



Press Coverage

[longnow.org](#) > [about](#) > [press coverage](#)

About

- [Background](#)
- [Press](#)

People

- [Board Members](#)
- [Staff Members](#)

The Oakland Tribune, April 12, 2002

Charities sure winners from nonprofit's long shots

By William Brand

SAN FRANCISCO -- Would you bet \$2,000 on the statement, "The U.S. men's soccer team will win the World Cup competition before the Boston Red Sox win baseball's World Series?"

Actor Ted Danson, star of the former television series "Cheers," set in Boston, is betting on his beloved Sox. But a Time magazine editor, who posed the question, believes he'll win with the soccer team.

How about, "By 2030, commercial passengers will routinely fly in pilotless airliners"?

If that's too risky to bet \$2,000, then betting \$20,000 on this statement might addle your mind: "By 2029, a computer or machine intelligence will be able to convince a panel of human questioners that it is human."

Or how about this: "A human alive today will still be alive in 2150."

Each of these mind-boggling bets -- all with a huge sociological twist -- has been publicly stated and the money placed in escrow with a new nonprofit group. Once a winner is decided, the money goes along with the accumulated interest to a charity of the bettor's choice.

This is a nonprofit writing a new chapter in the world of long-shot betting with heavy emphasis on "long."

Longbets.org is the brainchild of Bay Area original thinker Stewart Brand, who dabbled in LSD with author Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters and created the Whole Earth Catalog. His co-founder is Kevin Kelly, a founding editor of Wired magazine and longtime Brand collaborator.

In the 1960s, Kesey, Brand and others thought LSD could change the world. These days Brand, who still lives on a houseboat in Sausalito, wants to change the world in more sober ways. With an element of fun, of course.

The two deep thinkers unveiled longbets.org (officially the Long Bets Foundation) at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco earlier this week. It's also in an article, written by Kelly, in Wired's May issue.

"Our overall goal was to improve long-term thinking," Brand said. "The bets have to be scientifically important. The minimum bet is \$1,000, and we wanted the minimum time period to be 20 years (into the future)."

Long Bets invests the money, and when the bet concludes, the money goes to a charity chosen by the bettor when the wager was placed, Kelly said. All bets will be posted on longbets.org, and there will be a forum under each bet for the public to participate, he said.

"We're a federally registered nonprofit," Kelly said. "The money has to be reported and accounted for. We want the foundation to survive and be around when the bets are resolved."

One of the great things is that you cannot only predict future public policy, you may be able to influence it as well by raising important questions, Kelly said.

So how could a vote about the Red Sox and soccer be considered scientific?

That's easy, Brand said. Time editor-at-large Mike Elliot, who proposed it, suggests there has been so much immigration into America by people from soccer-playing countries that future Americans are certain to become great at the sport.

"This has to do with the fact that all this immigration will change the dynamics of sport toward soccer," Brand said. "It's basically a bet toward globalization."

In his Web site posting, Danson took exception. He points to the baseball lover's ultimate argument: statistics. "Scoring soccer goals is much harder than hitting a home run," Danson said.

"In the World Cup, you have the whole world against you," he said. "In baseball, the Red Sox only really have to beat the Yankees."

Elliot chose as his charity the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization. Danson chose the American Oceans Campaign.

That's the idea behind a foundation, Brand said. "We want to be sure someone is here and the money has been preserved when the bet is decided."

Brand is such a high-profile thinker that a number of well-known individuals have ventured questions. Mitchell Kapor, who created the Lotus business software program, proposed that a computer would fool a human panel in 27 years.

But the furthest out in time and one of the most thought-provoking bets ventured so far is the idea of a human living for 150 years. It was proposed by Peter Schwartz, an Emeryville-based futurist and author of "The Art of the Long View," who has served as a consultant on such films as "Deep Impact" and "War Games."

The statement has no opposing bettor so far.

More unanswered bets can be found at www.longbets.org/bet/proposed.

But a member of the Commonwealth Club audience, Melody Haller of San Francisco, said she's going to talk to friends and raise the money to counter the Schwartz bet.

"As Peter presented it, to get past 120 years of age, science has to crack a self-limiting factor in cells that makes them age," Haller said. "It was introduced into cells at the same time as sexual reproduction."

"It's one thing to take better care of yourself and live longer," she said. "But it would be another thing to break the self-limiting nature of living cells. I think that's a very dangerous place to go and we'll regret it."

The bet is on.



The Long Now Foundation
Fostering Long-term Responsibility
est. 01996.