



Guest Forum

## Sham:

# In The Shadow Of A Superhorse

by MARY WALSH

An American champion at heart, “The Magnificent Sham” achieved an unofficial record for the second-fastest time in the history of the Kentucky Derby. To many, he remains second only to the legendary Secretariat. Ironically, challenging Secretariat for the 1973 Triple Crown abruptly shattered his quest for fame and almost ended his life.

The following are some excerpts from this compelling book, scheduled to be published in mid-October, which unfolds that brilliant animal’s spellbinding story—the story of a courageous underdog born in the wrong place in time.

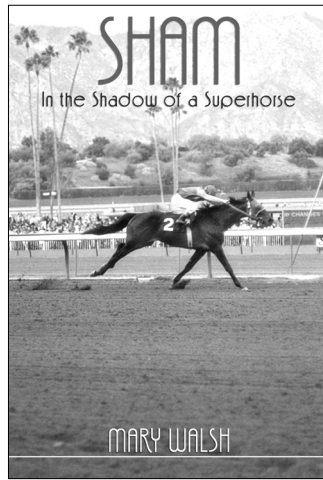
**California:** Santa Anita Park was beautiful. Warm, humid breezes drifted over the racetrack from the Pacific Ocean, leaving the grounds lush and tropical. When the sun rose above the magnificent San Gabriel Mountains, that racetrack was transformed into a gardener’s paradise. The renovated ‘64 design was inspired by Granada’s breathtaking Alhambra gardens. Thousands of blooming bushes and exotic flowers lined the roadway and park entrance amid towering rows of *Washingtonia* robusta palm trees that gracefully swayed in the breeze.

Spanish architectural design and exquisite ornamental sculptures throughout the park enhanced the grounds. A massive bronze statue of Seabiscuit proudly gazed out over the manicured box hedges at the base of the stairs that cascaded down from the Clubhouse Restaurant.

Sham stood with his head poking over his stall door looking out over the meticulously landscaped paddock gardens surrounding the saddling barn and walking ring. Birds swooped through trees singing musical songs. With tall, gracefully swaying palm trees piercing the cerulean sky, and millions of exotic tropical flowers in perpetual bloom, the grounds held a whimsical feeling of timelessness—a mysterious kind of Shangri-La.

**Santa Anita Derby:** Pincay wasted no time. He aggressively took hold of Sham, applied the whip to his heaving side and scrubbed the colt’s neck. Instantly, Sham stretched out and reached through the air like a black panther springing for the kill. He pulled away from Linda’s Chief as that horse, in turn, sped up and distanced himself from Out of the East. They were matched stride for stride only two lengths apart, both jockeys reaching and pushing in rhythm.

Sham’s speed increased again as the finish line loomed ahead. The horse skimmed over the dirt in a blur, each foot-fall driving him faster as he quickly surpassed Linda’s Chief by another half-length. Pincay froze immobile for Sham’s final thrust across the wire.



“And it’s Sham! First, in a burning drive, he wins it by two-and-a-half lengths equaling the stakes record of 1:47! Linda’s Chief second, another two-and-a-half lengths in front of Out of the East, with Ancient Title fourth. Groshawk and Knightly Dawn are fifth and sixth,” the announcer screamed above the pandemonium of the crowd.

**After the Kentucky Derby:** They all knew they had an incredible horse, even if he crossed the wire second to Secretariat’s furious charge. Sham conquered the field and led Secretariat on a progressively faster drive just to catch him. He forced Big Red into the fastest closing in Derby history, an estimated 23-second fraction. Incredibly,

Secretariat never tired; instead, he increased his speed from :25 1/5, :24, :23 4/5, :23 2/5, to :23. Unbelievable numbers in a mile-and-a-quarter race, and a record that more than thirty years later would not be duplicated!

Even though the official time is never really taken for a horse other than the winner, a general rule for handicappers is one length equals one-fifth of a second. Therefore, Sham’s crossing the finish line two-and-a-half lengths behind Secretariat made him an unofficial record breaker, too. If Secretariat won in a record time of 1:59.40, then Sham crossed the wire with a record-breaking time of 1:59.90! Sigmund and Viola had the second-fastest horse to ever run the Kentucky Derby, an unofficial record that would remain unbroken into the twenty-first century! The only other horse that ran under 2:00 would be Monarchos at 1:59.97 in 2001.

**The Belmont:** It almost appeared that the copper horse was quietly calculating some spectacular feat—an exploit of magnitudinal proportions. Secretariat was as cool as a vial of nitroglycerin. Flawlessly, he burst into overdrive like a time bomb. The mighty red horse had engineered a new gear ratio—a phenomenal dimension of speed—precise timing, perfect balance; a new efficiency requiring minimal power to deliver equal force. His hoof beats sounded like a tribal drum pounding out a war chant. He was soaring!

Sham’s body strained as he gave all he had. Bones and tendons violently writhed, while his heart pumped in staccato as he fearlessly kept up. His swollen nostrils, throat, and lungs sucked at the rushing air in loud, rhythmic snorts. The dark horse’s powerful frame whirred like a turbine engine in top gear, churning red-hot. 🐾

*Mary Walsh lives with her husband on their horse ranch in Parker, Colorado. Her lifelong interest in horseracing and sentiment for the underdog have become her writing passion. With several publications to her credit, she has spent the past six years researching her debut book about Sham, an unsung hero.*