

The Chihuahua's Goat

By Michael Groetsch

As we drive into City Park where the Wholesale Grocers Picnic is to be held, Dad tells us that the door prize this year is a live goat. We exit our car to instructions that we accompany him to the small registration desk located in the park's large pavilion. As we approach the desk, he instructs us to enter each of our names into the raffle. To the right of the pavilion sits a skinny gray goat tied to a tree.

"Is everyone here?" Dad inquires with subtle enthusiasm.

One by one he orders Mom and my brothers and sisters to fill out a raffle ticket. My brothers, *Little E*, Barry, and I go first. Dad then asks that Mom and my sister Brenda go next. Finally, he steps up to the counter with my sister Jeanne. He and Jeanne drop three additional raffle tickets into the large box sitting next to a fat man with a cigar. The fat man thanks Dad for his entries and explains that the winner of the raffle must be present to win.

"Dad, when you and Jeanne put the raffle tickets into the box, you filled out three instead of two. Who was the third one for?" I ask inquisitively.

"If it's any of your business at all," he responds, "which it's not, the extra one is for Tina Marie!"

"Tina Marie?" I respond with a confused look. "Dad, Tina Marie is our pet Chihuahua. What happens if Tina Marie wins the goat?" I ask with some degree of indignation.

"Shut up Mike and go unload the car with your brothers!" Dad whispers loudly.

As *Little E*, Barry and I unload the pickup truck, I once again ask the question.
“What happens if Tina Marie wins the goat?”

“I’m sure that he’s got a backup plan,” *Little E* replies.

“Yea, he always has a backup plan,” Barry echoes.

They’re probably right, I assure myself. Dad always has a backup plan.

While my brothers and I place the picnic baskets and ice chest under a sprawling oak tree with hanging moss, Jeanne and Brenda walk over to inspect the skinny goat.

“Gee,” I hear Brenda proclaim. “He would sure make a great pet.” Jeanne reluctantly nods her head while standing several feet away wondering if the thing bites.

As I pack the ice chest with soft drinks and beer, I can’t help but wonder what will happen if our Chihuahua wins the goat. I dismiss the thought as needless worry. The chances for a Chihuahua to win a goat at a family picnic are almost nonexistent.

My Uncle Jack and his family arrive and join us at our designated spot.

“*Big E*,” I hear my Uncle Jack yell to Dad, “are you ready for the greasy pig contest at 10 o’clock? Last year I nearly caught it!” Uncle Jack states proudly. “Had I not tried to catch the pig by the tail rather than by the feet, it would have been mine. I wore a flannel shirt this time that’s almost like Velcro. It won’t slip away from me this year!”

Uncle Jack boasts.

As my brothers, sisters, and cousins continue to survey the skinny goat, he seems to give off an apprehensive, “BAHH!” I suddenly have the premonition that we will somehow, some way, win the goat. If at all possible, Dad will see to it that we win the goat.

At 10:00 a.m. sharp, the fat man with the cigar announces that they are ready to hold the greasy pig contest. The contest is one in which, after pouring molasses over a large pig, they release it in the middle of a hundred or so picnickers, who then chase and try to catch the poor creature. The first one who catches the slippery pig gets to take him home. No questions asked.

I'm certain that the pig wonders where the Humane Society is when he needs them. No one ever explained to me the fate of the greasy pigs that were caught at the picnic in previous years. As the fat man yells for those in attendance to report to an area where they will release the greasy pig, my father gives us a cocky grin.

We stand in the background of an open grassy section of the park the size of a football field. Dad and Uncle Jack are assigned to a large circle of people who hope to catch the pig. At the count of 10, the poor animal, dripping with molasses, is let out of its cage to the sight of several dozen crazed picnickers. The pig, in an attempt to show that it's not going to give up easily, squeals loudly and makes a run for a cluster of trees. Meanwhile, convinced that he can catch the fleeing creature without a challenge, my father is already in the cluster of trees hiding and waiting for the animal to arrive. Seconds later, Dad reappears with molasses dripping from his arms and face. As the pig re-enters the open field, Uncle Jack makes a second attempt to catch the squealing swine, only to have it slip through his flannel Velcro outfitted arms. The pig heads for the Mississippi River levee, never to be seen again.

At 1:00 p.m., a man with a beard who resembles Abraham Lincoln gets on the bullhorn and summons all picnickers back to the open field. It's time to start the races and games. They were to start at 12:00 noon, but the moderator, the fat man with the

cigar cannot be found. It's rumored that he's on the Mississippi River levee looking for the pig.

For the first race, the 100-yard dash, Mr. Abe asks for all six to eight-year-old boys to gather behind a white line. As Dad insists that my brother Barry enter the race, Barry reminds him that he's 10-years-old.

"Dad, some of the kids here know that I'm in the fifth grade!" he states in protest.

"So what! Just tell them that you skipped a couple of grades! Tell them that you are just smarter than everyone else!" Dad responds smugly. "Now get in the race! If they ask to see a birth certificate, I'll have to come up with another plan."

Looking embarrassed and standing behind the starting line, Barry takes off as Mr. Abe drops the red flag. The younger kids are no competition for Barry. He wins the race by more than 10 lengths. A man at the finish line grabs Barry by the arm and brings him to the winners circle and awards him his prize, a basket of groceries and goodies. When the man asks that he state his name for the audience, he avoids eye contact and softly responds, "Barry Groetsch."

As Mr. Abe calls for the nine to 11-year-old boys to report to the starting line, I quietly try to sneak away. Dad, seeing my resistance, insists that I line up for the race.

"But Dad, I made 13 last week," I assert.

"Yea, that's true," Dad responds. "But you're short! Now get in the race and win us another basket of groceries."

