

THE MAN'S MAGAZINE

60 CENTS APRIL 1965 A FAWCETT PUBLICATION

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TIN LIZZIES ON A TEAR

Gleaming as though they were new, 35 Model T's started in a 535-mile race over plains and mountains. Thirty finished—and the winner's time? Well, hold onto your seat and get ready for a wonderful, rickety ride and a big surprise

BY CHRISTOPHER MICHAELS
PHOTOGRAPHED FOR TRUE BY THE AUTHOR

■ For sheer overwhelming noise and nostalgia, nothing could compare to the wild-eyed festival atmosphere rioting over the small plains town of Baker, Montana. It swirled around 35 Model T Fords that buzzed back and forth in the July dawn, vintage squeeze-bulb horns honking holes through the crowd. The Cross Country Model T Endurance Race was about to launch its astonishing 535-mile run.

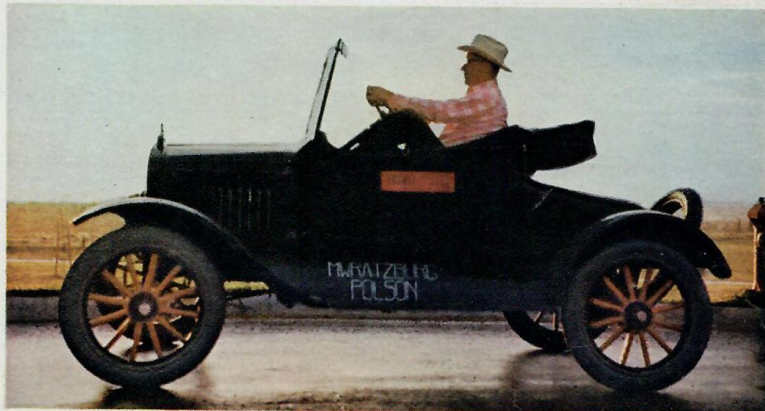
Old Henry Ford aimed to make an automobile that would run on any roads and these T's, elderly but able, were set to prove they could still do it. From 1908 when the first Tin Lizzie chugged out onto the road, to 1927 when the last one was made, Ford turned out 15 million of his most famous model. A hundred thousand still run around the roads of the world. The 35 T's that assembled in Montana to compete for \$1,180 prize money and the glory of winning a hard-fought race are among the best cared for and most cherished. At race time the T's, each with a num-



Polished brass radiator, more prized than later nickel-plated, is cherished by owner Ken Cook.



Hurling things out of blazing car, entrant Cliff De Jong put fire out and dashed back into race.



After 370 miles, driver relaxes in his cooling Model T at sundown just outside of Bozeman.

Proud Lizzies that finished race line up in Helena. Winner John Frick (No. 31) took home \$500.

TIN LIZZIES ON A TEAR



Making repairs on the run, driver was able to keep his T in contest.



Squeezing his bulb horn, eager contestant hoots competitors out of the way.



Expert touch on hand throttle and spark was nostalgic sight to watching old-timers.



Six T's, fender to fender, push across country at 60 mph. Models ranged from 1915 to 1926. All parts in each car are authentic Model T, even if not always same year.



Official seal is put on every motor at start. If broken en route, racer is disqualified.



Hot race across hot country requires plenty of water for a Lizzie.

ber on its windshield putted into a long, single-file line. The starter with his green flag was now poised spraddle-legged, flag held high. The flag whipped down. There was the snarl of an ancient motor, a small flurry of dust, a tumult of cheering from the crowd. The 1964 race, pride of the sponsoring Montana Cross Country Model T Association, was officially underway. Sixty seconds later the next T moved out. The others followed at minute intervals until all had roared off in one of the wackiest, most fun-filled, unusual and exciting contests on earth.

Although the race is fun, it is also a blood-in-the-eye hassle, a fight to the finish; the drivers are a cross section of hard-core Westerners filled with the old frontier to-hell-with-it guts and spirit.

As the last T growled past the starting flag at Baker, Bill Browning of the Montana State Chamber of Commerce and I leaped into our station wagon and took off in pursuit. We meant to run with the race and photograph it for TRUE. Somehow, we'd thought this would be easy and lazy. But now we realized that the cars, because of the interval starting, were scattered out for miles ahead. And we'd had no idea they were this fast. We'd been deluded because the night before car parts had been strewn everywhere.

