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Here’s how to enjoy this book.

Stop reading this introduction and start flipping through the pages. Pause at the first page that catches your eye. It might be a picture that grabs you (e.g., Nick Nolte’s mugshot). Or a name (Otis Redding). Or a song title (“God Bless America”). Or a fortune cookie (“Do or do not. There is no try”). Or a pairing of proper nouns you never expected to be linked together (Michael Jordan vs. John Glenn).

If you’re engaged by the page, you’ll start nodding your head in agreement. Or shaking it in violent disagreement. You might not agree that Paul Newman’s best role was in Absence of Malice, or that Mary Tyler Moore is the greatest American named Mary – ever! Or that Crunch Berries is the best breakfast cereal and Mark Twain had the best pseudonym and that a brew from Louisiana named Turdog is America’s best beer. Or that Maine has the most stylish license plate and “This Land Is Your Land” is the best choice to replace our current national anthem. Or that 1941 was the greatest sports year (I prefer 2008) and Scrabble is a better board game than Monopoly.

If you regard any of the above opinions as fighting words, then you’re already enjoying this book in the way we intended. In these pages we are celebrating everything good, surprising, and silly about America – which means that (a) it’s a happy, optimistic book that (b) is designed to generate arguments. If you want to have livelier conversations over family dinner, place this book at the head of the table.

On the other hand, you might have questions, such as: What does “bracketology” mean? Did you make it up? Why don’t you just make a list? Who are all these people with their firm opinions? Who died and made them boss? And of course, how can I do this stuff at home?

My job here is to answer those questions.

The bracket concept is not new. It’s a unique way of organizing information that dates back to the rise of the knockout (or single elimination) tournament. Its origins are not precisely known. It’s possible that the first bracket was drawn by a master of jousts at a medieval jousting tournament or by an enterprising member of a Scottish golf club in the 16th century as a way of determining the club champion. We do not know, because the crude chart informing jousters and golfers whom they would face in the next round does not survive. But there was genius in the bracket design and it hasn’t changed much over the years. By 1849 in London, Henry Buckle was winning the first modern chess tournament and adhering to the bracket format. Tennis, bridge, soccer, rowing, and other sports followed soon enough.

You, of course, may be familiar with the bracket format via the NCAA basketball tournament pairings each March. If you’ve ever watched ESPN or participated in a March Madness office pool, you know the guiding concept behind this book. All we’ve done here is take the knockout format and apply it to every category except basketball. In areas where taste, judg-
ment, and hard-earned wisdom really matter, we’ve set out to determine (as the book’s cover modestly announces) the Final Four of Everything.

A bracket is not a list, nor does it aspire to be one. The world already has enough lists. To us, a list is a crude, invidious, one-dimensional device. It ranks things from best to worst, but that’s all it does. It doesn’t explain. It doesn’t pit one item against another, allowing the two to rub together and create friction to determine the superior player.

A bracket is a more dynamic way of understanding personal preferences. The practice of parsing people, places, and things into discrete one-on-one matchups works because it’s simple and the face-off happens right in front of you— in real time. In that sense, a bracket invests your opinions with a narrative of how you decided something. Thus, when *Annie Hall* and *The Front Page* go at each other in David Denby’s Romantic Comedies bracket (#117), you are forced to compare the two films’ merits and debits. Isn’t a champion more interesting when you know who or what it had to beat to get to the top?

As for the term “bracketology,” it is one of those cute neologisms deployed by obsessive fans to inject greater significance into a familiar sports phenomenon—for example, threepeat or SABRmetrics or bouncebackability. I first heard bracketology used by the co-editor of this book, Richard Sandomir, in a March 2006 *New York Times* sports column, in reference to ESPN’s saturation coverage of March Madness. The term was new to me (clearly, I do not watch enough ESPN), but its meaning (technically, the study of the brackets) did not sail over my head. I knew it referred to Americans’ annual debate over whether the NCAA created a gross miscarriage of justice in, say, seeding Gonzaga (with their 26-3 record and a defeat early in the season of top-ranked Duke) third in the Midwest regional. So crisp and clean was the phrase, creating such a vivid picture of American men devoting their analytical powers to guessing the outcome of a series of basketball games over three long weekends in March, that I wondered, “What if that cranial energy, that heat and obsession, were placed at the service of a better, higher purpose?”

That’s when I knew that bracketology could be used to establish our preferences in . . . well, everything.

We do not claim authorship of the concept. One of the earliest non-sporting uses of brackets can be found in the December 1989 issue of *Spy* magazine. But we like to think that in this book, we have taken the concept to its logical extreme.

In celebrating America, we’ve tried to capture the nation’s greatness and glory and occasional foolishness in 150 self-contained two-page spreads of brackets. Our subject matter includes sports, of course, but ventures deeply into history, nature, people, food and drink, popular culture, and miscellaneous issues such as the most seductive foreign accent for speaking English.

We didn’t do this all by ourselves. We approached experts and celebrated authorities to render the verdict of what is good, better, and best in America. Thus, you will find bestselling thriller writer (and firearm aficionado) Stephen Hunter bracketizing on *American guns*. And *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins on First Ladies. And Kelly Carlin-McCall on her father George Carlin’s best comedy routines. And Pulitzer Prize–winning historian David Oshinsky on extremists and radicals. And Bill Geist on notable Williams and Bills.

