Pythagoras' Mistake

By Jack English

Round about 570 B.C. Pythagoras of Samos, known to his best friends as Thad, ran a private school for the children of rich Greeks. He was interested in how mathematics explained the natural world and thought about math all the time.

One day, he was walking alone when he saw something shiny hanging from a bush. It was magic beans. He ate one and was instantly transported to a North American Indian village where he lived for a month studying Indian habits.

One thing he noticed was that at four o'clock each afternoon, three Indian squaws would gather to discuss politics. They brought their babies with them since babysitting had not yet been invented.

One of the squaws sat on a deer hide. One of the squaws sat on a buffalo hide, and one of the squaws sat on a very rare North American hippopotamus hide. After observing the women for several weeks, it struck him as odd that the women on the deer and buffalo hides only had one baby each. While, the woman on the hippopotamus hide had two babies.

Pondering this, he concluded the squaw of the hippopotamus was equal to the sum of the squaws of the other two hides whereupon he was immediately transported back to Greece.

Pythagoras shared this revelation with his students. Two factors contributed to Pythagoras' misstate. One was the little-known fact that Pythagoras had a speech impediment. The other was that none of his students knew what a squaw was.

So, when he said, "The squaw of the hippopotamus was equal to the sum of the squaws of the other two hides."

His students thought he said "the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides." And that mistake has been with us for a hundred generations.