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AH English I: 2nd Period

24 March 2005

Seabiscuit Pulls Through in the Final Stretch

Thesis: Although *Seabiscuit* has its faults, it pulls through in the end because of its spectacular cinematography, comic relief, and cast.

I. Faults

A. Plot holes

1. Characters' lives
2. Racing gaps
3. Seabiscuit's lineage

B. Documentary style

1. McCullough's voice
2. Still images

II. Cinematography

A. Throws audience into races

B. Creates excitement and suspense

III. Comic Relief

A. Break from documentary

B. Tick-Tock McGlaughlin

IV. Cast

A. Tobey Maguire

1. Remarkable transformation
2. Underestimated as an actor

B. Jeff Bridges

C. Chris Cooper

1. Best performance in the movie
2. Brilliant transformation

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Based on the 2001 best selling book by Laura Hillenbrand, Gary Ross's *Seabiscuit* was a hit at the box office. Thousands flocked to the movie theaters to see this inspiring story of an underdog colt who ran his way to victory to become an American legend. The story begins with three men: an automobile salesman, a horse trainer, and a jockey. They struggled through the Great Depression finding hope in a racehorse. *Seabiscuit* provided optimism for Americans battling hard times. The critics loved Ross's rendition of Hillenbrand's novel. Although *Seabiscuit* has its faults, it pulls through in the end because of its spectacular cinematography, comic relief, and cast.

The movie was not perfect and did have its faults, including plot holes and the tone of a documentary. *Seabiscuit*, as Honeycutt, a critic from *The Hollywood Reporter.com*, said, because it was based on Hillenbrand's novel, creates a challenge for Ross to create and sustain historical plot lines (Honeycutt). First of all, he fails to include key elements of the characters' lives, such as the nagging question of what actually happens to Red Pollard's family after it abandon him. In addition to this, the audience is never quite sure of what exactly Tom Smith does before he becomes *Seabiscuit*'s trainer (Honeycutt). Ross also does not mention the fact that racehorses are handicapped with weights, and the large load that that *Seabiscuit* had to overcome with an unusually tall jockey; yet, he was still able to win (Ansen 54). The most surprising thing of all that was left out of the movie was *Seabiscuit*'s lineage. Ross makes the big match race look like

a race between any common rose and a distinguished horse, when in fact, both Seabiscuit and War Admiral are both descended from the great Man O' War (Keough). Seabiscuit's sire was also Hardtack. So as David Denby, a critic for *The New Yorker*, states, Seabiscuit was descended from two illustrious racehorses (Denby 84). Another flaw in the movie is the documentary atmosphere. Ross chooses to punctuate his film with voice-overs narrated by the familiar voice of David McCullough, a popular historian from PBS (Scott). McCullough's voice is "ideal for a documentary, but not for a narrative film" (Denby 84). Accompanying the voice-overs are photographs of automobiles and struggling Americans during the depression. These photographs add to the documentary-like quality of the film. Ross uses this technique of PBS style footage rather than creating something better through dramatic presentation (Denby 84). Clearly, the plot holes and documentary tone of the film downsize the movie.

On the other hand, the movie has many strong points as well, including its cinematography. The camera is especially well maneuvered during the racing sequences of the film. The director plunges the audience right into the fray of horses and jockeys (Denby 84). Ross seems to get so close to the action that the spectators seem to be hovering between two desperately striving horses and their jockeys (Ebert). This creates such excitement and suspense that viewers that already know the outcome of the race are still poised on the edge of their seats (Ansen 54). Ross and his cinematographer, John Schwartzman, definitely did not go wrong when they created these stomach-tightening racing scenes.

Another good quality about the film is its delightful comic relief. The director offers a break from the sluggish documentary like atmosphere by inventing the character of Tick-Tock McGlaughlin, a frenzied radio announcer (Ebert). McGlaughlin blurts out the events of the race track while throwing in corny sound effects and well-worn one liners. McGlaughlin's exciting

personality is perfect for a second-half comeback from the tiresome voice-overs of David McCullough (Honeycutt). Without it the movie surely would have gone south.

The best thing about the movie is its outstanding cast, which consists of Tobey Maguire, Jeff Bridges, and Chris Cooper. Tobey Maguire plays the part of a jockey named Red Pollard, who was abandoned at the race track by his parents early in life. Maguire undergoes a remarkable transformation to play the part of Pollard. His red hair, hollowed out eyes, and tall, slender body transforms him into a figure that “wouldn’t be out of place in a Dorothea Lange Dust Bowl photograph” (Ansen 54). Maguire’s performance is strong and leaves his adolescent softness a thing of the past (Denby 84). Maguire is underestimated as ever in his ability to succeed in a tough role like that of Red Pollard. Another actor that gives a fabulous performance is Jeff Bridges. He plays the part of Charles Howard, an ambitious automobile salesman obsessed about the future. His character buys a horse, after the loss of his son, who would later become the renowned racer of the depression era. On screen, Bridges bears Howard’s grief perfectly in his eyes and shoulders (Scott). The best performance of the film was put in by Chris Cooper, who plays the part of Tom Smith, a taciturn horse trainer. He undergoes a brilliant transformation to become a man who says exactly what he wants to say and nothing more (Denby 84). He moves his mouth and nods his head just like a horse would against the wind to make his character come across in precisely the right way (Denby 84). This wonderful cast certainly adds to this superb film.

Clearly, the cinematography, comic relief, and remarkable cast aid in making this heartwarming tale a success. Without them the theaters would not have been nearly as crowded as they were when *Seabiscuit* came out. This movie is truly a must-see that no one wants to miss. Gary Ross does a phenomenal job of putting together this uplifting story.

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