One of the underappreciated miracles here is how a bracket can provide an essential nitro-
glycerine tablet of information on the most complicated topics. In Harry Evans's *Innovators* bracket (#23), you'll find an instant summary of America's most durable business breakthroughs. In Pulitzer Prize–winner David Maraniss's *Olympic Athletes* bracket (#52), you get a memory-jog about our gold-medal heroes— all adding up to what could have been a two-hour documentary. Adam Liptak's *Supreme Court Decisions* (#24) is a cheat sheet for what we will still be arguing about in decades to come. In Stefan Fatsis's *Acronyms* (#133), you get the story of the last 100 years via our shorthand. In Richard Sandomir's *Magical Numbers* (#1), you'll find a stealth history of the United States through the numbers that we embrace. Each in two pages.

A bracket also displays great versatility as a communications tool. In her *Fatherly Advice* bracket (#131), writer Jancee Dunn accumulates all the pearls of wisdom—solicited or not—that she has heard from her father in her lifetime. Take away the bracket format and I doubt that Dunn would ever have gathered these nuggets in one place at the same time, let alone have them compete to determine that “when you meet someone, shake their hand firmly and look them right in the eye” is the best advice her father has ever given her. Absent the bracket, she might never have known how much she values that advice—and neither would her father.

In that sense, Dunn’s bracket could literally serve as her Father’s Day card this year—which suggests another use for brackets: *you can do them at home.* (That’s why we’ve provided a blank template at the end of this book.) Facing a dilemma of personal choice, don’t fall back on the usual list of dos and don’ts. Draw up a bracket of one-on-one items that gives structure and depth to your many options. The process is simple: fill in the first round with any idea that pops into your mind. Then let this jumble of competing notions play out in a tournament of the mind until a clear winner emerges.

More than anything, though, a bracket can function as a decision-making engine. It lets us confirm what we’re really thinking and, as a result, provides us with an incremental gain in self-knowledge. Not long ago I was at a wedding reception in upstate New York. It was a beautiful sunny day as I sipped champagne with a professor of Irish literature and a local attorney. Surveying the lovely scene and stunning weather, the professor said, "James Joyce believed that the two loveliest words in the English language are ‘summer afternoon.’”

“That’s nice,” said the attorney, clasping his flute of champagne. “But I’m partial to ‘open bar’ myself.”

It depends on who you are, I thought. To a schoolkid, the two happiest words might be “snow day”; to a job hunter, “You’re hired”; to a childless couple, “We're pregnant”; to a cancer patient, “in remission”; to a defendant, “not guilty.” And so on. Curious to know what my happiest two words were, I made a bracket that looked like this:
If you study this bracket closely, you could come to a few reliable conclusions about my demons and desires. (Which is why I encourage you to have everyone in your immediate family fill out a similar bracket, if only for mental-health reasons.)

Frankly, I was surprised that “Tee time” reached the finals. I didn’t know that playing golf made me happier than earning a living (“Royalty check”). This is particularly shocking if you’ve seen my golf game. As for the penumbra of happy thoughts surrounding the words “Spring fever,” that’s much more understandable. It takes me back to my schoolboy years, sitting in a classroom on a gorgeous day in May, scorched by a fizzy restless yearning to be anywhere outdoors. Spring fever reminds me of baseball, of graduation, of putting warm woolens away for another year. It reminds me that summer is not far away – and that golf season is beginning again. So much of what I enjoy is wrapped up in the promise contained within the words “spring fever” that I know its position as champion in my bracket is true. That’s something worth discovering.

In this book, we have gathered 150 brackets about something worth discovering in the great land that we live in. You may be glad or disappointed or furious about some of the conclusions drawn here (and we appreciate that; when it comes to brackets, disagreement is music to our ears). But what we’re really doing here is turning opinion into a sport.

Now so can you.
Pepe the King Prawn vs. Sam the Eagle
In a triumph for heavily armed (and legged) immigrants everywhere, Spanish émigré Pepe (full name Pepino Rodrigo Serrano Gonzales) makes a fricassee of Sam, the Red State eagle. This development makes Rush Limbaugh’s head explode. Now that’s entertainment.

Miss Piggy vs. Gonzo
More than just the other white meat, she’s the delicious dish (created by Frank Oz) whose passion for Kermit gave television its first interspecies romance, long before Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. (Were a frog and a pig to procreate, would they produce a frog?) Miss Piggy sashays to the finals after she blackmails the Davis with compromising photos of him with other farm animals.

By Michael Davis
Michael Davis is the author of Street Gang: The Complete History of Sesame Street. Not surprisingly, hectoring balcony critics Statler and Waldorf mocked it, Oscar the Grouch trashed it, but Elmo, who can’t read, loved it.
Miss Piggy vs. Kermit
Long before Howard Stern, Kermit was king of all media. He conquered television (hosting the Tonight show), the movies (opposite Orson Welles in one of the great denouements in cinema history), and theme park attractions. There’s even a Kermit balloon in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, this culture’s highest accolade! Only a brute would hog this amiable amphibian’s spotlight.

