

Left-out lefties limber up

The 'sinister' folk are finding a common tongue and say things are changing for the better

BY BRYAN VIRASAMI
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President Clinton and Fidel Castro face a common challenge: kitchen can openers. Like Marilyn Monroe and Kermit the Frog, they also have trouble with potato peelers, scissors and corkscrew openers.

But along with Jack the Ripper and others in their special fraternity, they probably excel at tossing coins into toll-booth baskets. The trait that unites them all is left-handedness.

For centuries, members of this club have been stymied by the mundane activities of everyday life. The world's majority right-handers have sealed their difficulty by making sure that everything from car controls to computer keyboards are designed with the comfort of righties in mind.

Lefties say they often feel marginalized. A history of stigmatization persists in some cultures where left-handers are shunned as strange or evil. "Gauche," the French word for left, also means clumsy, not to mention its other English meaning: "inept and tactless." In Latin, left-handed has the same meaning as "sinister."

But American lefties are finding their united voice, and they say things may be changing. Take golf. The 63-year-old National Association of Left-Handed Golfers tripled its membership to 3,000 after launching a Web site three years ago. Executive secretary Ed Martin said the group's national tournaments have one rule: participants can only play left-handed.

In the commercial world, marketers are slowly realizing there is money to be made from the 10 to 15 per cent of the people who predominantly use their left hands. Mail-order catalogue merchants and companies with Internet sites have blossomed, providing products like calculators, measuring tapes, wristwatches and playing cards specifically for left-handers.

"I know they had left-handed scissors but it was impossible for me to find them," said James Roberts, an ambidextrous Manhattan executive who had just learned about the availability of such products through specialty catalogues.

Steve Blackman, owner of Leftporium, a mail-order company based in Monticello, N.Y., has customers who call 1-888-416-LEFT from as far away as Puerto Rico. Blackman launched the company because he had trouble finding products that catered to his own left-handedness. His

top-selling items include clocks with backward numbers and quick-dry pens.

"Lefties always have ink all over their arms" from laying their left wrist and forearm on the written page, said Diana Ryan, owner of Southpaw Solutions, based in Hernando, Fla. Her quick-dry pens and No. 2.5 smudge-resistant pencils eliminate that problem.

M. K. Holder, a scientist with the Center for the Integrative Study of Animal Behavior at Indiana University, says most of the difficulties lefties face are trivial or annoying but some can lead to lifelong problems that can be overcome with basic understanding. He said parents should pay attention to their child's natural handedness and not force them to use their right hands.

"Things have changed for the better for left-handed individuals," said Mike Geden, president of the New Jersey-based League of Left-handers. The group, founded this year, is devoted to building awareness about the problems of left-handers. One of Geden's goals is to convince lefties Oprah Winfrey and Jay Leno to let him talk about his cause on their talk shows.

Despite the increased availability of left-handed products, however, lefties say that North American manufacturers are still slow to get on the band wagon.

Ryan said her products are more available from German and Japanese firms than from American companies. "It's difficult sometimes to tell manufacturers to make certain things and explain why you don't need 5,000," she said.

Martin's golf group hopes to influence U.S. companies. "My goal is to get the organization large enough so we can approach manufacturers and point out the errors of their ways," Martin said. Left-handed golf clubs are available but up to six weeks are required to fill an order, he said.

But if lefties sometimes feel left out, they need only look to the exalted company they share.

In addition to Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, the list of lefties includes past presidents George Bush, James A. Garfield, Gerald R. Ford and Harry S. Truman. Ronald Reagan was born a lefty but said his parents forced him to join the right. Other prominent lefties include Ross Perot, Mark Twain, Jimi Hendrix, Michelangelo, Pablo Picasso, Robert De Niro, Jerry Seinfeld, Whoopi Goldberg, Tom Cruise, Prince Charles, Sandy Koufax and Napoleon Bonaparte.

Left-handed Ret. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf learned during a dinner with Saudi Arabian tribesmen that eating can be as hard as a day's battle. In the desert, he was trying to eat out of huge communal plates while remembering not to use his left hand, considered "polluted" under Muslim custom, he told the Smithsonian magazine in an interview published soon after the Gulf War. Frustrated, he came up with a solution.

"I just stuck my left hand under my rear," he said.