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The Dartwing Challenge

Having been a racing pigeon for so long it was hard for Maximo to retire, but he had to admit that he was getting a bit old for the sport; at least everyone said so. All he really had to look forward to now was watching the younger ones as they lined up for their races, then taking off in a flurry of wings. This prompted memories of bygone days and glory, causing him to wonder if there was just a chance that he might be able to compete in one last race. “Forget it, Max,” Gertrude the Team Fixer advised when asked about the possibility. “You were great in your day, but that’s past history. I can’t put you in. Sorry. Just be happy to enjoy the races like I do.”

“But you’re a turkey, Gertrude,” Maximo reminded her, “And you’ve never raced. You couldn’t even imagine how I feel knowing I’ll never race again.”

Gertrude watched Maximo padding off, no doubt feeling very glum, and she only wished she could cheer him up. Suddenly, an idea came to her. “Hang on a minute,” she called out. “Even though you can’t race anymore, maybe there’s a way you can still be in the game.” Maximo was intrigued and waited for the Team Fixer to go on. “Well,” she said, “You know all there is to know about racing, so why don’t you become a trainer?”

“The present teams have already got trainers,” Maximo reminded her.

“So go out and build a new team,” suggested Gertrude. “There must be loads of youngsters who haven’t raced before.”

It was a thought. He set off that day, flying out of the valley and over places he knew from his racing days. Back then, he had never bothered looking down at what was going on below, mainly concentrating on flying as fast as he could towards the finish line. Now, however, he went slower and took more notice of things on the ground, especially birds he saw along the way.

There were enough of them – crows, magpies and plenty of tiny birds flitting around in the trees, but no sign of pigeons anywhere. Almost at the point of giving up, Maximo noticed a bird flying above him. Being an ex-racer it ought to have been easy for him to catch up, but this one was going really fast. Picking up speed he managed it and was eventually flying alongside. “Hello,” said Maximo. “I don’t suppose you could tell me where I might find some pigeons?”

“Hey, man, you’ve just found one,” said the bird. “The name’s Arfta.”

“That’s a weird name,” said Maximo. “No offence meant.”

“None taken, man,” said Arfta. “They call me that because I always seem to be the last across – you know, like after.” Maximo was about to say his name when Arfta cut in: “I *know* you – you’re Maximo, champion of The Dartwing Challenge. Greeb to meet you.”

“Thank you,” replied Maximo. “Glad to meet you too. Now, I’m a bit confused. You say you’re a pigeon, and you do look a bit like one, but you’re different somehow.”

“Yeah, man. It’s the sprout of feathers on top of my head, right?” Arfta continued: “But I *am* a pigeon; a crested pigeon actually. That’s what twitchers say we are; but everyone round here calls us punk pigeons. Pretty rude, I reckon.”

"I agree it's not very nice," said Maximo; then he had a thought: "You said 'us'. Does that mean there are more of you?"

"Too right, man," replied the bird. "I'm off to meet the crew now – late as usual, me. Wanna come along? If you do, better get your skates on: I've gotta zip."

They didn't have far to go and were soon approaching a number of punk pigeons sitting beside a road watching cars go past. The pair landed and Maximo was about to speak when one of them began scolding Arfta: "You really are a slacker. You seem to think you can turn up just whenever you like; no consideration for anyone but yourself. We've been waiting here for ages. In fact we've done a dash without you." This was Lippy, a good name for someone who never stopped chattering.

"Zip it Lippy," said Alice, "Before you do my head in, as per."

"Yeah, man," cheeped Sid. "Like, it wouldn't be half bad if you ever had something cool to say, which usually you don't."

"No need to get your tail feathers in a tangle, guys," said Arfta, trying to calm things down. "I know I'm late, but I'm here now; and I've brought someone with me. Say hi to Maximo, nine-time winner of the Dartwing."

The announcement caused a buzz and the group of punk pigeons moved to gather in a circle around Maximo. "This is a real hoot to meet someone famous," said the smallest of the pigeons excitedly.

"Not just famous, P2," Jonno put in. "Max is, like, the main man, a true legend."

Maximo was curious: "You called her P2. Was there ever a P1?" When a wave of sadness flowed over the group he guessed he had his answer. "Sorry I asked."

"No probs, Max," Jonno assured the newcomer. "Like er, since then we don't, like, dash cop cars no more; and that's all I have to say about that. Now, what brings you to our patch?"

