



'Crazy Good' traces life of harness-race star Dan Patch

By [Deirdre Donahue](#), USA TODAY

At the starting gate of summer book sales, *Crazy Good: The True Story of Dan Patch, the Most Famous Horse in America* by Charles Leerhsen is positioned nicely on the inside rail.

It's a terrific look at a legendary if now forgotten equine superstar named Dan Patch. Leerhsen does for early 20th-century American harness racing what Laura Hillenbrand's *Seabiscuit* did for Depression-era Thoroughbred racing.

Both are popular histories seeking to explain why the public connected with these beautiful animals.

Horse racing has people's attention right now. After winning the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness, Big Brown could be the first horse in 30 years to sport the Triple Crown if he wins the Belmont on Saturday.

That excitement is tempered by the breakdown at the Derby of the filly Eight Belles, who was euthanized on the track after breaking her front ankles. And Barbaro was put down in January 2007 after he shattered his leg at the 2006 Preakness.

Leerhsen's book touches on this central conflict: For centuries, humans have loved the thrill of watching horses race, but when does it become too dangerous for the horse? At what point does sport become exploitation?

By all accounts, Dan Patch adored the roar of the crowd. At the dawn of the 20th century, Patch reigned as the Secretariat of harness racing at a time when it was more popular than Thoroughbred racing.

Born in Indiana in 1896, Dan Patch was a small-town Hoosier made good. Intended for recreational riding, the stallion showed such speed that at age 4 he began racing. During his racing years from 1900 through 1909, he was front-page newspaper copy.

At the height of his fame, he earned for his owner more than \$1 million a year. His image appeared on everything from tonics to sleds to washing machines.

Crowds of 100,000 turned out for a glimpse of the stallion who possessed an unusually gentle temperament yet radiated charisma. Dwight Eisenhower lined up with his parents at the 1904 Kansas State Fair to see him, and Harry Truman recalled that as a boy he had written a fan letter.

Dan Patch's career was less dramatic than Seabiscuit's, so this equine biography is less compelling than Hillenbrand's book. But Leerhsen, an editor at *Sports Illustrated* who has worked at *Us Weekly* and *People*, has a snappy pop style that will help readers grasp the difference between Standardbreds and Thoroughbreds, trotters and pacers.

Leerhsen also includes the seamy side of the track in the 1900s when fixed races, cocaine rubdowns and poisoning horses were standard practices.

Patch's owner would push him to race even as he grew slow before dying in 1916. But thanks to Leerhsen, Dan Patch returns for another good run.