Animal vs. Cookie Monster
It’s Id versus Id in this battle between the Electric Mayhem’s libidinous stadium-rock drummer and Sesame Street’s serial noshing. Both are working through their problems with obsession, but how can you look into Cookie’s hypnotically googly eyes and not move him on to Round III?

Big Bird vs. La Choy Dragon
This battle of walk-around puppets pits an 8-foot canary from public television against a fire-breathing agent of clever commercialism from the mid-1960s. Big Bird moves on to the next round when the dragon suddenly realizes he’s extinct.

Kermit vs. Ernie
His split-personality bracket features the two projections of Henson’s ego, Kermit, the wry observer who is wary of the fray, and Ernie, the mischievous buddy boy. One could argue that Kermit was proto-observational comic. It wasn’t easy bein’ green, but he never worked blue.
By Stanley Bing
Stanley Bing is the pen name of a writer whose true identity is none of your business. You could find it anyway with Internet search engines that have taken the mystery out of everything. Bing adopted the name long ago to keep his corporate masters off his back, but it has failed miserably.
Mel Brooks vs. McG
Who is more powerful? The mature pseudonym who has produced his greatest work or the younger sensibility coming up the ramp? Mr. Nichol's music videos for Korn and Sugar Ray were groundbreaking re-thinkings of the genre, which he followed with his brilliant big-screen version of Charlie's Angels. But he can't yet equal Mr. Kaminsky's legacy on universal subjects like race, Hitler, religious intolerance, and flatulence.

Bob Dylan vs. Woody Allen
As Myron Cohen might have pointed out, what we have here are two elderly gentlemen of the Jewish persuasion – ultra-productive alter kockers – who have eradicated their roots to one extent or another. But it is Mr. Zimmerman's pseudonym – if not his work – that has been more effective at the job of mythmaking, for which it was intended.

Lemony Snicket vs. JT Leroy
Handler's creation has a certain reality as an author of creepy children's tales. But Mr. Leroy achieved a virtually unprecedented level of nonexistence with a fabricated biography that invalidated much of "his" oeuvre. Moreover, Leroy was two people – one who wrote the material and another who impersonated the author in public. Snicket's win is assured because a pseudonym cannot be utilized to create a pseudo-person.

THE USE OF PEN NAMES AND STAGE NAMES by writers, actors, and other obfuscators is as ancient as the human desire to morph into whatever is necessary. Some wish to appear less of whatever momentarily outré race, religion, or ethnic persuasion they might be. Some have simply been saddled with monikers that are useless in their chosen profession. Whatever the rationale, the pseudonym forever changes the fate of the individual who takes it on. The most influential men in history began as Emmanuel and Gautama, and Calcutta's poor were soothed by a sweet lady named Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu.
By Adam Liptak
Adam Liptak covers the Supreme Court for the New York Times.

Roe v. Wade (1973)
Roe v. Wade, which struck down laws limiting the right to abortion, would not have been possible without Marbury v. Madison, in which Chief Justice John Marshall established a principle that seems obvious now but was radical in 1803 – that the Supreme Court has the power to decide which laws pass constitutional muster.

Heller said there is an individual constitutional right to possess guns, and Roe said there is a constitutional right to an abortion. But there was more judicial heavy lifting in Roe, which was based on a privacy rights found, as an earlier case put it, in penumbras formed by emanations from the Bill of Rights.

Hamdi v. Rumsfeld vs. Gideon v. Wainwright
The Gideon decision said poor people accused of serious crimes are entitled to lawyers paid for by the state. That is a powerful thought, but not as powerful as the one in Hamdi. “A state of war is not a blank check,” the court said, ruling that prisoners at Guantanamo had the right to challenge their detentions.
SOME OF THE MOST FAMOUS Supreme Court cases are ones in which the Court got it preposterously wrong, like \textit{Dred Scott}, which said black people could be property but not citizens, or \textit{Korematsu}, which upheld the internment of 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent in detention camps during World War II. Those cases don't get into this bracket. But unpopularity does not disqualify cases if their reasoning has lasting force or if the rulings themselves altered the social structure. It's all about impact.

\textbf{Brown v. Board of Ed. vs. Marbury v. Madison}  
The Supreme Court's unanimous decision in \textit{Brown}, which said that segregating students by race in public schools was constitutionally intolerable, remains the Court's undisputed triumph. Some quarrel with its reasoning and with the studies on which it relied. No one doubts its moral power.

\textbf{THE WINNER}  
\textit{Brown v. Board of Ed.}  
(1954)

\textbf{Baker v. Carr vs. Bush v. Gore}  
\textit{Baker v. Carr}, which Chief Justice Earl Warren called "the most vital decision" of his tenure, helped establish the principle of "one person, one vote." \textit{Bush v. Gore} established the principle of "five justices, one election" and then cautioned that the decision was "limited to the present circumstances" – a ticket good for one ride only.
By Willie Geist

Celebrity Mugshots

Nick Nolte
Wynona Judd
Rip Torn
Kid Rock
Mike Tyson
Jane Fonda
Paul Reubens
Rush Limbaugh
Paris Hilton
Larry Craig
O.J. Simpson
Andre the Giant
Dawn Wells
Hugh Grant
Heather Locklear

James Brown vs. Nick Nolte
Nolte’s angry shot, the very image of human dissipation, screams: Celebrities, don’t let this happen to you. Nolte’s insurmountable challenge here is a hair-to-hair battle with Brown. Nolte’s locks look held in place with carpenter’s glue but Brown’s coiffure is only a slightly electrified version of his stage do. Brown didn’t feel good as the camera snapped, but Whoa!, he looks fantastic.

