

GO FIGURE

by Fred Hobbs

A strong case can be put forth that mathematicians have made the most significant discoveries of humankind. These geniuses were men and women handy with numbers. In today's computer-based world, that premise holds even more validity.

Unfortunately, one must count me out of that august and elite group. Numbers don't like me. I'm a words guy and my contributions to mankind are falling far short of significant.

Basic arithmetic and junior high algebra are the only applications of the numbers game in my portfolio. In army basic training we were forced on "penalty of death" to memorize our personal and M-1 rifle serial numbers. I still use one of them to access online my financial and medical information. Of course, in those applications no adding, subtracting, dividing or "square rooting" is required.

Not trusting my skill, and fearing Uncle Sam's wrath and attendant penalties, I consistently leave figuring my income tax to more dependable and accurate sources. My financial adviser of many years recently urged me not to spend money on this service. "Fred, you're a smart guy," she said. "You can do it." I just shook my head in a silent "no way." Hearing a subsequent account of my pathetic cop-out, my daughter volunteered the free services of my savvy son-in-law, a fund accountant for a major Denver-based national firm.

Somewhat ashamed of my ineptitude with numbers, I had never asked for that help, but when offered, I accepted gladly.

When our three children were in school, they introduced me to the concept of "new math." At the time, it was considered important in the competition between the U. S. and the Soviet Union, in the space race and in aspects of the Cold War. Both my wife and I struggled to understand this mysterious new way of dealing with numbers, equations and mathematical constructs. We were less than helpful with the kids' homework in that subject. "New math" seemed to disappear at some point and when my grandkids talk about today's approach to the subject, I'm simply lost.

I've heard conversations with my friends from the computer and engineering fraternities about "binary codes" and the strange notion that everything is related to a certain number of zeroes and ones. My eyes glaze over and I have a strong desire to butt in and suggest we switch the conversation to Obamacare or possibly a more neutral topic such as the prospect of the Broncos going "all the way" to the Super Bowl.

Why am I so hung up about numbers? Go figure. However, proof of my meager abilities in math comes from actual documents which, if stuff that old is saved, may be found in the archives of the University of Colorado.

In the first weeks of my freshman year, my faculty advisor administered a test to help me decide what major area I wanted to study. (Actually from the age of five I knew I wanted to be in broadcasting as an announcer or reporter; so journalism and speech were good choices.)

When I met with the “prof” to discuss the results of the test, he reviewed the scope of knowledge covered. Two areas stood out, he said. “You were in the 92nd percentile of freshman students in questions dealing with reading comprehension, writing, languages, literature and spelling.” Conversely,” he continued, you placed in just the 8th percentile in math and science.”

Showing college professors could have a sense of humor, he added, “Ironically, the good news is that if you add the two together, you get 100 percent.”