

The Palio Del Drappo Verde di Verona

The Palio Del Drappo Verde in Verona is not just the longest held foot race in the world – this year being its 600th running; it is not just the oldest foot race in the world – it is over 800 years old, it is much more important than that!

The Palio De Drappo Verde foot race offers us unique historical insights into the development of the sport of Athletics, especially foot races. It shows us the degree of continuity with the Ancient World, it documents how foot races operated in the Medieval world, and why such an event continued and survived for so many centuries.

The Palio Del Drappo Verde is a living, working fossil, an invaluable relict of much earlier times but it is much more than that - it is a joyous celebration of the enduring appeal and attraction of foot racing, for both the runner and the spectator.

The traditions of the Verona Palio races, like those held in other Italian towns in the Medieval period, are believed to be rooted in ancient games, dating back possibly as far as 500 BC to the era when the Etruscans dominated northern Italy.

Public festivals, including many kinds of physical activities, formed a significant part of Etruscan culture. Such Etruscan games included races involving the goading of buffaloes, which suggests early bullfighting, and long hazardous races both on horseback and on foot through the city. Etruscan art shows athletes competing for prizes in foot races.

With a longstanding tradition of such races, it is not surprising that well over a thousand years later it was in Northern Italy such Palii events featuring horse races and footraces as well, took place in the towns such as Asti, Padua, Ferrara and Bologna, as well as in Verona,

Such races were made possible by, and developed from, the wealth, freedom that existed in those Northern Italian towns and cities and by the competition between them. Many of the cities had become self governing and had broken away from the Medieval feudal system.

It is therefore no coincidence that the " PALIO DEL DRAPPO VERDE" foot race held in Verona celebrated the victory of the Verona City Republic over the Counts of San Bonifazio and the Montecchi family. The race reputedly dated from 1207 or 1208. (This difference in date could be attributed to 1207 being the date of the battle, and 1208 being the first actual footrace.)

The celebratory foot race was obviously modelled on an earlier horse race, (dating back to 1198) using the same course, but was open to a wider populace. A later Italian footrace of around 1450 suggests that there were "Many lusty active youths" who often competed in such foot races.

The Verona race is unusual in that its focus was always the footrace. It has been noted by historians as being distinctive and different from other palio events, usually dominated by horse racing.

The name of the Palio del Drappo Verde race comes from the prize that was awarded to the winner. The Italian word for palio comes from the Latin word Pallium meaning a rectangular piece of cloth.

Marco Polo's journeys in China led to an ever-increasing use of silk in Western Europe. As early as the twelfth century Venetian merchants traded extensively in silk and encouraged silk growers to settle in Italy. By the 13th century Italian silk was a significant source of trade. However it was still very much a luxury, and the prize of silk cloth would have been much sought after.

The Palio del Drappo Verde is remarkable because the footrace was held for so many centuries. The reason for this is almost certainly because the requirement

to hold the race was incorporated into Verona law.

The Statuto Albertino (the Albertino codex of laws) of 1271, compiled for Alberto della Scala, (which contained some laws which dated back several years before), stated that two races were to be held on the first Sunday of Lent, a horse race and a running race.

The Albertino codex of laws was then re-established by Cangrande I in 1328 and made the details of the prizes more specific. A green palio (the "green cloth"), would go to the winner of the footrace and a rooster to the last runner.

A very early victory for women's equality came with the Statuto by Giangaleazzo Visconti, which was approved in 1393. There was now to be a race for the women. The men would seek to win a red cloth, with the traditional rooster to the last runner. In the women's race, the palio verde that had previously been reserved for men, now was reassigned by Giangaleazzo Visconti to women.

The fastest woman would receive the green cloth, the slowest would be given a rooster. The Statuto even specified that the running event was open to "honest women, even if only one is to participate; however, if no honest women are available, then prostitutes would run".

The male runners traditionally ran naked. This was probably a link to the ancient Etruscan games, where those performing in athletic races ran naked. Another possibility is that running naked made it impossible for opponents to grab at the clothing of those in front of them to pull them back, in what would have been a much more robust and combative race than is permitted under modern rules.

It is uncertain whether women ran naked; as stated earlier the women's race was described as being open to "honest women", but if not even one came forward, then it was open to prostitutes. However contemporary painting of similar palios show women runners wearing clothes.

From 1207 until 1450 the races were held on the First Sunday in Lent, but from 1450, after Verona came under the control of Venice, it was held on Fat Thursday - which is the Thursday before Ash Wednesday.

