

## THE TRI-COUNTY PAPER AIRPLANE THROWING CONTEST

by Ryan Bruner

This was going to be my year. I could feel it. I had finally come up with the perfect airplane. It wasn't all that sleek, which was fine. You didn't win for sleek. You win because your airplane simply flies farther than all the others.

I would have won last year—if it weren't for Jason Mordecai. My plane flew 172 feet, with a perfect landing. Most of the other contestants only made it a few dozen feet, so when Mordecai stepped up to the throwing line, I was sure I would win. He was the last one to throw, then victory would be mine!

He tossed the plane gently, which is important. You toss your plane too hard, and it'll go straight up and straight down, covering only a few measly yards. It takes just the right amount of wrist action—and Mordecai had just the right amount.

But I wasn't worried. The toss is only half the game. The plane's design is what really mattered. There was no way anyone was going to beat my design. I would go down in the history books!

Except that Mordecai's airplane kept going and going. One hundred feet. Then 150. Then 160. And as it sailed over my entry, my shoulders slumped. 178 feet.

I couldn't bring myself to congratulate him. It wasn't fair. It wasn't even Mordecai's plane. His father made more in a year than my father would make in a lifetime. And when it came time for the Tri-County Paper Airplane Throwing Contest, Mr. Mordecai hired an engineer. And not just any engineer, but one from NASA. They computer-modeled and wind-tunnel tested until they came up with the optimum shape.

I complained to the judges, saying it wasn't fair, that Jason Mordecai didn't even design his own airplane. But it didn't matter.

"This isn't a paper airplane *design* contest, son. It's a paper airplane *throwing* contest. Nothing in the rules say the person had to actually design the plane."

So I was out of luck.

No matter. I outdid myself this year. Quite frankly, I had designed the ultimate paper airplane. Even my dad was impressed. In the first test flight, it soared 180 feet. Probably farther, actually, except that it drifted into a pond. I was finally ready.

The day before the contest, I made three identical planes. One for backup, one to throw, and one just for fun. I tossed that one out my bedroom window. The plane glided across the backyard, veering out of sight when a gust of wind knocked it off course. I shrugged and fell asleep dreaming of winning first prize.

Bird's Eye Field was crowded with spectators the next morning. Thousands came from three separate counties. The contest would last most of the day, and because I came in second last year, I wouldn't fly until the final group.

"Hey, Billy," I said to my neighbor and best friend. I could always count on him showing up to cheer me on.

"Hey, Dave," he said back. He stood there, his hands behind his back. "Did you see they raised the prize money? \$500 this year!"

I smiled.

"What are you gonna do with the money if you win?"

"What do you mean 'if'?" I said, playfully punching him in the shoulder. Something fell from his hands, and he quickly stooped to pick it up. "What is that?"

He blushed, then held it out. It was a paper airplane. Not just any paper airplane. It was *my* paper airplane. Or, at least, my design. The precision of the folds was far from perfect, and the wings didn't even line up, but it was quite clearly my design.

"Where did you get that?"

"I...made it."

"What are you planning to do with it?"

Billy held up his ticket. Number 27.

"You're gonna compete?"

He shook his head. "I know what you're thinking, Dave. But I needed to be sure, and it was the only way I could know and...don't be mad, please?"

Mad? I was beyond mad. I was furious. My heart started racing. "You're never gonna win, you know," I told him, turning away. "That's never gonna stay in the air."

I stormed off. I couldn't believe him! Who did he think he was? Apparently *not* my best friend.

I clutched the plastic suitcase I used to transport my planes as the first thrower took position. It was a little girl, maybe six. She swung back her arm and let it fly. The thing nose-dived, traveling no more than three or four feet.

"Hello, Dave." It was Jason Mordecai.

I tried to ignore him, but he huddled next to me as I watched several more contestants.

"You ready for second place again?" In his hands, he held a leather-bound combination-lock protected brief case. "Because you know, a few days ago I landed this baby at 190 feet."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Well, just last night I hit 200."

Of course, I hadn't. But then, I didn't believe he had made it to 190, either.

He raised his eyebrows and tugged at his bow tie. "Well then. May the best thrower win. But I have to tell you, my design is a whopper this year. My dad hired a whole team of engineers from Boeing."

"And next up," the announcer's voice radiated from the megaphone, "number 27. Billy James."

Mordecai laughed. "Poor kid. Hasn't got a chance."

"Yeah," I said, the anger stirring inside again. "Not a chance."

Billy took his position at the line, then threw a glance my way. I looked away. From the corner of my eye, I saw his version of my plane take flight. Gracefully, it rose upwards. At first, it appeared to fly perfectly. But after a hundred feet, it veered slightly, curving to the right. Eventually, it circled back on itself, making the grand total a mere 57 feet. Billy's gaze returned to mine and then he ran off.

Later, I would be sorry, but in the moment I was happy that Billy's attempt to beat me in my own game failed so miserably. And when Mordecai laughed, I laughed along with him.

It took a few more hours before my turn came. This year, Mordecai went first, and as he had claimed, his plane touched ground at precisely 190 feet.

Just before my turn, my father came to wish me good luck.

"Thanks," I said.

"Oh, and here." He handed me a paper airplane. *My* paper airplane. "Billy told me to give this to you."

I stared down at it. This wasn't the roughly folded plane I had seen earlier. It was mine. The one I threw out the window last night. So that's what he did. It probably landed in his yard, and he copied it. Serves him right he would lose.

"He wanted me to tell you that he didn't enter the other one. He entered this one. Isn't this one of yours?"

But how could that be? It didn't make any sense.

"Number 231. David Stemple."

I unlatched my suitcase and dug out my plane. If Billy threw my plane, why didn't it fly farther? Billy wasn't trying to win—he was trying to warn me! There was something wrong with my design. The night before, when my plane veered. It wasn't just the wind.

I glanced down at my plane. There wasn't time to change it now. From the moment they called your name, you had no more than two minutes to make your throw or you forfeit your turn. Which meant I had, maybe, a minute left. Then I thought of the version Billy showed me. How the wings weren't lined up properly. Quickly, I unfolded one wing, then refolded it so that it was shorter than the other. Of course! My design only worked when there was no breeze at all.

With only a few seconds left, I gently tossed my plane. It drifted upwards for the first few hundred feet. Then it crested. 150 feet. 175. 180. Finally, it landed. 198 feet! I had won!

“Why didn’t you tell me yourself?” I asked Billy afterwards.

He shrugged. “I didn’t think you’d believe me unless I showed you. That’s why I entered.”

“Of course I would have believed you!” But that was a lie.

“I found it in my yard last night. I tried throwing it, but it kept turning. So I made another one and modified it until it flew straight. That’s the version I showed you.”

I held the prize money in my hand. But it wasn’t my money to keep. Not really. “Here,” I said, handing over half of the cash. “You deserve this just as much as I do.”

His eyes lit up.

“And, Billy?”

“Yes?”

“Next year *you* can beat Jason Mordecai.”

THE END