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The Dartwing Challenge – Story Two The Finals

The Punk Pigeon racing team was bubbling with excitement following its win in the first heat of The Dartwing Challenge. “I reckon, like, we’re home and hosed,” declared Jonno confidently.

“Remember what Gertrude said,” Lippy reminded him. “Not to count our chickens; which, I think means we shouldn’t be too cock sure. On the other hand, we don’t have any chickens, so I suppose we may have to find something else to count; not necessarily birds, but...”

“Please stop twittering, Lippy,” pleaded P2, “And listen to Max.”

As the team’s trainer, Maximo had plenty to talk about. He had just returned from a meeting with the Racing Committee with news that was not good: “Tawoo, the President, got the officials to stir up the other racing pigeons into complaining that our team has an unfair advantage, mainly because you are smaller and lighter than them. So, it’s been decided to add an extra rule called a handicap.”

“I don’t, like, fancy wearing a cap,” Sid grumbled. “It’ll flatten my topknot.”

“It’s not that kind of cap,” Maximo had to explain. “What it means is that you will all have to wear bands on your legs heavy enough to bring your weight up to the same as the other racers.”

“Don’t reckon I could carry even a tambourine, let alone a whole band,” said Alice.

“This isn’t a musical band, Alice,” advised their trainer. “It’s just a circular ring. I tried to get the Committee to change the decision, but Tawoo wasn’t having any of it; although she did agree to give us some time to practise while wearing the bands. I only hope our next race isn’t too soon.”

The way it worked was that the Punk Team first had to be weighed. One of the other racing pigeons also had to stand on the scales so that the weights could be compared. On Tawoo’s orders the officials had to pick the pigeon to weigh and, as might be expected, it was the fattest, heaviest they could find. Mungo was the official given the job of figuring out the weight difference; and here was another setback because he wasn’t good at adding up, so the bands were heavier than they should have been. Although the members of Maximo’s team weren’t happy about it, they had no choice but to have the weights fitted to their legs.

“I call it just another kind of cheating,” The Team Fixer Gertrude muttered angrily as she stood alongside Maximo watching the punk pigeons practising. “I mean, look at poor little P2 – she has a job even getting off the ground.”

“There was nothing we could do about it,” said Maximo. “The others seem to be managing fairly well, though, especially Arfta; and as our secret weapon he might still be able to win.”

“Well, let’s hope they *all* get used to flying with the bands before the start of your next heat,” said Gertrude. “At least it’s another short race.”

It should have been; but Tawoo was taking no chances and set a longer distance. “It will give Maximo’s team more time to get their speed up,” was her excuse when Gertrude complained.

The Team Fixer went straight back to tell Maximo the bad news. On hearing it, he had his punk pigeons stop practising. "You need to rest up a bit," he explained. "Otherwise you won't make the distance. The problem will be wearing yourselves out before the final spurt; and I've had an idea about that."

It was as well they had taken a break because the call to assemble at the starting line came sooner than expected. Only four teams had qualified for this particular heat and they were initially lined up in two rows with Maximo's punks in front as before. Gertrude figured this was so that Ferrol's team could repeat the dust stunt; so she went to have a quiet word with the officials: "I know you three had a foot in that underhand scheme, Carly," she gobbled sternly, "And if it happens again I shall be reporting you to the Stewards." Apparently Lowry and Carly knew the consequences of being reported; whereas Mungo didn't have a clue what it meant and simply agreed with the others to allow the Punk Racing Team to start from the back row.

Jimbo Crow was peering along the starting line to make sure all racers had their toes behind it; and when he was satisfied he crowed the signal: "Corr, caar, caa-oh!" Because of the weighted bands on their legs, the Punk Team would have struggled to take off, gifting the other pigeons with a head start; but Maximo had instructed them to prepare first by flapping furiously to get their wing speed up. Then, eyes shut and holding their breath to combat the dust which happened to blow back on them because the wind had changed direction, they jumped into the air and shot forward.

By this time the rest of the teams were well in front; yet, despite carrying the extra weight the punks were managing to gradually close the gap between them and the field. Spectators on the ground were a little surprised at this, Tawoo in particular who was grumbling at the officials: "It's your fault – the weights are too light. I just hope for your sakes that they get tired soon."