This period in Italy from Fat Thursday (giovedì grasso) through to the Fat Tuesday (martedì grasso) is traditionally the time for staging carnivals and for eating well before the restrictions of Lent . Depending on the date of Easter such celebrations usually take place in January or February. The Palio races were an integral part of these celebrations.

The cooler conditions of this time of year were preferable to the heat of an Italian summer for the runners, but there was a greater chance of wet conditions. A report on a mid fifteenth century race in Pienza records "There had been a light rain and the track was slippery. They ran naked and now one, now another was ahead and often one or another could be seen to slip and fall and roll on the ground and mud and those who had been last were now ahead." So the event would often have been more like a muddy cross country than a road race, particularly bearing in mind that down the middle of each street would have run a virtual open sewer.

Fat Thursday and its carnival was a celebration for the whole community of Verona and its townsfolk were involved in the Palio itself. The losers were expected to tour the town, showing off their 'consolation prize'. The last horseman would cross the city with the leg of pork tied around his horse's neck. Under the race rules anyone could legally cut the rope and take the leg of pork.

Similarly it is likely the last runner would be expected to lead his reluctant rooster by a piece of string across Verona to the merriment of the

townsfolk. Any prankster would be able to cut the string and free the indignant fowl, which presumably would lead to free-for-all chase after the bird.

The length of the Verona footrace race is documented but the course could be changed by the podestà, the local noble executive officer that held the city's administrative powers. The podesta could also choose where the race would be held.

According to Indro Neri's detailed article on the race, the course would start from the Tomba neighbourhood (but later from the Santa Lucia neighbourhood) and would wind along the city walls south of Verona, running by the entrance Porta al Palio (also known as "Porta Stuppa" or "Stupa", built by the architect Sammicheli) and crossing the field "a mezzogiorno della città" (south of Verona).

The course was then heading back to Verona, going under the Arco dei Gavi (Gavi's arch), and continuing along Corso Vecchio (the old main street) to reach the Palazzo della torre a San Fermo (San Fermo tower's palace). Later the course would cross the current Corso to finish in piazza di Sant'Anastasia (Saint Anastasia square) at a column called "La meta" ("The end") that represented the finish line of the race. The horse race was held on the same course and was of the same length of the running event.

Stefano Scevaroli, who lives in Verona, estimates this course would have been at least seven kilometres long, perhaps over ten kilometres. Much of the course is still in existence; it is the return to the piazza di Sant'Anastasia from the Porta Palio that is unclear. The race would always finish in the public square of Sant' Anastasia.

It would seem likely that as silk gradually became less of a luxury, with the opening up of maritime trade routes to the east, and the development of the European silk industry, the intrinsic value of the Drappo Verde became less important, and its symbolic value increased.

Maybe by the eighteenth century, the foot race in Verona was similar to the modern day Palio horse race at Siena; a contest between runners from different parts of the city for a painted silk banner.

The Verona Palio footraces were held until 1797 when the Venetian Empire was conquered by Napoleon. Following the signing of the Treaty of Campo Formio on 17th October, 1797, Venice became part of the Austrian-held Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia. The Austrians took control of the city on 18th January, 1798. Venice and the cities of the former Venetian Empire fell into a decline.

The French Revolutionary movement was strongly anti-clerical, and religious celebrations and carnivals would have been discouraged, thought by those brought to power in Verona by Napoleon, to be old fashioned and potentially subversive. Thus carnival celebrations and the Palio races were no longer acceptable, and the long held traditions were suppressed or simply allowed to disappear..

The Verona Palio race had lasted some 590 years, making it the distance footrace with the greatest number of runnings known

This article was originally written in 2007. It was suggested that with the success of the Siena Palio horse races in attracting tourists to the city, perhaps Verona should consider reviving the Palio del Drappo Verde. Such popular city races have proven very successful in promoting and developing a distinctive identity for their host cities

In 2008 it would be 800 years since The Palio del Drappo Verde race was first held; by 2017 the 600th race could be the focus for a great cultural and sporting event. The longest running footrace could continue its

remarkable duration onwards into the future.

In 2008 the Palio Del Drappo Verde was revived, and this year sees a totally unique historical occasion, the 600th anniversary, after some 800 years. It will be a truly remarkable occasion, one that many involved will remember for the rest of their lives. They will not see such an occasion again in their lifetimes.

I would like to thank Indro Neri for his help with this article. His piece on the Run the Planet website "A Medieval Race in Verona" gives many important insights into the Verona race. Don Macgregor supplied useful information on the Pienza Palio race. Stefano Scevaroli was very helpful in explaining details and the length of the actual course that the runners would have taken.

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