Four Good Legs Between Us

When the lives of a failed prizefighter, an aging horsebreaker, and a bicycle-repairman-turned-overnight-millionaire converged around a battered little horse named Seabiscuit, the result captivated the nation and transcended their sport.

BY LAURA HILLENBREND

On a drab Detroit side street in August 1936, two hitchhikers hopped down from their last ride and walked onto the backstretch of Fair Grounds Racecourse. The stouter man was a jockey’s agent people called Yummy; he was with his client Johnny Pollard, a flame-haired former prizefighter. Yummy liked to refer to him by his boxing name, “The Cougar,” but most knew him as Red. The two had totaled Yummy’s car a long way back, picked through the wreckage to salvage their most essential belongings—twenty-seven cents and a half-pint of a brandy they called “bow-wow wine”—and thumbed their way to the track. Desperate for work, they wound through the shed rows, petitioning nearly every trainer on the grounds. No one was willing to give Pollard a leg up on a horse.

The last barn they visited was run by an obscure trainer named Tom Smith, a jut-jawed old cowboy whose horsemanship ran its roots back through frontier cattle drives. Smith had come east with his new boss, the San Francisco automobile magnate Charles Howard, in search of horses for Howard’s racing stable. Owner and trainer both needed a jockey sturdy enough to handle their new purchase, a rough, tempestuous colt named Seabiscuit; Smith thought Pollard’s boxer’s physique might do the trick.

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The lives of these vastly different men had come to an intersection, and their crowded hour had begun. The improbable partnership they formed would cultivate each one’s greatest, untapped talents, define a pivotal American era, and turn a battered little horse into one of the century’s most celebrated popular heroes.

Each of the men had traveled a long, hard road to the summer of 1936. For Charles Howard the journey had begun in New York in 1903, when the young cavalry veteran quit his job as a bicycle repairman and headed west to try his luck. Arriving in San Francisco, he set up a bicycle repair shop downtown. His timing was perfect. It was the dawn of the automobile age; garages did not yet exist, so owners began bringing their ailing cars to the closest thing to an automotive mechanic in the city, Charles Howard.

Howard became fascinated with the new technology, foresaw a revolution, and headed to Detroit. There he introduced himself to William C. Durant, chief of Buick automobiles and future founder of General Motors. Howard walked away with sole distribution of Buicks for eight Western states. It was 1905, and he was not yet thirty years old.

With two Buicks in tow, Howard returned to a San Francisco where his commodities, which churned up dust clouds and bogged down in mud, were banned in the city’s tourist areas. The machines were prohibitively expensive, with even the more moderate examples costing twice the average annual salary. As Howard wheeled his automobiles into his makeshift showroom, the parlor of his bicycle shop, his success was far from assured.

His turn of luck came in hideous guise. At 5:12 A.M. on April 18, 1906, the earth beneath San Francisco liquefied in a titanic convulsion. In sixty seconds the city shuddered down. Fires licked to life and raced over the ruins. The city was in dire need of transport for water, firemen, the injured, and 250,000 homeless—more than half the population—but conventional vehicles were crippled as wagon horses sagged from exhaustion. Howard, the owner of two automobiles, was suddenly and briefly the richest man in town. His cars joined those of others to become a lifeline, ferrying the wounded and probably bearing Army explosives used to blast firebreaks. As the fire advanced on them, soldiers packed Howard’s shop and the surrounding buildings with dynamite and detonated all in a desperate attempt to prevent the flames from swallowing the last of the city.
In the end, Howard, like virtually everyone else, lost everything. But as San Franciscans started over, Howard took
the opportunity to lure them into the automotive age. The earthquake had proved the automobile’s superiority to the
horse in utility, so Howard set out to prove its durability. He tested his Buicks in speed races and hill climbs, and his
aggressive promotion worked. By 1908 the one-man Howard Automobile Company had sold 85 two-toner White
Streaks at a thousand dollars each. “The day of the horse is past, and the people in San Francisco want automobiles,”
Howard wrote that year. “I wouldn’t give five dollars for the best horse in this country.”

He was half-right. With the fortune yielded by his auto distributorship—by the 1920s the world’s biggest—Howard
turned to philanthropy. In 1932, after his first marriage ended, he thrilled the society columnists by marrying
Marcela Zabala, a beautiful former convent student who had generated considerable local fame as an actress. In
1933 they embarked on a new venture—horse racing, a pastime that was enjoying such explosive growth that it
would soon be far and away the most heavily attended sport in America. Pari-mutual racing had been banned in
California for thirty years, but to boost revenues badly depleted by the Depression, the state legislature had just
legalized it again. Betting that the sport would catch on in the state, the Howards invested heavily in the founding of
the lavish Santa Anita Racecourse on the apron of the San Gabriels. They bought seventeen Thoroughbred yearlings
and went looking for a trainer.

