

# Rivalry, Revelry And Golden Horses In Northern Italy

In South Tyrol, Haflingers reign—and they're the stars of the Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein, a yearly medieval festival and tournament.

By Jess Morton





Thirty-seven years ago, a group of farmers in South Tyrol, Italy, came up with an ingenious idea to prevent the disappearance of the area's distinctive equestrian culture. They decided to organize a medieval-style riding tournament in honor of a local hero: knight, poet, diplomat and minnesinger Oswald von Wolkenstein. This real-life legend, who died in the 15th century, happened to be a passionate horseman, and he also happened to live in this region of Italy.

With its sharp peaks, impenetrable woods, fairy-tale villages, and close proximity to Switzerland and Austria, South Tyrol is one of Italy's lesser-known regions, but it contains astonishing scenery, endless outdoor activities and a fascinating equine history. Archaeological evidence suggests the first human residents in the Dolomites—the Raetians—were living there no later than 500 B.C. Due to the seclusion of many of the valleys, ancient tribal and folklore traditions have been proudly preserved among the tiny alpine communities. These traditions are especially concentrated on artisan crafts, sustainable agricultural practices and horse breeding.

There are two breeds native to South Tyrol: the heavy Noriker draft horse and the most popular equine export, the golden-coated Haflinger. Haflingers have roamed the rugged, alpine pastures of the Tyrol for thousands of years. One origin tale says that the ancestors of the modern-day breed were oriental war horses that the Goths abandoned while fleeing Byzantine troops in 555 A.D.

These horses adapted to the valleys and steep slopes of the Dolomites, and they're sturdy, spirited and versatile horses; over the centuries, they've played an important role in farming for Tyrolean smallholders.

What better way to honor this living cultural heritage symbol than with a medieval-style tournament on horseback?

### LA CAVALCATA DI OSWALD VON WOLKENSTEIN

What started as a simple idea among friends has now grown into a landmark equestrian event and a brilliant demonstration of horsemanship, endurance and teamwork. And while time travel might be impossible, the Oswald Von Wolkenstein ride, or the Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein, is pretty much the next best thing.

Every June since 1983—with the exception of this year, when the event was canceled due to the coronavirus—over 20,000 spectators flock to the pretty villages dotted around the Alpe di Siusi to watch the 22-kilometer ride between Castelrotto, Siusi and Fiè allo Sciliar.

Horsemanship tourneys played an essential part in European military training over the centuries. During medieval times,



The yearly Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein showcases the horses of South Tyrol, Italy, including its native Haflingers, but it also provides a few days of sporting fun for thousands of spectators to enjoy.

JESS MORTON PHOTO





One of the challenges of the Cavalcata di Oswald von Wolkenstein involves pitching a lance through a series of rings.

CAVALCATA DI OSWALD VON WOLKENSTEIN PHOTO

### LET THE SHOW BEGIN

tournaments were often mock battles between two or more teams. These adult play-fights, which often turned violent, engaged competing villages for several days in bloody warfare. The pope eventually got involved—and voted for less fierce demonstrations of skill, like jousting. These village games were organized to take place in a town square set up in the form of a theater so that everyone could take part.

The modern-day Cavalcata was designed to imitate four medieval-style challenges, which are replicas of actual games from the past, and the locations during the tournament all have some connection to Oswald von Wolkenstein's life.

The festivities kick off the day before the event begins with a costumed parade, complete with medieval-style drummers and flag throwers, beautiful horse-drawn Tyrolean carts and the 36 teams of riders parading right through the town. With thousands coming out to take part, including all the important local dignitaries—who are dressed in costume too—it's a great way to start the celebrations. The colorful procession ends in the square with a speech by the mayor. A brass band starts up, beer flows, and traditional food is served on long communal tables.

There is a saying in the Dolomites between tourists: "You don't want to be the driver." Narrow hairpin bends between villages require nerves of steel. Luckily there is an excellent public transport system that shuttles spectators between the different locations free of charge.

The 36 teams meet early on the first day of the tournament at a 12th-century fortress above Castelrotto. From here, the outlook is magnificent—masses of rock rear into a skyline dusted with snow from the week before. Lower down, villages cluster in the valleys, while jutting castles dot the steep hillsides. Each team of four riders departs separately. Start times are staggered to prevent teams bottlenecking at each challenge.

