

I might say that I am 90% sure that the distance is between 1200 and 1800 km. My rationale runs something like this: I think it is about 1200 km from the northern tip of France to the south coast. Paris is not quite at the most northerly point but Rome is half way down Italy so Paris to the Italian border must be about 1000 km and then it must be about another 500 km to Rome, so I reckon it is around 1500km. My Geography is fairly good so I reckon I am 90% confident that the distance is between 1200km and 1800km (300km either side of my initial estimate of 1500 km). Somebody with appalling Geography may plump for a wider range in which they are 90% sure the distance will be between, say 300 km to 3000 km.

Anyway, the answer is irrelevant. You understand that for the following questions you have to say "I am 90% sure that the answer lies between x and y". Get a pen and do this for the following questions. **DON'T CHEAT** and turn over the page where the exact answers are.

1. What was Mozart's age when he died?

90% sure between.....and.....

2. How far is it from Edinburgh to Bristol by road, in miles?

90% sure between.....and.....

3. What is the length of the Mississippi river in miles?

90% sure between.....and.....

4. How far is it in millions of miles from the earth to the sun?

90% sure between.....and.....

5. In what year was Henry VIII born?

90% sure between.....and.....

6. What is the distance by road in miles from Hull to Liverpool?

90% sure between.....and.....

7. How many caps did Diego Maradona have for the Argentina football team?

90% sure between.....and.....

8. How many gallons of paint does it take to give The Forth bridge one coat of paint?

90% sure between.....and.....

9. In what year did Charles Dickens write his book "The tale of two cities"?

90% sure between.....and.....

10. In days, what is the average gestation period of a blue whale?

90% sure between.....and.....

Right then! Having finished your ranges, let me tell you why you have done this before you go to look at the answers.

Over 99% of us are genetically pre-programmed to be over-confident in our estimations.

Whether you like it or not, we are, the vast majority of us, pre-programmed to be over-confident in our predictions and our estimations. You have been asked to say with 90% confidence that the answer will lie between x at the bottom end and y at the top end. (The questions are irrelevant, by the way, and anything with numbers will do to demonstrate the point). Given that there are 10 questions and you were 90% confident that the answer lay between x and y, you should have 1 of the answers that lies outside of the range you put down. Now turn over the page and check your prediction ranges.

1. 35
2. 373
3. 2320
4. 91
5. 1491
6. 126
7. 91
8. 7000
9. 1859
10. 340

How many did you get? (I won't say how many did you get right because we are not testing that, are we?) Anybody could have got all of them "right" if they used ridiculously massive ranges for all the questions. If you said that Mozart was between 0 and 150 when he died, for instance! If you got all of them in your low to high ranges then you are in a massive *minority*. You are also an *under-confident* person. If you got all of them or just one "error" then *you are one of less than 1% of the population who have done similar exercises.*

If 2 or more of the answers were outside your ranges then you are over-confident, but you are not alone as *more than 99% of us are just the same*. As human beings we are over-confident in our predictions. Whilst this might be just interesting for the casual observer, as bettors it is critical that we understand how we are made up, how we as human beings make errors in our predictions, not because we mean to but because that is the way we are made up.

I would regard myself as very analytical and cautious and instinctively have a second look before committing myself to something but 4 of my range answers did not hit the mark when I tried this exercise a few years ago.

As bettors I think we always need to be aware of what makes us tick as human beings and how we react to all situations that involve numbers. Betting is all about numbers and prediction or estimation. Don't lose sight of the fact that virtually every one of us is genetically pre-programmed to be over-confident in our ability to estimate and it matters little whether we use the distance from Hull to Liverpool or the chances of Kauto Star to overturn Denman.

Don't lose sleep over it and don't let it prevent you from betting BUT be aware of it and let caution be the default setting when you bet.