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WELCOME TO IL PALIO

Italy's Historical Horse Race

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Welcome to ITALY'S HISTORICAL HORSE RACE

BY BARBARA TORREVELTRI

There is no other event in the world like *Il Palio*. The rivalry, planning, history, risk-taking, and cultural reproduction culminates biannually in only one place—La Piazza del Campo in Siena, Italy.

I am here experiencing it all: the crowd, chants, pageantry, medieval regalia, the preliminary heats—when horse and jockey, who ride bareback, become acquainted with each other on the dirt track—and yes, the tension. At the urging of my Sieneese friends, I returned to Siena because “You must come for Palio.”

Upon my arrival, I didn’t know an *oca* (goose) from a *civetta* (owl). But within weeks, I resided in each district and was swept up with the territorial rivalry that marks the culture.

I learned that in Siena, seventeen *contrade* (city wards) have their own history, leadership, geographic boundaries, friends, enemies, head-

quarters, museum, church, patron saint, and songs. They adhere to the same centuries-old rules, regulations, ceremonial practices, and protocol. Social events organize the lives of generations of people.

The intense horse race of today that rallies the Sieneese citizenry into a cultural frenzy is rooted in the 13th century, when noble citizens sponsored a race in the main streets of Siena. The first Palio to take place in the Piazza del Campo, in the 17th century was held on August 16 in honor of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The second “Palio delle Contrade” was officially recognized in honor of the Madonna of Provenzano, held on July 2. In 1729, Princess Violante of Bavaria, *Principessa* and *Governessa* of Siena, who married into the Medici family, refined the rules of the Palio and reorganized the boundaries to the present-day seventeen Siena *contrade*:

		
Aquila (Eagle)	Bruco (Caterpillar)	Chiocciola (Snail)
		
Civetta (Owl)	Drago (Dragon)	Giraffa (Giraffe)
		
Istrice (Porcupine)	Leocorno (Unicorn)	Lupa (She-Wolf)
		
Nicchio (Shell)	Oca (Goose)	Onda (Wave)
		
Pantera (Panther)	Selva (Rhinoceros)	Tartuca (Tortoise)
		
Torre (Tower)	Valdimontone (Ram)	



The *Giraffa* (Giraffe) *contrada* in the ceremony prior to the race. (Janus Kinase)

Il Palio



(M. Rohana)

Contrada lore is handed down to the next generation starting at an early age. Kids learn the names of the enemy contrade, sing songs about them, and assume feelings of loyalty or enmity, based upon their elders' teachings. An example of *Reproduction Theory* in practice: if your great-grandfather was a *Tartuca*, then you, too, are a tortoise and wear the yellow and blue colors proudly. A centuries-old rite of passage socializes young boys into roles as drummers, flag-wavers, and singers of traditional songs. Women and girls support their men and sons behind the scenes.

One never knows which contrade will run until four weeks before the race, when ten balls, depicting the

colors of each contrada, are pulled in a lottery-like fashion. In all other sports, intense practice leads to the culminating event, but with random pairing of horse and jockey only four days before the event, the Palio exhibits a different type of intensity, that only adds to the drama. Contrada might be assigned a fast horse that doesn't take to the jockey or a slow horse with an aggressive jockey, and *il fantino* (the jockey) can be changed up to 10:00 a.m. on the day of the race!

Contrada leaders/members step into high gear and figure out their game plan, which includes strategizing and incentivizing. Male leaders of the contrada are on watch round-the-clock for days leading up to the event.

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The Onda (Wave) contrada march through the streets on their way to the race. (Cristian Santinon)



Sixty thousand spectators crowd the stadium for the race while thousands more hang from surrounding windows and balconies. (Cebas)

Their job is to protect the horse at all cost, keep their jockey away from bribes of the enemy contrada, and keep a lid on any situations that might disqualify them.

