

Dr. John B. Gayle

FOR WANT OF A NAIL

For want of a nail the shoe is lost;  
For want of a shoe the horse is lost;  
For want of a horse the rider is lost;  
For want of a rider . . .

George Herbert  
1593-1633

There is probably no more eloquent an expression of the importance of luck in human affairs than these words penned almost four hundred years ago. One has only to reflect on the past to recall some chance event--an unplanned meeting, a random bit of information, some unlikely coincidence--which markedly influenced his life from that point on. And when it is realized that everyone's present position in the scheme of things has been influenced by an infinite number of such events, not only during his own particular life time but also during those of his ancestors, it is evident that the odds for any of us being exactly who and where and what we are are infinitely small. A similar argument for the importance of luck can be made by reference to some individual who has enjoyed outstanding success. Consider a coach who has the good fortune to be in charge of the number one college football team in the country. The media attributes his success to managerial ability, rapport with the players, astute selection of plays, etc. Can anyone doubt, however, that if it were possible to produce clones of our hero and somehow confer upon them the head coaching positions at the country's leading universities, some would fail miserably, most would achieve moderate success, and one would be acclaimed numero uno?

Taken to the extreme, statistical models such as these tend to deny the individual any responsibility for his destiny, success and failure being separated only by the luck of the draw. Fortunately, other models are available. Granted that whereas chance events over which we have no control exert a tremendous

influence both on our initial endowment and final destiny, other chance events present us with opportunities to select from two or more courses of action which may be available. Although some types of decision situations are given explicit and detailed consideration (such as the purchase of a home or the acceptance of a position) there are also continuing sequences of small related decisions which at the time may not be recognized as significant but nevertheless over a period of time establish direction to our lives and determine the way each individual is viewed by society, for example as a good friend, an ambitious go-getter, a lazy so-and-so, etc. To the extent that each individual's destiny is influenced by a great many decisions, both large and small, on the average those who are more astute at selecting optimal or near optimal strategies would be expected to enjoy greater success in accomplishing their personal objectives.

So much for the average--but how about each of us as individuals? To what extent are we merely the result of an endless series of lotteries and to what the product of our own personal resources? No one can say of course, and perhaps it's just as well. For without this knowledge, those of us who are dissatisfied with our lot can place the blame on Lady Luck; possibly with ample justification. And those who have achieved some modicum of success can point with pride to our personal accomplishments, also possibly with some justification.