After catching the shuttle early to Castelrotto, we walk to Monte Calvario and find a seat at the medieval-style oval to watch the *Passaggio degli anelli* or "passage of the rings." The horses enter one at a time. Each horse gallops the complete oval while the rider tries to pitch a lance through three ring targets. If the rider misses a target, he must turn his horse and attempt the throw from the other direction. If



CAVALCATA DI OSWALD VON WOLKENSTEIN PHOTO





The Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein showcases the stunning scenery and quaint villages of the South Tyrol, Italy, area.



CAVALCATA DI OSWALD VON WOLKENSTEIN PHOTOS

the rider drops the lance, he must do a penalty round, pick up another lance and try again. At the end of a successful round, the rider passes the lance to another team member, who repeats the challenge until the team has finished their turn.

Nicknamed "alpine tractors," by far the most popular horses in the event are the golden-maned Haflingers. These horses once plowed mountain pastures, carried children to school, and packed supplies along steep and narrow farm trails with unwavering dependability and resilience. Equipped with an easy-going nature, the breed was particularly suitable for Alpine warfare. Heavily utilized in both World Wars, the breed almost died out.

But thanks to the dedication of Tyrol breeders, they are once again a celebrated and versatile pleasure horse in these parts, popular for trail riding in the summer months and pulling sleighs during the winter. The ever-shifting border means South Tyrol has been both Austrian and Italian, and the Haflinger horse, with his distinctive Habsburg heritage

and Italian flair, is symbolic of this collision of cultures in one of Italy's most spectacular landscapes.

Italy has many medieval reenactments with horses involved; the famous Palio of Siena attracts thousands of spectators from all over the world. But this bareback race has a dark underbelly, the victims of which are usually the horses. The Palio requires that the horses run three clockwise laps of the town square around deadly tight turns, some of which are downhill. Horses are occasionally drugged; injuries are common, and deaths do occur.

Sitting next to the team of veterinarians and farriers in the stands of the Cavalcata, I discuss this with veterinarian Kathrin Schrott. She smiles and tells me, "There have been no serious injuries to horses during the seven years I have worked here. We take horse welfare very seriously. Horses in this area are part of the community, not beasts of burden, but instead the stars of the show. This event is all about them."

As she moves away to check on a horse below, a team of

The final challenge of the Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein involves pole bending, and stakes are high as teams try to maintain hard-earned points from previous challenges in front of many spectators.



CAVALCATA DI OSWALD VON WOLKENSTEIN PHOTO





The challenges of the Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein test the speed, steadiness and willingness of the equine participants, and though any breed can compete, Haflingers usually do especially well.



waiting helpers runs out to rake the sandy oval for the next run. Teams are watering their horses in the village fountain. The pride and love these riders feel for their horses is evident in their handling and care, and never once did I see a horse treated badly; riders slapped the necks of their mounts at the end of every round and dismounted to rest them immediately after.

#### LABYRINTHS AND SLALOMS

Next we catch the free shuttle up the road to the picturesque village of Siusi to watch the labyrinth challenge, or *Labrinto*, which is the second of the four. Given the fairy-tale landscape, it's not surprising that folklore and magic are deeply entrenched in the culture here. The shaded pine forests dotted with castle ruins and ancient rock formations make it easy for the mind to wander and imagine fairies and enchanted marmots hiding around each corner. The

labyrinth test is held in an area of one of these enchanting pine forests, which is known as the Matzibödele in Siusi.

This test requires the team of riders to gallop all four horses through an L-shaped track, with each member holding one hand on a lance in front—no easy feat with excited horses and roaring spectators. One by one, the horses exit a starting gate to complete a test of accuracy, riding a tight set of turns without touching the sides. If a horse exits the gate too quickly, a smoke machine blows at the horse from behind, spooking him. This is where the steady horses gain points. Any type of horse can take part in the tournament, and while I see many beautiful Quarter Horses and Arabians participating, the Haflingers excel in this particular challenge.

Once the teams have completed the labyrinth, they ride on to the next destination—the Laghetto di Fiè. Nestled at the foot of the Sciliar mountain range, the lake is surrounded

by woodlands and is popular for swimming with local families.

The *Galoppo con ostacoli*, "gallop with obstacles," requires individual riders to cross a series of wooden rungs that have been placed above the ground. They must throw a wooden ball into a tube and retrieve it at the other end before galloping full speed to the gate, turning the horse on his haunches and backing him through an opening without hitting the sides. The fastest team with the least errors wins.

