



Seabiscuit

Book: *Seabiscuit* by: Laura Hillenbrand

Movie: *Seabiscuit* Starring: Tobey MacGuire, Jeff Bridges, Chris Cooper. Produced & Directed by: Gary Ross, 2003.

About Seabiscuit

Seabiscuit was an unlikely champion. For two years he floundered at the lowest level of racing, before his dormant talent was discovered by three men. One was Tom Smith, an arthritic old mustang breaker. The second was Red Pollard, a half-blind jockey. The third was Charles Howard, a former bicycle repairman who made a fortune by introducing the automobile to the American West. Bought for a bargain-basement price by Howard and rehabilitated by Smith and Pollard, Seabiscuit overcame a phenomenal run of bad fortune to become one of the most spectacular, charismatic performers in the history of sports.

“About Racing During the Depression” (Taken from: www.pbs.org)

By the time the [Great Depression](#) descended on the nation like a bitter cold front, horse racing in the United States was already in a deep freeze. It had gone cold during the first decade of the twentieth century, after a series of race-fixing scandals triggered a wave of legislation making betting illegal. The sport crumbled. At the turn of the century there had been 300 racetracks nationwide; by 1908, only 25 remained. The American bans proved a boon to the Mexican horse racing business, and Tijuana became a betting mecca.

Racing Renaissance

In the 1930s impoverished state governments, in search of ways to increase revenues, returned to the potential honey pot of horse racing. In exchange for legalizing betting on the sport, one state after another exacted steep taxes on racing revenues. The deal was mutually beneficial to private investors and government tax collectors, and led to a 70 percent increase in the number of tracks across the country. Crowds as large as had ever assembled for the sport turned up at the racetrack.

Big Money

In 1933 California legalized betting on horses and the sport found a home north of the Mexican border again. Near Los Angeles, investors spent about \$3 million on the state-of-the-art [Santa Anita Park](#), which thrilled horse owners and racing fans everywhere by offering a \$100,000 winner-take-all prize in its signature annual event, the Santa Anita Handicap. Today, the prize would translate to over \$7 million. Such extravagant prizes in economically sour times drew the horses, and the horses drew the fans.

Depression-Era Diversions

People visited the track by the thousands every day, eager for the drama of a horse race. Horse racing, along with baseball, dominated the sports world. Sports were not the only diversions available to Americans struggling to grind out a living. [Movie theaters](#) transported viewers to places as appealing as Oz, attracting 85 million people a week. Others preferred to take their escape around the living room [radio](#), listening to the heroic exploits of *The Lone Ranger* or *Little Orphan Annie*.

Dreaming of a Pay Day

The horses' power and beauty and the excitement of racing undoubtedly attracted many to the grandstands. Another draw, though, was the possibility of pay day that promised relief from the tight clamp of poverty for a week, a month, or, if a long shot finished first in the big one, even a lifetime.



The Only Place to Bet

"The opportunities for gambling in the 1930s were very limited," says Gene Smith, the author of many books on racing. "There were no state lotteries. Football was a very minor sport. Professional basketball was a very minor sport. You wanted to bet on a prize fight, you had to go find a bookie or something. There were casinos in Nevada, but how many people go to Nevada? Hence the only place you could really bet was at a racetrack."

Come On, Seabiscuit!

Seabiscuit was a true crowd-pleaser. Bettors, whether they were the hardcore daily ones or casual visitors, usually cheered a horse by its number: "Come on -- Number Three!" A large percentage of horse fans seemed to connect with Seabiscuit, and he was one of the few horses they rooted for by name.

A Underdog Who Triumphed

Fans, struggling to survive in their day-to-day lives, might have identified with the horse because of his underdog status. His stance was not regal; his body was rather low-slung. He had an awkward-looking gait. He had been mistreated as a young horse, raced and whipped too often, treatment which had turned him into an under-achiever and a steady loser. He had his greatest success at a relatively old age, another reason for fans to embrace him. He also had what many thought would be a career-ending accident. Still, Seabiscuit came back to win the Santa Anita Handicap with his jockey [Red Pollard](#), who had a matching hard-luck story. That race, and a glorious win, was his last, and it came in 1940, just as a trying decade was finally coming to a close. Says Gene Smith: "This is the story of every happy-ending fairytale that Mother read to us when we were in the nursery. And to a depression-ridden, anxious, frightened nation, it must have come like a great sunrise."