The punks were already tired, and would be even more so over the next minute as they put Maximo's plan into action. "You have to be like falcons," he had told them. "Climb high in the sky, fly straight until you have almost caught up with the leaders below; then fold your wings and let yourselves fall head first. With the extra weights, in moments you will be going really fast and having a rest at the same time. Just don't forget to pull up before you plummet into the ground."

Ferrol was chuckling to himself. He had taken a quick look back to see how far the punks had fallen behind and there was no sign of them, so he figured they had simply worn themselves out and given up. It came as a complete surprise to him and the other racers when six punk pigeons came zooming down from the sky above like rockets, levelled off and beat their wings for a final classic dash. With Arfta in the lead and the rest close behind, all six shot over the finish line just seconds before the leaders of the other pigeons. The next team over the line was Ferrol's and he was clearly furious. Lippy took the opportunity to jeer: "Now who are the losers, bozo?" And with those few choice words, for once she decided she'd said quite enough.

Shortly after the race, the air was tense at the committee meeting. "The weights were too heavy and just helped them go faster, you dopey dickie bird," Lowry cooed at Mungo. "The other teams are complaining and want them removed."

"Then we'll have to take them off to keep the peace," grumbled Tawoo, "But we must do *something*. Not only has Maximo's team qualified for the main race, but all six crossing the line first is unheard of in the history of The Dartwing Challenge. We can't risk these punks winning the main event – it's unthinkable. Another handicap I have in mind might stop them; but we can't rely on just that. Let's not forget that the final race is a long one; a very long one. All kinds of problems could occur over the distance, unfortunate accidents maybe; and I expect you three to think of some and make them happen."

"We may not need to," said Carly. "I've had an idea how we can prevent them from even racing at all."

Tawoo's eyes widened. "Oh, yes?" she hooted. "I am interested, dear Carly. Do tell."

A short time later, Maximo was watching as the bands were taken off the punk's legs; and Gertrude was there to see that it was done properly and gently. "You've heard about the new

handicap, I suppose,” commented the Team Fixer. “It sounds mean that you have to give the other teams a three second head start.”

“Better than the leg weights,” commented Maximo, “It *will* take a bit to catch up; but I know my punk pigeons have the dash to do it.”

Hopefully, that would be the case. The teams which had qualified for the final race were being assembled behind the starting line, and naturally the punks were a little nervous. As one of the qualifiers, Ferrol’s team were passing some sneering jibes to upset the punks. Maximo told them to ignore the comments. “They’re just trying to put you off because they know you can win. More to the point, I know it too.”

“And me,” said Gertrude to lend a bit more encouragement. “By the way,” she added, “I’ve been meaning to ask – why would a boy pigeon call himself Alice?”

“He’s just a bit, like, weird, man,” said Arfta, “But he’s fast, maybe even faster than me.”

The Challenge Final Begins

Part of the pre-race procedure was a count to ensure every team had the right number of members. Had Mungo been doing the counting it would have been a worry. Lowry, however, was much better at it; so it seemed rather strange when he declared: “The Punk Pigeon team cannot compete – it has only five members when it should have six.”

With all of the hustle and bustle, Maximo hadn’t noticed that he was missing part of his team. His eyes skipped from one to the other and he was shocked to discover Lowry was right. “Where’s P2?” he asked. “Has anyone seen her? All of you go off and search for her.”

“Hold it!” ordered Gertrude. “There isn’t enough time. All teams have to line up NOW.”

“Then, we’re done for,” sighed Maximo in disappointment.

“Not quite,” said Gertrude. “As the Team Fixer I thought you might need a substitute, so I fixed it with the Entry Steward. You’re the one, Max. You can take P2’s place; and it’s all official. Tawoo can’t stop the punks from racing. The thing is, will you be able to keep up with them?”

“Hey, dude,” chirped Jonno, “Max is the main man, the champion. I reckon *we’ll*, like, have a job keeping up with *him*.”

“Right then,” said Gertrude. “Get your team to the starting line, Max. I’ll look for P2.”