Horses had been the silent study of Tom Smith’s long life. As a boy on the Western frontier, he had ridden in the last
of the great cattle drives before being hired as a horsebreaker at just thirteen years of age. In 1899 the dour, taciturn
young man, known as Silent Tom, began breaking American mustangs for use by the British in the Boer War,
gentling as many as thirty horses per day, then became a cowpony trainer, veterinarian, and blacksmith on a
Colorado cattle range.

In 1923 Smith signed on with “Cowboy Charlie” Irwin, who operated two businesses: a massive stable of two-bit
racehorses and a traveling Wild West show. Smith worked as a caretaker for the show’s horses. He lived a nomadic,
sometimes squalid life, but during one stretch he was given some of Irwin’s racehorses to train, and he made the
most of it. At a little bullring in Cheyenne, his trainees won twenty-nine of thirty races. The next year, Irwin sent
him to Seattle to train a string of horses. Smith gave Irwin his greatest season in racing.

In his meandering path along the American frontier, Smith had cultivated a wordless, near-mystical communion
with horses. He knew their minds and how to sway them, he knew their bodies and how they telegraphed every
emotion and sensation, and his quiet hands could always soothe them. His rustic methods and obsessive devotion to
his job often struck other trainers as peculiar; he slept in his horses’ stalls and stood quietly by them for hours, just
studying them. He carried a stopwatch but never used it; he had an uncanny ability to judge a horse’s pace by sight,
and he resented any distraction that might make him miss a nuance of motion. He lived by a single maxim: “Learn
your horse.”

Somehow that afternoon the ailing colt won his race. The trainer memorized the name, Seabiscuit, and spoke to him as he was led
away: “I’ll see you again”

But success was fleeting. Irwin died in 1934, leaving Tom Smith, then
approaching sixty, flat broke and unemployed in the depths of the
Depression. He wandered around the Western racing circuit, mucking
stalls and grooming horses. One of his charges was a horse named
O’Riley, who toiled in bottom-level selling events called claiming races.
When O’Riley went lame, Smith scraped together a few dollars, bought
the horse from the owner, rebuilt him, and soon had him winning low-grade races. But Smith was barely able to
survive on the earnings of a one-claimer stable. His deliverance came through an accident of proximity: O’Riley
bedded down near the horses of a wealthy owner named George Giannini. Smith became friends with Giannini, who
introduced the old cowboy to his friend Charles Howard.

The two men stood in different parts of the century, embodying two currents of American life. Smith, a true
frontiersman, won over his slow, hard days with calloused, capable hands; Howard, a forward-thinking mass
marketer, was paving over Smith’s old West. But Howard had already shown his ability to see potential in unlikely
packages, and he had a cavalryman’s eye for horsemen. Smith got the job.
On June 29, 1936, Tom Smith stood by the track rail at Massachusetts's Suffolk Downs, watching low-level horses as they streamed to the post. Midway through the parade a weedy three-year-old bay halted before the trainer and regarded him with a regal expression completely unsuited to such a rough-hewn animal. The two looked at each other for only a moment before the pony boy tugged the colt on his way.

Smith flipped to the horse's profile in the track program. The colt was descended from the mighty Man o' War, but his stunted build did nothing to recall the beauty and breadth of his forebear. His body was a study in unsound construction; his short legs, sporting asymmetrical knees that didn't straighten all the way, gave him a crouching stance and an odd, inefficient "eggbeater" gait that one writer likened to a duck's. His career had been noteworthy only in its appalling rigor; he had raced a staggering thirty-five times as a two-year-old, at least three times the typical workload. He had found no takers in claiming races, and by the time Smith saw him, his punishing schedule had left him with permanent foreleg ailments and a manner that one jockey described as "mean, restive and ragged."

But somehow, that afternoon, the colt won his race. Smith memorized the name: Sea biscuit. He was a horse whose quality, an admirer would write, "was mostly in his heart, and Tom Smith had been the first to recognize it." Smith spoke to the colt as he was led away: "I'll see you again."

In a private box above Saratoga Racecourse one month later, Charles and Marcela Howard surveyed a field of generic claimers. Charles pointed to an especially wretched colt and asked his wife what she thought of him. She wagered a drink that the horse would lose, watched as the colt led from wire to wire, and bought her husband a lemonade. Sitting together in the clubhouse that afternoon, husband and wife felt a pull of intuition. Howard shared it with Smith, who walked to the stables to see the horse and found himself face to face with Sea biscuit again. Howard wrote a check for seventy-five hundred dollars.

Tom Smith inherited a sore, weary animal. Sea biscuit was two hundred pounds underweight and so nervous that he paced in his stall, lathered up upon being saddled, and refused to eat. On the track he displayed blistering speed but sulked when urged, bolted when checked, zigzagged, and raised holy hell in the starting gate. On the train to Detroit, Howard's next destination, Sea biscuit panicked so badly that sweat streamed from his belly.

