

Gracie Goat's Big Bike Race: The Barnsville Sports Squad Series

Erin Mirabella

Lisa Horstman, Illustrator

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When Gracie Goat's best friends form a cycling team to compete in the Summer Corn Festival Race, she wants to disappear like “a little worm...into a hole in the ground.” She reluctantly agrees to join the cycling team, but Gracie has a secret. She can't ride a bike and she's afraid to learn how.

This is the first book in a planned series centered around the Barnsville Sports Squad, a group of anthropomorphized barnyard animals whose sports experiences mirror those of human children. It is also Mirabella's first published book. The author represented the United States in cycling at the 2000 and 2004 Olympic games, and her perspective as an athlete gives her a fresh voice as a children's author. She writes in simple language about the sports issues that face elementary school-aged children every day, from a fear of looking foolish to making choices between good sportsmanship and “winning.”

Gracie's grandma seems to channel Mirabella's wisdom as she listens to Gracie's fears. These range from the improbable—crashing into a vegetable garden and getting permanently stained red by beet juice—to the universal, “I'm afraid I won't be able to learn.” Grandma's probing questions elicit a powerful truth, “Everyone fails sometimes. When you fail, you try again, and you get better.”

Gracie's story is illustrated in muted paintings which capture every emotion of the characters in expressive detail, from the shock on Grandma's face as she finds Gracie head-butting the couch in frustration to the satisfaction in Gracie's smile when she is able to help her Grandma overcome a long-held fear. Illustrator Lisa Horstman has several picture books to her credit, among them *Fast Friends*, which won the Dr. Seuss Picture Book Award and features a similar style of illustration.

Sports and childhood go hand-in-hand, and this is the perfect book to help young children develop healthy ideas about failure and goal-setting. Just about everyone can identify with a “learning to ride a bike” story, and Gracie's has the added bonus of teaching her readers that goals are achieved through consistent baby steps and that winning first place isn't the only joy to be found in sports. Sportsmanship and teamwork make everyone a winner. (August 18, 2009)

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