



The Snail Races

It was the day of the snail races at the Poof! Academy, and the little witches were brimming with excitement. This was an event they waited for all year.

Now, you probably think of a snail as something quite small and plain. But not in the long-ago time of the Poof! Academy. Snails were much larger then—their shells about the size of a muffin—and every little witch just had to have one. “Why would witches want to raise snails as pets?” you ask. Well, as you probably know, they love slimy things, and also...snails were among the few forest creatures not fast enough to run away from them.

Besides, the snails of olden days were beautiful in their way. Their bodies were bright red or blue or yellow, while their shells were white, like ordinary eggshells, but with complicated patterns outlined in black—and, like snowflakes, no two of them were the same. The little witches enjoyed painting in the patterns on their pets’ shells—every detail—in much the same way as you color in a

coloring book. When they wanted to change the colors, they simply gave their snails a bath by dunking them in a pail of water, which washed away all the paint.

What's more, snails were a lot smarter back then and could learn to do tricks like "chase your tail" and "roll over," which they did as a kind of somersault over their shells. They could even be taught to spell simple words like *am* and *is* with a trail of slime.

"How do you train a snail?" you're wondering. With lots of praise and daisy petals, its favorite food, as all the little witches knew. Sometimes if you praised a snail enough, it would actually wag its tail...sort of. The little witches' snails got so attached to their owners, in fact, that they would follow them to school, though by the time the snails were halfway there, the little witches were on their way home.

On this particular day, it started to rain early in the morning and then to storm with plenty of thunder and lightning, a witch's favorite kind of weather. Unfortunately, there were so many trees above the race course that not enough rain got through to make it muddy, which would have made the competition even more entertaining—but at least a few bolts of lightning struck nearby trees, adding to the day's excitement.

Things got off to a late start because Ms. Sniz was detained on her way to school by a vulture that kept trying to pluck the straw out of her broom for its nest. When she flailed at the pesky creature, she lost her balance and fell into a

gully. Luckily, she was flying so low she wasn't hurt.

The contestants were Oozer (Heppy's snail), Flash (Zelly's snail), Peppy, Zippy, Poke-Along, Fluffy – and Slimeball, which among witches is a term of endearment. (Fluffy belonged to Minna, who would rather have had a black cat.)

The main events were the two-yard dash and the obstacle course, though there was also a beauty pageant and a talent contest. Now, you know how you usually try to save the best for last? Well, the little witches couldn't wait very well, so they always saved the races for first.

As usual, the twins, who owned Peppy and Zippy, claimed their snails were ailing, as an excuse in case they lost, which they mostly did. And, also as usual, Prunella complained about the obstacle course, saying one thing or another wasn't right about it – there was a nail in the balance beam and the tightrope was too slippery. Of course, Ms. Sniz was the judge of the competition, which was just fine with the little witches because she was always fair and never played favorites. The Grand Prize for the all-around best snail was a chain with a locket containing a magical surprise that was different every year.

The little witches were required to stand behind a railing during the two-yard dash so they wouldn't be tempted to grab their snails and rush them to the finish line. Like I said, the little witches couldn't wait very well.

"Snails, on your marks, get set, go!" cried Ms. Sniz, who got almost as excited about the races as her students did.

And they were off!

Oozer, Heppy's snail, took an early lead, while Fluffy, little Minna's snail, trailed far behind the others. (Though Fluffy was usually the slowest snail in the dash, she was often the fastest in the obstacle course.) Oozer sailed through the first half of the race but couldn't sustain the pace. As he slowed down, Flash, Zelly's snail, started gaining on him. The two were neck and neck for the last quarter of the race, until the final five inches, when Oozer regained the lead. You might have said he was ahead by a nose if snails had noses. In those last few inches, Zelly could see Flash straining to reach the finish line and was afraid Oozer was going to win again, like last year. Even as they touched the line, Oozer retained the lead, but a snail race isn't won until a contestant's *tail* crosses the line. And, with a sudden spurt of energy, Flash surged over the finish line, winning the race!

