

# Race Without a Finish

BY DEAN MERRILL

**T**he Ogle County Fair was a wonderful place for a 9-year-old boy and his dad to spend a hazy summer afternoon. The midway with its towering ferris wheel, the popcorn stands, the 4-H displays of everything from blackberry jam to Hereford steers . . . I loved it all. And my tall, black-haired father had taken the day off from his duties as pastor of a small-town Illinois church to show me a good time.

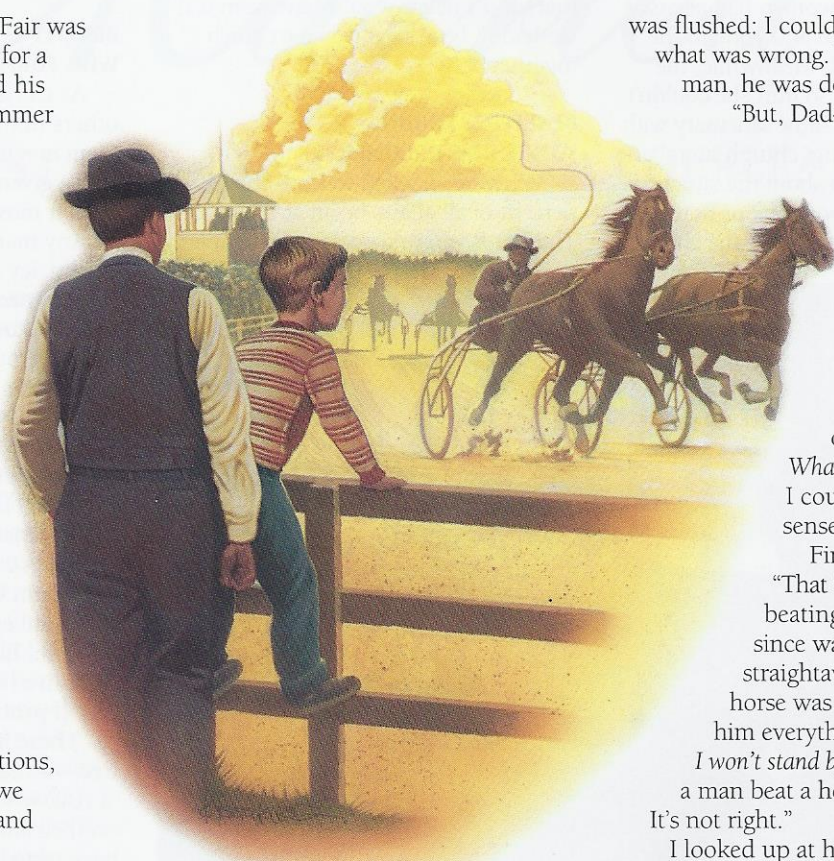
This was before the days of one-price entry fees; you had to pay a quarter or 35 cents for each ride. That meant I didn't get to go on more than three or four attractions, but I was still happy as we walked the dusty aisles and looked at the sights.

About 3:30 in the afternoon, the horse races began over at the big dirt oval. I knew my father was not about to get close to the gambling that went on there . . . but he loved horses. As a farm lad growing up, he had worked the fields with horse-drawn implements. He knew horseflesh better than anyone, I thought.

So we stood in the open grass outside the far end of the track, along the rail for the final turn. Several races went streaking by on their way to the finish line. The announcer's voice squawked over the PA system. I jumped up and down with excitement.

Then came the first of the harness races. One horse was in the lead, the second a length behind, and in third place another jockey was vigorously laying on the whip. "Go, go, go!" I yelled as the roar from the grandstand came to meet us across the track.

Suddenly, there was a jerk on my shirtsleeve. "Come on—we're leaving!" my father snapped. His face



was flushed: I couldn't figure out what was wrong. Normally a calm man, he was definitely upset.

"But, Dad—wait!"

"Come now."

"Can't

we just see the end of the race?

Please?"

"No."

We walked through the tall grass toward our old sedan.

*What was the matter?*

I couldn't make sense of anything.

Finally he said,

"That fellow had been beating that horse since way back on the straightaway—and the horse was already giving him everything he had.

*I won't stand by and watch a man beat a horse like that!*

It's not right."

I looked up at his eyes and almost thought I saw a tear. Little more was said as we drove the nine miles home.

My father didn't try to make a point by adding, "Don't you ever do anything like that" or "Be sure to be kind to animals" or some other comment on the abuse of power. He didn't need to.

He had implanted a value in me so deeply I remember it to this day, four decades later. He did it simply by being a man of principle himself. ■

*Dean Merrill, pictured as a young boy with his parents, oversees eight magazines as vice president of periodicals at Focus on the Family. His staff is thankful he doesn't go to the whip like the harness jockey did.*

