

THE COUNTER-CLOCKWISE WAY

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A couple weeks ago I asked correspondents who were going to watch the Olympics to take note of which way the figure skaters did their spins--clockwise vs. counter-clockwise.

After the first night you probably realized this was a loaded question--all 30 of the skaters spun counter-clockwise! Throughout the next two weeks of the games, I saw only two skaters who spun clockwise: Carolina Kostner of Italy, and Bronze Medalist Kaetlyn Osmond of Canada.

On one day I watched which way skiers turned coming to a stop after their Giant Slalom runs. Twenty one out of 22 turned left.

The bias cannot totally be due to handedness (or "sidedness"). The portion of lefties in society is estimated to be between 7% and 10%, but the portion of clockwise skaters was only 2,8% (5 of 176 performances that I tallied).

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The human animal, through all times and all cultures, is and has been a right-handed species. Whatever its relation, I have noticed in my studies of asymmetries that whenever humans move in a circular path they overwhelmingly do it counter-clockwise.

Consider: running tracks, auto race courses, speed skating, bicycle velodromes, baseball, roller derby, horse races, dog races, revolving doors, Whirling Dervish dancers, ballroom dancers around the dance floor, and chariot racers (as recreated in the *Ben-Hur* movies). The directions on a Hula Hoop were to hold the hoop against your back and push forward with the *right* hand, thus setting the hoop and the hips in a counter-clockwise rotation. At public ice- and roller rinks, they *make you* skate counter-clockwise.

In a survey of college students I found that the vast majority said that they walked or would walk counter-clockwise around a lake, an island, a supermarket or a county fair. I have been told that the rents at fairs are higher for booths to the right of the midway, to capitalize on visitors' tendencies to turn right after entering, to start a counter-clockwise circuit.

As seen from the north, as is customary, Earth spins counter-clockwise around its axis, (as do all the planets in their orbits around the Sun). This Earthly rotation indirectly results in Northern Hemisphere tornadoes and hurricanes spinning the same way. It is often claimed that water drains counter-clockwise out of bathtubs, sinks and toilets in the Northern Hemisphere, and clockwise in the Southern. In fact, water flows out of most sinks in the same direction it flowed in. The reason is that the Coriolis "force" (really an "effect", not a "force"), which is supposed to cause this, is almost immeasurably weak and is overpowered by the slightest current. In ideally motionless water the molecules at the south side of the sink are slightly closer to the Equator than the molecules at the north side; hence they are traveling a slightly larger circle around the

Earth's axis every day; hence they are moving through space slightly faster than the molecules at the north side of the sink! That's how weak the bathtub vortex is.

When I was once preparing a paper on the counter-clockwise phenomenon, and the complete absence of clockwise counter-examples, as far as I could tell, I asked three prominent anthropologists how this came to be--Irven DeVore at Harvard, Bernard Campbell at UCLA, and Sherwood Washburn at Berkeley--and they all gave me the same answer. Not, "Oh, that can be traced back to such-and-such", as I had hoped, but, "Hmmm. You know, I have never noticed that before."

I don't know of anyone else who has ever noticed that before.