It might have been better if the team Fixer had stayed to spot any cheating. Jimbo Crow was the usual starter for the first teams to take off, which was all bar the punks. Strides the rooster was the one to call the start for them; and he originally had Lowry to count the three seconds; but when the official noticed Gertrude walking away and wouldn’t be there to keep an eye on things, he claimed he had to go somewhere and put Mungo in his place. Maximo noticed and whispered: “Looks like our start time is rigged. It’s my bet Mungo can’t even count to three.”

Maximo glanced along the line of punks and saw who was closest to Strides. “Pass the word along to Alice,” he said to Sid. “Tell him to start flapping as soon as Jimbo calls the start for the others; and everyone be ready for our signal.”

The crowd of birds assembled to watch the race was buzzing with chirping and chatter; then it died down to an eerie silence. Fidgeting ceased in the ranks as the racers waited. Just when tension was fit to explode, Jimbo called out: “Corr,” followed by a pause; then: “Caar.” There was another longer silence until finally he let out a loud: “Caaaa-OH!”

A huge cheer went up from the crowd drowning the beat of wings as the racers took off. Mungo was starting his count for the punk team, had called ‘one’ and was trying to remember what came next; but it didn’t matter. Alice was already flapping madly, stirring up a cloud of dust that blew straight over Mungo and Strides. In a second, the rooster was coughing; except it came out as a gasping: “Cock-a-doodle-do.” That was the signal, and on hearing it, Maximo’s Punk Team was away and racing.

Although a bit delayed in starting following his dust-flapping, Alice soon caught up with the others. Arfta was last as usual, but it took only a few seconds before he was flying alongside Alice who said, "Glad you could make it, Bro. And, like, check out Max the man." Despite being the oldest of the team, Maximo was leading the way. "He's still got it," Alice added unnecessarily.

Although he wouldn't let on, Maximo was finding it hard going after not having raced for a long time; but he needed to be in front. He knew things the others didn't, especially about the course itself which he had flown many times; but he was also familiar with the kind of dirty tricks the cheaters might use against his punks. And, lo and behold, he was pretty sure he could see one coming up. They were closing the gap on Ferrol's team which was flying over a hill topped with trees. Just as they passed it, a bird shot out. "Wait for it," warned Maximo. "If I'm not mistaken that's Mungo, and I bet he's pulled some dirty trick."

Sure enough, as they were approaching, a mass of black rose up from the trees and began heading straight for the punk racers. "It's a huge flock of starlings," shouted Maximo. "Just as well Mungo can't count – he's set them off too soon. Veer left and go around them." The punks did as ordered, easily avoiding the flock of birds. Mungo was some distance away and had been waiting to see what happened; and there up ahead was Ferrol who had hung back from his team for the same reason. Max gave a little chuckle. "That's ruffled their feathers. Let's close the gap on Ferrol's lot; but stay behind. There's bound to be more sly moves coming our way."

Further along the course they had overtaken some of the slower teams and were staying in touch with Ferrol as they rounded the flag that marked the end of the outward leg of the race. "Homeward bound now," said Maximo. "We'll be coming to a stretch you know well – the railway line. That's when we'll start to make our move."

This was the plan, at least. Following the train line was no problem, not until the tunnel came into view. Maximo noticed two birds standing to the side waiting. One of them was a Marshall, there to make sure the teams kept to the route of the course. The other was Lowry, and he shouldn't have been there at all. In a few moments the presence of the official became obvious when Lippy said: "Isn't that an eagle up there above us?"

"You're not wrong, man," said Alice, "And it's starting to, like, swoop."

What had begun as a race with a few avoidable dirty tricks had suddenly turned into a desperate dash for safety; and the only place they could be sure of that was dead ahead. "Through the tunnel!" shouted Maximo. "The eagle can't get us in there." And he led his team into the darkness.

Only part way along the tunnel, Arfta caught up with him. "We may have a slight problem, Max. The one-fifteen's due, like, pretty much now – same train as the ten-forty, but on its return run."

"Yeah, man," added Alice, "Coming straight at us, like, in your face." He called back to the rest of the team: "Turbo power, guys, or it's P1 SPLATTO!"