"But Dad, aren't we the ones who donated most of the groceries to the organizer's of the picnic in the first place? If so, why do we have to win them back?" I ask.

“Don’t get so philosophical with me son. Just get in there with the rest of the kids and win!” Dad Yells.

As Mr. Abe drops the red flag, I cross the finish line before half of the kids even take off. As I receive my basket of groceries and tell the audience my last name, they seem impressed that I am the brother of the winner of the previous race. As I look into the crowd, I see that *Little E* is hiding behind a tree.

“And now for the 12 to 14- year- old boys,” Mr. Abe announces over the speaker. “Please line up behind the white line.”

“*Little E!* Where’s *Little E?*” Dad asks frantically.

“He’s hiding behind that oak tree,” Barry declares.

“*Little E*, get out here and win this race!” Dad demands.

“But Dad,” he explains, “I have a stomach ache, and besides, I’m almost old enough to join the Army.”

“Than I’m sure winning the race will make you feel better. Hurry up! You don’t want your brothers to show you up, do you?”

The red flag is dropped and within minutes, *Little E* is awarded his basket of groceries. As he shares his last name with the audience, Barry and I try to conceal ourselves behind Dad’s red pickup truck until the other races are over.

“Barry and Mike, get back over here!” Dad yells. “Your sisters rooted for you, now do the same for them,” he insists, as my five- year- old sister, Jeanne, appears willing and ready to race against a group of toddlers.

Within 10 minutes of each other, my sisters Jeanne and Brenda are awarded their baskets of groceries. The audience seems amazed that we all have the same last name.

Maybe we can convince them that we come from a good athletic gene pool. I suddenly hope that we don't win the skinny goat tied to the oak tree next to the pavilion.

Dad even manages to massage the odds in his favor for the adult races and games. In the sack race in which you must put both legs in a potato sack and hop to the finish line, Dad, at 110 pounds, actually runs within the sack to victory.

In the wheelbarrow race, in which you hold your partner's shins with your arms while your partner uses her hands to race to the finish line, Dad lifts Mom's hands slightly above the ground like a metal detector and glides her to another basket of goodies.

Even the egg toss contest that Dad enters with Mom seems suspicious. As they throw the egg from further and further distances, it seems to hit the ground several times without breaking. Other contestant's eggs break on the first bounce. Although Mr. Abe checks Dad's egg to make sure that he didn't slip in one that has been hard-boiled, I am still not convinced that he didn't somehow switch the egg a second time knowing that it would be checked before he could get his basket of groceries.

It is nearly 4:00 p.m. and the picnic is coming to an end. Baskets of groceries surround the outside of my Dad's red pickup truck.

"Okay, kids! Hurry up and help me load all of these goodies into the back of the truck," Dad demands proudly. "We have to go where they're going to do the raffle!" he states with excitement. "Boy, wouldn't it be great if we won the goat!" he proclaims.

To be honest, my brothers and I would be willing to forego the drawing of the door prize at this point. I'm afraid that Mr. Abe may get wise and ask that we bring back our birth certificates. To stay for another game is just pushing our luck.

Although the fat man with the cigar is still no where to be found, Mr. Abe announces on the bullhorn that the raffle for the goat will be held in 15 minutes. He reminds everyone that the winner of the goat must be present to win. Such a proclamation presents a problem should Tina Marie's name be drawn. First, as I stated earlier, Tina Marie is a Chihuahua. Second, she's still at home probably sleeping in her doghouse.

The skinny goat seems startled as he sees a mob of people approaching the tree on which he is tied. Within ten minutes, about a hundred people gather around Mr. Abe in eager anticipation of the drawing. As he asks a little freckled-faced kid to assist with the pulling of the raffle ticket, I suddenly feel butterflies in my stomach.

The freckled-face kid puts his hand into the raffle bin. I re-assure myself that the chance of us winning the goat is slim and that within minutes, we'll be on our way home before we're busted. The kid pulls a raffle ticket from among the 200 or so entries and hands it to Mr. Abe who seems to take forever to read the name. And then it happens.

"The winner of the goat is," he says, "Tina Marie Groetsch!"

"Hey that's the same Groetsch family who won all the groceries!" someone in the crowd proclaims.

I suddenly wish that I were invisible.

"Okay, Dad," I ask as I kick him in the right shin, "what are you going to do now? Tina's not only a dog, she's not even here! What are you going to do now, huh?"

Without hesitating and with a large smirk on his face, he looks over to my five-year-old sister and says, "Okay, Jeanne- Tina- Marie, get over there and get your goat!"

Being too young to give resistance, Jeanne walks over to Mr. Abe and accepts her (our Chihuahua's) door prize. Dad then tells Jeanne to hurry to our truck with the goat.

He suddenly seems worried about a possible inquiry. Suddenly everyone in my family, even the goat, seems anxious to leave.

Dad asks that we climb into the back of the truck with the groceries. He tells Mom to sit in the front cab and puts the goat next to her in the passenger seat. Mr. Abe and some of the kids that we beat in the races seem to stare at us as Dad hurriedly drives towards the park's exit.

"Big E, please tell the goat to get on his side of the seat!" we hear Mom demand, as Dad gives off a devilish smile. The goat sticks his head out the passenger window of the truck and seems to stare back at Mr. Abe.

"Gee, *Little E*, do you think that Tina Marie's going to live in the backyard with the goat or do you think that the goat is going to live in the house with Tina Marie?" I ask.

"I'm not sure," *Little E* responds with uncertainty. "But I'm sure of one thing," he says without hesitation.

"What's that?" I ask.

"I sure dread going to next year's picnic!" he responds.

"Life's humor is the antidote to a poisoned spirit."-Michael Groetsch