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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: Favorite sayings

Everybody has them. If you have grown kids ask them to recite yours. The two most often recited by my daughters are  
*save for a rainy day*  
and  
*when it rains you get wet.*

My favorites are:  
*Pigs is pigs, data is data*  
and  
*Too many pigs under the same blanket and they all get away.*

The first is due to Jerry Cornfield commandeered by me and the 2<sup>nd</sup> is mine.

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**Pigs is pigs, data is data**

Jerry Cornfield

Jerome (Jerry) Cornfield (1912-1979) was a biostatistician of international repute (BA in history from NY University).

I have written about Cornfield's saying in both my clinical trials textbooks and on this website, but since the essence of teaching is repetition and since repetition is a natural consequence of aging, so why not again?

Pigs is pigs is the title of a book written by Elis Parker, published as a short story in American Illustrated Magazine, September 1905. The story is about an argument a railroad agent (Mike Flannery) had with the father (Mr Morehouse) of a son when he came to pick up a pair of guinea pigs he ordered for him. The agent wanted to charge the rate for pigs, 30 cents. The father said they were pets and that the rate was 25 cents.

The agent argued "guinea" was the place they were from and that the charge would be the same for pigs from Ireland or any other place in the world.

They argued to a standstill, neither budging, so the agent kept the guinea pigs until he could get a ruling from headquarters.

Things dragged on, meanwhile guinea pigs do what guinea pigs do. Before long he had dozens and hundreds when he finally got orders to ship the guinea pigs back.

The story ends with a declaration from Flannery:

*Rules may be rules, but you can't fool Mike Flannery twice wid the same thrick – whin ut comes to live stock, dang the rules. So long as Flannery runs this expriss office – pigs is pets – an' cows is pets – an' horses is pets – an' lions an' tigers an' Rocky Mountain goats is pets – an' the rate on thim is twinty-foive cints.*

Cornfield used the title of the book and joined his phrase “data is data” to emphasize that the information in trials is in the data, not in p-values. As he noted “Just as the Sphinx winks if you look at it too long, so, if you perform enough significance tests, you are sure to find significance even when none exists”.

I commandeered the phrase as a way of reminding people that *data* is plural.

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**Too many pigs under the same blanket and they all get away**

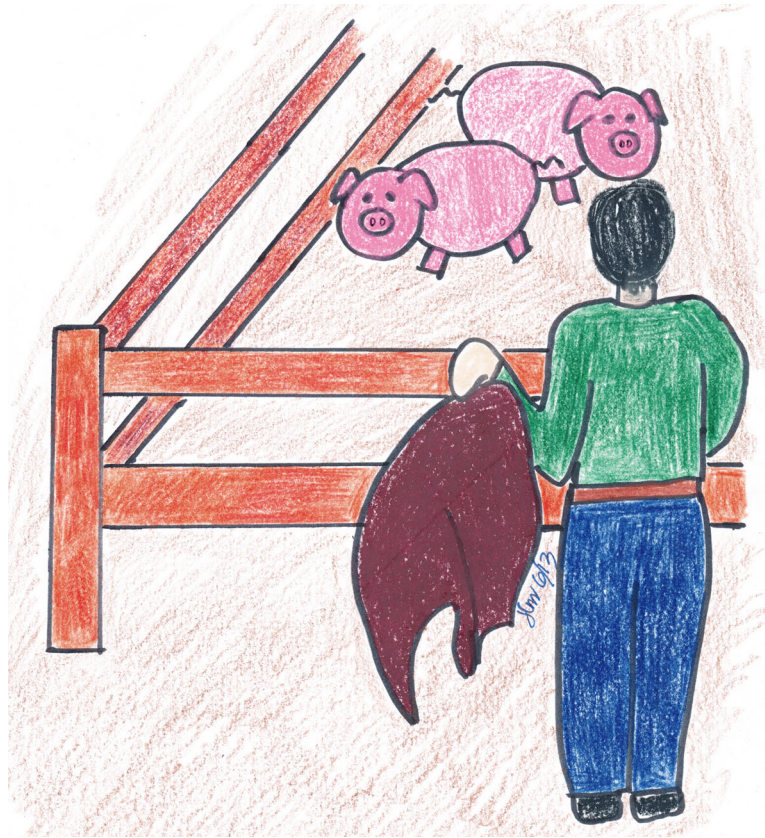
Curtis Meinert

Pigs – the smartest and most fastidious animal on the farm and the only animal on the farm that does not eat like a hog.

I grew up on a farm with pigs. My father kept a few sows for farrowing. Every spring we had little pigs. Once they got a few weeks old we would grab one and take it in the house. A little pig has a coat as smooth as silk. If it got away you had trouble catching it.

The saying is a comment on cramming too much into to what one writes so as to lose the message.

*The Brown County Toss-off* (pdf attached), an embroidered tale, details why one pig per blanket is the best you can do.



## The Brown County toss-off

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The principle of "one pig per blanket" is a harsh fact of life indelibly etched into my memory by events of my youth.

Little pigs are adorable. As kids we grabbed them and brought them to the house to let them run. Mother did not seem to mind. In fact, I think she liked them as much as we did.

The thing about little pigs is that they are spirited. To capture one you have to be quick, and even if you catch one, likely as not, it will slip from your grasp. The real trick is capturing one by tossing a blanket over it.

## The Brown County toss-off

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I learned of blanket tossing from Harvey Lendt. One of the three Lendt cousins living on farms south of town.