The first driver I'd talked to when we arrived in Baker was backed up to the right front wheel of his T, lifting the corner of his car off the ground single-handed while a helper jammed a block under the car.

"I hope to hell you write this like it is," he said. "We have to hear every year about the Indianapolis 500. But those guys spend tens of thousands of dollars, have all kinds of horsepower and soup-up. We have to scrounge for every damn nut and bolt, use authentic T tires, magnetos, and so on. We have to pay our own bills and most of us are just ordinary guys—not rich."

His buddy brandished a wrench. "Yeah, he said, 'add all that up, consider that the Indianapolis runs on a good track, with mechanics waiting and spare parts by the bushel. We gotta jump out and fix anything that

[Continued on page 108]

Unusual sight in the '60s—Model T's reach town prior to big race.

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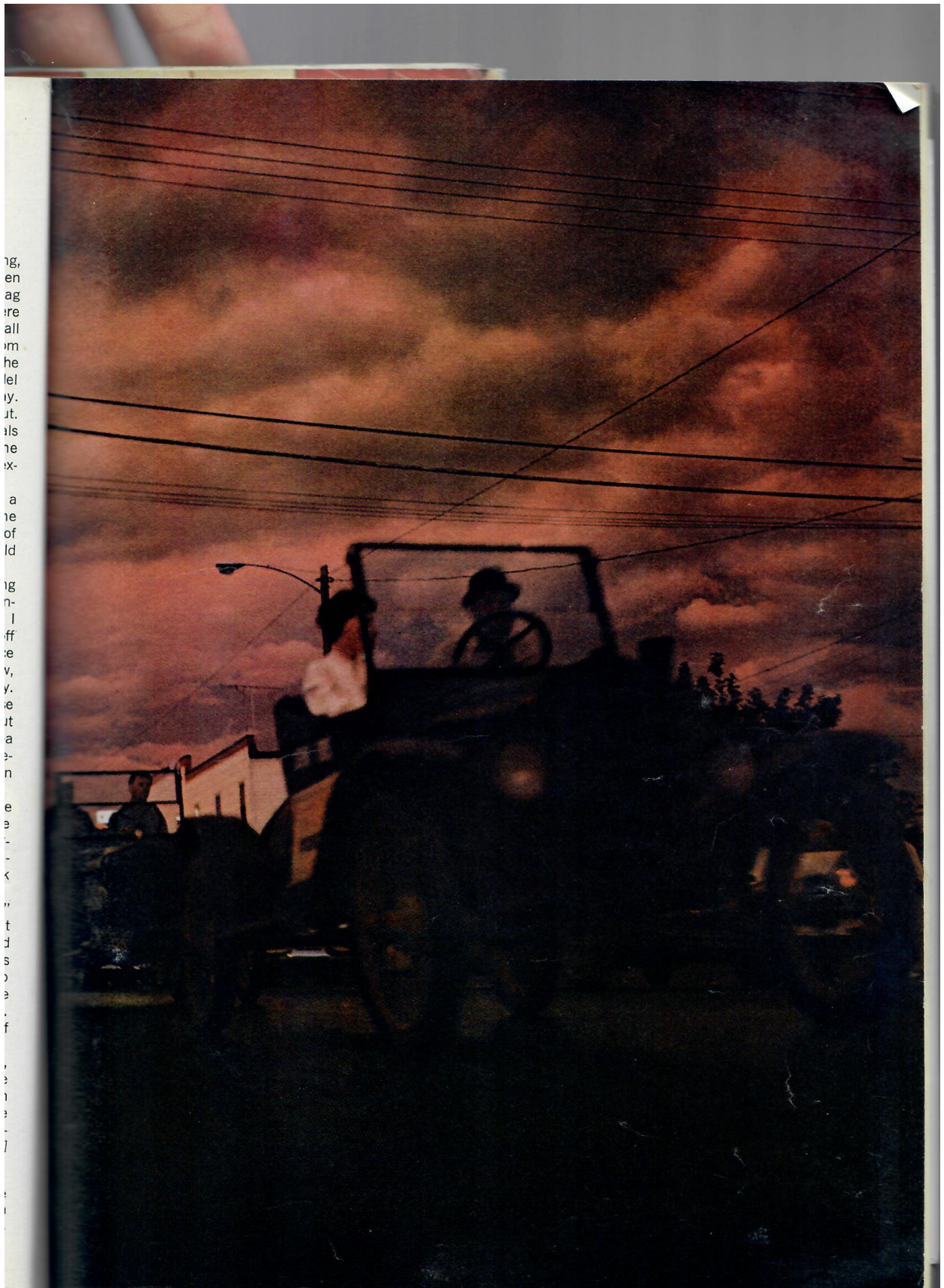
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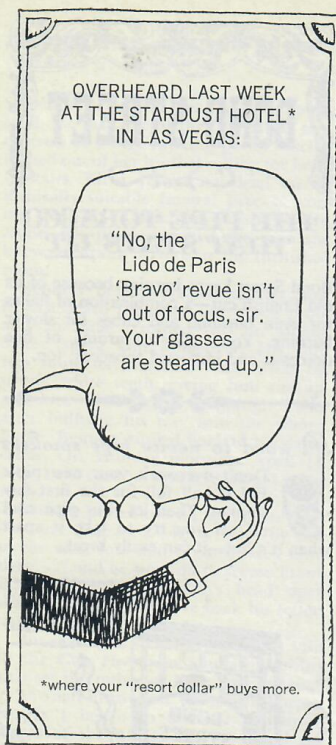
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TIN LIZZIES ON A TEAR

