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Gaming the Movies: Secretariat

(Note: This is an abbreviated column, less extensive than the normally published versions but it collects some helpful ideas in case you wanted to play a game inspired by the movie, Secretariat.)

My wife and I watch a lot of movies, although this was a rare weekend that we saw two at the theater. Friday night was spent with the Social Network (very impressive, great acting, compelling) which was fortuitous considering Eisenberg and Zuckerman's appearance on Saturday Night Live night (one of the better SNL's this season). But it was Saturday night's movie, Secretariat, that had me thinking of gaming.

You might ask why a classically constructed Disney sports/horse movie about actual people, races, and horse could be relevant to your next role-playing game night with your friends. Close your eyes and... ok, wait, don't close them, you have to keep reading since I don't podcast this stuff (yet). Imagine a fantasy realm full of tension, countries at peace but barely, eager to compete against each other in every way, to demonstrate their strength. If that state lasted for a few decades, a firm tradition could have taken hold, say one where the different countries competed in a series of animal competitions?

I say "animal competitions" because while horse racing is truly compelling and could definitely become a major element in an adventure or even a campaign, our fantasy world premise gives us more options than that. What if the competition was a race between Pegasi? You think a ruler desperate to win that race would hesitate to send out a team of powerful adventurers to capture the most impressive wild pegasi for his stable? The race itself would be fantastic running over hours and hundreds of miles, through lightning and thunderstorms, through high mountains, aerial battles between racers, sudden encounters with a dragon (who might have laid a large wager on one participant and wants to tip the balance of the race), and more.

Perhaps the competition is more of a melee, between highly trained and carefully bred dire wolves? Maybe each nation can bring whatever creature they can come up with as long as magic is not used in the battles? Again, adventurers capturing monsters or stealing their eggs/brood could lead to some exciting times in the campaign.

Taking it the last logical step, these competitions could be between people, pseudo-gladitorial or medieval joust but where the fighters represent their nation, receiving great training and wondrous laurels and boons should they win. That sound like a challenge worthy of your player who always lusts to be the greatest warrior in the game?

Let's look at the movie specifically for more inspiration. I'll describe it (spoilers!) but in terms that you could easily interpret as a fantasy campaign storyline.

Our heroine, a scion of a racing horse breeding house, is brought back home with the death of her mother and incapacity of her father. While torn between the struggling family business and her original life, she discovers that her father made a shrewd wager. The result of a coin toss would determine while foal sired by a great champion would be taken by the sire's breeder and which she would retain. Her horse-breeding instincts lead her to the less likely choice and losing the toss, she gains him anyway.

She has to find a trainer and later a rider to bring the most out of this horse for the big race. A trainer of excellent instinct but bizarre behavior is hired. While others doubt her and the debts of the business mount, she has faith in this improbable horse. She enters them in a provincial race only to see him fail. The trainer has miscalculated. The rider is not right for the horse.

Now she takes another risk, a rider who is known for driving his horses to the limit (and beyond in one case where the horse died while racing), for taking risks, but getting the most out of a horse. The chemistry gels and the horse begins to win races, gaining the attention of local racers and those in positions of power who control the greatest three races. Out of money, our hero takes a big risk, a big wager that her horse will win not one great race but all three. If the horse performs, she'll never want for wealth again. If it fails, she will lose everything.

Now I might tweak it a little to set up a major rival house and horse and to have victory be best two out of three. That gives the GM some wiggle room if the PC's horse falters in one of the races and sets up the drama of a winner-takes-all final race.

As to rules, finding a set to augment your preferred fantasy campaign to handle the races is vital. Savage Worlds has a decent set of "Chase Rules" which could be ported to any other system. You could also break out your copy of Circus Maximus or its recent descendant, Circus Minimus to adapt (unless you want to keep the chariot racing theme).

No matter what kind of race you decide upon, I recommend queuing up Ben Hur on your DVR to crib everything you can from the race scenes. There are dozens of other racing movies you can sample for ideas to spice up the race. A series of rolls to see who goes a little faster or a little slower this turn gets boring fast. Players (and the GM) need to have tactical options to affect the outcome of the race or you're both stuck with just the fate of the dice which rarely produces the most exciting, dramatic adventures.

So if you haven't seen Secretariat yet, I'd highly recommend the movie. If you're interested in doing something like this for your game, I'd recommend it even more.

(This is a brief version of the type of analysis I provide every month in the pages of Knights of the Dinner Table Magazine in my column, Gaming the Movies. I select a movie, movie franchise, or television series and deconstruct it with the intent of understanding how I would create a campaign for my friends that caught the essence of that movie or show. There's a lot of

other great stuff for gamers in that magazine and I'd highly recommend you check it out at your Friendly Local Gaming Store.)