

PROMPT #2: You open a book and a note with a letterhead falls out. At the top it says: If you are reading this, ...

The Turtle Races of Festus

by **John Aaron Anderson**

Saying Oscar, that's me, has an interest in turtles, you would need to dial back the time machine to the year 1957. Not a significant point in time, but then in a small town in the state of Missouri named Festus, not that much momentous ever happens. Especially when you're nine years old. Then one day your father persuades you that some of the country's fastest turtles are going to compete across town at the Robert Gooch Public Park. I asked, "Dad, what do you mean? Turtles aren't fast!" His wide smile and almost circular eyes made me think he was part turtle as he responded, "You remember the old story I read to you a few weeks back, The Tortoise and the Hare? That turtle finished the race in first place," plainly putting the emphasis on the word turtle.

I blurted out, "So what?"

"Oh, Oskie," which was a nickname that he called me. It had something to do with being adventurous and curious. "Today is May 23rd, World Turtle Day, a day where the fastest turtles race for the Festus Blue Ribbon, and a crown made of lettuce."

I couldn't help myself. I laughed loudly and tried to imagine what a turtle with a crown of lettuce would look like. I was curious though as I tried to picture how fast a turtle could be. Dad passed a book to me as I sat shotgun on the passenger side. The cover simply read TURTLES. It had a variety of turtle shell photos that were of multiple sizes and colors, overlapping into a kaleidoscope-like pattern. I held the book on my lap in front of me before looking away. When I almost dropped it, I grabbed it by the front cover and the pages fanned out. A single folded piece of paper dropped to the floor. I picked it up and opened it to find the printing at the top read, World Wildlife Federation, and the Department of Terrapene Preservation. The letter announced the day's event as if it were the Super Bowl of turtle races.

Time passed quickly, and while I was reading, dad wheeled our old Chevy into the park area pressing me against the door. The car shook and chattered over the cobblestone road as we drove closer

to a large greenspace. The area was separated from the baseball fields by a lazily flowing creek. Huge oak trees surrounded the greenspace except where the parking lot was left open for foot traffic. I put the book in the car seat as we both pushed open the car doors. Dad and I piled out of the car to head for the freshly cut grass. It was cut at two different heights to reveal a shorter circular shaped inner circle of about 50 paces. A white painted dot in stood out in the center. The outer border of grass was about 5 inches higher, and the public sat in a variety of outdoor lawn chairs and on the ground near the circle's edge. Dad and I sat next to one of the gigantic oaks. I settled on top of a large root that had made its way to the surface and protruded about a foot from its base.

The grass was damp from an earlier rain shower, but folks didn't seem to mind. The sun was shining now, and the people were engaged in idle chatter with each other. From a staging area near the stream, ten men walked to the center spot, and each held up large box turtles whose outer shells had been painted with large white numerals 1 through 10. The men paraded one by one near the outer edge of the circle ceremoniously presenting the lineup for the race. The crowd of onlookers cheered and clapped as the caretakers of the turtles returned to the center spot and gently placed them all in a large cardboard box. It was sufficiently large enough to allow for some movement inside.

The host said a few words to identify the turtle race as a fundraiser to bring awareness to the disappearing numbers of terrapins, especially in and around Festus. He assured the crowd that these turtles would be released into the surrounding forests when the race was concluded. Someone then blew an air horn, and the entrants were carefully dumped onto the white circle. The Festus crowd came alive, cheering wildly at the confused turtles. The official turtle handler held the box high above his head and hurried away to the sidelines.

Several turtles sat motionless, and some had withdrawn their head and feet into the safety of their shell, while others dispersed in all directions. After a few moments, the turtles became self-adjusted to the scene and 3 or 4 headed for the high grass, which I assume they perceived as safety. In my mind, I had picked one turtle with the number 9 on its shell. I immediately thought I'd call him 'Tank.' He stopped and stretched his long neck skyward as if he were looking for the best escape from the horrid box where he was temporarily held captive. He pointed his legs toward the turf and lifted the bottom carriage of his body free from the surface below him.

