

Seabiscuit Comes to San Diego

That was as rough a race as I've ever seen in my whole life. They were hitting each other over the head with their whips and Richardson had Woolf in a leg-lock. Never seen so much trouble in one race and there was a hell of a stink about it.

--Oscar Otis, track announcer, Seabiscuit vs. Ligaroti, Aug.12, 1938.

It was the event that put the Del Mar racetrack on the map. The horse racing duel between the thoroughbreds Seabiscuit and Ligaroti drew more than 20,000 fans to the seaside track while a captivated nationwide audience listened to the race on a live radio broadcast.

In only its second season, the Del Mar racetrack needed a spark to boost sagging attendance. Bing Crosby's \$600,000 investment was attracting only about five thousand fans each race day—drawn largely from San Diego's quiet population of fewer than 200,000, or from Los Angeles, a hundred miles away by train. But a match race between California's biggest sports celebrity: Seabiscuit, and Ligaroti, a rising star from Argentina, promised national exposure, and a big gate.



Seabiscuit with trainer Tom Smith

A friendly family rivalry led to the famous race. Lin Howard, who owned Ligaroti along with Bing Crosby, was the son of Charles S. Howard, owner of Seabiscuit. The two horses had faced each other before. Seabiscuit had won but Ligaroti was improving fast, winning three of his last four starts. Lin Howard thought his horse was ready to upset the 'Biscuit and challenged his father to a head-to-head race. The two Howards struck a deal to run a mile and one-eighth on August 12. It would be an exhibition race with no public betting. But the owners would compete for a purse of \$25,000, winner-take-all.

A poster promoting the race listed the matchups: Father vs. Son, Charles Howard vs. Bing Crosby, America vs. Argentina. Even the trainers were matched up: Seabiscuit's trainer was "Silent Tom" Smith while Ligaroti was trained by Smith's son, Jimmy.

A record crowd filled the grandstand on the day of the race. Lin Howard set up a cheering section for Ligaroti. His designated cheerleader was David Butler, director of several Shirley Temple movies, and later the "Leave to Beaver" TV series. Butler wore a red sweater emblazoned with a big "BL" for Binglin, the name for the Crosby and Howard stable. Hundreds of rooters waved pennants with small L's for Ligaroti. Bing Crosby and actor Pat O'Brien watched from the roof of the grandstand, behind a microphone that would call the race for the radio audience.

“Seabiscuit by one punch” was the consensus prediction. But the *San Diego Sun* boldly predicted the favorite would win by eight lengths “unless he is pulled up to give Ligaroti a chance.” To even the odds both owners had agreed to a big weight advantage for the underdog: Ligaroti would run with 115 pounds, Seabiscuit would carry 130.

A coin toss determined the starting position and Seabiscuit won the important inside post. Trainer Tom Smith told his jockey, George “The Iceman” Woolf, to go for the early lead and get clear of Ligaroti.

Both horses broke cleanly from the gate. Seabiscuit led by a half length going into the first turn. Aboard Ligaroti, jockey Noel “Spec” Richardson drew within a head of Seabiscuit and stayed there. Going into the final turn, the horses were matched stride for stride, close to the rail, only inches apart.

The crowd was frantic. So were the jockeys. Unable to pass Seabiscuit, Spec Richardson reached over and grabbed Woolf’s saddlecloth. Woolf fought back with his whip. Then Richardson locked his leg with Woolf’s. As the horses approached the wire, a desperate Woolf grabbed Ligaroti’s bridle and tugged. They crossed the finish line with Seabiscuit ahead by a nose.

The victory set a new track record (1:49) that smashed the old mark by four seconds. The crowd was thrilled but was surprised when the inquiry sign flashed almost immediately. The two jockeys stormed off the track, both claiming the other had fouled. Bing Crosby met the riders in the jockey’s room and told them to keep quiet.

After a brief consultation, the track stewards declared Seabiscuit the official winner. Woolf and Richardson, however, were suspended.

Days later, the Del Mar stewards watched grainy film footage of the jockey duel down the home stretch. While it seemed to show Richardson as the aggressor, the stewards decided to lift the suspensions on both riders since the race had been an exhibition with no public betting involved.

The exciting race stayed in public’s attention for days. Then the *San Diego Sun* added a new controversy with the claim that Seabiscuit’s rider, George Woolf, had been instructed “to hold his horse in” and “make a race out of it.” It was further alleged that Richardson, knowing of Woolf’s orders, had placed large bets on Ligaroti.

Charles Howard dismissed the charge, saying “it would be foolish to give a jockey aboard Seabiscuit orders to make it close because Seabiscuit has a tendency to loaf if he’s ahead.” Howard also pointed out that Seabiscuit’s record time “proved that he was really running and that Ligaroti is a much better horse than we figured.”

Both horses would finish the 1938 season on top. Ligaroti would win the Del Mar Handicap. Seabiscuit, in the best known race of his storied career, would defeat Triple Crown winner War Admiral on November 1 in another match race. But for Del Mar, the classic duel will always be Seabiscuit vs. Ligaroti.



Before 20,000 screaming fans, Seabiscuit leads Ligaroti by a head as they approach the finish.
Del Mar Turf Club

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2011).