



Seabiscuit takes exercise run or to his duel with War Admiral at Belmont in '38.



"Seabiscuit: An American Legend" by Laura Hillenbrand
Random House
339 pages, \$24.95

By MICHAEL GILTZ

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

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

Veteran racing writer Laura Hillenbrand tells this tale of a sad little horse that could in a gripping new biography, "Seabiscuit: 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 trumpeted 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."

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



Laura Hillenbrand

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

A thrilling ride

And what a story it is. The characters 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 eye (a 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 retiring horse trainer who didn't have much patience for humans but treated his equestrian charges as if

they were princes.

"They were good men," says Hillenbrand, 33, who lives in Washington. "It's a pleasure to be able to write a story about men who were really decent people."

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

And he was so stubborn that his first trainer, a man considered to be the best in the country, gave up on him after endless work (Seabiscuit's late blooming under Smith is one reason the horse never won a Triple 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, Seabiscuit showed heart and blistering speed — and won legions of fans. These photographers got their shots as the horse arrived at Belmont Park in 1938.

he won just about every one. Seabiscuit was so popular that 40,000 people turned out one day just to see him train."

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 unveil the harsh realities of horse racing in the 1920s and '30s. She describes punishing, life-threatening ways jockeys dieted to make weight; a warehouse 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.

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, Seabiscuit" by Ralph Moody.

"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 everywhere. 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 research 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.

"My health really took a turn for the worse when I turned in the book last September," Hillenbrand admits. "I overdid 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."