

CHAPTER X-3



LAUREL RACEWAY ... ON A MULE

Oh Hell. Yes...I'd Love To

The Maryland Multiple Sclerosis Society was planning a fund-raiser, one requiring participation from radio, TV, and newspaper 'celebrities' – six from each category: three from the Baltimore metro and three from the Washington, DC metro.

For donors there'd be dinner in the Clubhouse Dining Room, great seats, betting slips, random-drawn prizes, etc., etc., all the 'right stuff' one finds at charity affairs of this kind. Plus nine exciting '*for realsie*' harness races to bet.

But Wait – There's More

Oh yeah...and three races featuring the above mentioned 'celebrities' – one race for radio people, one for TV people and one for the newspaper folks, six participants in each race (three from each market).

The MS folks contacted representatives from the various media organizations including our WCBM Program Director, Dale Andrews.

They presented Dale with the details. He said, 'We're in, and I got your guy!'

'Your guy' was me.

A Dream Come True

I've always wanted to sit in a sulky and drive a trotter or pacer.

When I was a teenager my Dad told me stories about 'Fanny Sprout,' his trotting filly who was named for one of the schoolteachers of that day.

He told me about the fun he had driving his filly on the dirt roads, 'drag racing' the farm kids from Farragut and Picture Rocks (PA)...1910 style.

'Out in the sticks' Dad used to say.

So, Dale is telling me about the event and I'm catching on fire!

"So I'm gonna sit in a sulky and drive a harness horse, right? Count me in!"

Ahmmm, Not Exactly

"Well...you'll be sitting in a sulky all right. But you'll be driving a mule."

("Huh?")

It seems that the MS Society had engaged the services of a guy who had a bunch of mules that were trained to pull sulkies. We'd be driving *them* in the races.

("Sounds like Donkey Basketball, right?")

Off To The Races

Barbie and I got the kids in the car and headed for Laurel Raceway.

During the ride the kids peppered me with comments and questions about the race, mostly about stuff like 'overturned sulkies,' 'internal injuries' and 'death.'

They were terrified that something bad was going to happen to me.

Truth?

I was a bit queasy. But I've always wanted to sit in a sulky and drive a trotting or pacing horse, and this might be as close as I'll get.

"Not to worry," sez I. "I watched my Dad drive the work horses on our farm. I'll be fine."

Upon arriving at the track I got Barbie and the kids squared away at a table in the Clubhouse and I was off to the barns to meet my mule.

The Drill

For the evening there'd be three 'celebrity races – one each for radio, TV and newspaper folks, mules to be chosen by random drawing.

Note: For the uninitiated, a mule is the result of a mating between a jackass and a mare (horse). Though born male or female, most mules are hybrids and cannot reproduce.

Mr. Rent-A-Mule had eight or ten animals in his barn, a menagerie in varying sizes and colors. I drew a paint female (her mother was no doubt a paint horse).

Each of us had a 'handler' whose job it was to lead the mule onto the track for the start of the race.

The mules were harnessed to the sulky. We were given our 'racing colors'.

I climbed on board and up to the track we went.

Hector was my 'handler,' a talkative and calm fellow who worked for one of the trainers at Laurel Raceway.

We entered the track at the head of the homestretch and walked slowly toward the finish line where I assumed we'd be getting lined up to start the race. There were three mules maybe eighty to one-hundred feet ahead of me and another one about forty feet ahead. There was also one some fifteen feet behind me.

As we walked along Hector said, "Senor Pablo, thees ees a fast feeley. Jhou have a good chance to ween thees race. Take holt of her at the start. Keep her out of trouble, an' when you turn for home jus' slap her once or twice with the lines. She will do the rest."

I solely concentrated on Hector's instructions when suddenly, just the first three mules arrived at the finish line all of the handlers let out a loud 'Whoop!' and released their mules.

The race was on and there was no 'trotting.' These were at full gallop!



Annd They're Off!

For a split second I was caught off guard but quickly realized I need to calm down and figure things out – quickly.

My 'feeley' was indeed quick. By the time we were halfway through the first turn she'd caught the 'single' mule in front of us and he'd almost caught the threesome ahead of him.

Remembering what Hector told me I took a slight hold on the reins.

'Feeley' had settled into a smooth gallop down the back stretch, passing the 'single' and gaining rapidly on the threesome in front, one of which was a big grey mule. She was doing this all on her own - no urging from me.

So we're in the two-path reaching the far turn, where we caught and passed the three 'leaders' who by that time were strung out, single file.

As we're headin' for the wire the mule that was behind us at the start began to make his presence felt.

As the contender drew alongside I remembered Dad telling me about his 'drag racing' days and how he never used a whip or shouted at 'Fanny' when he wanted her to quicken. Instead he'd just pull the reins back until she had the bit in her teeth, after which he'd hold the reins firmly and 'smooch' to her. And awaay she'd go.

"What the H", sez I. "If it worked for Dad it'll probably work for me."

With about one-sixteenth of a mile to go I was on the inside, neck and neck with the other mule with the wire plainly in sight.

I pulled the reins back until I felt 'Feeley' grab the bit. I 'smooched' to her and she found another gear.

We won by a nose!

After the race Hector explained the reason for the staggered start.

In order to make the races more competitive they decided to give the slower mules a 'head start.' This worked sometimes but was of no help in this race as the two mules that had proven fastest over many races finished first and second.

I guess they should have given the slow ones a bigger head start!

We Made The Playoffs!

After the race I learned that the first and second place finishers in each race were to return the next week for a race that would determine the overall champ.

This time I drew the big grey mule.
He couldn't beat a turtle with three legs.

We finished next-to-last.

Epilogue

I always wanted to sit in a sulky and drive a real trotter or pacer.

I still do.

So...would you happen to know anyone who...

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