

# *The Big Race*

Everybody in Bluffton who isn't too old or too young to remember things will recall the big race that was run right down the main street. It was one of the most exciting events that ever took place in Bluffton. But it wasn't recorded in any of the racing journals, because at that time Bluffton wasn't connected with the rest of the world. There were no telephones, the nearest telegraph office was eighteen miles away, and the road to Savannah hadn't even been dreamed of.

I'm talking, of course, about the big race between Lonnie Mulligan's black billy goat and Johnny Harrison's brown and white-spotted billy goat. Those two handsome goats were just about the same size, and everybody in Bluffton wanted to see them race. Everybody, that is, except Lonnie and Johnny. They knew it was bound to be a pretty close race, and they tried their dead-level best to talk it down.

"My goat was just operated on about two weeks ago," said Johnny. "It'll be another month or so before he can run again."

"I'm fatter than Johnny," said Lonnie, "and it wouldn't be a fair race because my goat'll have more to pull."

But nobody paid them any attention.

Grandpa Guilford was the mayor of Bluffton, and he instructed Mr. Forester, the marshal, to convert the main street into a race track. The street was paved with oyster shells and was just about a half mile long. The race, Grandpa said, would start in front of Prince Riley's barber shop at the north end of the street and stop at the big oak at the top of the hill leading down to the wharf at the other end. The winner, he said, would be awarded a two-bushel sack of oats. He appointed Captain Haynesworth of the steamer Attaquin the judge at the finish line, and they set the starting time at 2 o'clock the following Friday afternoon.

The night before the race I slept with Lonnie and his goat in a crocus-sack tent in Lonnie's yard. It was a black-as-pitch night and a hoot owl was mourning low in the pear tree back of Lonnie's kitchen. We had a lantern hanging on the pole, but the chimney was all smoked up, and it was almost as dark inside the tent as it was outside.

The goat bedded down between Lonnie and me and chewed his cud. He dozed with his eyes half shut, except when he was coughing or sneezing. Lonnie laid flat on his back with his legs crossed and his hands locked under his head, so he could watch for daybreak through

a hole in the top of the tent. I laid on my side with my head on one arm, so I could see Lonnie's face under the goat's beard.

Lonnie hadn't swallowed a mouthful of supper or drunk a drop of milk or water since dinnertime. He wasn't going to eat or drink anything until after the race. He said he had to get as light as Johnny by racing time, because the goat that had the most to pull was bound to lose the race.

"I'm empty as a church on Saturday night," Lonnie said, "and I'm all dried up inside for want of milk and water. But nothing's going down my throat till after that race tomorrow, and I mean it."

It wasn't easy to change Lonnie's mind, because he had red hair, just like Miss Chaplin, our school teacher. Once she told you to stay in after school for throwing a spitball or something, you could move up to the head of the spelling class, but you still stayed in after school.

But I knew Lonnie would be too weak to ride in the race if he starved himself all night. I tried to tell him that a cold biscuit filled with a little bit of Georgia cane syrup wouldn't make him much heavier.

Lonnie didn't take his eyes off that hole in the top of the tent. I couldn't see much use in saying anything else, but I had to keep trying.

"Shucks, Lonnie," I said, "did you ever watch your mother bake biscuits? Did you notice what a little bit of flour it takes to make a pan full of biscuits? I'll bet there's not one teaspoonful of flour in one whole big biscuit."

I kept watching Lonnie's face to see if he was changing his mind, but he kept his mouth shut tight as an oyster and I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"One teaspoonful of flour," I said, "is light as a feather on a buzzard's back. A buzzard's back got about a thousand feathers on it, but all thousand put together don't weigh enough to hold him on the ground. Any time he wants to, he can sail straight up into the sun so high you can't even see him."

Lonnie sat up and looked at me with his mouth wide open, the way you look at Santa Claus the first time you see him.

"Dogbite my skin," he said, "how come I didn't think of that!"

He jumped up and snatched the lantern off the pole and headed straight for the kitchen.

"Bring two!" I yelled after him.

He came back with two hunks of cornbread. Somebody, he said, had eaten all of the biscuits left over from supper.

The cornbread was dry as talcum powder and it made us thirsty.

We had to go to the pump on the back porch and get water before we choked to death. We drank about a quart each, and then Lonnie said he felt as if he had gained about three or four pounds. He sounded awfully discouraged. What I had gained didn't matter, because I wasn't riding in the race.

We went back to the tent and laid down and stayed quiet a long time. We could hear a poodle dog over on the main street barking at a ghost or something. We could hear the little hoot owl in the pear tree back of Lonnie's kitchen. We could hear two bullfrogs beating a bass drum down in the cove back of the old school house. I was just about to fall asleep when Lonnie suddenly sat up and started talking again.

"Dogbite my skin," he said. "I'm not running my goat in that race tomorrow, and I mean it."

"Gee whiz!" I said.

"Gee whiz nothing," Lonnie said. "I'm twice as fat as Johnny now, and his goat'll make a fool out of mine."

I didn't know what to say, so I said, "Shucks, Lonnie, I'm just about as light as Johnny. If I were you and you were me I could ride in that race, only it would be you and not me." And quick as lightning it brought a good idea into Lonnie's head.

"Dogbite it," he said, "how come you can't ride in that race? How come somebody else can't ride with Johnny? That way, we can even up the weight. Dogbite my skin, how come I didn't think of that before!"

He jumped to his feet and popped his fist in his hand a couple of times. Then he snatched the lantern off the pole and headed straight for the kitchen again. In less than two minutes he was back with a pot full of cold lima beans and a whole pitcher full of buttermilk out of the icebox.