[Continued from page 48]

busts on our 50-year-old heaps, maybe even do it as we drive. No relief driver, either."

That speech sold me and as we started out now to catch up with the race, Bill Browning said, "Buckle your seat belt," and jammed his foot to the floor. We wanted to get into the middle of it, maybe even catch the front runners. Some were bound to creep up on others. We soon found there were small knots in huddles, each car jockeying to get around the others. We rocketed past several of the last starters, waving and shouting encouragement. We were held up by regular traffic and realized what hurdles these racers have. One, along with us, was wasting precious time trapped behind a big truck on a hill.

"This first run is the big shake-out," Ray Habel had told me. Ray, a farmer from Dutton, Montana, is current president of the Association. Ray had just lost almost everything he had in a violent Teton River flood. But it didn't keep him from mixing it in the big race. "It's about 80 miles to the first time-out stop, Miles City," he said. "That first couple of hours will pretty well sort the cars and the drivers."

We didn't have long to wait for the first casualty. We zoomed over a rise and there ahead on the flat, smoke was billowing around a T. The driver, Cliff DeJong, who had come clear out here from Oskaloosa, Iowa, to enter his car, was out on the shoulder jumping up and down. We barreled up to a sliding stop and rolled out.

"No, no!" Cliff yelled.

There's a rule: no outside help while under time on the road. Should we let Cliff burn up? If we helped and he got going, wouldn't he be heavily penalized? Bill and I ran into the ditch and shot pictures while Cliff fought his fire alone.

"Gas line sprung a leak," he yelled. "Caught my clothes and some other stuff afire on the floor."

"Great picture," Browning muttered to me, grinning.

We thought surely Cliff was out for good. But at that moment he cranked up, leaped into his topless T and shoved in the clutch. "She ain't leakin' bad," he called back, and was off again. Bill and I scrambled up the bank and stomped out the rest of the fire so the grass wouldn't catch. Presently we were hurtling across the plain again, fastening safety belts as we went.

Soon we caught and passed Joe Walsh. Joe is from White Sulphur Springs, Montana. It was Joe who had fathered Model T racing in the state. How did it happen?

"Some of us grew up driving Model T's," Joe told me. "Several of us stayed interested, I guess, and reconstructed T's as a hobby. I got a little race going there—you know, my T against somebody I knew. It spread and we began having longer races, with T owners from other towns coming over."

Later on, Ed Towse, a banker from Circle, Montana, hatched the idea of the cross country as an added annual big-time

event. Ed, who was up ahead of us somewhere, was to come in third in this endurance race. The Association and its rules, evolved from among the enthusiasts who began to hear about the cross country and gather from all parts of the state. The rules are severe. The T enthusiasts didn't want this to be a group of souped-up cars, or of "classic" cars such as one sees in museums and at Old Time Car Meets. Sure, you can have a brass radiator and polish it if you wish. But the idea here was *authentic* T's, just like granddad drove, for all-out highway driving. They were to have all parts authentic, and the rules carefully covered additions or subtractions of any parts or equipment.

A racer is allowed to build up his car from parts scrounged from several others. Usually he has to, in fact, because parts are so difficult to find nowadays. Ken Cook, of Bozeman, who ran last, located his fine brass radiator from a man who'd found it in an old mine shaft abandoned years ago. But no modern soup-ups are allowed, although some stripping down is. The boys like to get 'em as light as possible. Every little bit helps. Some even run without a fan belt, to save a bit of drag on the motor. After all, these old T motors are only 20 to 22 horsepower—which makes their final elapsed times the more astonishing.

