

*The true story  
of a horse  
named Lizard  
and the longest,  
strangest,  
perhaps most  
lucrative race in  
state history*

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# THE SIXTY-MILER

**S**INCE ANCIENT TIMES, a horse race has been a way to settle a difference of opinion. In Deer Lodge, Montana, in the early winter of 1870, two fine steeds squared off in the longest, and perhaps most unusual, horse race in the state's history.

Henry Valiton and James Talbot, proprietors of the local livery stable, were proud owners of a little horse they called Lizard. They proposed “a single dash of 60 miles” against the horse Billy Bay, property of Colonel John C. Calhoun Thornton, also of Deer Lodge. Details were agreed upon, and each side posted \$1,000 for the winner. Multiple riders were secured for the contest, to change as often as they liked. Side bets were encouraged.



The editor at the New North-West newspaper in Deer Lodge eagerly promoted the contest. Promising his readers “the most interesting contest of speed and endurance ever performed” in the Montana Territory, the match race was to take place on November 16, 1870, at Olin’s Track, a quarter mile from town. Built by blacksmith G. S. Olin, it was a sophisticated track by frontier standards, described by the newspaper as “without a pebble on it; just the right character of clay,” and included judges and spectator stands.

The paper published extensive profiles of each

horse, allowing readers to gauge each animal’s chances and wager accordingly. Lizard, long in body and light in flesh, was described as “hound-built.” At 6 years old, he stood slightly more than 13 hands and weighed about 690 pounds. Three years of racing made him a “famous little nag,” and though his speed wasn’t necessarily blistering, Lizard illustrated exceptional stamina for so slight a horse. In his most recent race, at Olin’s Track on October 29, he met four opponents for a set of three-out-of-five heats of 1 mile each. In the first heat, he finished third. In the next two, Lizard smoked his

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rivals with ridiculous ease. The judges had seen enough. They suspended the remaining heats and declared Lizard the victor.

Conversely, Billy Bay's merit as a racehorse was a tale waiting to unfold. A "bright" bay in color, he stood a leggy 14 hands and weighed 900 pounds. The paper described him as an extraordinary saddlehorse with "great powers of endurance" proven on arduous trips carrying heavy riders through mountainous country. But the brutal 60-miler was to be the 10-year-old's first competition on a racetrack.

Race day arrived fogged in, and the thud of frost-stiffened wagons arriving for the race could be heard before they were seen. Men huddled in wagon boxes. More men walked across frosted ground. While waiting for the fog to lift, the race fans dispersed into saloons.

In those times, with serious horse breeders scarce, pockets of horses found in Montana hamlets often shared similar origins. Lizard and Billy Bay were prime examples. They were not only Deer Lodge Valley home-breds but also half-brothers through their sire, a blood bay named Papoose.



Legend has it that Papoose had been stolen by Indians as a colt from Mullan Road travelers, fell into the hands of traders, and was later purchased by a Deer Lodge man. Papoose's mixed breeding was thought to include thoroughbred bloodlines.

As for the breeding of the dams, mothers, people could only speculate. The mare that foaled Lizard could have been part cayuse and part American stock, meaning she carried thoroughbred or standardbred blood, maybe both. Guesswork over Billy Bay's dam presented her as a cross between American and California stock.

When the fog lifted from the valley at 11 a.m., messengers sprinted around town with word that the race would go on. Hundreds of men streamed from the saloons to Olin's Track where they fanned around the 1-mile oval. The betting, generally fearless, involved gold dust or horses. Most wagers favored Billy Bay, on the popular belief that the sturdy saddlehorse would wear out the slim racehorse in the last 10 or 20 miles.

Billy Bay was the first horse on the track. A few minutes later a handler brought out Lizard. Handlers lifted their blankets. Billy's rich brown coat with black points glistened under the sun. He loomed over Lizard, who also looked to be in tiptop condition. At precisely 12:20 p.m., one of three judges called up the horses.

Amid eager shouts from hundreds of voices, Billy Bay leapt into his stride with young Bobby Graham, at 69 pounds, in the saddle. Graham moved his mount along at an easy lope. At 82 pounds, Tommy Woods held Lizard a length behind Billy, but Lizard wanted to run faster and picked a fight. Woods gave in and let out a bit of rein. By mile 2, Lizard had surged ahead of Billy Bay.

By mile 5, both horses skimmed over the oval in easy lopes, yet Lizard extended his lead to half a mile. At mile 7, Woods pulled up Lizard to change riders. Billy Bay loped on and in the time it took to switch Lizard's rider, Billy Bay cut the lead to a quarter mile. At mile 8, Graham jumped off Billy and a new rider got a leg up.

By mile 15, the horses were "down to steady work" and sweating profusely. There were no checks by a veterinarian, but trainers sponged down each horse whenever riders changed. Lizard's slender legs continued to outpace those of Billy Bay, and his lead increased to a mile and a half by mile 22.

By mile 40, Billy Bay's pummeling legs and thudding hooves cut Lizard's lead down to a mile. Lizard eased his pace to a snappy trot through mile 41, yet Billy Bay's jockey, concerned his mount would lose more ground at a trot, compelled the horse to lope. Though Billy Bay showed signs of fatigue, Colonel Thornton continued to accept sizeable bets. All the while, Lizard clipped along "bright and springy" on his feet.

Billy Bay wasn't giving up the race just yet. The man who straddled Billy at mile 42 felt the animal's powerful hind legs gather and stretch while his forelegs reached forward in desperation to catch his rival.

But Billy's effort extended only through 6 more miles. When he reached mile 48, he wanted off the track. At 55, he flat-out quit. "Entreaties of word and whip to open a trot failed to rouse him," the New North-West observed. Lizard's lead was a 4-mile chasm. Colonel Thornton resigned himself to the fact Billy Bay was soundly beaten. He waved his horse off the track and led him away.

Lizard, with little more than a mile of soil to cover, circled the oval at a trot. He finished 60 miles as the wintery sun sank and the temperature chilled. The little horse had circled Olin's Track for 4 hours and 28 minutes. A chorus of cheers erupted from 500 spectators who had remained to see the race out. Some thought Lizard would have preferred to continue circling.

Everybody declared the contest a perfectly fair one. All bets were paid straightaway, in horses or in gold dust doled out from buckskin bags. More than \$10,000

exchanged hands, the equivalent of roughly \$210,000 in today's dollars. Henry Valiton and James Talbot, having backed their horse enthusiastically, raked in \$2,000 for Lizard's victory. Colonel Thornton lost nearly \$3,000 on what stands as Montana's, and possibly America's, longest horse race on an oval racetrack.

That night, spirited patrons packed the saloons, and into one of them Lizard was escorted. Leather-tough men crowded around the horse in a smoky, foul-smelling room to stroke his smooth coat with their rough, work-hardened hands. "Caressed like a child" was how one witness described the gentle handling. When a brawl broke out, shouts came from one end of the saloon: "Don't shoot this way! Lizard is over here!" A quick-thinking barkeep put a rapid halt to the dangers.

The next morning Lizard frisked in a flood of sunlight, his energy restored by rest, clean air, and nutritious bunchgrass. Valiton and Talbot were on the move, talking up their spry little horse, who seemed eager to race anew, and offering to put him on Olin's Track for a 3-miler, against time.

They found no takers. ❏