Smith drew upon sixty years of frontier remedies to rehabilitate his charge. He doctored his body with homemade liniment and knee-high bandages; he focused his mind by fitting him with blinkers that blocked his peripheral vision. To soothe the colt's nerves, Smith showered him with affection, knocked down the wall between two stalls, and moved him in with three roommates. One was a stray dog named Pocatell. A second was a spider monkey named Jo Jo. The third was a placid yellow cattle-rope horse named Pumpkin, who would travel with Sea biscuit for the rest of his life. Playing with his bunkmates by day and sleeping with Jo Jo in the nook of his neck and Pocatell on his belly, Sea biscuit began to relax. Smith's headstrong colt was ready for training. He needed a very strong rider.

The jockey who walked into Tom Smith's barn in the summer of 1936 had learned early the sharp turns that fortune could take. In 1925 Johnny Pollard had abandoned his formal education to ride racehorses. He was only about fifteen years old when he turned up at the little racetracks of Butte, Montana, eager to learn the reinsman's trade. Although his five-foot-seven-inch height left him towering over other jockeys, Johnny wangled his way into the local fairs to ride racing quarter horses around ovals cut through hayfields. In spite of his talent, he didn't win a race for at least a year. To earn food money, he moonlighted as a prizefighter, boxing under the name "The Cougar" in bouts at cow-town clubs. He lost "a lot of 'em," he later said.

To calm the frantic horse, Tom Smith gave him three roommates: a stray dog named Pocatell; Jo Jo, a spider monkey; and a yellow horse named Pumpkin.

From Butte, Pollard went to British Columbia and the bullring tracks of Vancouver, where he became an apprentice jockey, or "bug boy," contracted to ride free for a room and a five-dollar-a-week food allowance. Red, as most now called him, liked to play practical jokes, sometimes went hungry for lack of money, quoted Omar Khayyam and Emerson—"Old Waldo"—and became known as a buoyant, witty, brainy
kid. He had chosen a grinding profession. In exchange for the exhilaration of piloting 1,200-pound animals at forty-five miles per hour, he subjected himself to torturous regimens to make the roughly 110-pound maximum riding weight. For most riders this involved induced vomiting, laxatives, abusive exercise, and sweating rituals, sometimes including immersion in the fermenting track manure-pit. Once a journeyman, Pollard earned just fifteen dollars per winner, five dollars per loser, less fees for laundry (fifty cents), valet (one dollar), and agent (10 percent).

Worse was the sheer peril of his workday. Serious injuries were inevitable—the jockey’s only protection was a cardboard skullcap—but there was no protocol for handling them. In 1927, when Earl Graham broke his back, he was left on a saddle table until long after nightfall, when it was convenient for someone to drop him at a hospital. He died ten days later. Finally, like virtually every other jockey, Pollard couldn’t afford the skyhigh insurance rates his job warranted, and tracks, fearing rider unionizing, blocked jockeys’ efforts to create their own insurance. When Tommy Luther, who had originally been slated to ride Graham’s fatal mount, tried to start an injured riders’ fund, he was banned from riding for a year. Very early in Pollard’s career a horse kicked debris into his head. The blow cost him the sight in his right eye. Though the blindness greatly compounded his risk, Pollard kept it secret and kept riding.

In the 1930s Pollard moved his tack to New York. His career foundered. By the time he reached Detroit, he was drifting into the great slipstream in which many promising jockeys are lost, their talents never tried for lack of the skilled trainer, the wise owner, the gifted horse. But in Tom Smith, Pollard met a man intimately familiar with his hardscrabble world. Smith had a hunch that the jockey’s boxer body and long tenure with troubled bullring horses would suit the explosive, neurotic Seabiscuit. He was right. The lost young man and the edgy little colt took to each other immediately, and Pollard won the job riding the horse he called Pops.

In Smith and Pollard’s care, Seabiscuit was transformed. In the barn he was an easygoing, disarming affectionate glutton, “as gentlemanly a horse,” said Smith, “as I ever handled.” On the track he displayed astonishing speed and bulldog tenacity. He had two weaknesses. One was a perpetually iffy left foreleg. The other was an evil sense of humor; he seemed to take sadistic pleasure in harassing and humiliating his rivals, slowing down to taunt them as he passed and pulling up when in front so other horses could draw alongside, then dashing their hopes with a killing burst of speed. But in a fight he was all business. “Once a horse gives Seabiscuit the old look in the eye, he begins to run to parts unknown,” said Pollard. “He might loaf sometimes when he’s in front and thinks he’s got the race in the bag. But he gets gamer and gamer, the tougher it gets.”