Then came the beauty pageant, where the snails were judged on how pretty and detailed their painted shells were. Usually it was held last, but today it was held sooner because even a few raindrops could make the paint run. Well, everyone agreed that the twins had outdone themselves painting their snails, Peppy and Zippy, and since no one could decide which of the two was prettier, Ms. Sniz awarded them both blue ribbons.

Next was the obstacle course. This year the snails had to crawl over a log, up a wooden pole about as high as your waist, and along a tightrope made out of a vine that stretched to another pole. After that they had to race the length of a low railing, bridge a gap by stretching over it, and continue along a second

railing. And last, they had to climb another pole onto the “looserope,” which was like the tightrope except that it was quite slack and so was whipped back and forth by the wind. The snails had to hang on, and the first one to ride the looserope for ten seconds was the winner of the obstacle race. For the snails, it was sort of like riding a bucking bronco at a rodeo, I suppose. Naturally, the obstacle race had to be held in an especially grassy area so the snails wouldn’t hurt themselves if they fell.

This year the snails raced the obstacle course in much the same order as last year, with little Minna’s snail, Fluffy, maintaining the lead throughout. No matter how much the other witches cheered their snails on, no other contestant even came close. Then the unthinkable happened. The rain turned to hail, hailstones as big as snowballs blasting through the leaves overhead and pelting witches and snails alike. The brims of the witches’ hats pretty much protected them, but as Fluffy led the other snails up the third pole, a really *huge* hailstone hit her and knocked her to the ground. A horrified gasp went up from the little witches.

Though Fluffy looked frail, she was actually the most daring of all the snails, which is why she usually won the obstacle race. She wasn’t afraid to try anything. When the hailstone hit her, all the color drained from Minna’s face and she couldn’t move – she was so afraid Fluffy had been maimed or worse. In that moment she realized that even though she’d wanted a cat before, now all she really wanted was Fluffy – for her to be all right. Then, as the other little witches

ran over, under a shower of hailstones, to see how Fluffy was, she turned herself right side up and, to their amazement, headed straight for the pole again.

Well, there was no way the little witches were going to endanger their beloved pets. Heppy snatched up Fluffy and Oozer while the other witches grabbed their snails and ran for the cover of a large oak tree. The obstacle race was over, but Ms. Sniz gave Fluffy an honorary blue ribbon for bravery.

Only one event remained – the talent contest, in which the snails showed off their slimewriting abilities. The rules Ms. Sniz had laid down were these:

1. If a snail crawls off in the middle of a letter or otherwise fails to complete it, it's disqualified.
2. If it fails to write a real word, it's disqualified.
3. Owners must refrain from touching their snails to guide them or aid them in any way. The one exception is they may pick them up to help them dot an *i* or cross a *t*.
4. Owners must show restraint and not boo other witches' snails for their efforts.

The competition for best slimewriter was kind of a letdown each year because Prunella's snail, Poke-Along, always won. He was one of the few who could write two-letter words, and he also had the best handwriting. Actually, "handwriting" isn't the best choice of words because the body of a snail is called its "foot," so "footwriting" would be more apt. Anyway, the reason poor Poke-Along always won was that Prunella made him train for two hours a day in the weeks before the contest.

This year Mehitabelle decided to enter her new pet, Slimeball, in the talent

competition. He was an ungainly snail whose shell was too big for his body, so he swayed when he crawled. The day after he appeared on her doorstep, she had to search the cottage high and low to find him. He turned up in a pot, of all places. As soon as he climbed out, he sped around and around in circles – a snail’s “happy dance.” Then the next morning she had to search again...and she found him in a corner behind her broom. He was playing hide-and-seek, she realized with delight. But when she’d tried to teach him the word *a*, he was such a lackadaisical pupil that sometimes he would write it and sometimes he wouldn’t, no matter how much praise or how many daisy petals she gave him. Still, she had faith that he’d do his best in the competition.

So she was astonished when, during the contest, Slimeball didn’t wait the way the snails were supposed to after finishing their word but kept going. He went right on to write an *n*, making the word *an*. Well, Heppy, for one, was flabbergasted because it had taken her three years to train Oozer to spell a two-letter word, but even she wasn’t as surprised as Mehitabelle, who hadn’t taught Slimeball the letter *n* yet.