Paris Hilton vs. Larry Craig
Paris Hilton violated the spirit of the celebrity mugshot by doing her hair and makeup before turning herself in. Not cool. But Larry Craig’s shot is a perfect portrait of dissonance: the conservative United States senator in the plain blue suit who knows his exotic private life, or at least the one in the airport men’s room, is about to become public.

O.J. Simpson vs. Hugh Grant
O.J.’s almost banal mugshot is the shocking and enduring symbol of an ugly moment in American history. But Hugh Grant’s famous shoulder-shrug booking photo says, “Yes, I just cheated on Elizabeth Hurley with a hooker named Divine. Can we get this over with?” Human frailty – and post-humiliation self-deprecation – beats human evil in this one.
CELEBRITIES EXIST IN A SCRIPTED, AIR-BRUSHED PARALLEL UNIVERSE where every image of them is controlled. The beauty of their mugshots is the absolute loss of control. They can’t summon Annie Leibovitz for their shoots or demand a second take. Instead, they’re at the mercy of fluorescent lights, cinderblock backdrops, and the officer working the night shift at the Santa Monica Police Department. A classic mugshot is the inartful result of bad photography, the absence of hairstylists, and a great backstory.

John Daly vs. Andy Dick
John Daly was caught drunk outside a Hooters. Andy Dick was caught drunk outside a Buffalo Wild Wings. Original Hooters always beats faux Hooters – and Daly’s sleepy-eyed visage, sloppy prison jumpsuit, and sunburned chest are enough to overcome Andy Dick’s grinning serial killer charm.

Glen Campbell vs. James Brown
Glen Campbell, the beloved country music star, looks like he’s about to kick the photographer’s ass. But James Brown looks annoyed, and just a tiny bit bemused, at having been dragged out of bed, wearing a memorable “Are you really arresting the Godfather of Soul?” expression. Extra style points for wearing a hideous green-blue bathrobe for the occasion.

THE WINNER
James Brown
By Richard Sandomir

Richard Sandomir wrote a memoir of his long-faded hairline, *Bald Like Me: The Hair-Raising Adventures of Baldman*. He was stimulated to shave his Larry Fine-like fringe of unkempt hair by Charles Barkley, who told him, "Brother, what you got ain’t working for you." Barkley’s intervention exempted him from this competition.

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David vs. Kuralt

David is one of America’s most articulate bald advocates, always eager to snarl at those who deny bald men their due (he’s especially strong on the right to sympathy sex). He sought hate-crime status in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* when two teenaged girls to whom he denied Halloween candy, spray-painted "Bald Asshole" on his front door. If Kuralt ever raised his voice to protect his brethren, he did it in a whisper lost to the tumbleweeds out on the road.

Eisenhower vs. Simpson

Eisenhower led us to victory on D-Day, a feat that should have clinched his victory over a fat, stupid toon. But there’s something about Homer – that elliptical head, those squiggly hairs framing his meager fringe, and that singular level of buffoonery at home and at the nuclear plant – that elevates him above an easy-but-bland choice like Ike. And Homer worked naked.

Jordan vs. Glenn

Both men soared, Glenn into outer space (at age 40 and again at 77) and Jordan above the rim. Orbing the earth is more impressive than leaping over Patrick Ewing, and what could have been more macho than being a star astronaut in the ’60s? But Jordan flew under his own power, not with the help of rocket boosters. And while Glenn’s bald head has all the right structural stuff, Jordan’s shaved bean embodies the sleek aerodynamics needed for flight.
WHO IS THE TRUE BALDIE: the one whose hair loss is genetically programmed or the one who shears all the hair from his head? The debate will continue unabated as long as men lose their hair or see a benefit in shaving it all off. In this celebration of both species of homo baldus, we derived spiritual guidance from the words of the fringe-haired dyspeptic, Larry David, who said: “Anyone can be confident with a full head of hair. But a confident bald man – there’s your diamond in the rough.”

Jordan vs. Brynner
Jordan shaved his balding head early in his NBA career, which enhanced the imagery of his aerodynamics and also led other players and millions around the world to “Be Like Mike.” He wasn’t the first famous man to go smooth (Louis Gossett, Jr. was prominent among the early adopters), but he is the most influential. Brynner’s look probably led Savalas to reach for the razor and shaving cream, but not many others.