About Horse Racing

1. What three races make up the Triple Crown?
2. What is the difference between a filly and a colt?

Answer After the Movie

3. Name three or more Historical Events that took place during the movie.
4. Describe the time period in which the movie takes place.
5. In the movie, Red Pollard (Tobey MacGuire's character) says, "You don't throw a life away just because it's banged up a little." Relate this statement to a situation in our world.
6. What are the differences separating Seabiscuit and War Admiral, and what did each competitor represent in the American experience that set one apart from the other?

7. All jockeys in the 1930s endured terrible hardships and hazards, starving themselves to make weight, and then competing in an exceptionally dangerous sport. For George Woolf and Red Pollard, there were additional factors that compounded the difficulties and dangers of their jobs--diabetes for the former and half-blindness for the latter. What have you had to overcome in your life in order to achieve “greatness”?

8. How did the media help Seabiscuit's career, and how was it a hindrance? Fill in the chart below. This will help brainstorm the paragraph you will write.

| How Media Helps Seabiscuit | How Media Hinders Seabiscuit |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| | |

Seabiscuit-itis

Marketing of Seabiscuit (www.pbs.org)

In the late 1930s, as the Depression hovered persistently over the nation, Americans turned to one newsmaker with joyous devotion. His name was [Seabiscuit](#). One sportswriter called the nation's addiction "Seabiscuit-itis."

Popular Athlete

"He may have been in his time the most popular athlete that America has ever produced," says [Laura Hillenbrand](#), author of *Seabiscuit, An American Legend*. The horse's popularity was fueled by his remarkable feats on racecourses, but the man who owned the horse, [Charles Howard](#), stoked the fires of Seabiscuit's fame. Howard had made a fortune using innovative marketing ploys. As a San Francisco distributor for Buick, he had offered driving lessons to uncertain buyers, and accepted horses as trade-ins. But in 1936, at the age of 59, he turned a lifetime of selling skills to his newest prospect: Seabiscuit.

Making a Superstar

"Charles Howard invented sports marketing," Hillenbrand says. "He would woo the press every chance he got. He didn't want for this horse only to be successful. He wanted him to be a superstar in America." In pursuit of column inches, Howard sent reporters champagne and called them up with scoops. In 1938, as a result of Howard's constant promotion and his horse's exciting races, Seabiscuit got more ink than President [Franklin Roosevelt](#) or Nazi leader [Adolf Hitler](#).



Spokeshorse

Behind Howard and the press came marketers who knew there was a buck to be made on the back of such a popular racehorse. Railroads advertised "Seabiscuit Limited" trains to take fans to his races. People carried their betting money in Seabiscuit wallets, and those who had a little extra money in those wallets could splurge at Fifth Avenue shops to buy fancy Seabiscuit hats. Race fans could play any of nine commercially-marketed games that bore the horse's name. There were Seabiscuit toys and Seabiscuit wastebaskets. His image was used to promote dry cleaning services, hotels and a pinball game. His profile was even slapped on crates bearing Seabiscuit oranges.

The Rumor Mill

Seabiscuit inspired the kind of rumors that usually develop about Hollywood stars. One inventive scribe wrote that trainer Tom Smith poured two quarts of Golden Rod beer for Seabiscuit to drink before each race. If this brew is denied the stallion, the imaginative writer wrote, the horse "whinnies and stomps to indicate displeasure." The *Chicago Tribune* joked in the summer of 1938 that "as a result of his Maryland victory, Seabiscuit will get the Rhett Butler role in *Gone with the Wind*."



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The Height of the Frenzy

Americans developed extreme cases of Seabiscuit-itis in the months prior to his 1938 matchup against the [Eastern-bred](#) champion [War Admiral](#). But excitement mounted even higher in late 1939 when Howard announced that the horse, in a comeback from a bad injury, would race for the \$100,000 winner-take-all prize that had previously eluded him at the Santa Anita Handicap. Movie theaters from coast to coast showed newsreel footage of Seabiscuit's races, which got top billing over the the new Jimmy Stewart feature. (*The Story of Seabiscuit*, starring Shirley Temple, would not be released until 1949.) Shortly after noon on the day of the race, Seabiscuit's competition on the entertainment pages began to arrive at the racetrack: Jack Benny, Tyrone Power, James Stewart, Clark Gable and Carole Lombard, and Bing Crosby.

Believe the Hype

In a country with about half the population of today, 78,000 fans, about the size of a current Super Bowl crowd, came to watch the star horse's last race. As if to prove to all that the hype was not a commercial exaggeration, Seabiscuit clocked the fastest mile-and-a-quarter in Santa Anita's history, which was the second-fastest time ever run for that distance on an American track. It's considered one of the greatest comebacks in the history of American sports. "Oh," wrote columnist Jolly Roger, "that I have lived to see this day."



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