



SIENA'S CENTURIES-OLD
90-SECOND HORSE RACE

PALIO

Photographs by O. LOUIS MAZZATENTA

ANCIENT ETRUSCAN SETTLEMENT, the walled city of Siena has released its passions each summer since the 1600s with a raucous horse race around Piazza del Campo pitting the city's neighborhoods, or *contrade*, against one another. Each has its flag, colors, and symbol (Ram, Wolf, Turtle, Snail). With some rivalries centuries old, the race often resembles a Renaissance free-for-all.

On the day of the race, horses and jockeys are led to the altars of neighborhood churches and blessed, with emphasis on the horse (left). "The animal is everything in the Palio," says a local expert. "The jockey is only a mercenary." In the main event (right) jockeys ride bareback around the course, often careering into mattress-cushioned walls as they round a turn. A sixth-century B.C. Etruscan frieze (top) seems to mirror the race. A religious banner is the coveted prize. Explains one lifelong fan: "The Palio is a serious matter. It's the very life of our *contrada*."







TRAGEDY STRIKES two-time winner Brandano, a prize gelding racing last year for Chiocciola, the contrada of the Snail. As

sometimes happens, several horses went down while rounding Curva di San Martino, a sharp turn opposite the finish line made

all the more difficult by its downward slope. Brandano suffered a broken leg (above) and had to be destroyed—a crushing blow to members of

the Snail (right). Five jockeys were injured in the accident.

On loan from local owners, the horses for the Palio are distributed among

the city's contrade by lottery three days before the race. Then the real action begins, as neighborhood leaders plot strategy and form numerous *partiti*,

secret race-day alliances designed to help their own causes and hinder others. Almost anything is fair game: whipping an opponent, blocking, even

bribing an opposing jockey. The first horse to complete three laps around the square—with or without its rider—wins the race. □