

A “tragicomic” Palio won by San Magno

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✘ The real protagonists of the historic “Palio” in Legnano (the horse race in which the different districts of the town are represented by a horse) were the splendid, imposing pitch black Friesians, with their flowing manes and tufted fetlocks. No horse is more spectacular than this gentle beast, and there were many to see, galloping around the track of the “**Mari**” **Stadium in Legnano**.

The districts parading under the watchful eyes of their inhabitants portrayed themes of life: marriage, strength, work, victory, nobility, hunting and religion. Here, the saints, who give their names to the districts, were mistaken for ordinary mortals, becoming the objects of derision and mockery. For one afternoon, the only god was the horse. It was he who governed man’s pleasure and pain. Above all, however, there was death. And when it was the turn of Sant’Erasmus, the district with the most victories (12 to its credit), the opponents of Legnarello honoured them with a banner dedicated to Andrea, a young inhabitant who died last year.

The “Palio” is a money machine, and it makes a lot. The “older brothers” of Siena, who came to Legnano to see their “assassins”, could say a thing or two about it. They took notes, they commented and exchanged opinions. “Almost all of the jockeys are from Siena,” said **Davide, from the “Della Torre”** district. “We know them well, we live with them all year round. For us, this is a sort of test, we see how they behave.”

First heat – Fate placed San Magno by the rail, then came San Martino, Legnarello, and Sant’Erasmus on the far side. The first start was called false, as was the second, even though the horses were perfectly in line. The third had a clown-like tragic feel to it. The Starter failed to notice that the Sant’Erasmus horse had turned round, and declared the start good, setting it off with a comical “Ready, off!”, when it should have been called false. “It’s insane,” people shouted from the stands. Sant’Erasmus was out, the first heat was the best of three. San Magno started in the lead, with Legnarello making a great comeback. In the meantime, a number of inhabitants of Sant’Erasmus stormed the Starter’s box, to “avenge” the injustice. The official order of the first heat was: Legnarello, San Magno, San Martino, with Sant’Erasmus unclassified. The first two would go on to the final. However, the protest did not die down; in protest, the grand prior of Sant’Erasmus withdrew the banner from the field, and the inhabitants of Sant’Erasmus left the terraces.

Second heat – Sant’Ambrogio was by the rail, then came San Domenico, La Flora, and San Bernardino, on the far side. Three false starts. On the fourth, which was also false, the La Flora jockey was thrown and trampled on, but he limped back onto his horse. There was a fifth false start, but the sixth was good. Sant’Ambrogio went into the lead, followed by the others in the starting order. On the second lap, however, the Sant’Ambrogio jockey fell, and lay still on the track. The horses continued to race, but **Silvano Mulas** remained on the ground, unconscious. It was thanks to the quick intervention by a number of extras, who dragged the

jockey under the rail, that he escaped the hooves of the other horses. The finishing order was Sant'Ambrogio, La Flora, San Bernardino, San Domenico. Sant'Ambrogio would go on to race the final with the reserve jockey, Leonardo Chessa. Mulas was taken to hospital for checks. (See the photos.)

The Final – Fate smiled on Sant'Ambrogio, which, unable to race with its official jockey, began by the rail. Then there came La Flora, with Siri in the saddle, Legnarello, with Pusceddu, and San Magno, with Atzeni. The first start looked as though it would be like the one that disqualified Sant'Erasmo from the first heat; the Starter was slow to call a false start, and only did so after the San Magno jockey had raised his whip in the air as a sign of protest.

The Starter raised his voice to the jockeys to get them back in the starting order. The audience responded by whistling their protests. It had become a war of nerves. The Starter tried to impose his authority, but was not listened to by the jockeys or by the people, who had probably already written his name in the “black book” of the Legnano Palio. The second start was also called false, after a quarter of an hour of trying to line up the horses.

At 8 pm, the final had still not taken place. In the sunset that loomed over the Mari Stadium, all that could be heard was the Starter's shouting; “... spread out ... squeeze together ... make ... room ... that's no good Sant'Ambrogio ... make more room San Magno.”

The third start was inevitably a false one. A chorus rose up of “Idiot, idiot”, and the Starter responded by calling for a pause. The horses had still not run the final, but judging by the sweat on their coats, they had run three. At the fourth start, tragedy was just avoided again, when the La Flora horse literally sat on its hindquarters, squashing its poor jockey for a second time, who dragged himself under the Starter's box to receive aid. There followed another long pause to allow Siri to recover. At 8.35 pm, there was a fifth false start, but the one at 8.40 was good: **San Magno took the lead, followed by Sant'Ambrogio, Legnarello and La Flora.** And this was how they finished in the final of the Palio.

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