It took two months of minor-league test races and intensive schooling to get the bugs out. In his first two races Seabiscuit ran greenly but still claimed a fourth place and a third place. In his third start he won a minor stakes race, earning back half his purchase price, then won a bigger one two weeks later. Smith sent his newly polished competitor to New York, where he won the prestigious Scarsdale Handicap in track-record time. Then, like his owner thirty years before, Seabiscuit traveled from New York to San Francisco to conquer the West. In Howard’s hometown he racked up electrifying victories in two major races. He began 1937 at Santa Anita, where he trounced the superb closer Rosemont. Elated with Seabiscuit’s success, the Howards made a bold move. Santa Anita, the track Howard had built, had inaugurated the hundred-thousand-dollar Santa Anita Handicap, the richest race in the world. The Howards dropped Seabiscuit’s name in the entry box and set their hearts on winning it.

On February 27, 1937, sixty thousand fans gathered to see the first of Seabiscuit’s three appearances in the Santa Anita Handicap, an event that would come to define him. In a massive field of eighteen horses, including the favored Rosemont, Seabiscuit was crowded at the start, forcing Pollard to check him. On the backstretch he began picking off horses in a rush, moving from ninth to fourth in a few yards. As they turned for home, Pollard threaded Seabiscuit through a hole and drove him to a commanding lead. Behind them were seventeen of the best horses in the nation. Ahead was nothing but a furlong of red soil.

Pollard and Seabiscuit thought they had it won. The jockey sat absolutely still, his whip idle against his mount’s shoulder. Seabiscuit saw nothing around his blinker cups but the vacant track ahead. Neither horse nor jockey noticed that toward the grandstand, rallying furiously, was Rosemont, swallowing a foot of Seabiscuit’s lead with
every stride. At the last moment Seabiscuit saw his rival and lunged for a photo finish. He was less than one inch too late.

Though Seabiscuit had lost, he was rapidly becoming a phenomenal celebrity. Two factors converged to create and nourish this. The first was Charles Howard. A born adman, Howard courted the nation on behalf of his horse much as he had hawked his first Buicks, undertaking exhaustive promotion that presaged the modern marketing of athletes. Grafting daring, unprecedented coast-to-coast racing campaigns, he shipped Seabiscuit over fifty thousand railroad miles to showcase his talent at eighteen tracks in seven states and Mexico. The second factor was timing. The nation was sliding from economic ruin toward the swirling eddy of Europe’s cataclysm. Seabiscuit, Howard, Pollard, and Smith, whose fortunes swung in epic parabolas, would have resonated in any age, but in cruel years the peculiar union among the four transcended the racetrack.

The result was stupendous popularity. In one year Seabiscuit garnered more newspaper column inches than Roosevelt, Hitler, or Mussolini. Life even ran a pictorial on his facial expressions. Cities had to route special trains to accommodate the invariably record-shattering crowds that came to see him run. Smith, fearing Seabiscuit wouldn’t get any rest, hoodwinked the press by trotting out a look-alike. Such fame fueled the immediate, immense success of Howard’s Santa Anita and California’s new racing industry, today a four-billion-dollar business.

Equipped with a chastened Pollard and blinker eye-cups with rear-view peepholes cut in them, Seabiscuit embarked on a spectacular tear through the elite races of California, New York, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Maryland, winning ten major events, eclipsing five track records, and bankrolling 1937’s highest earnings. But he was not named Horse of the Year. As it happened, Seabiscuit had been born just a year before an Eastern horse named War Admiral, an exquisite black colt whose talents and achievements were comparable to his own. Though he had never met Seabiscuit, on the strength of his unbeaten season, during which he became just the fourth horse in history to sweep the Triple Crown, War Admiral was voted Horse of the Year. The ballot did not settle the issue. The nation divided into Seabiscuit and War Admiral camps, the dispute taking on an East versus West flavor. One of the century’s most famous sports rivalries was born.

Seabiscuit’s second try at the Santa Anita Handicap was just weeks away when Red Pollard, riding Howard’s mare Fair Knightess in a race at Santa Anita, was caught in a pileup after a horse ahead of him stumbled. Badly hurt, he was told he would not ride for at least a year.

Pollard suggested that Smith hire George Woolf, Red’s best friend since their bug-boy days. The son of a broncobuster and a circus rider, Woolf was a handsome, independent, utterly fearless young man. He also may have been the single greatest talent his sport ever saw. He could, horsemen marveled, “hold an elephant away from a peanut until time to feed,” timing his mounts’ rallies so precisely that he regularly won races with breathtaking, last-second drives. He knew his horses, and everyone else’s, and blew contests wide open by ruthlessly exploiting his rivals’ weaknesses. Pollard started to call Woolf “The Iceman,” and the nickname stuck. The Iceman had only one hint of athletic mortality: diabetes. He made a dangerous habit of juggling insulin dependence and drastic reducing, running a high risk of fainting in the saddle.