Mr. Clean vs. Brynner
No one established the image of the smooth-headed foreign exotic with more élan than Brynner. He was smart, imperious, and manly as a Siamese king, a gunfighter, or an Egyptian pharaoh. Procter & Gamble’s grime-fighting Mr. Clean is an enduring marketing vision of macho purity a half-century since his creation, but Brynner proved the commercial impact of regularly shaving one’s head down to his Mongolian skin.
Chemistry vs. Mechanics

Traditionally, chemistry is the province of BALCO, mechanics are the province of Aamco. But in the world of sports clichés, chemistry and mechanics are the ephemeral forces that hold together teams and individuals, respectively. It’s close, but Rx defeats Car-X, in overtime.

Gut check vs. Crunch time

Gut checks and crunch time are closely associated. And indeed a man who performs a gut check often feels inclined to do crunches afterward. Both phrases refer to that part of the game or season when it’s “do-or-die,” “win-or-go-home,” though going home is never that simple: Losing, in the broadcast vernacular, always necessitates a “long flight home” – followed by a “long off-season.”

It is what it is vs. Give 110%

What is “It Is What It Is”? The obvious answer – “It Is What It Is” is what it is – is true enough. But it’s more than that. The phrase is a Zen koan that means nothing and everything, a kind of verbal yin-and-yang, which in turn evokes one of sports’ greatest visual clichés: the Chinese character tattoo.

Steve Rushin is the author of the nonfiction books Road Swing and The Caddie Was a Reindeer and a forthcoming novel, The Pint Man. He has been a columnist for Sports Illustrated and an essayist for Time.
We play ’em one game at a time.

The kid’s got tremendous upside.

Nobody gave us a chance.

We have to stay within ourselves.

They threw him under the bus.

All credit goes to my Lord and Savior.

All credit goes to my Offensive Line.

The guys have to dig deep.

I have a family to feed.

We sent them a message today.

We left it all on the field.

He has ice water in his veins.

This was a wake-up call.

Someone needs to step up.

Let’s take it to the next level.

“I want to spend more time with my family.”

The French have more names for boredom than cheeses, among them ennui and malaise and plat (“flat”), from which we get such touchstones of tedium as “platitude” and North Platte, Nebraska. But no word conveys existential weariness quite like cliché, and no cliché deadens the soul quite like a sports cliché, in which all fired coaches “step down” and all winning teams “step up.” But you know that. The sports cliché, to use a cliché, needs no introduction.

Gave 110% vs. One game at a time

Athletes traditionally give 110%, unless they’re calculating the tip on a restaurant check, in which case 5% is more typical. Whereas all games – except bingo and some speed-chess exhibitions – are played one at a time. And so the favorite phrase of Bull Durham’s Crash Davis (this bracket’s patron saint) shocks the world. It’s going to Disneyland. Nobody gave it a chance.

Lord and Savior vs. Offensive Line

Running backs and quarterbacks have been known, in consecutive sound bytes, to give all credit to the Almighty and all credit to their offensive lines. In that way, sports really are a microcosm of America – there’s another cliché – in which overextended lines of credit lead to depression.

Family to feed vs. More time with my family

“I’ve got a family to feed” was given new life by Latrell Sprewell, who said it plaintively while drawing a $14.6 million salary. But this cliché owes less to Sprewell than to Orwell, who wrote: “The great enemy of clear language is insincerity.” Ask any athlete or coach who retires to spend more time with his “family” (i.e., “golf clubs”).
**Sitcom Dads**

**By Steven Reddickliffe**

Steven Reddickliffe, a media editor at the *New York Times*, has been a suburban dad for 18 years (his children contributed to the Danny Tanner entry here). He has always tried to be more Cleaver than Cheever.

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**Howard Cunningham vs. Steven Keaton**

Two TV parents best described as obligatory, but with genuine decency. Howard had only to deal with the easily likable Richie, Potsie, and Fonzie, the least delinquent JD ever. Liberal Steven had son Alex P., a conservative careerist who carried a briefcase to school and a brief for William F. Buckley, Jr. As a baby Alex had a Nixon rattle. Once said, “People who have money don’t need people.” Case closed.

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**Bernie McCullough vs. Red Forman**

Gruff, tough-talking dads. Red was master of the bitter barb; Bernie could bluster with the best. But wouldn’t you rather hang in the den with the guy who also regularly showed a softer side? Bernie was a supremely entertaining embodiment of TV’s custodial dad tradition, uncles who include Bentley Gregg of *Bachelor Father* and Bill Davis of *Family Affair*. Unlike them, Bernie had a sweet soul soundtrack, smoked cigars, and paid absolutely no attention to the fourth wall.

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**The Winner**

*Ward Cleaver*  
*Leave It to Beaver*
Dad’s a doofus – that’s the long-lived misconception when it comes to television. Although there may be the occasional dips and dorks, situation comedy dads are usually sane and sensitive fellows, wry guys who can impart useful life lessons between mowing the lawn and conducting goldfish funerals. There are exceptions, sure (Frank Costanza’s discourse on the brassiere somehow leaps to mind), but mellow understanding prevails. As the ’60s soul group The Winstons once put it, “I think I’ll color this man love.”

Cliff Huxtable vs. Ward Cleaver
No one ever should have been worried about the Beaver. Ward was the unshakable foundation for the admirable TV dad – affectionate, patient, good-humored, capable of making a mistake and of deftly repairing one. Also dried the dishes. Cliff played a genuinely funny, contemporary riff on Ward (he cooked, wife was a lawyer), but there can be no rancor or raised voices in this battle; wouldn’t be fatherly. As both Cliff and Ward would tell their children, there is only one champion, and sometimes the good guy who gets there first wins the prize.

