
HILLENBRAND, LAURA. *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. New York: Random House, 2001. Pp. xiii+399. Index, photos, notes. \$24.95.

Every once in a while a racehorse bursts into the general public's consciousness: Secretariat in the 1970s, Carry Black and Kelso in the 1960s, Man o' War in the 1920s, and Seabiscuit in the 1930s. Whether by personality, accomplishments, or underdog status—or a combination of all three—the horse captures the public's fancy and heart. Often, during tough times, people seek a hero for whom they can root, one who will assuage their cares and the ills of the world. Such a hero was Seabiscuit during the Depression.

As a spectator sport, horse racing enjoyed the number one attendance status through the 1950s. With the ascendancy of professional football and basketball to prominence in newspapers and prime-time television programming, coverage of daily racing in the papers and weekly broadcasts of stakes races on television declined drastically. The Triple Crown—Kentucky Derby, Preakness Stakes, and Belmont Stakes—remains the prime focus of televised racing of a major network stating in addition to the one-day Breeders' Cup races in the fall. ESPN and ESPN2 occasionally broadcast a major Saturday stakes race leading up to the Triple Crown or bury "Today at the Races" on a midday weekday half hour. In stark contrast to the media's relegation of racing to one step above roller derby, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* exploded onto the publishing scene with as much power as the horse itself. Seabiscuit never ran in any of the Triple Crown races and never raced for a television audience (although some races were filmed), but in 1938 alone he received more press coverage than Hitler, Mussolini, or Roosevelt.

As much about his owner, trainer, and jockey as the horse, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* focuses on the human side of horse racing. The cast of characters include Seabiscuit's failing jockey, Red Pollard, whose undiagnosed diabetes blinded one eye and threatened his racing career; his enigmatic trainer, mustang breaker Tom Smith, whose silent cat-and-mouse games with the press frustrated them; and self-made millionaire owner, Charles Howard, whose astute knowledge of horses helped him recognize the greatness in Seabiscuit.

Laura Hillenbrand has been writing about horse racing since 1988. Her familiarity with the subject and lyrical writing style combine to create an engaging book that has caught the attention of casual readers as well as racing aficionados. Hillenbrand's research exposes the dangerous weight loss practices of jockeys, Pollard's visual handicap and diabetes that accounted for some of his odd behavior, and the marketing practices

that capitalize on a popular sports figure. She adeptly places Seabiscuit and his human companions in the context of the Depression while exploring why the public and the press became so enamored of his racing exploits.

For sources, Hillenbrand relied on newspaper and magazine articles, and telephone and email interviews to flesh out "the textures of . . . [her] subjects' personalities, their complex relationships, motives, fears, thoughts, and secrets" and to discover the "small but telling details that give historic figures immediacy and resonance in the imagination" (p. 342). Attention to detail, solid research, and elegant writing separate Hillenbrand from the journalist-turned-authors who try to enliven their prose with groaningly unfunny humor. She captures the excitement of the world of horse racing and explores the lives of the often ignored workers at the track.

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