Woolf got the job and did his homework, learning every contour of Seabiscuit’s personality from the hospitalized Pollard. He knew the horse to beat was a colt named Stagehand. The Santa Anita Handicap, like every race Seabiscuit ran, was a handicap, in which better horses carry higher weights to increase long shots’ chances. As usual Seabiscuit was assigned by far the highest weight, this time 130 pounds, an impost that had proved too much for most of history’s greatest horses. Stagehand, fresh off four straight victories, was assigned just 100 pounds, a preposterously light load. Because every two to three pounds are believed to slow a horse by one body length at the distances Seabiscuit ran, the thirty-pound difference was a massive concession, and Woolf knew it. He also knew that Stagehand’s silks and those of another competitor, his brother Sceneshifter, were identical, but for a single difference, a white cap on Stagehand and a colored cap on Sceneshifter. Woolf noted the difference and suited up to chase Stagehand while an ashén, anxious Pollard left his hospital bed to sit with Marcela on the grandstand roof.
Then, as Seabiscuit broke from the gate, he was broadsided by another horse, knocking him nearly to the ground and vauluting Woolf up onto his neck. By the time the jockey shimmied back, he and his mount were trapped in a pack of stragglers. On the backstretch a hole opened before them. Seeing the white cap bobbing ahead and fearing it would be his only chance to break loose, Woolf drove Seabiscuit through the gap and into a premature open-throttle drive with six furlongs still to be run. In the next half-mile, in which he swept past the entire field, Seabiscuit was clocked at 441/5 seconds—two seconds, the equivalent of ten lengths, faster than the world record. He ran up alongside the white cap, and the horse beneath it faltered, exhausted, and dropped back. Seabiscuit hit the stretch in front and backed off to wait for challengers.

On the far outside a closer broke clear of the pack and drove toward Seabiscuit as Rosemont had done a year before. Woolf glanced back and was stunned to recognize Stagehand’s head. After a moment’s confusion he had a terrible realization: Stagehand’s and Sceneshifter’s caps had been switched, and Woolf had spent Seabiscuit’s rally too early, in pursuit of the wrong horse. Woolf asked Seabiscuit for still more speed. Stagehand drew even, and, incredibly, Seabiscuit accelerated to match him. After a ferocious head-bobbing duel, the pair tripped the win photo together.

Stagehand had outbowed Seabiscuit by two and a half inches. Atop the grandstand Marcela and Red wept.

On the same afternoon, beneath the drowsing palms of Florida’s Hialeah Racecourse, War Admiral cantered to his tenth consecutive win. The desire for a Seabiscuit-War Admiral match had become an international obsession.

If the match race was going to occur, Red believed he would see it from Pops’s back. By the summer of 1938 his body had healed, and he joined Seabiscuit in Massachusetts. One morning, fresh off Pops and in jubilant spirits, he offered to ride a colt for another trainer. The colt rammed Pollard through the track rail, nearly severing the jockey’s leg. Howard flew in a team of prominent doctors. They told Red he might never walk again.

What the famed sportswriter Grantland Rice would call the greatest horserace he ever saw was conceived in the fall of 1938 by Alfred Vanderbilt, the twenty-six-year old president of Baltimore’s Pimlico Racecourse. Vanderbilt wanted to host a Seabiscuit-War Admiral match, but he was playing with a weak hand; his track could offer only a small purse. War Admiral’s choleric owner, Samuel Riddle, erected his own obstacles, declaring that he would not run his colt from a conventional gate, preferring instead an antiquated gateless “walk-up” start. But Vanderbilt was a master diplomat. Sixty years later he recalls forging a deal by appealing to Riddle and Howard’s one shared attribute, sportsmanship. “I told them that this was just a little track and we couldn’t put up a lot of money, but that it would be a good thing for racing, which they both liked,” Vanderbilt remembers. “It took a little doing.”

For more than half a mile, the two horses dueled shoulder to shoulder. Then, as forty thousand voices shouted them on, War Admiral pushed his head in front.

Ultimately Howard bowed to Riddle’s demands, and Vanderbilt rushed to Manhattan’s Pennsylvania Station, intercepted Riddle between trains, and refused to let him board until he signed the contract. Riddle gave in. The mile and three-sixteenths Pimlico Special was set for November 1, 1938, for a winner-take-all purse of fifteen thousand dollars. Each owner would put up five thousand, and each horse would carry 120 pounds and break from a walk-up start.