"Dogbite it," he said, "I'm hungry."

We gave the goat one or two beans along as we ate the rest and washed them down with the buttermilk. Lonnie drank all of the juice out of the bottom of the pot, and then we laid down again and rested, till Lonnie saw a streak of gray through the hole in the top of the tent.

"Dawn's busting," he said. "I got to get up and go to work. I got a million things to do before racing time at two o'clock."

"Me too," I said.

I ran home. I went straight to the kitchen and got the milk bucket and went out to the barn and milked Daisy. I ran back to the kitchen and strained the milk into pans and set them in the icebox. Then I ran out to the woodpile and started swinging the axe. I swung it until Mama called me to breakfast. After breakfast I ran back to the

woodpile and kept cutting wood until I had plenty to last through supper. By the time the dinner bell rang, I had already toted the wood into the kitchen and filled the woodbox behind the stove. I swallowed a plate full of rice and gravy and roast beef and mashed potatoes and squash and green peas and some hot buttered biscuits and a glass of cold milk, and then I grabbed a big slice of Mama's apple pie and ran back to Lonnie's house.

Lonnie had finished greasing both wheels on his cart with lard and was waiting to borrow my knife. He said he had to put a sharper point on the end of his whip handle. He said he had to have it just right — not too sharp and not too blunt, but sharp enough.



He drew his .38 Special and told us to get ready.

While he was doing that, I got his mother's scrubbing brush off the back porch and brushed the goat's hair. I brushed him all over until he was as shiny as Dan Patch in the picture on Grandpa Guilford's desk. It took me about a whole hour to get him that way, and before I knew it Lonnie was saying it was time to get on up to Prince Riley's barber shop.

Johnny and his goat were already there when we got there. Mr. Forester and a lot of other people, white and colored, were there too. As far as I could see down both sides of the main street, people were waiting for the race to start.

Lonnie drove the cart up alongside of Mr. Forester's buggy. He told Mr. Forester that he wasn't racing his goat unless I rode in the cart with him.

"Let Johnny pick himself a rider too," Lonnie said. "I don't care who, so long as the two together's no lighter than me and Kink." (Lonnie called me Kink on account of my curly hair.)

Mr. Forester called Johnny over to the buggy and explained what Lonnie had said. Johnny said it was all right with him, provided he could have Wesley Clemons in his cart. Mr. Forester got out of the buggy and lifted us four boys one at a time.

"Yep," he said. "Wouldn't be three ounces difference one way or the other."

Lonnie and Johnny were satisfied, and Wesley and I were just about the happiest fellows in the world.

Mr. Forester drew a starting line across the street with his club. He took a big gold watch out of his pocket and looked at it.

"Two minutes to starting time," he said. "Better get those racers lined up."

The crowd on the corner thinned out pretty fast. Some of the boys had bet their best spinning tops on the goat they thought would win and wanted to be at the finish line when the race ended. My brother Luke was getting a haircut in Prince Riley's barber shop, and he got so excited that he jumped out of the chair with the cloth still tied around his neck and took out after those other boys.

Lonnie and Johnny lined the goats up on the starting line. They ba-a-a-a-ed and stamped their feet and shook their tails, but they toed the mark and stayed right on it.

Mr. Forester held his watch in his left hand. He drew his .38 special out of the holster and told us to get ready. He kept his eyes on the watch as he raised the pistol above his head and pointed it toward the sky.



I reached out my hand to be ready to twist Lonnie's goat's tail, but Lonnie jerked my hand back.

"This is no tail-twisting race," he said. "What you think I borrowed your knife for? You just bend to the wind and hold on tight!"

Lonnie had the pointed end of the whip handle aimed at a certain place. I looked over at Johnny and saw that he had the pointed end of his whip handle aimed at the same place on his goat.

When Mr. Forester fired his pistol and yelled, "Go, goats, go!" Lonnie and Johnnie jabbed those pointed whip handles just as hard as they could, and those two goats leapt straight up into the air, just as though a couple of mad hornets had popped stingers into them. They came down with their feet flying back and forth like the shuttle on Mama's sewing machine.

Lonnie and Johnny didn't let up on those whip handles either. They held them tight in place the whole time those goats were running. I think both Lonnie and Johnny would rather have been dead and buried than to have lost that race. I don't think they could have stood the shame of it for the rest of their lives.

"Bend to the wind!" Lonnie cried. "You're holding me back!"

I was already kissing the singletree, but I bent some more. I bent so low that I couldn't see when we passed Papa's store, or the post office in the corner of Uncle Sam Graves' yard. I think we had just passed Mrs. Lockwood's house when I heard the sharp clang of iron against iron and somebody yelling, "Look out! Look out!"

But it was too late.

The inside wheels on the two carts locked together like two bulldogs. The carts tilted up on one outside wheel, then up on the other, then flipped all the way over, like Mama's waffle iron, throwing the goats out of the shafts and piling us four boys against the Episcopal churchyard fence, less than fifty feet from the finish line.

The goats lost no time getting back on their feet and heading back the other way just as hard as they could go — trying, I guess, to put plenty of distance between those pointed whip handles and the places where they had been.

Captain Haynesworth and about a hundred other people gathered around us boys to see if we were hurt. And when they saw that there wasn't one scratch on any of us, they all broke out laughing.

I think Lonnie and Johnny wanted to cry with joy when Captain Haynesworth said he would have to call it a tie race and divide the oats between the goats. That way, nobody lost the race, nobody got hurt, and everybody except the goats had a lot of fun.