

Connie Sonne Preliminary Challenge Test at TAM 7

Written by Alison Smith
Friday, 17 July 2009 00:00

At the Amaz!ng Meeting 7, we conducted a Preliminary Challenge Test for the JREF million-dollar prize - the first time we've ever done this in front of a live audience. It was done with total transparency. We invited all TAMgoers, as well as media representatives and famous skeptics and magicians, to attend a preliminary Challenge test of Ms. Connie Sonne.

For those who weren't able to attend in person, we streamed the test live so those at home could watch from their computers. We had six hundred people watching from the audience, and 1,600 watching from home. The in-person audience included people like Penn and Teller, Mac King, Jamy Ian Swiss, Dr. Joe Albietz, and, of course, Randi. The video was viewed by people from all over the world, just as it happened in real time.

Connie Sonne had designed the parameters for her own test. She chose to dowse for the contents of double-enveloped playing cards on stage with the supervision of famous skeptic and mentalist, Banachek. She needed to identify three cards using her dowsing ability in order to pass to the Formal Challenge. She failed: she did not correctly identify any of the three cards, and her Challenge file has been closed - though she will be free to re-apply one year from the date of her test, assuming that she qualifies under the rules governing the Challenge at that time.

Sonne had agreed to give interviews and to participate in an exclusive press conference to discuss the procedure, following the test. Many in the audience were impressed at how gracefully she conducted herself despite having failed her test, while maintaining a firm belief in her dowsing abilities. The audience attending both the test and the press conference applauded her courage in appearing before so many people.

That opinion has since changed.

Sonne now claims that Banachek, who she agreed to accept as the official tester, had cheated her out of passing the preliminary test. As it happens, many individuals on both the JREF forums and attending the in-person press conference wondered aloud at our willingness to allow a "magician" to run the test, so I want to set the record straight.

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Firstly, Banachek is a mentalist, not a magician. My response to the dissent in the press conference was pretty simple - Banachek simply did not have the opportunity to cheat in any way whatsoever. Even if you call him a "magician," he is not actually magical. If I give a magician a top hat that I bought and searched, and never gave the magician any information on it before putting it in his hands, and then demanded that he make a rabbit appear from inside it, he would most probably be unable to do so. Magic seems unfathomable to an audience, but let's face it, there is an explanation for each illusion that fits the laws of physics.

If you were watching the streaming video prior to the test, you were able to see both Banachek and I as we entered the testing room. Neither Banachek nor I nor anyone else involved with the JREF had contact with Sonne, save one person, Bart Farkas, JREF press liaison. Farkas met Sonne as she entered South Point. He sequestered her backstage. She never spoke to any other TAM attendee or individual associated with the JREF during her time inside South Point until her test had been concluded.

No one, save Farkas and individuals employed by South Point, was permitted on the stage prior to the test. The tables and chairs used in the test were placed by South Point employees. We did not know, until they were already being set, which tables or chairs would be used.

The envelope containing all the materials needed for the test was sealed, by me, one week in advance of the test. Every seam was sealed with duct tape. Every seam and seal had my signature across it. The envelope was labeled on the outside, in large letters, in my handwriting, "TEST 1." When I entered the testing room, I put the envelope containing all testing materials in view of the cameras on the stairs leading to the stage. That package was put into the hands of a security guard who was not informed of the details about what it contained or how it would be used. Banachek was not permitted to stand within five feet of the envelope. He was not permitted to touch the envelope in any way. Once he entered the auditorium, Banachek was not permitted to leave - except once, to use the restroom. And even then, we sent an escort with him to ensure that he did not attempt to find Sonne. I'm sure that was an awkward moment.

When preparing for the test, I had bought decks of Bicycle poker-sized playing cards. These cards come in many varieties, and the backs can be many colors. In fact, in case there was a technological problem with the test, or we had to start over for any reason, I made multiple test envelopes, each with all the materials required for a single test. There were three total full tests available. The cards inside each test had differently colored backs. There were, I believe, two decks of red-backed cards, and one deck of blue-backed cards. After enveloping the cards, I no longer knew which deck was in which testing set. Banachek, of course, never knew what colors there were at all.

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I shuffled each suit of a deck of cards separately and put each card in a small coin envelope. I then sealed the envelopes, and shuffled them in turn. I then put the envelopes into larger coin envelopes, and shuffled them again. I then gave the envelopes to Jeff Wagg, who shuffled them yet again. At that point, there was no way for me, Jeff, nor Banachek to know which card was in which envelope - and additionally, Banachek still never knew even what color of Bicycle playing cards were being used.