There were six of us farm guys standing around in the school yard one noon in our freshman year exchanging ideas as to how to pass time on the farm. One guy, I think Walter Schellum, went on at some length as to how he entertained himself mapping the routes of cows from the pasture to the barn. There was another guy (I forget who) whose entertainment was testing the force of fire crackers by "measuring" the upward travel of a #8 tin can propelled by firecrackers of varying sizes. Jim (aka Zeke) Phillipson spent his time looking for prime numbers.

Harvey said he and his two cousins "blanket tossed". I remember smiling to myself, waiting for someone to rise to the bait. Sure enough one of the guys did and that was all Harvey needed. He told us that he, and his two cousins, Armin and Arno, would get together and take turns tossing an old canvas horse fly apron into a pen of pigs and count the "captures".

To my surprise in no time at all there were other tossers. At lunch the tossers would boast about their skills.

Eventually, there were arguments regarding the size and weight of the blanket and the length of time a pig had to remain under the blanket before it could be counted as a "capture". Soon, in part because not everyone had fly aprons to toss, there was agreement that the blanket should be a wool, double bed, blanket. Ultimately, it was agreed that for tosses to be official the tosser had to be using a 3 stripe, double bed, Hudson Bay blanket.

The next spring I tried my hand at tossing. I ferreted off with a blanket from the house and started tossing. The blanket was for a double bed alright but not a Hudson Bay (we could not afford them) so I sewed 1" washers on each corner to make it "regulation" weight. As luck would have it, Harvey had brought his Hudson Bay to school so I had an official weight.

I think Harvey's blanket still resides in the trophy case of Sleepy Eye High because it ultimately became the official blanket for tossers at Brown County Toss-Offs.

## The Brown County toss-off

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By my junior year, blanket tossing had spread across the county giving rise to blanket tossing tournaments. The first one I know of took place on Harvey's farm. I forget the number of pigs in the pen or the size of the pen, but I do remember that there were four tossers. Each tosser got 3 tosses but only one toss a turn – to add suspense. The order was determined by tossing a horseshoe at a stake 30' away. The one closest to the stake got the first toss and so on. If a tosser got a ringer he was automatically first. The order of the other tossers was then determined by lot.

As competition grew, there came a need for more precision. Early on there were no requirements for the pen or the number of pigs in the pen. Eventually, it was agreed that the pen should be exactly 10'x10' (inside dimension) and that the pen should have 10 pigs, that the combined weight of the pigs should not be less than 380 lbs or more than 420 lbs, and that no pig should weigh less than 18 lbs or more than 22 lbs.

This weight requirement created problems for groups planning summer or fall toss-offs because spring pigs will exceed the weight limit by summer. A little known fact, even to Wikipedia, is that the tossing tournament spawned the feeder pig industry in the Midwest. Before long there were farmers raising pigs just for toss-offs. Growers were farrowing pigs so as to be assured of a constant supply of 20 lb pigs any time of the year.

Before long there were standards as to the height of the pen and where the tosser had to stand. I suspect even today, if you went to the Dyckman Free Library in Sleepy Eye you would be able to find the official rules for Blanket Tossing and winners at Brown County Toss-Offs.

There were no judges at the early events, but that changed after the "Big Fight". Two tossers got into an argument that resulted in, shall we say, a brouhaha. It wasn't long before there were tossing judges. The first judges were not very good. Indeed, most of them had never tossed and hardly knew the rules. But in short order there was a judging school in New Ulm, exams to pass, and vanity license plates to set judges apart from ordinary folks.

Today, Toss-Offs are like thrashing bees. You can only find the event at county fairs as relics of the past. Eventually blanket tossing, like so many other things, was done in by TV and Pac-Man.

## The Brown County toss-off

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By my junior year I had gotten pretty good at tossing. I remember one toss where I got four pigs on one toss – for a couple of seconds that is – but there were lots of tosses where I came up empty.

In my senior year I progressed from the Prairieville Toss-Off, to the Tri Township Toss-Off, and from there to the Regional Toss-Off. A win there sent me to the grand event – the Brown County Toss-Off. The run-up to the grand event probably had 300+ contestants, but that number was whittled to ten crème de la crème contestants and I was one of them!

People came from far and wide. We had a family from Spencer, Iowa camped in our pasture for the toss-off. Merchants had sidewalk sales and local churches were frying hamburgers. Prizes were donated by local merchants. The grand prize in the 1952 Toss-Off was an Emerson tabletop radio, donated by the Coast to Coast Hardware store. The second place tosser would get a pair of brown loafers, donated by the Place Shoe store, and the third place tosser would get a beef commercial lunch for one at the City Cafe.

I was sitting 2nd after my 2nd toss, having captured a pig on each of my first two tosses. I was tossing last having had the worst horseshoe toss. Lyle Koberstein came just before me. He got blanked on his 1st toss but captured two on the second toss. We were tied for first. On Lyle's 3rd toss he captured one so he had the score to beat.

I walked up for the toss. The crowd hushed. I unfurled the blanket and it landed like a butterfly smack dab on two pigs. I had my winning score – for a moment (for captures to count pigs have to remain under blankets for a minimum of 10 seconds). There was the usual wiggling and squealing and out came one pig and then the other and I ended up with the loafers.

That sad experience was instrumental in teaching me that one should be content with one pig per blanket because in all likelihood with more than one they will all get away.

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