

The New Orleans Times-Picayune

Friday March 05, 2004

Win or place, they'll show

Sure bet for fun: Book club members will costume for day at the races

Angus Lind

When the horses go to the post Saturday for the classic race for 3-year-old fillies -- the Fair Grounds Oaks -- there will be a genteel group of literati in attendance, some women from Natchez, Miss., who could easily steal the show in the Fair Grounds clubhouse.

Members of the Natchez Women's Book Society, who will be busing in for the City of Natchez Purse, another race on the card, will be wearing head-to-toe period attire from the 1930s in honor of Seabiscuit. Hats and gloves are mandatory. Purses and pearls will accent the look.

The women read and reviewed Laura Hillenbrand's best-selling book, "Seabiscuit," and were so taken with it, they decided to get in the spirit by costuming. There are three rules to get on their bus: You have to have read the book, you have to costume and you have to be a woman. No men allowed.

"After all the mimosas on the bus, I don't know how genteel we'll be," said Diana Glaze, one of the ringleaders. "And I'm in charge of the mimosas."

There's little doubt that "Seabiscuit" -- the book and the movie, which was nominated for the Best Picture Oscar -- stirred interest in horse racing that hasn't been stirred in years. You didn't have to know or understand horse racing to get into the book, Glaze said.

"None of us are horse racing aficionados, none of us are involved in racing but without fail we all gave it a high rating at our meeting. I didn't realize how influential horse racing was during the Depression. It was a very educational book," she said.

And it was something the society could have fun with. With the City of Natchez day at the Fair Grounds coming up, she said, "We just decided we were going to pretend we were going to see Seabiscuit run. We do a lot of costuming here in Natchez for Mardi Gras and the theater, so it was a natural progression for us."

To rally the troops to participate in the outing, Glaze wrote a call of a race, a spin-off of what might be heard by track commentator Michael Wrona:

"And they're off! Boredom takes the lead out of the gate and into the mud, followed closely by Tedium, with Monotony running a close third. Nearing the first turn Ennui takes the rail and gains the advantage over Fatigue, holding a slight lead over Exhaustion.

"But wait -- emerging under sunny skies we now see Amusement overtaking Monotony and gaining on Tedium. On the outside Joy makes a move and is determined to outpace Ennui. Fun has found an opening and is running strong through the pack. Moving into position on the far side, Tedium is threatening to overtake Boredom but his strength is failing . . .

"And now it appears that Boredom, Tedium and Monotony have lost all steam. Exhaustion and Ennui have lost their rhythm. This race is being dominated by Amusement and Joy with Fun gaining the inside and racing for the finish line -- and it's Fun by a nose!"

Book clubs nationwide have regained the popularity they once had in the 19th century. Typical of Natchez's rich Southern heritage, its club is not a club but a "society" and there are "rules."

One of those rules states: "As Southern ladies are wont to do, they change the rules whenever the mood hits."

Also, members do not have to attend any particular number of meetings, do not have to finish or even start the book to attend the meetings and are allowed to use the meetings as a method of pretending to be well read.

A passage from "Wives and Daughters," written by Elizabeth Gaskell in 1866, describes the meeting of a book society in a bookseller's shop as "the center of news and gossip, the club, as it were, of the little town. Everybody who pretended to gentility in the place belonged to it, it was a test of gentility, indeed, rather than of education or a love of literature."

The Natchez Women's Book Society meets at the Cover to Cover book store on Main Street in Natchez and, of course, subscribes to that 1866 appreciation of what they are all about. "True Southern ladies always strive for total gentility," said Glaze.

So, she was asked naively, does the genteel book society of Natchez gossip?

"Absolutely. What do you think keeps us in there? We have to be informed. And we prefer to think of it not as gossip but as having a genuine interest in our community," she said.

Of course. Ask any member of a ladies book club.

The running of the City of Natchez Classic at the Fair Grounds is intended to commemorate the city's rich antebellum horse-racing heritage. Coincidentally there was, a century later, in the late 1940s, a thoroughbred named Natchez who was a direct descendant of the legendary Man o' War.

Not all of the women have been to a racetrack before so visiting the Fair Grounds for live racing will be quite an experience. Glaze is one of those who has been to the betting windows before. When she was in Lafayette, she recalls vividly her first trip to Evangeline Downs:

"I won eight out of 10 races. And I've never come close to doing that again."

.....

Columnist Angus Lind can be reached at alind@timespicayune.com or at (504) 826-3449.