On the day of the race, in ceremonial fashion, *il cavallo* (the horse) and *il fantino* (the jockey) proceed inside their contrada's church. The priest's blessing sends horse and jockey off with the traditional "Go and come back a winner!" as contrada faithful weep.

An extravagant procession that depicts medieval life in Siena then unfolded, lasting more than an hour. We waited for the two-minute race that consisted of twice around a track less than two miles in length. The entire city and thousands of onlookers from around the world were there. Radiotelevisione italiana (RAI), Italy's national public broadcasting company, was there too, televising the event and streaming it online.

I was one of the crowd, beckoned here by my Sienese friends who are loyal to one of four contrade: *Oca*, *Chiocciola*, *Tartuca*, or *Civetta*. I dared not wear one silk scarf over another.

The sea of humanity engulfed my petite frame, but I, too, swelled with the emotion that had been building for months.

Grandparents carried grandsons and fathers hoisted daughters on



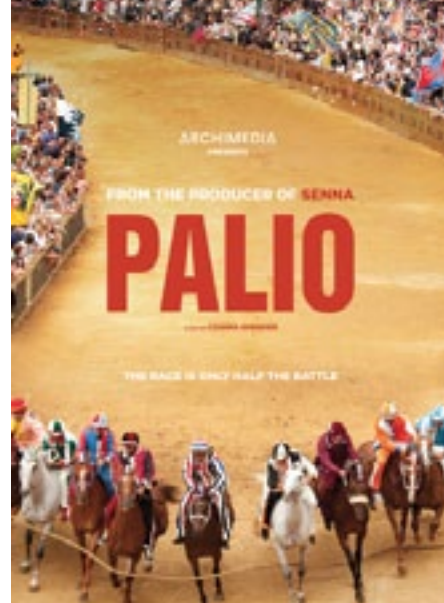
(M. Rohana)

their shoulders for a better view. Bleachers adjacent to the Torre del Mangia Tower were filled with children decked out in the colorful shirts and scarves of their *contrada*. Even the *piccolini* (little ones) have assembled, a sign of Siena's immersion of its youth into Palio culture. In sing-song cadence, the *Oca* *contrada* youth taunted their enemy—*il Torre*—with centuries-old songs of their ancestors. A five-year-old from the *Istrice* covered his ears with both hands and looked forced to be there.

We, the onlookers, were one, waiting with anticipation until finally, at 7:00 p.m., a firecracker shot fired

exhaled. We were not numb or dejected. Rather, we milled about aching to find news of the winner. There is no announcer on the loudspeaker, no fanavision to offer an instant replay. Palio is a ceremonial sporting event with strict adherence to historical protocol.

The winner was ... *Selva*, the rhinoceros. Throngs of grown men hugged each other, jumped from viewing stands, ran to the winning horse, pulled the jockey from his perch atop his steed, and embraced. Some even sobbed, for they had never witnessed their *contrada* as a victor in their lifetime.



Find Cosima Spender's acclaimed documentary "Palio" on Amazon.com. It has a current rating of 94% on Rotten Tomatoes.

I resided within their *contrada*, where the partying lasted into night.

My three friends were disappointed, but there was no enmity. After all, they concurred, "At least our enemy didn't win. That is good for us."

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La Piazza del Campo where the race is held twice each summer.

by the starter, signals for the rope to drop. Ten horses ran at breakneck speed. Two sent their jockeys careening at the site of a hairpin turn, thirty seconds into the race, which, for centuries, has led to broken bones for many unfortunate riders. According to Palio rules, the hopes of the *contrada* are still alive since it's the horse that must cross the finish line first (even without the jockey) to be declared *il vinci* (the winner).

We gasped, cheered, yelled, prayed, cajoled, and then finally ...

Every other horse and jockey, surrounded by members of their *contrada*, walked together through the streets of Siena, back to their stable and "home" territory.

The winning *contrada*, *Il Selva*, filled the streets and proceeded to The Duomo to give thanks for their win prior to engaging in any celebratory activities.