

Horse-racing legend Seabiscuit comes to life in a winning new biography

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"Seabiscuit: An American Legend" by Laura Hillenbrand Random House 339 pages, \$24,95

By MICHAEL GILTZ

he biggest news story of 1938 wasn't FDR or Huler. It wasn't the world war brewing in Europe, It wasn't even "Garie With the Wind," the Pulitzer Prec-winning best seller, which was being made into a movie for release the next

No, the bippest story of 1938 was Scabiscuit, the most unlikely racehorse ever to catapult into fame.

Veteran racing writer Laura Hillenbrand tells this tale of a sad littion of that could in a gripping new biography, "Scabiscutt: An American Legend," due out Tuesday, Her account of how

a forgotten, floundering racehorse became the toast of the sports world already has wowed the publishing community, being trumpered by the likes of best-selling historian Stephen Ambrose, who said of Hillenbrand, 'I wish all

sportswriters could write like this."

Veteran Sports Illustrated scribe
William Nack called her book "one
of the best sports biographies in

the history of the genre."

Scabiscuir, filled with high drama and colorful characters, also
has been optioned by Universal,
which has begun production of a
fillmed version of the story.



Laura Hillenbran

And what a story it is. The character's include Red Pollard, a broken-down jockey who never had any success before Seabiscuit — and never told even his closest friends that he was blind in his right cye (2 handicap that would have ended his racing career).

There's also owner Charles Howard, who left for California with 21 cents in his pocket and became a millionaire by popularizing the automobile. He grew so attached to Seabiscuit that winning brought him to tears.

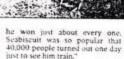
And there's Tom Smith, a reticent horse trainer who didn't have much patience for humans but treated his equestrian charges as if they were proces.

"They were good men," says Hill lenbrand, 33, who lives in Washing ton, "It's a peasure to be able to write a story about men who were really decent people."

Most important, of course, was Seabiscoit himself. The champior racer wasn't particularly good looking. His gait was so awkware that casual observers sometimes thought he was lame.

And he was so stubborn that his first frainer, a man considered to be the best in the country, gave up on him after endless work (Seabicuit's lare blooming under Smith is one reason the horse never won a Trijbe Crown, which is limited to 3-year olds).

"He was such a bad horse when he was 3 that he wasn't eligible for it," laughs Hillenbrand. "But there are a lot of other races to win, and



Despite being slight and awkward, Seabscuit, showed heart and blistering speed — and won-legions of fairs. These photographers got their shots as the horse arrived at Belmont Park in 1938.

The horse even had an arch rival, the classically handsome War Admiral. The two met in a wildly anticipated match race, one that is still considered by many to be the greatest in history.

Seabiscuit's story gives Hillenbrand a chance to unwell the harsh realities of horse racing in the 1920s and '30s. She describes punishing, life-threatening ways jockcys dicted to make weight; a whorehouse in Tijuana that was the largest in the world and a virtual second home for some of the

athletes: and behind-the-scenes politics that determined when the most popular horses would race and under what rules.

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Hillenbrand's passion for horses, she says, began the first time she went to a racetrack.

"I think I was 5 years old," she " says, "and I was hooked from the first horse I saw — the speed of it and the beauty of it."

Her interest in Seabiscuit began with a children's book called "Come On, Scabiscuit" by Ralph

"I remember carrying it around with me so much as a child that I actually read the covers right off of it." the author says. "It was a little paperback, a very cheap copy we'd gotten for 20 cents somewhere. The spine broke and the pages started flying overywhere. I still have that and it's all wrapped up in rubber bands because it's completely destroyed."

Ironically, as Hillenbrand was researching and writing her book, her own life proceeded at a slow pace: She's been fighting chronic fatigue syndrome for more than a decade. She did all her interviews for the book by phone and had friends go to libraries to get the extearch she lacked.

Sometimes, her vertigo gets so intense that she can write only a

paragraph at a time, and then must go outside and stare at the sky to try to regain her equilibrium.

Thy he regain were equilibrium. The health really took a turn for the worse when I turned in the book last September. Hillenbrand admits: I overedid it. My next project is probably going to be a lengthy article where I talk about CFS.

She says she hasn't always been comfortable discussing the affliction.

"It's something I kept secret from most people all this time," she says. "It needs a better, more accurate image. People lose their lives to this. They don't die of it, but you lose almost everything."