

Renaissance Revival

A sports event with 350 years of tradition, Il Palio is a race marked by passion, an unrivaled setting and a bit of chaos



BOB LATHAM

It's early morning in Florence, Italy. Sure, there are museums and other compelling attractions within walking distance. But a one-hour train ride away in Siena, there is also one of the most distinctive sporting events in the world—one that dates back almost to the Renaissance. As a committed sports tourist, I cannot pass up the opportunity to see it.

It is **Il Palio**, a horse race around the Piazza del Campo of Siena (the town center) held twice a year, on July 2 and August 16. If you were wondering what that medieval-looking horse race was at the beginning of the James Bond film "Quantum of Solace," that was Il Palio. In person, it looks and feels more like a scene from "A Knight's Tale." The setup in the piazza gives the impression that not much has changed since the original "modern" version of Il Palio in 1656. Ten riders ride bareback for three laps on a dirt track around the town center, with people in small grandstands along the side, or hanging out of shops and windows, plus the thousands crowded into the middle inside the track. I was one of the thousands. Each of the 10 riders represents a *contrade*, a city ward of Siena. Each *contrade* has its own colors and mascot, many of them animals.

The day of the race is something to behold as the *contrade* elders lead legions of supporters in their *contrade* colors through the streets of Siena on their way to the piazza. I get caught up in this mass movement shortly after I get to Siena with my 13-year-old daughter, and I suggest that we join a crowd of "giraffe" supporters who are no doubt going our way, as they are led by a guy in medieval attire. Sporting the colors of the giraffe *contrade*, he looks strikingly like Sonny Bono (and I thought Cher wore some wild outfits). My daughter quickly surveys the scene and says, "No, we'll run into turtles" (tortoises actually), and she proves to be right as the giraffes and the tortoises converge on each other like the Jets and the Sharks but with a much more peaceful ending.

This commotion all happens after the more localized "blessing of the horses," in which each of the 10 competition horses walks into the church of the *contrade* it represents to be blessed. You feel a little bit as if you're watching an episode of "Mister Ed" or listening to Shecky Greene performing in the Catskills ("A horse walks into a church ...").

We follow **Sonny Bono toward the piazza** and join a sea of people forming in the center hours before the race starts. The excitement builds amid the pageantry and reaches a fever pitch as the 10 riders enter the piazza. The start is a completely disorganized affair where the starter simply drops a rope when he thinks the horses are reasonably closely aligned. There are no starting gates. The horses take off, and the crowd shouts, screams and cries. On the second turn, one rider slides off the bare back of his horse and into a wall. This, of course, is part of the allure of Il Palio, as the horse is more than welcome to continue the race without his rider. Indeed, the third lap is even more remarkable as two more riders go down, yet their horses continue and finish third and fourth. It isn't

IT ISN'T CLEAR WHETHER THE RIDERS ARE FELLED BY THEIR OWN DOING OR HAVE HELP FROM OTHER RIDERS, BUT IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE.

clear whether the riders are felled by their own doing or have help from other riders, but it makes no difference. The race is much more like equine roller derby, and physical contact between the riders, or a rider whipping a competing horse, is not only allowed but expected.

It is a spectacular 90 seconds with the porcupine *contrade* claiming bragging rights until the next Il Palio, and a porcupine supporter to our left breaks down in tears. Never had I seen anyone cry in the name of a porcupine. The winning jockey, Luigi Bruscellini, appears to be the calmest man in the piazza as hordes of people storm the track and rip off his porcupine colors. In fact, some fans do not wait for the end of the race to jump onto the track, and the two horses who lost their riders on the last lap smash into perhaps half a dozen fans who, fortunately, are able to rise before being trampled.

"My God," I say to no one in particular. "Have you ever seen such chaos?" "Yes," comes the answer from my daughter, "in the Milan train station." A fair point perhaps, but Il Palio also brings 350 years of tradition, tear-inducing passion and a town that looks like a movie set—a scene that has no parallel in American sports. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and is a former chairman of USA Rugby. He can be reached at blatham@jw.com.