With a burst of sudden energy, he appeared to be headed in my direction. Several others were headed to the outer circle as well, but some would stop and go - Not Tank. Some turtles stayed behind in the center circle, closing then opening their shells and peering outward, hoping the cheering crowd was gone. Jake, who supervised Tank's care was an overweight gentleman with a kind face. He was panting, and his eyes were darting between the hysterical crowd and the escaping turtles. I noticed that my number nine crossed the finish line first and stopped right in front of me. Tank stretched his long

neck to look directly at me. Jake scooped up my winner and circled the crowd again who gave Tank an enormous roar of approval. The number nine had his head out and he was looking at the ground while his legs flailed in the fresh air. Jake stopped in front of me, and I hollered at Jake, "Can I release him?"

Jake looked at my dad who gave him an up and down nod. Jake looked back at me and said, "release him in a pleasant spot, shaded is best, and far from any roads." I responded I would and carefully held him in my hands by the sides of his shell. Dad and I walked back to the car with me carrying my new friend. The letter in the book kept me focused on saving turtles within their natural habitat. When we arrived home, I exited the car and took Tank and walked toward the woods behind the house. Dad asked, "where are you going?"

I smiled and said, "I'll be back in a few minutes."

I walked into the woods for about ten minutes. Recalling a specific location, where there was a grassy area next to some trees that could be perfect for Tank. It was only steps away from a gurgling spring and far from the nearest road. I placed him in such a way that my careful handling left him near the grassy undergrowth under the shade of the trees. Tank retreated into his shell for a few minutes. I waited, and he finally opened his shell to peer outward between his sturdy lower armor and thick, multicolored shell. He started to close-up again, then he saw me laying still on the ground nearby. Tank then opened up and stretched his legs outward until his clawed feet rested on the soft ground. He blinked, and slowly turned in place until he sensed the higher grass among the trees.

I whispered and said, "goodbye my friend - safe travels." He had regained his energy and with a burst of the same speed that led him to the finish line in Gooch Park, he pulled himself safely into the taller weeds and I watched and smiled as I could see the growth parting from above as he continued on. I realized I had done my part to preserve the turtle population in Festus by letting him return freely from captivity and away from the noisy town folk. Like a thoroughbred, he was retired and set out to pasture, possibly living another 50 years with his box turtle kin in the woods, free from harm.

Returning to those same woods some four decades later and walking deep into the woods where I remembered leaving Tank. Confident, I was now well versed as to the habits of turtles in the wild, having read many books and articles about their habits. I thought because of their territorial tendencies I might just find him. Almost timidly, I looked around to make sure no one was in the woods with me. In a slightly elevated voice, I said, "Tank, it's me Oskie!" I repeated the call several times as I walked almost laughing at the thought. I was talking to a turtle. One I wouldn't know even if I saw him. I had time to remember the day of the race in Gooch Park and felt calm about my walk in these woods. I spotted a few turtles, but none that had the markings I remembered reminded me of Tank.

With the thought of turning back, I pressed on until I found the spring and continued for another hundred yards. Then I spotted a group of four baby turtles nestled next to the base of a tree. Their mom was a few steps away, chewing on some greenery and watching her crew making little progress as they ran into each other and circled close to the tree. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a movement among the brush nearby and redirected my attention to that area. I sat quietly as a turtle emerged into a break in the growth. It couldn't be I thought. Yes, it was. It had to be Tank because there was a visible, albeit faint, faded number nine on his shell.

The moment was mind-blowing. There was Tank, stopped with his head lifted high and staring at me. He didn't move, and we seemed to lock eyes as if the recognition was clear and my memories came flooding back. Tank slowly moved closer to the tree, and I felt that the fastest turtle in the world had slowed some. I clutched the blue ribbon from his first-place finish at Gooch Park and held it up, foolish to think he would head toward me. On World turtle day forty years ago, my friend Tank was the fastest turtle on earth. Almost sadly, I stood up to start my walk back through the woods. Tank spun around in place and with that seemingly lost burst of speed, charged back to the underbrush. The other turtles did not react, as if to signal he does this all the time.

As I exited the woods and returned to my parked car, I felt fortunate and grateful that maybe I had done my part to preserve not only one speedster named Tank, but possibly a few generations of a turtle tribe in a far-out wooded area of Festus, Missouri. The turtle races ended fifteen years later and just like Tank, there were others who got to wear the crown of lettuce and be celebrated as that day on March 23rd, as the fastest in Festus.