Herman Munster vs. Dan Conner
Physically imposing dads, one built in a laboratory, the other built with cholesterol. Herman, a genuine sweetheart, is challenged only by his vampire father-in-law; Dan’s challenge comes from the most formidable wife in sitcom history. But winning the dad trophy often comes down to the better bowler, and based on bendability alone, that man would be Dan.

Danny Tanner vs. Steve Douglas
This one’s strictly a numbers game. Tanner: kids D.J., Stephanie, and Michelle, a dog named Comet, Joey, Jesse, Jesse’s wife Becky, and their twins Alex and Nicky. Douglas: three biological sons, one adopted son, triplet grandkids, a dog named Tramp, a wife late in the game, Bub, and Uncle Charley. That’s a fuller house.

JULIUS ROCK, FRESHMAN YEAR

Andy Taylor
The Andy Griffith Show

Jack Arnold
The Andy Griffith Show

Herman Munster
The Munsters

Dan Conner
Roseanne

Cliff Huxtable
The Cosby Show

Alex Stone
The Donna Reed Show

George Bluth, Sr.
Arrested Development

Hal Wilkerson
Malcolm in the Middle

Julius Rock
Everybody Hates Chris

Ray Barone
Everybody Loves Raymond

Julio Larraz
Home Improvement

Frank Costanza
Seinfeld

Danny Tanner
Full House

Nick Russo
Blossom

Steve Douglas
My Three Sons

Mike Brady
The Brady Bunch
**Invulnerability vs. Flight**

The classic confrontation (at least according to John Hodgman on public radio’s *This American Life*). Flight represents our mythic and heroic self (what we wish we could be) and invulnerability, our darker and hidden self (what we fear we really are). Reality (i.e., voyeurism) wins.

**Magnetism vs. Invulnerability**

Invulnerability is the ultimate passive-aggressive power. You don’t actually do anything; you simply cannot be harmed. Other powers come with problems. Telepathy, for example, means thinking about sex, money, and their hair; who wants that in their head? With magic, you could accidentally summon Cthulu and bring on the apocalypse. But invulnerability - hey, skydiving without a parachute and having bullets bounce off your eyes? How cool is that?
THIS BRACKET STEMS FROM CHILDHOOD FANTASY, when we debated which is the best power to have, either in daily life or for fighting crime. I think we can admit now that none of us really wanted to dress up like a bat and spend our nights on patrol. It wasn’t the costume; it’s the actual superpower that’s cool and fun. Ever since Gilgamesh went looking for immortality, people have dreamed of having superpowers to escape the monotony of mundane existence. But if you could only have one power – whether it’s physical, mental, or meta – which would it be?

**Dial a Power vs. Reality Warping**
Having access to every superpower sounds great, right? But then come the rules like you can use each power only once or once a year. All that record keeping is such a headache. And the research: always having to look for new heroes and new powers? Who wants that? Superpowers should be fun, not homework. Decision: Reality Warping.

**Reality Warping vs. Magnetism**
Sure, controlling reality seems like the best power, but your every thought becomes reality. This is particularly dangerous if you have any attention-deficit issues. A stray intrusive thought, however quick and harmless inside the mind, can create havoc. But magnetism represents the ultimate vanity: everything can be attracted to you. Magnetism wins.

**Turn into a Wall vs. Body Part Separation**
These comic-book superpowers are so stupid and useless that the contest is a draw – and they present a virtual bye for omnivory in round two. With omnivory (the ability to eat anything – bricks, prison-robot fingers, iron chains – that taste like chocolate cake), at least you can make a living as an “anything for a dollar” geek.

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**Dial a Power (Kid Eternity)**
**Superpower Mimicry (The Mimic)**

**Reality Warping (Proteus)**
**Time Stopping (Hourman)**
**Magic (Dr. Strange)**
**Weather Control (Storm)**
**Eye Blasts (Cyclops)**
**Explosion (Human Bomb)**
**Pyrokinesis (Iceman)**
**Pyrokinesis (Human Torch)**
**Magnetism (Magneto)**
**Magnetism (Magneto)**
**Electicity (Electro)**
**Superventriloquism (Superman)**
**Omnivory (Matter Eater Lad)**
**Turn into a Wall (Blockade Boy)**
**Body Part Separation (MFE Captain Marvel)**
Fears and Phobias

By Roz Chast

Roz Chast is a cartoonist for The New Yorker magazine.
EVER SINCE I WAS LITTLE, I have always had a lot of phobias. When I was a kid, the main ones were appendicitis (thank you, Ludwig Bemelmans); going blind; going cross-eyed; nightmares; losing my permanent teeth; kites; leprosy; spontaneous combustion; and balloons. I have outgrown most of these but not all. The bad news is that as I get older, I accumulate new ones.