The competition by now is getting heated, with some of the younger, less experienced riders going head-to-head with some of the most seasoned and having surprising results. One of the riders, Verena Gasslitter, represents Italy in cross-country skiing. Her family runs an important local riding center and chalet nearby—and the locals roar when she rides past.

Her father is also competing. And while he may not be the oldest rider, he boasts the most tournament miles, with a local record of 37 appearances. He was one of the founding group who came up with the idea.

"What is fascinating is how the tournament has evolved over the decades. It's not the same thing at all as it was in 1983," Reinhold Gasslitter, his brother and teammate, tells me. "It's a different type of event now. The riding has evolved. The way the challenges are organized is better; so is the setup. It's almost unrecognizable."

With a mixture of age and experience among the riders, and many young horses in the tournament, the contest is exciting and unpredictable. Forty-eight teams qualified in 2019 for only 36 places, and the competition is intense. This is no relaxed, fun ride. Teams are out to win.

The final location is, without a doubt, the most mesmerizing. Enshrouded by the giant Sciliar Massif, the Pröls Castle is a 12th-century gothic fortress famous for its notorious witch trials. This is a fairy-tale backdrop if there ever was one.

Before the final challenge, the teams ride up from behind the castle. After 22 kilometers under the bright mountain sunshine, most riders are walking their horses on foot for the last challenge to give them a break.

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Between phases of the Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein, riders hack their horses from village to village.



Castles dot the South Tyrol region.



The labyrinth challenge requires the team of riders to gallop all four horses through an L-shaped track, with each member holding one hand on a lance in front.

Approaching the castle from the road offers a particularly magical outlook. In the background, the mighty Sciliar peaks are shrouded in a violet luminous glow known as *enrosadira*. Banners are fluttering, music is playing, and refreshments are being served to the many spectators and tired riders. There are people everywhere. It's a total immersion into medieval life.

The final challenge is the pole-bending slalom. This trial is the most thrilling to watch, not just because of the riding—there's fast-paced galloping between posts—but because the horses and riders are now fighting desperately to hold their hard-earned points. The air is electric with excitement.

Pretzels, white sausages and delicious fried *krapfen* (a local sweet) are available to hungry spectators and riders. The region's most popular beer producer, Forst, sponsors the event, and glasses of frothy beer are poured out to everyone.

Once the riders have completed the final challenge, the points are tallied up, and the prize-giving ceremony takes

place. In medieval times glory was a strong motivator to win a tournament, but so was the prospect of financial gain. The contemporary prize-giving ceremony is much the same. Teams are called up in front of thousands of merry onlookers and handed their respected prizes. The winning squad receives a victory standard and a tidy sum of money, which is presented in true Robin Hood style: in a brown sack.

The winning team earns a decorated wooden standard they keep for a year. If a team manages to attain three victories in different years, the trophy stays with them forever.

At the end of the day, tired and with a sunburnt nose, I reflect on the primeval joy of applauding horses and riders in these outdoor theaters. For those who thought the age of chivalry and knightly rivalry was now a distant memory, the Oswald Von Wolkenstein ride is an event that should not be missed. 🐾

## Want To Attend?

**EVENT NAME:** La Cavalcata Di Oswald Von Wolkenstein or Oswald Von Wolkenstein Ride

**WHAT:** A medieval-style horse tournament through the Alpe di Siusi in the Dolomites

**WHERE:** The Alpe di Siusi (or Seiser Alm in German) is Europe's largest Alpine pasture. The area sits north of Bolzano in the South Tyrol region of Italy. Villages to stay in include:

Castelrotto, Tires, Siusi and Fiè allo Sciliar.

**WHEN:** The Calvacata was canceled in 2020 due to the coronavirus, but it's usually held the first week of June, and it's anticipated to return in 2021.

**WHAT TO EAT:** Tyrolean food is a tasty blend of Mediterranean, mountain cooking and German influences. Try the Canederli,

Spätzle and Schlutzkrapfen—and don't miss the apple strudel!

**WHAT TO DRINK:** White wines Gewürztraminer or Müller Thurgau and red wines like Teroldego and Lagrein are popular. Try the grappa too—this region produces some of the best in Italy.

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