



Red Rag To A Bull

From a revolutionary method of ploughing 300 years ago, it did not take long for Madurese farmers to start racing each other in the fields. Then it was only a small step to the exciting, crowd-pleasing bull-races of today. Words and pictures by **Annemarie and Holli Hollitzer**

The hot air stands still, the noisy crowd falls quiet and all eyes are focused on the two restless teams of honey-brown, doe-eyed bulls. Lightly built jockeys in bright-coloured silk shirts take their places on the footbars of the wooden, plough-like *kleles* sleds, ready for the start.

The bulls, unaccustomed to the throng and the commotion, trample the ground nervously, then abruptly they rear, front hooves violently thrashing the air. The crowd scatters, and dark men with tense, sombre faces bustle around the beasts, calming them and forcing them down. The tension

mounts, the jockeys lean forward into their racing sleds, firmly grasping the bulls' tails. The red flag falls and, with a snort of their nostrils, the bulls are off, hooves pounding the light-coloured earth into a suffocating cloud of dust. Neck-and-neck the teams thunder down the straight 120-metre racecourse, prodded by thorn-spiked batons and egged on by shouting, jostling spectators. With no firm barriers to contain it, the crowd surges forward onto the track as soon as the bulls have roared past, and almost before we know it the race is over. In less than 10 seconds the front feet of the bulls from the



red team have passed the finishing line. The three-man jury is united in pronouncing it the winner.

A 750-rupiah ticket gives us entry to the racecourse at Muneng in East Java, where a traditional *kerapan sapi* (bull race) takes place only twice a year. The word *kerapan* derives from an old Madurese word, *garapan*, meaning "to work the soil", and *sapi*, which is the Indonesian word for both bulls and cows. Forty-eight pairs of young bulls have come here to race with their owners, trainers and jockeys. The sturdy breed of Madurese cattle, which is descended from the wild *banteng* that once inhabited this region, has evolved into today's sleek and hardy animal. These mild-eyed racing bulls reach their peak around the age of five years.

Bull racing has its origins in Madura, a large island just a 30-minute

ferry ride from Surabaya in East Java. According to legend, the birth of this popular event took place near the turn of the 17th century and is credited to Lord Ketandur, who was the first Indonesian to suggest that the farmers use cows to pull their ploughs in his sun-scorched fields on Madura. This revolutionary method of ploughing proved a great success and, with the Madurese being a competitive people, it did not take long for the farmers to start racing each other in the fields. It was only a small step to the type of exciting, crowd-pleasing bull racing that endures today on Madura and nearby East Java.

The small island of Sapudi, just off Madura, is famous for rearing fine bulls and, although it is only a few kilometres long, conditions are ideal for cattle breeding. Hardly a day passes without bulls and cows being shipped to nearby Madura and East Java, and young Sapudi boys dream of becoming famous jockeys. Their ultimate goal is to race in the grand finals on Madura, and Sapudi has produced many of the sport's best jockeys.

But it is a long road to the final. First, the young bulls must be taught to run in a straight line on the 30-metre-wide practice ground. Then come the village competitions, run on a 110-metre track, from which the teams are

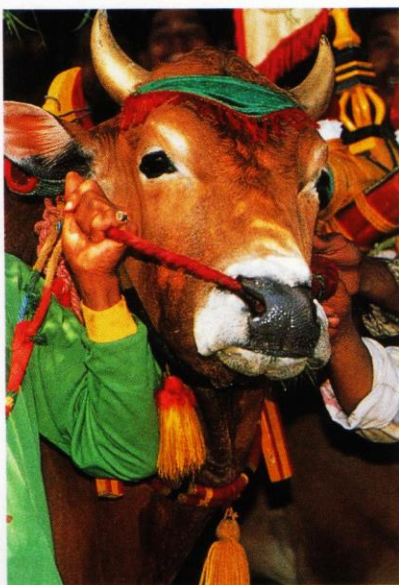
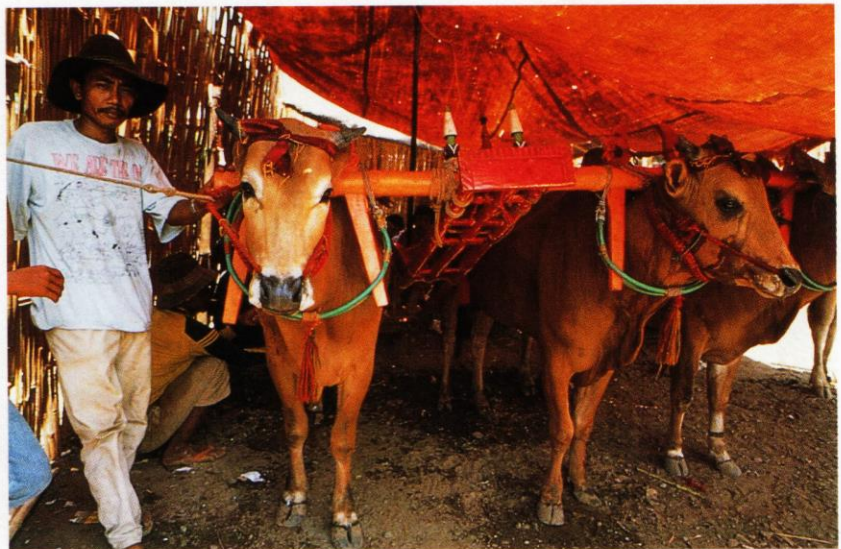
divided into groups of winners and losers after a series of elimination heats between two pairs of bulls. The winner in each group goes on to the district competition, then to the semi-finals at Sumenep. Only the very best teams reach the glorious *Kerapan Besar*—the grand final—at Pamekasan.

