

It Seems There Were Three Techmen . . .

FINALS AT TECH burst upon us with the same newness each term. The Caltech Student Body Protective Association, a fiction that stands for a spirit that pervades the Houses, springs into action as finals close in. The medium-fair students settle down to their role of average-boosting by snaking alone, while the dull boys and the bright boys work feverishly at salvaging the former's 1.9's for another term while pulling down the latter's 4.0's.

The freshmen bow under their first dose of this tri-annual measure of virtue and accomplishment; they begin to talk louder and louder as excitement wells.

The sophomores let off their tension by playing loud frittering games in the courtyards. This serves the dual purpose of releasing steam and guaranteeing that no one will slit your throat by studying while you're plugging up the air with noise.

A fifth-year senior explains his agony thus: "When I was a kid I was smart, but I get dumber and dumber and dumber. At the end of five years at Tech I'll be an average human being."

Sleep, milk, fruit and Wheaties—all the folderol of a training athlete becomes important as we try to create a best human within ourselves, to be measured as our average. It all seems a little ironic to the students at this shrine of measurement that we're actually being measured to four significant figures.

Ice cream bar sales soar in the Houses, and the sound of puttering in the alley kitchenettes rises as the time burnt in Pasadena hamburg palaces is sublimated by feelings of guilt into time burnt in the kitchenettes. Coffee breaks are taken hastily in the lounges at clammy samovars. (Samovars designed to decant only the sludge at the bottom of the pot, which plummets down your gullet to carom off your stomach wall and modify the nature of your alimentary community for days. It's less risky to make tea with tap water if you can outguess the cycle of the steam plant.)

Apparently we split into three broad groups for finals. We react to this biggest stress of our lives in different ways. Let's look at Techman₁. His is the broadest group. He knows he'll do even worse on this test than ever before. His work isn't done yet, so he works along till the last gun is fired, even learning a bit new during the exam while thumbing through the text in open-book tests. He is as tense going into a final as an athlete before the big game. His main effort and all conscious thought go into juggling the symbols on his paper and twirling his

slide rule. (We don't have to apologize to anyone for mastering the slide rule, although we could be a bit more discreet about wearing them attached to our loin-cloths out in the open. A six-inch tool in the breast pocket is quite adequate for computing. Those who want something more in a slide rule can cart an electric sign that bleats: "Look, guys—I'm neat; that is, I'm an *engineer*—and that *is* neat, isn't it? *Isn't it?*")

Techman₁ learned in high school that science is nice and got a little self-confidence in the bundle, so he puts forth his best without flying into a tizzy and accepts his marks with a minimum of post-morteming and bitching to his instructors. He knows that finishing at Tech and learning at his own rate will be adequate for a job in business. Maybe it took two years to get his own rate to begin to coincide with Tech's rate (and that was painful) but his junior and senior years began to be productive.

Techman₂ can't take it. He lasts about two years before "financial reasons," or some such alleged force, forces him to get his bearings or carve a niche in some other part of society. As the finals draw nigh his burning interest in a local girl or the House Spirit or some hobby looms large in his mind to take all his snake time. It's just as well, because snaking at this stage—for him—is futile. He has let it go all term, hanging around the lounge. Maybe his energies got channeled into making the adjustment to college life or city life or just having freedom.

We are all plagued by this or something similar, coming to Tech. It's just a matter of proportion. For him they loom large enough to nudge him to the fringes. Perhaps lack of communicative skill made it hard for him to get the word, get his sense of proportion and scale and perspective knocked back into line in bull sessions, so he's finally nudged to the outermost limbo, called: "OUT OF IT." Man, he just doesn't dig this the most. Hence another engineer, physicist, pre-law or pre-med student is flushed down Tech's tubes.

Techman₃ is a noxious paragon. He is always up to date going into finals week. Hence, his last weekend of snaking holds the luxury of three hours in Pasadena's fine frittering dens, the movie parlors. It's only one movie, yet it seems like the height of conspicuous waste of time to my humbler species.

Actually, Techman₃ gives away even more time playing professor in the valuable exchange of knowledge that arises from the Student House system of free tutoring.

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Student Life . . . CONTINUED

Techman₃ has a clearer understanding of the guy who comes to him with a problem than a professor does. He doesn't have the age or pomposity barrier surrounding him. He understands whether there is time enough and value enough in going back to first principles, or whether it is better to merely solve the problem by crank-out techniques.

Techman₃ can insult the guy he is helping because the guy (generally Techman₁) is not paying a cent for the service and is, in fact, soaking up Techman₃'s snake time. This prod can be effective, and can be used by him more and more, without being mistaken for something else.

Don't misunderstand! I'm only suggesting that a professor may be construed wrong, though he may have the purest of motives. The truly effective professors in my book get there by being what we know the student tutors are: friends interested in the growth of their charges.

The energy-savers

Wisecracks fill the exam room. ("Handing out a UCLA application for those who don't complete the first four questions?") So we end up taking our exams in our room to escape the phoney tension. The panting and sighing and moaning is just too, too dramatic. And some of us like to do our unconscious dramatics in the privacy of our own boudoirs so as to waste no energy being self-conscious and fretting about disturbing others with an occasional, fervent "Crap!"

Then home for Christmas. We return home to get a job to pay for the ticket that got us home to the job. I find a Mechanical Engineering background permits me to get my teeth into the fundamentals of soda jerking. I can see Boyle's Law in action as the pin-points of carbonation expand as they rise in the seltzer under decreasing pressure. The notions of science and the urge to sell an extra pound of candy go hand in glove as I chirp, "May I help you, ma'am?" during the Christmas rush at the drugstore.

We return home to a holiday of fuzzy thinking and saying what must be said, hoping that people will psyche out what we actually mean, while they say what they must, assuming that we will know just what should be interpreted—in a human and practical way, of course. Numbers get tossed around with a freedom that would cause an ardent Techman to writhe at every such sacrilege of the faith he's picked up. So we shift into the real world level of fuzziness—not necessarily better; just more human. If you tell a customer at the drugstore his bill is "about 69 cents to two-figure accuracy," he'll take his trade elsewhere, muttering, "What do you mean 'about'? They're numbers, aren't they? What a way to do business . . . mumble . . . mutter . . ."

Maybe we should rehabilitate the Techman before turning him back on the world?

—Russ Hunter '57