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High expectations

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Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania have discovered that men who are below average height at age 16 go onward, if not upward, to earn as much as 10 percent less than their lankier peers.

It doesn't matter if they hit a beanstalk growth spurt at 18 and become the star center for the Washington Wizards. The study, which examined the correlation between men's income and height at the ages of 7, 11 and 16, found 16 to be the magical determinant of future success.

We've long known the connection between height and professional success. Of 43 American presidents, only five have stood significantly below average height. James Madison, the most diminutive of our American presidents, did indeed author most of the U.S. Constitution, but let's face it, that was before CNN. In 10 of the last 13 presidential elections, the taller man prevailed. (But let's not give 7 foot 1 Shaquille O'Neal any bright ideas.)

What the three University of Pennsylvania researchers determined was that employer discrimination against shrimps doesn't appear to be the wage culprit here. And to keep things in perspective, race and gender affect future wage earnings more than verticality does.

The speculation is that self-esteem at age 16 is key. Those who are taller at 16 are more likely to participate in sports teams and extracurricular activities that help develop all-important social skills and a sense of self-worth. Shorter kids tend to be more ostracized and picked on, and avoid extracurricular activities more.

The philosophical question that ties everyone in knots is whether higher self-esteem prompts participation on the tennis team and debate club, or whether it's victories on the tennis team and debate club that builds self-esteem.

What then? Sports teams for little guys? Chess clubs for adolescent Napoleons?

A more logical solution may be found among the runty likes of Tom Cruise, Jean Claude Van Damme, Dustin Hoffman, Danny DeVito, Robert Redford and Richard Dreyfuss.

If you want to be president, it's good to be tall. If you want to be a movie star with a Malibu mansion, on the other hand, it's good to be short. Cameras can lie. And, of course, actors can always pretend they're tall.

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