"Most of the cars never had self-starters, of course," one driver told me. "But if they did, we take 'em off and crank. Saves weight. Most drivers remove the hood, too. That's allowed. Some of the boys get their cars down to about 1,300 pounds."

Visiting with Ed Towse at one stop, I asked how many Model T races there are in the U.S. "Just us," he told me. "There's a small-potatoes hill climb in California, but no real T racing anywhere except in Montana. And this cross country is the only race of its kind in the world." Montana fans would be glad to go out of the state to race, he explained, but there are no organizations or challengers. They do, however, draw some entries from other states and more are always welcome.

Before we got to Miles City, several cars broke down. We came upon one crippled T with its follow-up car and trailer already loading to haul it in.

Soon after we came to a crossroad. Several modern cars were parked here, the occupants gathered from their ranches and farms to watch and cheer as the race went by. It was a scene to be repeated hundreds of times. Montana is a friendly and refreshingly unsophisticated hunk of country, still a little bit frontier. Because of this, we found it tough to get into and out of any time-out rest stop village on schedule. At every pause, there was some kind of banquet, or a barbecue in the town park, or an impromptu main-street parade, at which the local sheriff and his deputies unsnarled, and sometimes snarled, the piled-up traffic.

Miles City's one-hour rest stop produced a welter of excitement, disaster, exasperation, and hilarity. A dozen cars homed in to a privately owned old-car museum, desperately seeking parts and

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"Mr. Joplin can't see you now. He's busy burning some records."

repairs. Bill and I hurried on downtown, where cowboys on horseback were gathered around parked T's. Characters straight from Charlie Russell canvases swarmed out of the local bars—looking like many yesterdays—and offered to set 'em up, a pastime officially ruled strictly taboo for racers.

Suddenly into this melee somebody shouted, "There's a T up the street on fire!"

Flames were shooting high. Before help could arrive, it was a burned-out shell. The owner, Dick Schuler, from Dutton, said dejectedly: "Chunk from the mag-neto broke off and went through the hog'shead. Punctured the gas tank and poured gas over the motor. It was gone almost before we could begin to get away."

Bill and I had to hurry on out to the stockyards, where the first-off racers were about to be checked out for the next leg of the run. Just as we arrived at the take-off point, with the T's beginning to line up and the front runners under the flag, a group of cowboys appeared, hazing a herd of long-horned steers across the highway to the yards. Away through the Lizzies they bolted, bawling and kicking up. The race starter lowered his flag and swore. The driver under the flag chimed in with polished accompaniment. I was sure I saw one cowboy, cud in his weathered cheek, smothering a howl of laughter.

"The longer this race goes on," Bill Browning murmured, "the wilder it's going to get."

Bill was right. The next day, after a stop-over at Laurel near Billings, the country became more mountainous. With some cars out, others lagging, competition boiled up in intermittent flurries of high excitement whenever little groups closed up. On a washboarded gravel stretch of detour, we watched three

T's come neck and neck, fenders almost touching. At full speed, their front wheels shimmied and bounced clear off the road. They wobbled and sashayed, each driver grimly hanging on. Others behind emerged out of the dust cloud, standing up while driving with gas levers clear down, trying to see where they were going.

There's a good deal of danger for drivers in this race. The ancient cars were never intended for such grueling high-speed punishment hour after hour, even way back when. They catch fire easily. Because they're so light, they're hard to stop, easy to skid and to roll. We saw several take to the fields and ditches on tight turns. An old wheel may break, a skinny tire blow. The ordinary hazards that lose time are legion, too. We got used to seeing a T driver leap out and run to a creek to scoop up water for a steaming radiator. Or frantically wire something together with baling wire. Once we caught a fellow hastily sneaking a hunk of wire from a ranch fence for rush repairs.

Normal highway traffic is, of course, always a serious hazard. And sometimes the racers, in their determined competition, are a holy terror hazard for other traffic, too. All traffic rules are supposed to be obeyed. A citation costs a one-hour penalty. But when a little pod of three to five drivers found themselves crank to tail light, the heat of a "race-within-a race" always flared into flame. Bill and I followed one such group darting enthusiastically and precariously in and out around each other. Suddenly there was a snug moment. A right front fender and a left rear on the car ahead of it touched with a "ping" at almost 60 miles per hour. Another inch would certainly have rolled both, end over end, into the path of the following T's.