"Actually," Maximo began, "I'm scouting for racers to join my new team. I don't suppose any of you would be interested?" No-one answered. The group of punk pigeons seemed suddenly distracted and had become very tense for some reason. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Did I say something to upset you?"

"Not hardly, man," replied Sid, "And about your team: like, hang five and we'll get back to you – there's a Big Mack coming and we've gotta dash."

Maximo noticed they were all looking up the road watching the approach of a huge truck that was travelling at speed. They waited until it was almost level with them, then flew straight across the road in front of it. All except Arfta who took off too late; at least Maximo thought so; and he held his breath, expecting another P1 incident. Fortunately, it was not to be – Arfta shot across the road like a dart, barely missing the truck's grill. Once the road was clear, Maximo went to join the others on the far side. "That was really something," he said. "Do you come here often?"

"Like er, every day, man," replied Alice. "Sometimes twice a day if we haven't, like, anything better to do. Now, you were saying something about a racing team."

"I was," confirmed Maximo, "And I was going to ask how fast you could fly, but I've just seen it for myself."

"So, have we got the gig?" asked Lippy. "I mean, it would be grouse if we have; but then if we didn't we probably wouldn't care; except we might because we're fast enough for racing..." She noticed scowls of disapproval from the others and stopped cooing.

"Well, there's a bit more to it than quick bursts of speed," explained Maximo. "You'd need to fly fast over long distances. It would mean going through some serious training before you're ready for that."

"No worries, man," said Sid. "We do serious every day. We're off for training right now. Come have a gander." With that, they all took off, Maximo following while Arfta waited a bit as usual. Shortly, they were coasting down to an area Max knew well. This was the railway line

which cut across the countryside, then disappeared into a tunnel. Sid glanced up at the sun. "The ten-forty should be along, like, pretty soon; then we'll show you some really bonza training."

As they had done before on the roadside, the gang of punk pigeons waited beside the rail line. The ten-forty train they were talking about soon appeared over the hill, then began picking up speed on its downward run. Maximo was expecting the punks would make a last minute dash across just as it reached them; and at first it seemed this was their idea; but once in front of the train, they turned and began flying straight along the track ahead of it. Maximo joined them, only he had the sense to fly alongside and out of danger. From his point of view it certainly was dangerous because the train was now going incredibly fast. The pigeons, however, were flying slightly faster, staying at a safe distance in front of the engine. Then Maximo spotted a real hazard ahead – they were approaching the tunnel and it looked as if they were going to enter it with the train right on their tails. At the very last moment, the flock of punk pigeons veered off to the side with Arfta now in the lead.

Settling on the wall over the top of the tunnel, Sid said: "Told you we did training. Does that, like, get us in your team?"

"I have to admit I'm impressed," said Maximo, "And I think you have the right stuff for long-distance racing; but there's more to The Dartwing Challenge than just flying fast. There are a few tricks you must learn to be better than the other teams, some of which actually cheat. I'll tell you more on the way. Follow me and we'll see if we can enter you in the preliminary heats."

"The what?" queried Jonno. "I, like er, don't like the sound of that. We don't do, like, hot, man; and anyway what's prelimin..."

"Don't worry about it," Maximo assured them. "You'll breeze through the heats. Our biggest problem could be getting our team accepted by the race officials; and they aren't the friendliest of birds."

Never was a truer word said. There were three minor officials: Lowry, Carly, and Mungo who wasn't the brightest bird on the perch. These were pigeons; then there was one other: Tawoo, well known as a force to be reckoned with. She was an owl, a very disagreeable one, and as the President of the Dartwing Racing Committee she generally had the final say when it came to new teams being allowed to race. "I can assure you they are pigeons," Maximo said.

Gertrude added: "They certainly are – crested pigeons: I looked them up in the Bird Book – so I've fixed them to race in the heats."

Tawoo scowled. "I will decide who races," she grumbled, "After it's been put to the vote." Turning to the three officials she glared at them. "What say you?" Lowry started to ask a question, but Tawoo cut him short: "Yes or No!" she snapped, "That's all I want to hear from you." Lowry voted 'yes' immediately, explaining that, as the newcomers truly were pigeons, they couldn't be refused entry. This encouraged the other two to vote 'yes' also, which definitely displeased Madam President. Waiting until Maximo and Gertrude had led the punk team out of earshot, Tawoo grated: "Thanks to you three we have to let them race; but only in the heats: I don't want them qualifying for the main event. See to it. You know who to talk to."

