

The Allure of Thoroughbred Racing

By David Woods

Overtaken by lotteries, casinos, and other forms of gambling, thoroughbred racing has become something of an also-ran in recent decades.

But the success of Lauren Hillenbrand's bestseller *Seabiscuit*, and the hugely popular movie based on it, could herald a renaissance for the sport of kings. And Smarty Jones, narrowly denied the triple crown in 2004, attracted lots of attention even from those who don't normally pay much attention to horse racing. The success of Funny Cide, the unfashionably-bred winner of the 2003 Kentucky Derby, and owned by a group of regular folk from upstate New York, suggests that racing could once again become the sport of the people, too.



I hope so. As a young man in the 1950s I was taken to Epsom Racecourse, site of the English Derby which was first run there in 1780. I was immediately hooked. And pretty much for the reasons advanced by Luigi Gianoli in his book, *Horses and Horsemanship*: "The fascination of horse racing lies in its complex appeal to our varied interests and emotions, catering as it does to our scientific bent, irrational enthusiasm, pleasure in method, delight in chance, knowledge of the past, and search for the future."

There's also the intellectual challenge of analyzing form – speed, weight, genealogy, distance – while never losing sight of the fact that racehorses are not machines. The 'best' horse in a race might get hemmed in behind a wall of other horses, or might simply be off form and not feel like living up to its best performance. But, as Hall of Fame jockey Willie Shoemaker put it: "There's only one way to win – get there first!" And there's no doubt that whether you're an owner, a trainer, a jockey, or a bettor at the two-dollar window – winning is better than losing.

One of the earliest bets in racing was the coin toss between Lords Derby and Bunbury to see whose name would be applied to the annual classic for three-year-olds. Well, we know who won, otherwise we'd have the Kentucky or Santa Anita or Pennsylvania Bunbury today. Lord Bunbury did have the satisfaction of seeing his horse win the first Derby, though.

Since that little wager, billions of dollars have been bet, fortunes won and lost, on that composite of man, animal, heredity, climate, mathematics, and chance called racing – much of it, needless to say, by people who wouldn't know a roan filly from a chestnut gelding, a fetlock from a pastern. Gamblers' eternal optimism leads them to expect more rational performance from a horse than man has ever had. And they're partly right: no horse would bet on a human.

Thoroughbreds typically weigh more than 1,000 pounds. They are noble and courageous creatures, bred to compete. You can see what happens when a jockey falls off – the horse keeps galloping on to get to the winning post ahead of all the other contestants. And the jockeys, who average about 112 pounds, are just as brave and focused ... many of them suffering broken bones in a career that, unlike that of other sports, can last well into their 50s. The legendary British rider Lester Piggott, who was told that he was too tall to be a jockey, went on to win nine Derbies, hanging up his saddle when he was pushing 60.

All the thoroughbreds in the world stem from Oriental bloodlines introduced into England in the early 18th century – specifically from three great stallions and their descendants, Eclipse, Matchem and Herod. And the earliest report of racing in England dates from 1074.

So are we about to see a resurgence of interest in this great sport? The bucolic beauty of Delaware Park, with its purses inflated by revenues from the track's slot machines, suggests that we might. The once seedy venue now boasts gleaming facilities, a manicured infield, a tree-shaded paddock, and the \$750,000 Delaware Handicap race. Philadelphia Park, while not as pretty on the outside, boasts a completely refurbished interior, and a state of the art technology that makes it a hub for off track wagering by phone, online, or at its five Turf Club sites in and around Philadelphia. Now the legislators in Harrisburg have finally decided to allow slot machines at that track it will boost prize money and attract higher class fields.

History, pageantry, competition, overcoming the odds – that's what *Seabiscuit* was about. And that's what excited me about thoroughbred racing that long ago day at Epsom.

