



## Calcio Storico: A ball game like no other

By Kathleen Aoki

*In the time of the gladiators in ancient Rome, brawny men wore costumes and beat the living crap out of each other. At the Calcio Storico in modern day Italy, brawny men wear costumes and beat the living crap out of each other. Apparently not much has changed over the millenia.*

Welcome to the Calcio Storico or “Costume Football,” an historic and brutal sporting event dating back to 1580. It’s held every year on June 24<sup>th</sup>—the day of the Saint Patron of Florence—at San Giovanni at the Piazza Santa Croce in Firenze (Florence), one of the city’s main squares.

The objective of the game, ostensibly, is to score a goal by moving the soccer ball to the opposing end of the pitch and into the net by passing the ball to your fellow team members. However, the real objective of this rugby-cum-gladiator game seems to be pounding as many members of the opposite team into the mud during the fifty minutes of playtime as you can.

In this game of anything goes, tackling, punching, fist fighting, head-locking, strangling, mounting, hair-pulling, tripping and shorts-grabbing, are not only acceptable, but encouraged, judging by the frenzied screams of the

thousands of fans who attend this event every year. The only rule which is actually enforced is to not beat up (or kill) an already-unconscious player. Thank goodness for rules.

The big, tough, and ubiquitously tattooed Calcio Storico players are culled from the four quarters of Firenze, and it's a serious matter of pride for the Firenzians, many of whom train all year with the hopes of representing their quarter. Each district's team is color-coded: Blue for St. Croce, red for St. Maria Novella, white for St. Spirito and green for St. Giovanni. This year's final was a face-off (no pun intended) between favored team Azzurri (blue), standing champion of the Storico, and team Bianchi (white).

The 500-year-old game opens with a festive pageant featuring hundreds of the city's elite wearing colorful Renaissance-style costumes. They proudly parade through the city with feathered helmets, flags, trumpets, and various medieval weapons. They're later followed by the bad-ass players from all four districts, whose steely, impassive gazes suggest a limited sense of humor. As the colorful parade pours onto the playing field amid the cheering and wild screaming of fans, one cannot help but feel the kind of nervous excitement that precedes someone being eaten by a lion, or dropped into a pit of alligators. In other words, the exciting prelude to a day of fun family entertainment.

After the traditional procession has made its way around the muddy pitch for a while (complete with an impressive display of synchronized flag throwing), the air buzzes with electricity as the 54 players are left alone on the field—fists pumping and legs kicking in an warm-up display of testosterone-fueled anticipation.

Then, the whistle blows, and they're off like underfed animals with steaks strapped to each other's backs. The ball is nowhere to be seen. Fist fights and brawls break loose across the brown, sloppy pitch amid the screeching of fans who throw their water bottles to the players like panties to a rock star. Where is the ball? Who's got it? Who cares? At first it can all seem a bit crazy, unless you understand that one tactic of the game is to weaken the other team, which is performed successfully by a couple of bloodied noses within the first few minutes.

Fortunately, there are several doctors and medical personnel on-site, along with four brightly-colored ambulances, not to mention lots of female riot police, who look rather cute in their tailored blue uniforms and hats.

While it may not be obvious to the casual observer, there actually *are* tactics of ball possession and even defined positions for the Calciente (players) on each team. There are four Datori Indietrio (goal keepers) guarding the skinny net which stretches the whole width of the pitch, three Datori Imanzi Terzini (side defenders)—guys you would definitely not want to run into in a dark, or even lit, alley—five Scanciatori (mid-fielders) and 15 equally scary-looking Imanzi Coridori (strikers). Yet throughout the duration of the game, most are deadlocked like boa constrictors in a pas de deux to the death, occasionally pausing for a sip of water from the many bottles lying on the field generously donated by the fans.