Maximo didn't believe he had ever flown as fast as he did then; and he had to in order to keep up with the team which had gone past him. Heart pounding, he could see light in the distance as they neared the end of the tunnel, and he tried to convince himself that they would make it out in time. Almost at the exit, a loud 'parp' resounded as the one-fifteen blew its whistle. Putting on a final spurt, the punk team burst out of the tunnel. "DASH!" shouted Jonno. Five punks and one ordinary pigeon instantly changed direction and zipped to the side, missing the front of the oncoming train by a mere feather.

The one advantage for them was that the route they were forced to take was shorter than Ferrol's team had to fly by going over the hill which the tunnel went through. They were up there, though, and while Maximo's punks were gathering their senses, Ferrol seized the opportunity to make up lost ground. In moments they were the ones in front. After the dash through the tunnel the punks were tired; yet, encouraged by Alice and Arfta they managed to find enough energy to begin closing the gap between them and what was now the leading team.

“Well done, guys,” puffed Maximo, quite out of breath. “We’re on the final straight. Once over the lake, a mega dash should win us the race.”

He was imagining that there would be no more cheating; but he was very wrong. Ferrol and his team were crossing the lake just before them. They were almost on the far side when another pigeon came from nowhere and dived close to the water, startling a big group of ducks swimming there. They took off in a flurry straight up to collide with Ferrol’s team. Sid recognised the one who had panicked the ducks. “That’s, like, the official Carly. What a dirty trick! But it’s backfired. Check it out.”

The leading team of pigeons had been slowed by the water birds and the punks were about to overtake them when Maximo spotted something below. “One of them must have got hurt and its floating on the lake. I think it’s Ferrol. I’m going down for him.”

“That’s, like, crazy, man,” said Arfta. “He’s a cheat.”

“Maybe,” said Max, “But he doesn’t deserve to drown. Lead the team to victory, Arfta; and do the last dash for me.” He didn’t wait to see the punks racing off because he was more concerned about Ferrol who was struggling to stay afloat and seemed very tired. So was Maximo, but there was one last job to do. Swooping down, he flapped over his arch rival, dropped until his feet were on Ferrol’s back; then he closed his claws to grab a good bunch of feathers and pulled upwards. His idea had been to carry the rescued bird back to the finish line; but Ferrol was too proud, saying that he could manage perfectly well himself. Maximo agreed to let him fly on his own and stayed with him, just in case.

By the time the pair reached the finish, all of the other teams were home. Although last across line, the waiting crowd went wild, cheering and cooing loudly for the hero of the day and a rather soggy Ferrol. Maximo was looking forward to finding out if his team had won the Challenge; then Gertrude bustled up with some awful news: “They’ve been disqualified,” she declared. “The Racing Committee claims they cheated by going through the railway tunnel which isn’t part of the course.”

Surprisingly, Ferrol grated: “That’s not on! Where’s Tawoo? I’m going to have words; and she’s not going to like them.” Ferrol did indeed have words, first with Tawoo; rather loudly so that everyone could hear: “Maximo’s team followed the proper route, and there’s nothing in the rules to say the tunnel’s out of bounds.” Then he had a quieter word with the three officials: “What you did was worse than mean; it was despicable. Declare the punk team the winners or I’ll tell everyone about the nasty, dangerous tricks you pulled.”

There was no doubt that Ferrol meant what he said; and the decision about the winners was quickly changed. Maximo’s Punk Racing Team was presented with The Dartwing Challenge Trophy; while Lippy was declared overall Champion and awarded the Golden Feather. “That’s a bit strange,” commented Maximo. “I’d have thought Arfta or Alice would have been first across the line.”

“They, like, held back to let her win,” explained Sid. “We all did.”

“That’s crazy,” said Ferrol.

“No, man,” put in Jonno. “That’s called team spirit.”

Ferrol sighed; then drew Maximo aside for a quiet word: “I wanted to say thanks for saving me and to tell you I had nothing to do with what happened; not even locking P2 in the food store – that was Carly. One last thing - I’m sorry you didn’t win your tenth Championship.”

“No you’re not,” said Maximo with a knowing grin.

“You’re right,” admitted Ferrol. “Still, better luck next time, eh?”

“I don’t know there’ll be a next time,” said Maximo.

Ferrol laughed. “Pull the other wing, Max. You can’t quit, not just yet – I want a re-match.”

“Minus the cheating?” mused Max; and when there was no reply, he had his answer.