

My Own Seabiscuit:

“You don’t throw a whole life away because it’s banged up a little.”

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York Dispatch/York Sunday News



It happened way before my time. Still, I felt an odd connection to it, and I wasn’t sure why.

Maybe it had to do with my love of animals. Maybe it had to do with my admiration for horses – one of the most majestic creatures God ever put on this planet. Maybe it had to do with my affinity for rags-to-riches stories.

Maybe it’s a combination of all of the above.

Maybe a lot of things, I guess. Or maybe it’s because I have a horse story of my own.

For whatever reason, I love the story about Seabiscuit, the Thoroughbred race horse that single-handedly dragged America out of its doldrums during the Great Depression.

I bought and read the best-selling book by Laura Hillenbrand some months back. I watched a couple of TV documentaries about Seabiscuit. I watched the late 1940s movie, “The Story of Seabiscuit,” also known as “Pride of Kentucky,” two or three times. And I watched the most recent “Seabiscuit” movie last week.

The book was wonderful. The latest movie is outstanding. But neither are as good as the true story of Seabiscuit, the smallish – less than 15 hands (that’s about 60 inches at the shoulder) horse with a big heart that managed to become one of horse racing’s most enduring legends.

Seabiscuit was a horse from the wrong side of the tracks. A reject. A loser of 16 consecutive races at the start of his career. Undersized. A lousy attitude. Awful conformation. A sprung knee. An underdog every time he set foot on a race track.

But boy, could he run. When he felt like it, at least.

Add to Seabiscuit's tale of woes by matching him with Charles Howard, an owner with a broken heart; Tom Smith, a trainer with an uncanny knack with horses but who rarely spoke to humans; and Red Pollard, a jockey with a chip on his shoulder and one blind eye. The horse, and the three humans most closely connected to him, were battered, bruised and destined for the scrap heap of life.

But fate brought them together. And as a team, they set America on its ear in 1938 when few people had anything to cheer about.

People old enough to remember – that would be 75 or older, I'd guess – consider it the greatest horse race of all time. A match race. David against Goliath. The barnyard mule running against hi-ho Silver.

Two horses from a jump start. The tiny Seabiscuit against War Admiral, the triple crown winner in 1937 that was a foot taller, stronger and came from a better gene pool.

It was the little guy against racing's elite.

And the little guy won by four lengths.

It is a story about overcoming adversity. Not just the horse, but his owner, his trainer and his jockey too.

There is a line in the book and movie that really resonated with me. Actually it was the same line by two different people. Smith used it when explaining to Howard why he wouldn't put a horse down because it was damaged goods, and Howard used it later when explaining to Smith why he wouldn't fire Pollard after learning his jockey was blind in one eye.

It is a line – and a philosophy – we'd all do well to commit to memory: “You don't throw a whole life away because it's banged up a little.”

It's not a Golden Rule, but it's close to it.

In a nutshell, it's the story of Seabiscuit.

It's also the story of a down-and-out Amish buggy horse that was headed for a Canadian dog food factory a few years ago, until it was rescued at the last minute by the Lost and Found Horse Rescue in Jacobus.

Her name is Melody, a beautiful, sweet-tempered Saddlebred mare that was 17 years old when I adopted her from the Horse Rescue. Actually, it'd be closer to the truth to say she adopted me.

What I learned about her was that she had been used as a buggy horse by an Amish family in Lancaster County. But she came up a little lame – bum right knee – and apparently wasn't considered reliable anymore. In the Amish world, horses have a job to do. And when they can no longer do it, they're considered excess baggage.

So she was sent to a horse auction, where most of the horses were bought for next to nothing and sent to a dog food factory. But Mel got lucky. She was rescued and then adopted by me three years ago.

Let me tell you something about Melody. She's never won a race. In fact, she's never run a race as far as I know, except the daily race to get to the hay before her pasture buddy, Cochise, can get to it. But she's about the sweetest gal a first-time horse owner – that would be me – could have found.

It was meant to be, I think. Fate. Good fortune. Luck. Whatever you want to call it.

It's true, I take good care of her. But she takes very good care of me, too. She tolerates my

mistakes. She doesn't let me do anything terribly stupid. And she never fails to greet me when I appear out of nowhere.

We ride now and again, the old gal and I, just enough to keep her joints and mine limber but not so much to punish her bad knee. Mostly, her's is the life of Riley. She takes it easy in her twilight years – lots of grass and enough hay and grain to keep some meat on her old bones.

And I'm glad to help her do it. Few things in life make me happier, make me feel better about myself, than knowing I'm doing a good thing for Mel.

There's that line again: "You don't throw a whole life away because it's banged up a little."

It's the story of Seabiscuit.

It's Melody's story, too.

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