

NICHOLSON, JAMES C. *Never Say Die: A Kentucky Colt, the Epsom Derby, and the Rise of the Modern Thoroughbred Industry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2013. Pp. xvi+218. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 cb.

Who would have thought that a Kentucky-bred racehorse, the first to win England's prestigious Epsom Derby in 1954, would have in common The Beatles, the heir to the Singer Sewing Machine Company, and the third Aga Khan, in addition to the author's grandfather? James C. Nicholson, author of *The Kentucky Derby: How the Run for the Roses Became America's Premier Sporting Event*, weaves together an interesting backstory on these connections, making a case for the rise of the modern thoroughbred industry in America and its eventual international domination of the sport.

The horse's breeder, Sultan Mohammed Shah, the third Aga Khan, discovered horse racing while in Paris and after World War I had an epiphany during a dinner conversation in England when he realized he wanted to breed and race thoroughbreds in Europe, competing at the highest levels. Nicholson's grandfather, John A. Bell III, rescued the colt from a difficult birth and raised him in Lexington, Kentucky. Robert Sterling Clark, owner of the colt, inherited his wealth from his grandfather, Edward Clark, whose business smarts turned the Singer Sewing Machine Company into a profitable enterprise despite the profligate nature of his eccentric bigamist partner, Isaac Merritt Singer.

Nicholson relates the story of original Beatles drummer Pete Best's mother Mona pawning her jewelry to bet on the longshot Never Say Die to win the 1954 Epsom Derby. She cashed in her winnings to put a down payment on a house in Liverpool where she converted the basement into the Casbah Coffee Club with the opening, and soon to be regular, band, The Quarrymen (later renamed The Beatles), in residence.

Unfortunately, the tale weakens after Never Say Die is retired to stud. Nicholson introduces tangential horses who raced long after Never Said Die passed away, with only gossamer threads to tie the later stories together. Up to that point, the "six degrees of separation" tied together an unlikely assortment of people who would otherwise have no connection to each other. The mini-biographies whet the reader's appetite for more in-depth exploration of their lives—beyond the scope of this book.

Nicholson makes a good case for Never Say Die being the fulcrum upon which the balance of thoroughbred racing teetered in the mid 1950s, tipping the scale from British racing and breeding dominance to American in the years that followed. The horse's ability to win the Epsom Derby proved that American horses could stand on equal footing with their British counterparts. Nicholson provides solid, well-documented evidence for the shift from landed English aristocracy to American industrialists in transforming twentieth-century racing. All-in-all it is a fascinating story of how the butterfly flapping its wings changed the course of history—for thoroughbred racing and Western culture.

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