**Plane Crash vs. Cancer**

After playing all of my phobias against each other, it came down to plane crashes and cancer. Of all the nightmare scenarios I fear – elevator cable snapping, spiders, tidal wave, getting lost while driving, etc. – those two seemed the most nightmarish of all. Cancer beat out plane crashes, though, for the simple reason that if I really wanted to, I could stop taking planes, and that would take care of that. With cancer, there's no avoiding it, if that's what fate has in store for you. You can be a health food fanatic and run ten miles a day, but it won't necessarily protect you. Anything can cause it. Worrying about it too much can cause it, as well as not worrying enough about it. And treatment for it can lead to other cancers. As far as balloons go, this is a fear I've had since very early childhood, which was probably caused by a lame-brained kid popping balloons in my face. I still get the heebie-jeebies when I see them, and would rather not be around them.
Moisturize your neck, or people will know how old you really are.

Never go to a doctor whose office plants have died.

Don’t drink milk with spaghetti and meatballs.

Stop hunching and stand up straight.

The sleep before midnight is the best sleep.

Go to bed the same day you woke up.

Eggs for dinner does not count as dinner.

Everything improves when you gargle with salt water.

Never order French onion soup on the first date.

Never have a joint checking account.

Why should he pay for the cow when he can get the milk for free?

If you want to meet more men, take up smoking.

Marry someone who thinks you’re funny.

Marry someone who makes you a better person.

How he treats his mother is how he’ll treat you.

Marry a Cubs fan. You can crush their hearts, but they’ll always come back.

The same advice stated twice. The value of tucking in before midnight seems to defy the laws of nature – after all, sleep is sleep. But the older you get, the earlier you go to bed. So it must be true. The more felicitously phrased version also prescribes rest within a 24-hour period, and thus advances.

Milk for free vs. Funny
It’s nice to have humor in a marriage, but there’ll come a point when you’ll wonder if your mate is laughing at you or with you. And that’s not funny. Although the imagery of cows and free milk is a peculiar way to promote premarital chastity, this classic advice does double duty as a career caveat for any self-employed “consultant” who lets others pick his or her brain before the meter starts running.

Milk for free vs. Ask your father
The trouble with “milk for free” as advice is that, in a land where only 5% of married couples are virgins on their wedding day, it is honored more in theory than practice. Advice from mom that is so egregiously ignored cannot win. On the other hand, “Ask your father” is a masterpiece of passing the buck. It deflects the tough questions. It sends son or daughter off to seek additional counsel. And if father agrees with mother, it invests any motherly suggestion with twice the parental authority. As advice, it’s a twofer – and wins.
UNLIKE FATHERLY ADVICE, which tends toward the protective, motherly advice is all about creating a prettier, smarter, longer-living, more successful you. In other words, dads play defense, moms play offense. Moms want us to marry well and happily ever after. They think they know what we should put in our mouths. And they usually see our career paths more clearly than we do. Memorability and pithiness are the main criteria here, with bonus points for real-life effectiveness or absurdity. P.S. All variations on the Golden Rule (“Do unto others . . .”) have been banned here, or else there would be no contest.

**Thank You**

“Thank you” vs. Ask your father
Of all the gems here, saying “Thank you” to a compliment is the easiest to do. You just put your lips together and say it. But it doesn’t stand a chance against the mother of all delegating lines.

Don’t be cheap vs. A movie alone
Life really is better when you’re wearing fine leather and drinking great Champagne over an expensive slab of beef. But it’s not a foolproof strategy, not if your boss is a PETA-loving alcoholic vegan. The obvious benefits of seeing a movie alone include never having to share your popcorn or sit through all the credits. And you can walk out anytime, no explaining needed. Plus, solitary moviegoers build up rugged independence the way fitness freaks build muscle – and that indy streak sustains through the bleakest personal trials as well as the lamest indy films.

Ask your father
You can always make new friends, but old friends are good as gold.

Nobody will ever love you like your mother.

Tell your mother you’ll visit her grave. She’ll never know, but the promise will make her feel better.

Never refuse a hug from a person just because his hands are dirty.

When someone pays you a compliment, first say “Thank you.”

What goes around comes around.

It all goes by in an instant.

The A’s and B’s always end up working for the C’s and D’s.

Don’t be cheap about meat, Champagne, and leather.

Forecheck, backcheck, paycheck.

What comes easy isn’t worth having.

Never assume people are too busy. Pick up the phone. Even Marilyn Monroe sat home Saturday nights waiting for a call.

There’s nothing wrong with seeing a movie alone.

If it’s a choice between being smart or pleasant, choose pleasant.

If it’s attention you want, pee in the street. Someone will always see you.

**THE WINNER**

Ask your father

Of all the gems here, saying “Thank you” to a compliment is the easiest to do. You just put your lips together and say it. But it doesn’t stand a chance against the mother of all delegating lines.
**Cocktails**

By Jonathan Miles

Jonathan Miles writes the “Shaken and Stirred” column for the Sunday Styles section of the *New York Times*, and is the author of a novel, *Dear American Airlines*.

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**Pisco Sour vs. Pink Lady**

We shall leave it to Chile and Peru to fight (and they do) over who gets credit for this frosty, fragrant mixture of pisco (South America’s answer to grappa), lemon juice, simple syrup, egg whites, and bitters. Like the ideal lover, it’s exotic and comforting at the same time, and less creamy – and dainty – than its pink lady-friend.

