



The SPEISENSTEIN Files

2. Stat of the Art

Speisenstein is going through the motions of his backhand drive in the locker room. But I can see his mind isn't really on the strokes.

"Hi!" he says; and carries on sweeping the raquet through the air, more to create a barrier between us than to practice his squash.

I shout across. "Read any good papers lately, Spice?"

A grunt.

"Or write any good papers yourself?"

A vicious sweep and follow through.

"So how's that toadfish work coming on?"

He pulls the raquet back behind his left shoulder. "You really want to know?" Then completes an elegant follow through. "Lousy!"

"Toads' rights activists on your tail or something?"

"Toads are not toadfish", he says icily, and flings the raquet across the room.

"Hey Spicy, what's got into you?"

"So everything's got into me. You heard of the Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index?"

"Not in my book. What's it do?"

"Good question. Look I was brought up the old fashioned way. You know - t-tests, chi squares, p values, means and SEMs of groups of at least two experiments, all that sort of nonsense. Perhaps a bit of that analysis of variance thing to keep the folks happy. Now, God

knows what they want.”

“So what’s that got to do with the Soapsudski Sequencing thing?”

“Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index. Its got damn everything to do with it. So I send this great paper to the yellow journal about ion transport in the toadfish colon. Good topical stuff. And the results so obvious I just put in a t-test or two for decoration. You know, the usual crap. And now their Lordships tell me it means nothing unless I do the Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index.”

“Well, Spicy, I’d just go ahead and put it in. Anything to keep them happy.”

“I’d keep them happy OK. But I can’t find the goddam thing. I looked everywhere except the kitchen sink.”

“It has to be in one of those glossy Stats coffee table books everybody has lying around to give a good impression.”

“I tell you I looked everywhere. I got my librarian to do a complete literature search. So what to do? I can’t tell them I never heard of the stupid thing, can I.”

“Well why don’t you put in any old number and say it was the Spoolsilkski index and that made it significant. They’d be happy with that. They’re only human after all.”

“Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index. I’ll think about it. Anyway, nice seeing you.” And he picks up the raquet and starts an ungamesmanly attack on the Club Cup.

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K.I. Witherington swivels round from his imposing desktop PC as his secretary ushers me in.

“Take a seat. Two seconds and I’ll be through with this stuff.”

Instead I walk across and look over his shoulder. Witherington is swiftly mousing his way through an oversize monitor blazing with columns of exotically colored numbers. Window after colored window come and go or get stacked up in a corner. Pull-down menus click through a labyrinth of calculations. Witherington gives a grunt of satisfaction as the final window appears with the message: Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index 9.4037; p = 0.00284931.

“Knew I was on the right track,” he says. “Wonderful things these programs. Just input the data and out comes the answer. Fifteen seconds flat.”

I ignore the exaggeration. “I was brought up the old fashioned way. You know - t-tests, chi squares, p values, means and SEMs of groups of at least two experiments, all that sort of nonsense. Perhaps a bit of that analysis of variance thing to keep the folks happy.”

“The outmoded trappings of yesterday’s kid-science,” he snorts. “Out of the ark. Any respectable scientist these days uses the Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index for pretty well everything. I, personally, wouldn’t accept a paper without it.

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Speisenstein is busy studying the coffee stand at the ISHR meeting.

“Did you send that paper off Spicy?”

“And got it back. They say my figure for the Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index is impossible. Got to recalculate the lot. How in the hell do I get myself out of this mess? You got me in it.”

“Why don’t you say you used the Bulschitz correction factor?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Neither has anybody else. Just say you used it.”

“I’ll think about it. Anyway, nice seeing you.”

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Audley is ringing from London. He is still having trouble with that channel analyzer.

“By the way,” he says, “I know you are interested in statistics. Have you come across this new thing, the Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index?”

”Yes, I know about it.”

“Do you use the Bulschitz correction?”

“I know some people are doing so.”

“I see. Thank you for all your help. I hope to see you soon.”

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Why is Witherington always in the chair of every committee? Now he is chairing the Ways and Means Committee. This is usually a nice leisurely affair. Sort of opportunity to catch up with the gossip. But today Witherington is rushing it through. Hardly time to enjoy the tea and home-baked cookies his secretary puts out.

He grabs me as I try to slip out with a cookie in my pocket. “Remember we talked about the Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index?”

“Sure. You having problems with it?”

“Not exactly. But they are saying now you need to use the Bulschitz correction. You heard about that?”

“Yes, I did come across it.”

“You think it absolutely essential?”

“Now I wouldn’t be so sure. Why don’t you ask Audley? He was mentioning it the other day.”

And that’s the way the cookie crumbled.

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Speisenstein shakes me warmly by the hand. “Good to see you.”

“Good to see you, Spice. So what happened to that paper of yours?”

“Fantastic! The swallowed it whole. Already at the printers. I don’t know how to thank you. Got me ahead of the whole field.”

“How d’you mean?”

“Well, you know. Other people working on this problem seem to be having trouble with their statistics. Some of them never even heard of the Bulschitz correction. I tell them, either you use the Bulschitz correction or you go back to basics. You know - t-tests, chi squares, p values, means and SEMs of groups of at least two experiments. Fundamentals.”

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A row of empty coffee mugs separates Witherington from his beloved PC. His secretary is on vacation.

“So its ‘Home Alone’, K.I.”

“Yeah, Yeah. Good joke. You know something? This new Stats package from Softsell stinks. It don’t even use the Bulschitz correction for the Spielsudski-Weckenhof Rank Sequencing Index?”

“Why do you need it?”

“I don’t need it, for God’s sake. Why the hell should I? The data speak for themselves. But Audley says its essential. And those assholes at the yellow journal tell me I got to use it.”

“Why don’t you go back to the old fashioned way. You know - t-tests, chi squares, p values, means and SEMs of groups of at least two experiments, all that sort of nonsense. Just the sort of thing those old fuddy-duddies will lap up.”

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And Bulschitz never did show up to receive his Most Cited Author’s Award of the Biostats Soc.

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