Although Seabiscuit was the sentimental choice, War Admiral was the overwhelming betting favorite, and he deserved to be. The most decisive weapon of match races is early speed, and in this department the Triple Crown winner had a critical edge: While Seabiscuit liked to stalk pacersetters, War Admiral was a half-ton catapult, and he had drawn the favorable inside berth. That Seabiscuit could outbreak War Admiral was inconceivable, and most experts predicted the race would be over the instant Riddle’s colt rocketed off the line.
Tom Smith had other ideas. “I’ll give them birds the biggest surprise they ever had in their lives,” he told a friend. “I’m going to send Seabiscuit right out on the lead.” He began by fashioning a starting bell from a dinner bell and telephone batteries and encasing it in a homemade redwood box with a button on the outside. He led Woolf and Seabiscuit to the training track. Standing behind Seabiscuit with a buggy whip, he hit the bell just as he tickled Seabiscuit’s flanks with the whip and Woolf broke into frantic urging, sending Seabiscuit lunging forward. Woolf brought him back, and the drill was repeated. By the third repetition Seabiscuit was long gone before Smith could wave the whip. The trainer then pitted the colt against top sprinters, sending them through countless walk-up starts.

Between workouts Woolf traveled to the hospital to consult with Pollard. In traction the redhead was swigging bow-wow wine. Yummy had smuggled in and reciting Old Waldo to the nurses; he was trying to woo one of them, a beauty named Agnes, away from a resident doctor. Pollard told Woolf to gun to the lead at all costs but to let War Admiral catch up to prevent Seabiscuit from loafing. Then, he added, “race him into the ground.”

On the eve of the match, Woolf walked onto the Pimlico track alone, flashlight in hand. Rain had fallen that week, and Woolf worried that Seabiscuit would founder on a damp, soft track. “Biscuit wants to hear his feet rattle,” he liked to say. The jockey scoured the track for the driest path, and at the top of the stretch he found a hardened tractor-wheel imprint, circling the course several feet from the inner rail. The path was obscured by harrows, so Woolf walked the track until he had memorized its location.

Vanderbilt, concerned that sixteen-thousand-seat Pimlico would be overwhelmed by spectators, had scheduled the match for a Tuesday in hopes that fewer people would attend. It was no use. A record crowd of forty thousand wedged into the little track. The clubhouse was so mobbed that the NBC announcer Clem McCarthy couldn’t reach his post and was forced to call the race while perched on the track rail. His voice crackled over the radio waves to millions of listeners, including President Roosevelt, who delayed a press conference to hear the call.

At four o’clock War Admiral and Seabiscuit stepped onto the track. The elegant War Admiral was a grand favorite, whirling and bobbing. Seabiscuit followed in his customary plodding way. Before a crowd, wrote Rice, “keyed to the highest tension I have ever seen in sport,” Woolf worked to fray War Admiral’s famously delicate nerves. While the Triple Crown winner waited with growing agitation at the starting line, Woolf put Seabiscuit into a long, lazy warm-up, stalling past his rival and answering demands that he bring up his mount with a shrugging reply that he was under orders. After an agonizing delay he walked Seabiscuit to the line. The starter’s arm, flag in hand, went up. The two noses passed over the line together, and the arm came down.

At the sound of the bell, Seabiscuit uncorked the greatest burst of speed of his life. To the crowd’s utter amazement War Admiral could not keep up. Woolf drove Seabiscuit to a clear lead, then looked back, laughing, and dropped inside to claim the tractor-wheel path, instantly nullifying War Admiral’s post-position edge. He cruised into the backstretch on a two-length lead, and Woolf, heeding Pollard’s advice, began to reel him in. To his outside War Admiral started to roll. At the half-mile pole he swept alongside Seabiscuit, who dug in, cocked an ear toward his rival, and refused to let him pass. For more than half a mile, the two dueled shoulder to shoulder. Then, as forty thousand voices shouted them on, War Admiral pushed his head in front.

Seabiscuit and the Iceman had been waiting for him. Woolf looked at War Admiral and saw the depth of the colt’s effort. “His eye was rolling wildly in its socket as though the horse was in agony,” he said later. “I knew we had him right then.” He dropped low over the saddle and called into Seabiscuit’s ear, asking him for everything he had. Seabiscuit gave it to him, delivering a rally that carried him back to the lead. War Admiral’s mouth dropped open; he had had enough. Seabiscuit galloped down the lane alone as hundreds of fans stretched their hands out over the rail to brush his shoulders. He hit the wire four lengths in front in near world-record time, completing what Rice called “one of the greatest competitive efforts I have ever seen.” As thousands of frenzied spectators breached the rails and poured onto the track, a laughing Woolf stood in the irons and looked back at War Admiral, gesturing in triumph.

After the race an envelope from Woolf arrived at Pollard’s hospital room. Inside was fifteen hundred dollars, half of the jockey’s purse.
Seabiscuit was crowned Horse of the Year, but there remained one contest the Howards yearned to see him win: the Santa Anita Handicap. The horse returned to Santa Anita in January 1939 to prepare for a third try at the race. But as Seabiscuit made his move for the lead in his prep race, Woolf heard a sharp crack, and the horse began to lurch. Woolf bailed out and dragged him to a halt. Seabiscuit’s long-suffering left front tendon had ruptured at last, and his career was surely over. He was in his stall when his stablemate, Kayak II, won the Santa Anita Handicap. Marcela found the victory empty.