**Daiquiri vs. Pisco Sour**

Let’s clarify. This isn’t the rummed-up slushy that you buzz in a blender or buy at drive-thru “daiquiri” stands in Louisiana. We’re talking the austere, citric original that flowed out of Cuba in the early 20th century: just white rum, lime juice, and simple syrup. And maybe a splash of grapefruit juice, if you’re Ernest Hemingway. The Pisco is fine, but it didn’t have Papa for a spokesman.

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**Martini vs. Manhattan**

It’s one of the great chemical mysteries of our time: why the Martini, a bracing, limpid, diamond-colored combination of gin and vermouth (which should always be used as an ingredient, not a prop) tastes so ridiculously, lethally good. The Manhattan’s autumnal gravitas just can’t top it. “When you come down to brass tacks,” as W. Somerset Maugham wrote, “there’s nothing to beat a dry Martini.” Except another.
**Bloody Mary vs. Michelada**
This is the one drink for which every American is allowed to claim a “secret recipe.” Just about everything has been wedged into this tailgate and brunch standard—from pickled oysters to okra, and that’s just the O’s—with varying degrees of success. The beer-based Michelada is another kitchen-sink of a drink, but not quite so all-purpose. You wouldn’t want one for breakfast.

**Aviation vs. French 75**
Credit the Internet for this archeological find. Online cocktail geeks rescued this sublime, Prohibition-era fusion of gin, maraschino liqueur, and lemon juice (and Crème de Violette, if you want to stay true to the original recipe) from undeserved obscurity. Like the French 75, it’s now an iconic fixture at haute cocktaileries, but it’s a more streamlined concoction, and packs a higher coolness quotient.

**Hurricane vs. Long Island Iced Tea**
This is where memories of a trip to New Orleans go to die: at the tail-end of a 29-ounce Hurricane at Pat O’Brien’s French Quarter bar. The Hurricane can be a splendid drink if you ditch the souvenir powdered premix and mix it from scratch. The present revival of Tiki drinks may bring this mindblower some kitschy respect. Long Island Iced Tea, on the other hand, will always be the Amy Fisher of drinks.
**Breakfast Cereals**

By Drew Magary

Drew Magary is the author of *Men with Balls: The Professional Athlete’s Handbook*, and the co-founder of Kissing Suzy Kolber. He has eaten cereal for dinner more often than he has eaten real food for dinner.

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**Crunch Berries vs. Raisin Nut Bran**

Obviously, Raisin Nut Bran has no place among the four best cereals of all time. It reaches the Final Four only because it’s the strongest entry in a weak regional, and even that’s debatable. The raisin nuts are a delight; the bran, not so much. Crunch Berries advance.

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**Cheerios vs. Grape Nuts**

I hate all cereals in this regional. My wife constantly urges me to eat more nutritious cereals, but honestly, they’re all revolting. Why would anyone eat regular Cheerios when there are Honey Nut Cheerios right next to them? (“Oh please, unflavored Cheerios for me!”) And to all you people who say Grape Nuts taste great served hot: you are wrong.

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**THE WINNER**

Crunch Berries vs. Raisin Nut Bran

Obviously, Raisin Nut Bran has no place among the four best cereals of all time. It reaches the Final Four only because it’s the strongest entry in a weak regional, and even that’s debatable. The raisin nuts are a delight; the bran, not so much. Crunch Berries advance.
I am 32 years old and have eaten every breakfast cereal known to mankind. Ever have C3PO’s? I have. Ever moan in ecstasy at the sight of a box of Oreo O’s, which were discontinued in 2007 because they may or may not have caused instadiabetes in toddlers? I do. The best cereals stay crunchy in milk; leave tasty-flavored milk at the end; have enough sugar to destroy your pancreas; and have not-too-challenging mazes on the backs of their boxes.

**Crunch Berries vs. Cinnamon Toast Crunch**

In seventh grade, a friend of mine conducted a science experiment to determine which cereal stayed crunchy in milk the longest. All Cap’n Crunch varieties won by a mile. Unlike Cinnamon Toast Crunch, which de-crunches faster than I like, you could leave Crunch Berries in battery acid for a week and they’d still be intact – and they’d leave behind strawberry milk. If you don’t think that’s a great way to start a morning, I don’t want to know you. You probably eat All Bran.

**Lucky Charms vs. Cocoa Puffs**

Cocoa Puffs wins the toughest second-round matchup on the strength of the milk it leaves behind – a chocolaty mix so deep and flavorful it makes Ovaltine taste like raw sewage. Lucky Charms, on the other hand, leaves behind an odd gray puddle at bowl’s bottom. I wish there were an all-marshmallow version of Lucky Charms. Don’t you?

**Cinnamon Toast Crunch vs. Golden Grahams**

If the only criterion here was which cereal tasted best at the very first bite, these two would meet in the finals. Each little piece of Cinnamon Toast Crunch is coated in cinnamon and sugar. But that last bite of Golden Grahams sure as hell doesn’t taste like the first bite. Milk degrades the taste and integrity of Golden Grahams. They’d be so much better if they were coated in polyurethane. I’m willing to accept the risks involved.