

Bench Marks*

There is more to a bench than meets the eye (to pick an anatomical reference at random). Benches have made their undeniable mark on many walks (and seats) of life. Seldom does the name of so inanimate an object say so much about so many animate experiences. Yes, it occasionally needs the help of prefix or preposition and suffix and supposition, but that hardly diminishes the feat.

Extensive undocumented study has shown¹ that the best way to categorize the anthropomorphism of a bench is according to height.² At the lower stubby end we find athletes on the bench hoping to get off. It is, after all, on the field or on the court where their jobs are done and awards are won. To be "benched" is to have one's hopes for the adulation of crowd and coach thwarted.³ Those sidelined feel decidedly misunderstood and "misoverseated." To make matters worse, all the newer stadiums are enclosed and protected from the elements, so even in the dead of winter, the bench warmer is reduced to an anachronism.

At slightly higher elevations, normalized to the stature of the usual occupant, being benched implies high praise. It implies one's attributes are worthy of exhibition. As thrilling as this may be for prize winning canines, it offers little solace to the slumping athlete.

Then there is Parliament, which somewhat confounds not merely British subjects but our monotonic correlation of height with prestige. Unless the MPs are leaders, they are back benchers—fairly high office nonetheless. But, in classic auditorium style, the farther from the leadership a bencher sits, the higher the back bencher rises. Only an interview with a far back bencher could ascertain how self-esteem is affected by elevation and whether it is party dependent.

Arguably, the highest of the sitting variety is the judicial bench. For a barrister to be promoted from the bar to the bench is the crowning accomplishment of

a career in the law. From the bench one looks down (at least figuratively) on the court below, and, you know, we all need special permission to approach that bench. Imputed majesty and concomitant authority are proportional to perceived elevation. So important is the bench to the judicial role that a judge in office, even when on the tennis court, is a "sitting" judge. An easy target for a passing volley. Of course such levity about this particular bench warrants caution, lest a wooden sense of humor mistake it for contempt.

Benches are for more than sitting, however. They are tables, too. The sturdy carpenter's workbench is a prime example. Such benches are solid. And one feels the workers at those benches are solid, too. More the down-to-earth craftsman than the brain-surgeon image of the benchman emerges. As it happens, one type of early benchman was the chemist who performed laboratory tests for sugar processing. And we, the researchers of the modern world, have inherited that legacy and the stalwart, if not terribly sophisticated, implication along with it.

Our benches do lack the majesty and authority of a court, and we do don lab coats instead of robes. But, we practice a higher law, the law of nature, and our jurisdiction is the knowable universe.

Nevertheless, rarely do our students enthusiastically proclaim working at the bench to be their ultimate professional goal. No, it appears that the bench is seen more clearly and fondly in hindsight (not even a random anatomical reference intended here). To wit, the oft heard "back to the bench" in senior R&D circles. It is not clear whether this backward transition is up or down on our prestige altimeter. Some who have left the bench for grander challenges will nostalgically pine (or oak⁴) for the bench as though it embodied a simpler or more rewarding life, or offered more individual freedom of action and thought. It is also the clichéd dissemblance averring that a retreat from the fray of technical manage-

ment is entirely voluntary. So for those of you who have mixed feelings about the bench as a place to be, whether reached through advancement or in full retreat, be advised that in these austere budgetary times, it's the right place to be.

You see, the bench has an alter ego with which it shares common roots. One ancient table, sharing a name that sounded much like bench, did not evolve into today's bench at all—the moneychanger's table became today's bank,⁵ the very best place to aspire to or go back to when running short on funds.

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*This month's POSTERMINARIES is particularly shallow and silly. As such, it establishes a point of reference for a new breed of surveyor that has been visited upon us. They are the soldiers of the *quality* revolution who go about benchmarking everything in sight. The only defense is to serve up to the invading hoards a standard of performance that leaves more than ample room for continuous improvement by anyone's choice of metric. Voilà!

1. This is about as reliable as "highly placed sources have said . . ."
2. Here, it is the height of the top surface of the bench as seen from the observer's frame of reference and can usually be regarded as the sum of the length of the legs or other supporting members that are an integral part of the bench and the apparent altitude of the plane upon which that support stands.
3. Those who have rowed a boat know how hard a thwart can be.
4. A little used archaic laboratory dialect for the more common "ache."
5. From the grunt, "bheg-," through Old High German's "banc," and the Italian, "banca."

Your comments, serious and humorous, on matters of interest to materials scientists are welcome.

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