Banachek and Sonne took the stage from different directions. Banachek entered from the audience, Sonne entered from the wings.

In order to randomize the target value for the cards, Banachek used a ten-sided die. He was not given access to the die in advance of the test (it was sealed inside the envelope along with everything else). It was, in fact, an odd ten-sided die in that each face was printed with a word - not a number - so that the die said "one," not "1".

Banachek gave the die three test throws prior to conducting the actual preliminary, to ensure Sonne did not believe the die was weighted. She stated that she did not believe it was weighted.

Sonne then dowsed, looking for the value - 1 to 10 - rolled on the die. She picked three envelopes in this manner. Banachek wrote the value she had stated on each envelope. He then put a notecard, folded in half with the value written on it as well, on top of each choice. These stayed in full view of the camera for the duration of the test.

At the close of the test, Sonne used scissors to cut open each of the envelopes to compare the value she had dowsed for against the actual value of the card. All her choices were wrong. She cut the envelopes, and Banachek physically pulled the card from the envelopes. The cards were never hidden from her.

After the test was complete, Sonne cut the seal on every single remaining envelope to ensure that they were not, say, all fives. Or all hearts, or anything but what they were supposed to be.

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Every card remaining completed the deck. There were no doubles. There were no mistakes.

Where was the opportunity to cheat?

Many people have said that Banachek did not cheat because obviously he has too much integrity. That is a value judgment. Banachek's integrity, or even potential lack thereof, has nothing to do with this test. Let me say that again - *Banachek's integrity does not enter this equation.*

He simply had no opportunity to cheat. None whatsoever.

Let me explain.

Even if he had a deck of cards in his pocket that he was dead-set on using to replace the ones in the envelopes, *he didn't know what kind of cards to use.*

Even if he made sure to have twenty-five decks of Bicycle sized poker playing cards with all differently colored backs, just in case, stashed about his person, *the envelopes were opened in full view of Sonne and in front of three cameras, thus in full view of the audience, both those in the auditorium, and all over the world on the Internet.*

Even if Banachek had a super special ten-sided die made that was weighted, *different values were rolled each time, indicating that it was not weighted to a particular side.*

Even if Banachek knew the die being used far in advance of the test, and had one made that was weighted in such a way that three different rolls in a row would come up with three different values and you would know what they would be in advance, *he still didn't know which cards were where.*

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Even if Banachek "psychically" knew the location of every single value of every single card on the table, *he could not make Sonne choose a particular envelope as her target.*

Even if we all desperately wanted Sonne to fail, which we did not, her failure of the test would have required the complicity of four members of South Point staff, the complicity of the entirety of the JREF, the complicity of the security guard, and the complicity of several inanimate objects - including a die, playing cards, envelopes, cameras, tables, and chairs.

If you believe that Banachek couldn't have cheated simply because of integrity, then Banachek needs to apply for the Challenge right this second - because in order for that to be the case, he would have to have *several paranormal abilities.*

Additionally, the agreement Sonne signed - live, on stage - was given to her months in advance. One of the items stated that she had no problem with Banachek conducting the test. And we also let her know that Banachek is both a mentalist and a well-known skeptic.

But what does Banachek have to say about all this? Well, here's his statement:

I find Connie Sonne's accusation both amusing and sad. On the same note, I take it very seriously as well. Connie, or anyone else, should think very carefully prior to making such libelous and slanderous statements. I take defamation of my character quite seriously. I would also suggest that anyone repeating Connie's suggestion - that I called out the card prior to it being removed - as a sign of cheating, place a card in a coin envelope then try to remove it and you will readily see that the moment your thumb enters the envelope to remove the card you can easily see what it is prior to it sliding out of the envelope. This is not cheating. It was simply me, trying to move a lengthy yet necessary process along. Also, there were steps put in place by the JREF to make sure there was no way I could have cheated Connie at all. For this to have happened both myself, the JREF, and anyone else involved would have had to be involved in the entire crime - and yes, it would be a crime. So once again, be very careful prior to making libelous or slanderous statements.

The test of Connie Sonne was honest, straightforward, open, and witnessed all over the world a

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s it took place.

Ms. Sonne has disappointed us all by reneging on her very positive statement that the test was properly designed and conducted.