Yes, the fans. Scanning the predominantly male crowd in the heat-soaked, dusty afternoon one can witness an impressively macho display of bare chests, along with the occasional t-shirt declaring, "I'm too big for you." Innuendo at its finest there. However, the overabundance of testosterone that is the hallmark of the Calcio Storico does not deter the many female fans, who will tell you to *vaffanculo*, thank you very much. It's also a family event, judging by the number of kids and little Italian grandmothers in the stands, pumping their fists and screaming as yet another player is felled by a blow to the head.

At certain points during the game, it's actually difficult to tell the players apart from the fans, as drunken aficionados of the sport try to scale the alarmingly thin metal fence separating the action on the field from the hapless media people standing behind it. One particularly overweight and hairy male fan—complete with ass-crack showing—has to be calmed down by several event workers, who are strangely sympathetic to his plight. His arms, bloodied from his goes at the fence, are lovingly attended to by a male friend, as he screams "Let me play, muthafuckers" (in Italian, of course) at the top of his lungs.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, the seemingly non-existent ball appears and breaks loose with a passing run of a Bianchi striker tightly guarded by fist-throwing bodyguards clearing a path for him toward the goal. This speedy, war-like action leads to underdog Bianchi taking the lead quite early in the game, much to the dismay of the team Azzuri fans, who boo loudly and throw even more water bottles onto the field (out of smoke bombs, apparently).

With Bianchi having scored, the teams switch sides causing the players to quickly reposition themselves, finding the next best opponent to engage in a bare-knuckled fist fight. Again, the ball is nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, as team Azzurri is preoccupied with their fistfights and getting the better of the whites in retaliation for the early set-back—bam!—a brilliantly un-choreographed mid-air collision puts the ball again in favor of team Bianchi and then safely into the net—making it a nicely buffered two-zip for the men of St. Spirito.

The intensity of the game has now and truly spilled out of the gladiator cage and onto the tribunes with fists swinging in mid-air to a chorus of the most exotic kind of Italian phrases. Witnessing firsthand the frenzied energy of the game, it is easy to understand why the city of Firenze was invaded and overtaken a few centuries earlier by the Turkish army in the middle of a Calcio game. So entranced were the soldiers by the football action, they neglected their posts at the city gates, only to find that by game's end the city was no longer theirs.

Back to the sidelines, a seriously dazed looking player from team Azzurri is having his broken and bloodied nose attended to by the bright-yellow uniformed medical team. Not looking good, pal.

Fortunately, this year's event did not see any serious injuries, although not for a lack of trying. While pure, unadulterated violence does seem to be the Calcio Storico's *raison d'être*, the game was on hiatus from 2006 to 2010 due to the large number of serious injuries encountered on the field, including a missing ear ala Mike Tyson style. The organizers, in an attempt to curb the violence and number of missing ears, set an upper age limit for players as

well as banned players with a criminal record involving theft, bodily harm, and murder. These rules seemed to have reduced the serious injury rate considerably as well as number of missing body parts.

Despite the harsh combat tactics and the deadly seriousness of the game, the display of sportsmanship between players was quite heart-warming in moments. As sweaty, battered and exhausted players leaned or sat on each other to rest, they could be seen pouring water over each other in a display of downright chivalry between punches.

Men from all stations of life train for twelve gruelling months to take part in this popular event, many of whom also play sports with rules such as rugby or soccer. Conspicuously absent from this year's game was famed father and son duo, Gabrielle Zena and son Emmanuelle, the big hope for team Azzurri. Unfortunately junior got barred due to a late-night brawl a few weeks earlier and dad just surpassed the age limit—a huge blow for the team.

As the game came to a close, team Bianchi extended their lead by yet another two goals (the blues managing only a near-goal), much to the furor of the white fans. When the cannon thunder announced the end of this year's Calico Storico Final, history was made with team Bianchi defeating Azzurri 4-0. Immediately the pitch was flooded with thrilled St. Spirito fans as the blue team stood in shocked disbelief. No matter how you dice it, it's hard seeing big, tough guys lose.

As for the winning team—they get a real live cow. No wonder the game has been going for over 500 years running.

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