The first heat was divided into four races with two teams competing in each. "This is not so much about winning," Maximo explained in a whisper as the punks were lining up. "You can do it easily; but only one of you needs to be in the first three past the finish line for the entire team to qualify for the next heat; and we don't want to let on how fast you really are." He glanced at the other team they were racing against. "The big one is Ferrol," he said, "And he'll do anything to make you lose, so watch out for him."

The two teams lined up. Maximo's punks were standing on the dirt starting pad, whereas Ferrol's pigeons were squatting on the ground behind them. "What are you up to?" questioned Lippy when she noticed. "Are you planning something sneaky? Because if you are..."

"Don't be like that," said Ferrol in a voice that sounded quite friendly. "It's just to give you newbies a head start. We wouldn't want you to look silly on your very first race, would we?"

Maximo was watching and commented under his breath: “Knowing Ferrol he’s got something other than kindness in mind.”

Gertrude was beside him and groaned: “Too right. I reckon that shifty bird’s going to pull the dust stunt.”

Maximo had only ever heard of this, so all he could do was wait to see what would happen. Nothing did for the first minute. Jimbo Crow was making sure all of the racers were behind the starting line; then he did the ‘ready-steady-go’ bit, except it came out as: “Corr, caar, caa-oh!” This was the signal Ferrol and his team had been waiting for. As they rose up from their squatting positions they began flapping madly, seemingly to take off; but that wasn’t the idea because they weren’t actually going anywhere. What they were doing, however, was stirring up clouds of dust which rolled forward to completely cover the punk pigeons in front of them.

For Maximo’s team it seemed like a disaster. They coughed and spluttered, their eyes were stinging so that they couldn’t see properly; and worst of all they were too confused to fly. Having caused the dust storm, Ferrol’s team simply flew up and over it. He was well pleased, and as he passed the punk pigeons hidden by the red cloud below he called down: “Shame about that. Welcome to the big time, losers.”

“Do something, Max,” pleaded Gertrude. “Get them out of there.”

“Not allowed,” said Maximo. “Trainers can’t coach from the sidelines: it’s against the rules.”

“So’s cheating,” Gertrude pointed out, “Anyway, I’m the Fixer and I’m telling you to fix it.”

“Okay.” Maximo leaned towards the dust and yelled: “Hold your breath, shut your eyes, and dash!” When nothing happened, he repeated the last command: “Dash, Punk Team, DASH!”

His words must have got through. The next moment the dust stirred as the punks took off after Ferrol’s team. By this time the cheaters were well ahead; but having dashed in front cars and trains for so long, the punks simply put on a burst of speed and began catching them up. Even then, it still seemed unlikely they could beat Ferrol’s team to the finish line. Lippy glanced at the others and said: “Where’s Arfta when we need him?”

“Coming past now,” declared Alice, ducking as something zoomed overhead. It was Arfta, late as usual and flying faster than his buddies had ever seen before. He was gaining on Ferrol’s team which hadn’t bothered to look behind, thinking they would win for sure. In fact, they were so confident that they had slowed down. With just metres to go, Jonno, Sid and the others were yelling and screaming: “Go, man, go! Flap it to ‘em!”

Well, Arfta did just that, passing them and zipping across the finish line first.

“Wow,” declared Gertrude. “So that’s what ‘dash’ means. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Neither had the officials. Tawoo was particularly annoyed because, after some persuasion, she grudgingly had to admit that the punk team had broken no rules. Gertrude had been at the meeting and passed on the good news that Maximo’s team was through to the second round. “But,” she added with concern: “Don’t start counting your chickens, Max. You know what Tawoo’s like – she’ll pull out all stops to end your winning streak.”

“Just let her try,” chirped Sid. “We’re gonna, like, be the next champions of The Dartwing Challenge. Don’t you worry, Maxie baby.”

Maximo, however, was worried, but he kept quiet so as not to spoil the enjoyment of his team. Soon enough they would find out that the task ahead of them promised to be anything but easy. He could warn them about the cheating because it was something he had seen for himself during his racing years; but the other teams had been the ones to pull the dirty tricks then. This time the punks would have Tawoo and her committee against them; and that was a really serious matter.