The Great Race: a zodiac folk tale

Years 1 to 2. Read the story with a grown-up, then answer.



Long ago, says an old story, the Jade Emperor wanted a way to name the years. He called the animals to a race across a wide river. The first twelve to cross would each have a year.

The rat could not swim well, so it rode on the ox's back. Near the bank, the rat jumped off and ran to the finish. The rat was first and the ox was second.

The tiger swam hard and came third. The rabbit hopped over stones and a log and came fourth. The dragon stopped to help others, so it came fifth.

The snake hid on the horse's hoof and slid ahead, so the snake was sixth and the horse seventh. The goat, the monkey and the rooster crossed on a raft. The dog played in the water and came eleventh. Last came the pig. It had stopped for a snack and a nap!

1. Who came first in the race?

2. How did the rat get across the river?

3. Which three animals crossed on a raft?

4. Why was the pig last?

Retold by Colouring Nest. The Great Race is a folk tale with many versions; this is one of them.

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Years 3 to 4. Read the story, then answer in full sentences.

This is a folk tale, and it is told in many different ways. In most versions, the Jade Emperor, a ruler of the heavens in old Chinese stories, wanted a way to name the years so people could count time. He announced a great race: every animal that crossed the wide, fast river and reached him would have a year named after it, in the order they finished.

The rat was small and could not swim far, but it was clever. It asked the strong ox for a ride, and the kind ox agreed. As the ox climbed out on the far bank, the rat leapt from its head and scampered to the finish line first. The patient ox came second.

The tiger fought the current with all its strength and arrived third, panting. The rabbit could not swim at all, so it hopped from stone to stone and floated the last part on a log, finishing fourth. Everyone expected the dragon, who could fly, to win easily, but it arrived fifth. In many tellings it had stopped to bring rain to a dry village, or to blow the rabbit's log to the shore.

The horse galloped in next, but the snake had been hiding curled around its hoof. It slid out in front, and the startled horse came seventh. The goat, the monkey and the rooster worked together: the rooster found a raft, the monkey and the goat pulled away the weeds, and they finished eighth, ninth and tenth. The dog loved the water so much that it stopped for a bath and came eleventh. Finally the pig trotted in, after a big meal and a long nap.

In Vietnam, the cat takes the rabbit's place in the cycle, so some tellings there include a cat in the race.

1. Why did the Jade Emperor hold the race?

2. Which word in paragraph 3 means the push of moving water?

3. Give two reasons the dragon may have been late, from the story.

4. How did the goat, the monkey and the rooster work as a team?

5. Was the rat's plan fair? Give a reason.

6. Why does the text say the tale is told in many different ways?

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Answers: The Great Race

Years 1 to 2

1. Who came first in the race?

The rat

2. How did the rat get across the river?

It rode on the ox's back, then jumped off near the bank.

3. Which three animals crossed on a raft?

The goat, the monkey and the rooster

4. Why was the pig last?

It stopped for a snack and a nap.

Years 3 to 4

1. Why did the Jade Emperor hold the race?

He wanted a way to name the years so people could count time.

2. Which word in paragraph 3 means the push of moving water?

current

3. Give two reasons the dragon may have been late, from the story.

It stopped to bring rain to a dry village, or to blow the rabbit's log to the shore.

4. How did the goat, the monkey and the rooster work as a team?

The rooster found a raft and the monkey and the goat pulled away the weeds.

5. Was the rat's plan fair? Give a reason.

Any reasoned answer: for example, no, because the ox did the work; or yes, because the race had no rule against it.

6. Why does the text say the tale is told in many different ways?

It is a folk tale passed on by many people, so the details change (for example, the cat in Vietnam).