

The **Palio di Siena** is a horse race that is held twice each year, in Siena, Italy. Ten horses and riders, bareback and dressed in the appropriate colors, represent ten of the seventeen *contrade*, or city wards.

The first modern Palio took place in 1633. At first, one race was held each year, a second one was added from 1701. The first race (Palio di Provenzano) is held on 2 July, which is both the Feast of the Visitation and the date of a local festival in honor of the Madonna of Provenzano (a painting once owned by the Sienese leader Provenzano Salvani, which was supposed to have miraculous curative power). The second race is held on 16 August (Palio dell'Assunta), the day after the Feast of the Assumption, and is likewise dedicated to the Virgin Mary.



The *Palio di Siena* is more than a simple horse race. It is the culmination of ongoing rivalry and competition between the *contrade*. The lead-up and the day of the race are invested with passion and pride. Formal and informal rituals take place as the day proceeds, with each *contrada* navigating a strategy of horsemanship, alliances and animosities. There are the final clandestine meetings among the heads of the *contrade* and then between them and the jockeys. There is the two-hour pageant of the *Corteo Storico*, and then all this is crowned by the race, which takes only about 75 seconds to complete. Although there is great public spectacle, the passions displayed are still very real.



The race is preceded by a spectacular pageant, the *Corteo Storico*, which includes (among many others) *Alfieri*, flag wavers, in medieval costumes. Just before the pageant, a squad of *carabinieri* on horseback, wielding swords, demonstrate a mounted charge around the track. They take one lap at a walk, in formation, and a second at a gallop that foreshadows the excitement of the race to come, before exiting down one of the streets that

leads out of Piazza del Campo. Spectators arrive early in the morning, eventually filling the center of the town square, inside the track, to capacity; the local police seal the entrances once the festivities begin in earnest. Seats ranging from simple bleachers to elaborate box seats may be had for a price, but sell out long before the day of the race.

At 7:30 p.m. for the July race, and 7 p.m. for the August race, the detonation of an explosive charge echoes across the piazza, signaling to the thousands of onlookers that the race is about to begin. The race itself runs for three laps of the *Piazza del Campo*, the perimeter of which is covered with several inches of dirt and tuff (imported and laid for the occasion at great expense to the city) and the corners of which are protected with padded crash barriers for the occasion. The jockeys ride the horses bareback from the starting line, an area between two ropes. Nine horses, in an order only decided by lot immediately before the race starts, enter the space. The tenth, the *rincorsa*, waits outside. When the *rincorsa* finally enters the space between the ropes the starter (*mossiere*) activates a mechanism that instantly drops the *canapo* (the front rope). This process (the *mossa*) can take a very long time, as deals have usually been made between various *contrade* and jockeys that affect when the *rincorsa* moves - he may be waiting for a particular other horse to be well- or badly-placed, for example.

On the dangerous, steeply canted track, the riders are allowed to use their whips (in Italian, *nerbi*, stretched, dried bulls' hide) not only for their own horse, but also for disturbing other horses and riders. The Palio in fact is won by the horse who represents his *contrada*, and not by the jockeys. The winner is the first horse to cross the finish line—a horse can win without its rider.