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# A Horse's Death Grips Many in the United States

By REUTERS

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PHILADELPHIA (Reuters) - For some Americans, weary of war in Iraq and uncertain about the future, the race horse [Barbaro's](#) fight for life was a welcome tale of hope in the face of adversity.

The horse was euthanized last Monday after losing an eight-month battle to recover from an injury sustained -- before millions watching on live TV -- in last year's prestigious Preakness Stakes.

Many believed Barbaro, winner of the Kentucky Derby two weeks earlier, could have been the first horse since 1978 to win the coveted Triple Crown, the pinnacle of U.S. racing.

The horse's story recalled the rags-to-riches story of Seabiscuit, who triumphed in the face of long odds during the Great Depression, and who like Barbaro captured headlines across the United States.

``We are going through a period in American history when there is insecurity and discontent," said communications professor William Husson of the [State University of New York](#).

``Horses are pure of heart and noble in spirit -- they can't lie and they can't steal," he said.

Barbaro's emphatic victory in the Kentucky Derby gave him a mythical aura and led people to see his achievements and, later, his downfall in human terms. ``There was a person with tremendous potential cruelly cut down," Husson said.

The interest in Barbaro was a faint echo of the immense following enjoyed by Seabiscuit, an unlikely racing champion who captured the hearts of Americans to become a legend and a symbol of hope. Against all odds and after a run of bad fortune, Seabiscuit became an almost unstoppable champion and the single biggest newsmaker of 1938 -- receiving more coverage than [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) or [Adolf Hitler](#).

Barbaro's death made the front page of the New York Times on Tuesday and took up almost two pages of its sports section. A column was headlined ``Horse's Desperate Struggle Gripped Anguished Nation."

## HEADLINES AND TEARS

The Philadelphia Inquirer, the nearest big-city paper to the veterinary hospital where the horse was treated, devoted most of its front page and five inside pages to the story.

``I couldn't stop crying, and neither could my children," said Shantih Brando, 39, a mother of four from the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia, recalling their reaction to news of Barbaro's death. ``You could be anywhere in the country and feel a connection to it."

Brando said that while she also cries over military and civilian deaths in Iraq, she would rather lament the loss of a horse than the many war dead, perhaps because the horrors of war are so much greater. ``It's easier to cry about than hundreds of those people in Iraq," she said.

But others were angered by the idea of people grieving for a horse while the country was at war and many Americans were suffering at home.

``Things are so bad, and it diverts attention because they don't want to face it," said Tanya Slattery, a physical therapist also from Mount Airy.

For months, the public expressed its love for Barbaro through dozens of get-well cards and posters, displayed on the gate of the [University of Pennsylvania's](#) New Bolton Center, where he was housed.

``This horse just had a wonderful personality," said Joette Rockow, a communications lecturer at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee who studies the role of animals in popular culture. ``People wanted the story to end well."

Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University of Buffalo, said the public appetite for the Barbaro story reflected a desire for distraction from more pressing matters such as war, healthcare or poverty.

In a celebrity-obsessed media world, Barbaro was just the latest sports figure who allowed people to forget about real challenges, she argued. ``People don't want to think about what bad shape we're in," she said. ``It's a matter of fiddling while Rome burns."

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