



Ruffian: A Race Track Romance

William Nack

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On July 6, 1975, a 3-year-old filly named Ruffian was loaded into the starting gate at Belmont Park for a televised match race against Kentucky Derby winner colt Foolish Pleasure. Since winning her first race a little more than a year earlier, the unbeaten, unflappable Ruffian had literally raced her way into the hearts of a nation. One of those hearts belonged to *Newsday* turf reporter William Nack. As a boy in Illinois, Nack had carried in his pocket a trading card of his hero, Swaps, the winner of the 1955 Kentucky Derby. As a young soldier in Vietnam, Nack tuned out the midnight bomb blasts by listening to racetrack broadcasts from Santa Anita. Now, fresh off the publication of his astonishing biography of Secretariat -- described by *Seabiscuit* author Laura Hillenbrand as "the gold standard of horse books" -- he found himself smitten once again.

But tragedy struck that summer's day at Belmont Park. After charging from the gate, Ruffian stumbled and shattered her right foreleg. She had to be put down. Nack's heartbreaking run with thoroughbred racing's most famous filly will soon be immortalized in a made-for-TV movie to be broadcast on ESPN and ABC. In this moving, lyrical memoir, he relives the afternoon that forever changed his love affair with the track.

Ruffian: A Race Track Romance Details

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Cat says

The book is as much about, or even more, Nack's love of horses and horse racing and the events of the 70's and beyond which brought a dose of reality to that love. Ruffian's breakdown during the match race with Foolish Pleasure was the pivot. She was bred for speed, with a pedigree weighted with forebears who were fast, but prone to break down. She was raced carefully, and removed from racing for a long rest after suffering a hairline fracture in one leg. At the same time, Nack notes that the growing prevalence of other trainers and owners to use steroids to mask pain and keep horses racing. It was a match race that didn't need to be run, but trainer Frank Whiteley and owners Stuart and Barbara Janney were sucked up into a carnival atmosphere that presented a Ruffian-Foolish Pleasure match race as the horse race battle of the sexes, in the same vein as the Billy Jean King-Bobby Riggs tennis match.

Nack was at Belmont when the race was run and witnessed the efforts of a team of vets and her trainer to save Ruffian. The last few pages are very difficult to read. Throughout runs his thoughts that the race wasn't necessary, no chance that Ruffian might have beaten Foolish Pleasure was worth the risk of running her.

I would gladly give the book that one extra star, except it occasionally feels choppy. I believe Nack put it together from articles he wrote at the time and perhaps a diary and that shows in a slight disjointedness.

It's a small book, 5 1/4 x 7 1/2, 103 pages, hardback. It's a simple elegance in its format and adds to the feel of holding and reading a personal memoir.

Megan says

A fast read and love song for racing and for the horse who embodied the best and worst of of it.

Rochelle says

Takes 2 seconds to read. Sweet and succinct!

Carin says

The definitive book on Ruffian has already been written and this one is not it (read *Burning From The Start* by Jane Schwartz.) Still it is interesting to hear Nack's perspective on the triumph and trajedy surrounding the greatest filly that ever lived.

Wendy says

I'm not entirely sure how he managed to conceal it in his book on Secretariat, but William Nack is a pompous ass. Seriously. He thinks he knows everything just because he's been around a while. Sorry, but other people have been around horses, too, and most of them don't act like that makes them smarter than everyone else. Also, he places himself in situations where cameras say he was not, like running across a racetrack during a race...who would do that? And why can't I spot him on the footage? It could just be that I can't find him because I've always been terrible at 'Where's Waldo?', but I seriously don't see him running across the track and almost getting run over by Foolish Pleasure.

Also, his account of Barbaro is considerably different from the people *who actually knew the horse and were standing right there with him after he broke down*. He is clearly condescending about Barbaro, and characterizes him as being so scared he almost hurt himself further. Other people have said he was relatively calm and seemed to know he should try not to move, and other than repeatedly flexing the injured leg in what seems to be an uncontrollable pain reflex, he stood fairly calmly in the footage, considering the level of pain he had to be in and how much adrenaline was probably pumping through him. I was watching live on television at home, and I didn't see him plunging or trying to rear or do anything else to almost hurt himself.

Basically, the whole tone of the book is off-putting, and I did **not** enjoy Nack preaching to us as though 'only *he* really knew the horse!' I enjoyed his Secretariat book, but I **hated** this one and will not be reading anything else he writes.

Instead of this one, read *Ruffian: Burning from the Start*. It's about a million times better.

Miranda Prather says

The words move across the page in a lyrical way that evokes strong emotion, just like Ruffian herself.

Teeni says

Truly, "A Racetrack Romance" for the author. I loved his writing; that he didn't dumb down the language and his dry, fast (pun intended) style. Short but memorable.

Nicole says

I'm on page 15 and I'm already holding back the tears. So sad. This is an insider view from a man who was there and knows so much about horseracing. An amazing story.

RRex says

An excellent book on a great horse that many consider to be the female Secretariat.

Nack's SECRETARIAT: THE MAKING OF A CHAMPION is also highly recommended.

Tom Barnes says

One of the greatest fillies in racing history was undefeated before the race hailed as 'The battle of the sexes' in a match race that pitted Ruffian against Kentucky Derby winner Foolish Pleasure."

Ford says

It is a dated book unless you like horse racing, It all took place in the early 70's so I remember the horses and some of the events.

kathy says

I read this after watching the HBO Movie, Ruffian, so most of it was a repeat and therefore disappointing. Also, it was severely lacking in photos of Ruffian.

Andrew says

Not sure why I picked this up, but in the end, it was a well-put together and interesting read. It really is a love story. Nack loves his horses and Ruffian was a filly unlike any other. Tragic as well. Ruffian was the Barbaro of her generation.