There was much banter at the rest

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stops about who'd be first to run over one of us. Bill and I lay with cameras at pavement's edge below a rise and watched four T's come over the hill abreast. They roared down on us, taking up the whole road, and missed us by inches.

"I swear," I quavered to Bill, "those crazy devils would run right over anything that got in the way."

Bill's reply was the understatement of the run. "I think," he said, "they're out to win."

But the most dramatic instances of super Teemanship occurred when a coil acted up, or a small gas leak started, or a car started missing but didn't quite quit. Nobody wanted to stop and lose time repairing. So the driver simply climbed out onto his running board. While steering with his right hand, he knelt and stuck his head into the motor area, looking up occasionally to make sure he was still in Montana. He'd fiddle with this or that, get her putting evenly again. One racer we followed was at it for over a mile and still traveling 40 by our speedometer. Then, patched up on the run, he climbed back in and poured the coal to her.

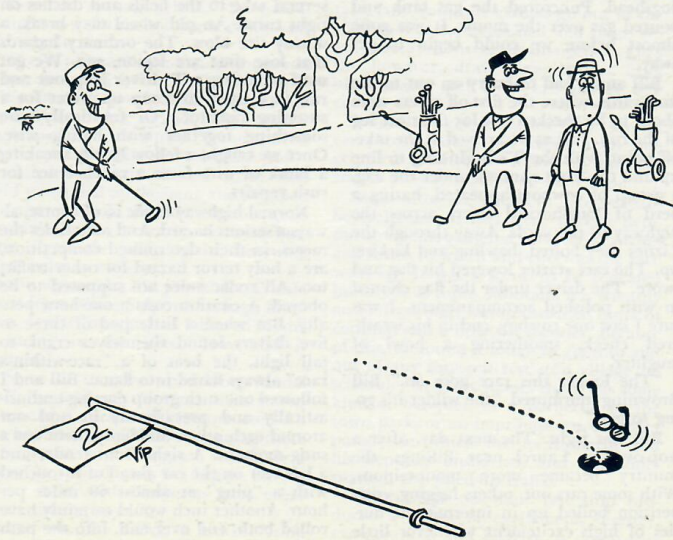
Each evening before and after local banquets, and again at dawn, the guys all huddled over their cars, tuning, fixing. They cannot, of course, make any major repair such as an engine change, or removal of head or pan (two-hour penalty for that unless you are under the time clock). The engines must be officially sealed before the race. This is done by drilling a left front head bolt, second or third large pan bolt head, and first or second small pan bolt head. A safety wire with a lead seal is then attached. At the finish, the first three cars placing have the seals broken, and they are torn completely down for inspection by three or more appointed inspectors. No. 4 must stand by for inspection, in case one

of the others should be disqualified.

At one of our last sops, the bugs had been bad and drivers were nervous. Bugs plaster windshields so a driver can't see. No electric wipers, remember, on a T. Then just as the cars were getting away a shower came up. Bill and I drove hellbent behind a pod of jockeying racers all reared up squinting over their rained-out windshields. They were taking a beating from the cold, pelting rain. But the windshields can't be opened. They, too, are sealed shut before the race, so everybody is even on wind drag.

Suddenly on a wet curve we found ourselves boxed in. T's surrounded us. Two more whose motors were stammering loomed up in front. "Take her to the barn!" I yelled to Bill. He hit the shoulder skidding, leaving it all to the wildly wheeling racers. One shot past us on the right, went down into the ditch and back up and never lost his place in the formation. Another skidded broadside, somehow shaped up and roared on. An oncoming tourist car had heads stuck out every window. My impression was of bunches of eyes on stalks. I didn't blame them.

After that there was no letup. Adrenalin flowed freely right on down to the Helena finish line. There spectators were packed solid at the city limits to see 30 T's cross the finish line. Winner John Frick, Dutton, Montana, made the run in the almost unbelievable elapsed time of 10 hours, 9 minutes, 11 seconds. Even more amazing, the first 10 T's were separated by a bare 25 minutes. This means the winner made roughly a 50-mile-an-hour average. As everyone knows, this means running 60 much of the time. Pretty good going for a bunch of elderly Tin Lizzies. The Association is already taking applications for next July's race from proud T owners who think they can do even better. —Christopher Michaels



"That ball acted like it had eyes!"

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