Then, before the wondering eyes of all the little witches – and Ms. Sniz too – Slimeball started a third letter. By this time the other little witches were cheering Slimeball on, hoping that someone was finally going to beat Poke-Along, while Prunella was so upset she started grinding her teeth.

When Slimeball finally stopped, Heppy exclaimed, “Hitty, he’s waiting for you to pick him up so he can cross the *t*!” (This was the first time anyone at

school had called Mehitabelle by her nickname, and she was so pleased that she blushed.)

After Slimeball completed the *t*, spelling the word *ant*, the little witches couldn't contain themselves. They started to jump and shout, throwing their pointed hats into the air and hugging each other. Slimeball had done it! He'd written a three-letter word, the first in the history of the races. The little witches were so busy celebrating they didn't notice that Slimeball had resumed spelling from where Mehitabelle had set him down at the end of his word.

It was then that Prunella, scowling, went over to see if there was any detail in Slimeball's word that Ms. Sniz would have to take off points for. To her gleeful surprise, she found something even worse, for Slimeball had just finished a fourth letter that looked like an *h*! Well, as you probably know, "anth" is *not* a word and wasn't even way back then. "Ms. Sniz!" cried Prunella, cackling. "Slimeball has to be disqualified for writing letters that aren't a word! That's what the rules say!" Now she was the one jumping up and down.

"You're right, my dear," sighed Ms. Sniz when she came over to take a look, whereupon Mehitabelle began to wail, she was so disappointed.

So Ms. Sniz presented Poke-Along, who'd spelled the word *my* the most legibly, with the blue ribbon for most talented pet.

Then it was time for refreshments, and all the little witches sat down in the damp grass to gobble up their snap pea cookies and peach pit tea, letting their pet snails entertain themselves. But not all of them did. No...while no one was

paying any attention – well, no one except little Minna – Slimeball kept writing away. Minna was the most observant of the witches and often sat quietly by, just watching one thing or another.

“Ms. Sniz!” she finally piped up. “Ms. Sniz!” But Ms. Sniz was too deaf to hear her above the thunder, so Minna raised her hand and waited for someone to see her.

“What is it, Minna?” asked Zelly.

Instead of explaining, Minna just pointed at the ground where Slimeball had finally stopped. Seeing what she was pointing at, Zelly shouted, “Hey, you guys! Take a look at this! You’re not going to believe it!”

As all the little witches curiously crowded around, what they saw, written in snail slime, was a word that contained...no, not five letters...no, not six...but *seven* letters!...and that word was *anthill*. Well, Mehitabelle fainted on the spot, and there was general pandemonium. (Snails of old steered clear of anthills, not just because they were too crumbly to crawl over, but to avoid being stung by the giant ants of the time.)

Once everyone had calmed down, it was time to vote for the best all-around snail. Since they never failed to vote for their own pet, it always came out a seven-way tie, and Ms. Sniz had to cast the final ballot to break the tie. But this year, after the ballots were counted, they didn’t need Ms. Sniz’s vote because there were *six* votes for...you guessed it!...Slimeball! In fact, the only little witch who didn’t vote for him was Prunella, who was a bit of a sore loser.

So Mehitabelle won the locket on the chain. What it contained, she discovered, was a tiny blue seed. "Swallow it," coaxed the other little witches. Though she did, at first nothing happened. She waited a full minute for some sort of surprise, then tried to say, "It's not working." Instead of words, however, a bubble came out of her mouth that swelled to the size of a beach ball. "Wow!" she started to say, but then a second bubble popped out, and a third, which also puffed up as big as beach balls. And more kept coming. When little Minna tried to pop one of the bubbles, it sailed away; when she tried to pop another, it dodged her too. Pretty soon all the little witches were running around, bumping into each other, even knocking each other down, trying vainly to pop the huge bubbles that zipped this way and that as if they were in a game of tag.

At the end of the festivities, they all agreed that it was the best day at the races ever. That night Mehitabelle showered Slimeball with all the daisy petals she could find. What she didn't know – and neither did any of the others – was that Slimeball was a two-hundred-year-old snail who had been owned by other little witches before her...and in a couple hundred years, you learn a thing or two.