For nine months Seabiscuit stalked the fences at Howard’s Ridgewood Ranch, fat and stir-crazy, trying to race deer that wandered nearby. Pollard, after several leg operations, left the hospital on crutches. He was now engaged to nurse Agnes, but he was so frail that she was certain he was dying. A friend likened his leg to a charred broomstick. “One little tap,” Pollard said. “Just one.” Medical bills had bankrupted him, and he had nowhere to go, so the Howards took him in at Ridgewood. There the invalid horse and jockey commiserated. Once Seabiscuit’s lameness was gone, Pollard and Howard began cinching the horse into a stock saddle each morning. Red was too weak to hold the horse, so Howard lifted him into the saddle, swung aboard a lead pony, and led the two around the meadows, gradually increasing the length and speed of each outing. “Our wheels went wrong together, but we were good for each other,” said Pollard. “Out there among the hootin’ owls, we both got sound again.”

By year’s end Smith and the Howards decided to give Seabiscuit one more shot at the Santa Anita Handicap. Pollard’s leg was so brittle that he needed a steel brace to prevent it from snapping, and he was under strict orders never to ride again. But he couldn’t bear to watch Pops race without him. He also had a family to think of; he had married Agnes, and she was expecting a child, and he was dead broke. Howard reluctantly gave him permission to ride. The comeback, if successful, would be utterly unprecedented; no horse had ever returned to top form after such a serious injury and lengthy layoff. In addition, Seabiscuit was seven years old now, more than twice the age of some of his rivals. But Howard, Smith, and Pollard thought he could do it. Seabiscuit and Pollard set out for Santa Anita to chase the one prize that had eluded them. “Old Pops and I have got four good legs between us,” said Pollard. “Maybe that’s enough.”

Wedding Call suddenly shouldered Seabiscuit into a pocket. Thinking that bad luck would cost his horse victory a fourth time, Pollard prayed aloud.

As Seabiscuit and Pollard stepped onto the track for the 1940 Santa Anita Handicap, the record crowd of seventy-four thousand delivered two emotional ovations. Howard, his hands shaking so badly he couldn’t light his cigarette, watched his old warrior go from the paddock. Marcela hid in the quiet of the barn. “I’d seen Johnny’s leg,” she explained. “I just couldn’t watch it.” At the last moment she changed her mind and ran toward the track.

Seabiscuit broke well and settled into perfect striking position around the first turn and down the backstretch. As they leaned into the final turn, Pollard had dead aim on the leaders and an armful of horse beneath him. But a horse named Wedding Call suddenly shouldered Seabiscuit into a pocket, leaving Pollard standing half upright to hold back his mount, straining his bad leg to the limit. There was no way out. Thinking that bad luck would cost his horse victory a fourth time, Pollard prayed aloud. A moment later Wedding Call drifted out, and Pollard hung on as Seabiscuit burst into the lead.

In the center of the track, a closer began to roll into Seabiscuit’s lead like a ghost from his past. This time it was Kayak II, his stablemate and the defending champion. For the last time Seabiscuit eased up to tease a rival. Then, in one great, final effort, he swept away from Kayak to win the Santa Anita Handicap. He had run the second-fastest mile and a quarter in American racing history.

Across the track Marcela Howard stood atop a water wagon. She had scrambled aboard just in time to see her horse put her long-sought dream into the palm of her hand.

“Little horse, what next?” wrote a sportswriter after the race. In six years Seabiscuit had won thirty-three races, set sixteen track records, and equaled another. He was literally worth his weight in gold, having earned a world record.
$437,730, nearly sixty times his purchase price. The Howards brought their gentle horse home for good. The partnership was over.

On a January day six years later, George Woolf slid into the Santa Anita starting gate for a weekday race. At thirty-six he was feeling ill and was ready to put an end to one of the greatest riding careers in history. But over Santa Anita’s red soil that afternoon, something happened. Some witnesses thought his horse stumbled; most said they saw Woolf sink from the saddle, unconscious, his dieting and diabetes finally taking their toll. The Iceman struck the track head first. He never woke up.

Tom Smith parted amicably with Howard and joined Maine Chance Farm, where he became the nation’s leading trainer. But in 1945 a steward caught a groom using a decongestant spray on Smith’s horse before a race. Although the spray wasn’t performance-enhancing and Smith likely didn’t know the drug was being given, the trainer was suspended for a year. In his seventy years, Smith had never known a life apart from horses; he spent his days sitting alone outside Santa Anita watching his sport go on without him. Reinstated, he trained many top horses, including the Kentucky Derby winner Jet Pilot, but the scandal may have cost him a berth in racing’s Hall of Fame. He died in 1957.

