

SCIENCE

'J' My Name Is Jessica, And I Like ...

HERE AT NEWSWEEK, WE have a soft spot for Ken Griffey Jr., but that's not why we're making excuses for his 18 percent career strikeout rate—a notch above baseball's historic average. The excuse is his initial: that K makes him gravitate unconsciously toward things, good or bad, that begin with the letter K. Such as K's, the sport's short-hand for strikeouts.

Bizarre as it sounds, studies have documented what scientists call "name-letter preference" since 1985. People are more likely to buy brands that begin with one of their initials, so Tom is more likely to buy a Toyota and Larry to buy a Lexus. Even important choices seem to be shaped by this preference: Mildreds are overrepresented in Milwaukee and Dennises among dentists. Critics have been unable to

find flaws in these studies,

and not for lack of trying.

Now researchers are finding that "name-letter preference" even holds true for undesirable things, like bad grades or a strikeout. Players whose names begin with K strike out more often than other players, Leif Nelson of the University of California, San Diego, and Joseph Simmons of Yale will report next month in the journal *Psychological Science*. Based on statistics from 1913 through 2006, they found that "batters whose names began with K struck out at a higher rate [18.8 percent] than the remaining batters [17.2 percent]." The pattern held for grades, too. Using 15 years of grade point averages for business-school graduates, the researchers found that students whose names begin with C or D earned slightly lower GPAs than those whose names begin with A or B, mostly because the Carters and Dorns performed worse than average.

The effect, of course, is not all-powerful. The strikeout rate for Kennys is only a sliver above that for Robertos, and the GPA gap is tiny—3.34 versus 3.36. But there's a saying in science that if you discover a way to levitate objects with your thoughts by one millimeter, you don't focus on the millimeter—the size of the effect—but on the fact that something happened at all. Nelson says he was "completely taken aback by our findings, but we ruled out every statistical anomaly we could think of." Let the alternative explanations begin. —SHARON BEGLEY



ALPHABET SOUP: Does Jessica Alba (left) like Jell-O, Jackson Hole and Jeep?

