

JOURNAL → FESTIVAL



Tobago's racing ruminants and their barefoot jockeys are off to a flying start.

And They're Off!

On tranquil **Tobago**, a day at the races is a chance to see goats treated like sports royalty.

A BUGLER MARCHES SMARTLY ONTO THE TURF, RAISES HIS GLEAMING horn and sounds the call to the post. A wave of anticipation sweeps through the spectators packing the grandstands, like the ripple of the trade winds on the nearby sea. Meanwhile, in the paddock, jockeys adjust their silks. Trainers grab the reins of their headstrong hopefuls Ben Hur, Running Scared and Silver Baby and lead them toward the starting gate — and perhaps to glory — at this year's goat races.

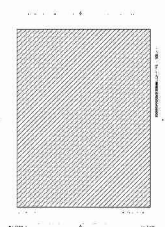
That's right: goat races.

Churchill Downs has the Run for the Roses, and Pamplona, Spain, has the running of the bulls, but Buccoo, Tobago, boasts The Men Who Dare to Run With Goats.

For the past 85 years, this tiny westside village better known for its beautiful fringing reef has hosted one of the Caribbean's most surreal spectacles. Held annually the Tuesday after Easter, the Buccoo (pronounced boo-KOO) Goat Race Festival

began as the working-class answer to the blue-blooded sport of horse racing. And today the goat races are taken every bit as seriously as the soca-soaked revelry on Tobago's sister island of **Trinidad**. So seriously, in fact, that the venerable post-Lenten event is no longer run in a dusty field but in a new \$16 million "goat-drome," which features a 100-meter-long grass track, a starting gate, a paddock building, grandstands and a VIP box with air conditioning and a flat-screen TV.

Luxury aside, the experience also offers an authentic dose of down-home Caribbean culture, with pan orchestras, dancers in traditional finery, minstrels, wisecracking emcees, kiosks serving up shark 'n' bake, local characters galore and even a few crab races for comic relief.



CHRISTOPHER COX (4)



Race day brings big excitement to tiny Tobago. Combining local color, spirited competition and racing pageantry, it's been the highlight of the island's sporting calendar for almost a century.



But at its heart, this day at the races is all about the goats. With some purses approaching \$400 — and plenty of betting among the spectators — there's a lot riding on these racing ruminants. Right after Carnival, trainers such as Oliver Williams of Canaan, a mason by trade, begin sharpening up their charges: running the goats on sandy beaches, swimming them in the shallows to build endurance and practicing the all-important start.

It's also crucial for a stable to have a good jockey, who must keep pace with the goat while running barefoot, brandishing

a switch and holding a 7- to 9-foot tether. If the leash is too taut or too loose, the goat might stop running, while losing one's grip altogether means disqualification. The best jockeys combine a sprinter's speed with a goat-whisperer's empathy.

But make no mistake: For the various Tobago stables, this is cold-eyed competitive racing. George "Sparrow" Clarke of Mount Irvine, a 75-year-old former jockey who has raced goats for 64 years, says a lead-footed handler gives an animal no chance. But at least these slowpokes can aspire to become trainers — slow goats

meet their fate in a cooking pot. And as for past-their-prime champion goats: "Well, you get rid of them too," Sparrow says matter-of-factly. "You sell them, and people eat them." One imagines they taste delicious — like curried victory.

With sleek coats and numbered bibs, the goats certainly look like thoroughbreds as they strut in front of the stands and load into the gate. Let the record show that at 1:10 p.m. on April 6, 2010, Fiery Foot Step, running in the C2 juvenile class (the lowest rank) and goaded by jockey Leroy Kerr, made history by winning the inaugural 100-meter race in the world's finest goat-racing facility.

Swift, nimble-footed and unapologetically stubborn, the goats are a handful for any jockey. A third of the way through the 15-race program, Leroy collapses with a torn hamstring. A few races later, another handler is stretchered from the track with a leg injury. The goats, however, keep on gamboling. One of Sparrow's most promising youngsters, Running Scared, trots away with a pair of Class B races. But Flying Missile, a past Buccoo winner for Sparrow, is a Class A also-ran.

As evening falls, the crowd swells to watch the main event: the Champ of Champs, a showdown of the day's winners, including Running Scared, Mr. Fox, Fiery Foot Step and Silver Baby. And down the stretch they come! Less than 12 seconds later, it's Silver Baby by a nose — or horn.

Back in the paddock, trainer "Shadow" Roberts is thrilled with Silver Baby's performance. "It was a coming-out party," he says. Sadly, there'll be no stud work for the new champ, who's a gelding.

A few pens over, Sparrow seems satisfied with Running Scared's form. Next year his upstart will run with the big billy goats in Class A. As for the underachieving Flying Missile, well, he'd be wise not to get too comfortable in his hay-filled stall, Sparrow cautions: "I've got goats coming up." — CHRISTOPHER R. COX

✦ *The Buccoo Goat Race Festival is held annually after Easter in Buccoo, Tobago. Track admission is about \$2.50 for adults. visittobago.gov.tt*