Red Pollard retired after the Santa Anita Handicap and began training horses but soon resumed riding. In 1942 he retired again to join the war effort, but his body had taken such a beating that all three services rejected him. He wound up back in the bush leagues, booting horses around Rhode Island’s declining Narragansett Park, soon to meet the bulldozer, where he and Pops once raced. He continued to endure bone-crushing falls but kept riding, struggling to get by. “Maybe I should have heeded the rumble of that distant drum when I was riding high,” he once said. “But I never did. Trouble is, you never hear it if you’re a racetracker. Horses make too damned much noise.” In 1955 his career petered out. For a while he worked at backwater tracks, cleaning the boots of other riders. By the time he was seventy, his ceaselessly painful riding injuries had landed him in a nursing home built on the ruins of Narragansett Park. There, for reasons no one ever knew, the eloquent reinsman simply stopped talking. He lived out the rest of his days in silence, and he died in 1981. No cause of death was found. It was as if, says his daughter, Norah Christianson, “he had just worn out his body.”

As Seabiscuit settled into Ridgewood, drowsing under an oak tree, happily herding cattle around a pasture, and greeting the fifty thousand fans who eventually came to see him, Howard faded. When his heart became too frail for him to endure the tension of seeing his horses run, he came to the track anyway, sitting in the parking lot and listening to race calls on his radio of his Buick. On pleasant days he would throw a saddle over Seabiscuit, and together they’d canter into the hills and walk among the redwoods.

On the morning of May 17, 1947, Marcela met her husband at breakfast and told him his rough little horse was gone, dead of a heart attack at only fourteen. The sometime bicycle repairman, whose own heart would fail him just three years later, had the body carried to a secret site on the ranch. After Seabiscuit had been buried, Howard planted an oak sapling on the spot, telling only his sons the location. The memory of what tree entwines its roots with the bones of Howard’s beloved Seabiscuit died with them.

Laura Hillenbrand, a contributing editor at Equus magazine, is writing a book about Seabiscuit.

RACING THEN AND NOW
Why Seabiscuit is, quite literally, incomparable

The names jingle in horsemen’s pockets with the bright, weighty ring of precious metal. Secretariat. Man o’ War. Ruffian. Citation. Exterminator. Seabiscuit’s name is among those that clang down the years, but attempting to find his place among the greats is a hopeless labor. The conditions of racing have changed so much over time that definitive ranking of its legends is virtually impossible.
Weight.
Until recently, a major hallmark of greatness was the ability to win while lugging a whopping 130 pounds or more and to beat horses toting far lighter burdens. Seabiscuit shattered a track record under 133 pounds, won while carrying as much as 32 pounds more than his rivals, and finished first or second by a nose in eleven of the thirteen races in which he carried 130 or more. A handful have done better—the track record Dr. Fager set under 139 pounds has stood for thirty years—but today's tracks lure elite horses to their races by offering them low impost, so top horses seldom carry more than 127 pounds or face a weight spread greater than 12.

Surface.
Modern tracks are several seconds faster than those of decades ago, so race times aren't a useful means of comparing horses of different eras.

Distance.
Lexington, the most celebrated horse of the nineteenth century, was at his best at four miles; the 1918 Kentucky Derby victor Exterminator won at two and a quarter miles; 1970s champion, Forego, and 1960s star, Kelso, cemented their greatness in two-mile races. Today there are only two top races on dirt at more than a mile and a quarter; both are just one and a half miles.

Competition.
Horses of past eras had the benefit of coming from small "crops," the group of horses born annually; since superior horses are rarities, barring fantastic coincidence, the smaller the crop, the easier it is for one gifted horse to dominate. Man o'War's awesome record—he lost only once and won by as much as one hundred lengths—may be partly attributable to the fact that he was an enormous fish in a tiny pond of 1,680 North American Thoroughbreds born in 1917. Since then crops have seen explosive growth, to 36,000 today, making top-level competition increasingly formidable; the 1972-73 champion Secretariat, usually cited alongside Man o'War as the best ever, raced in a crop fourteen times the size of Man o'War's. As competitive depth has improved, more and more great horses have had to prove themselves, head to head, against other greats, as Seabiscuit did. Epic rivalries between greats have included Nashua vs. Swaps in 1955; Bold Ruler, Gallant Man, Round Table, and General Duke in 1957; Affirmed vs. Alydar, then Seattle Slew, and finally Spectacular Bid, in 1978-79; and Easy Goer vs. Sunday Silence in 1989. Today's horses may face the toughest challenge; because of the increasing ease of international horse transport, contemporary stars like Cigar and Silver Charm must test their mettle against elite horses of Europe, Asia, Australia, South America, and the Middle East, from a world crop of 110,000 horses.

—L.H.