With the exception of the village races (*kerapan desa*), which are a free-for-all for bulls and jockeys, strict rules apply regarding the bulls' breeding, colour, height and strength. Only the finest specimens are chosen to race. In 1926 the Dutch East Indies government offered an annual subsidy of 10,000 guilders to promote bull racing in Madura. It was right to recognise the potential the races held to develop the cattle livestock in the province. Today stud bull breeding is big business. Owning a great team of bulls is a seri-

ous responsibility and getting the animals fit to win a race is no cheap undertaking. But in return a winning team will bring its owner rich rewards and endow him with honour and prestige among his people that cannot be counted in rupiahs.

These racing bulls are loved and cherished by their owners, nurtured and pampered by their handlers and nourished on a diet of the choicest ingredients. As the competition day draws nearer, special tonics are prepared. Some bulls are fed up to 100 raw eggs a day, made tasty by the addition of a secret recipe of herbs and spices, wine, honey and grated ginger. For that extra zip and fire, no tonic would be complete without a few red-hot chillies. A good trainer is vital for success, and occasionally rival owners may offer substantial bribes to entice a victo-

Clockwise from right: waiting for the race to start, precious bulls are shaded from hot sun; bull team No. 5 is parading along the race track; dressed in their finery, bulls are waiting for the parade to start





rious trainer to move camp. But no final can be won without the application of some magic, so a professional magician, who may whisper sacred formulas into the ears of the bulls, is often hired. He may even burn some verses from the Koran and then mix the ashes into the bulls' tonic. Another powerful weapon is a strip of cloth inscribed with holy words that is tied firmly to the bull's yoke. After these rituals you can only hope that your magic is stronger than that of the opposition.

On the eve of the big race in Pamekasan, usually at the end of the dry season in October, a soft humming can be heard from the stables as owners and handlers softly sing their bulls into a restful sleep. Come morning their prized beasts are lovingly bathed, groomed and massaged before being dressed up for the pre-race procession through the streets of town. Shaded under brightly coloured parasols, proud owners parade their cherished bulls. The animals are bedecked in gilt and silver-decorated leather bibs and adorned for the day with bejewelled head-dresses and shining yokes. Flower garlands and tassels flow from their horns, and bells jangle merrily as they prance through the packed streets. Basking in the crowd's admiration and respect on this day is the owners' reward for their year of hard work.

To entertain the crowd and delight the bulls before the race starts, a beauty contest for cows is held in which glitzy decorated cows coyly flutter their eyelashes as they parade before an over-

Clockwise from above: happy and excited crowds come to encourage their favourite teams; a smile from a spectator; the golden trophies in this district final were donated by Mrs Tien Soeharto, Indonesia's first lady

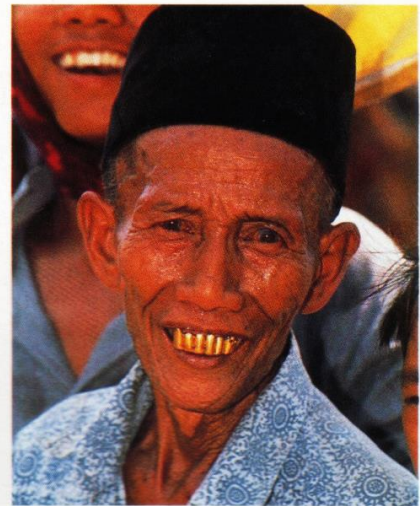
head mirror. The winner is the cow that first looks up to admire its reflection.

The fast, metallic beat of *gamelan* music hastens and the excitement intensifies. Then the racing bulls are stripped of their finery, yoked to their wooden sleds and each given a generous swig of *arak* (rice liquor) from a pointed bamboo tube. The atmosphere is electric as the best teams in the land line up at the starting line. Fearless jockeys take their places on the sleds, each centred between his two bulls. With a power-

ful lunge forward they're off, hooves flailing, muscles rippling and the slender jockeys in their bare feet bouncing precariously on the fragile-looking skids. The best bulls cover the distance in nine seconds, a time faster than the men's 100m world sprint record.

With the excitement of the big day getting to jockeys and bulls, not every team manages to race in a straight line and, in the very next heat, two large, sweating bulls crash to the left into the yelling and fleeing crowd. Back to the starting line. Stopping is another test of the jockey's skills and there is a great commotion at the finish line as one powerful team, still going strongly, refuses to stop.

Heat follows heat in a long day of



racing, until the two winners emerge—the best of the losers and the best of the winners. At the end of the day, the annual champion and its owner are rewarded with the President's Cup, which in some years is awarded by President Soeharto himself.

After a final parade around the stadium, this year's grand final is over and the winners return in triumph to their villages while the losers are left to ponder what went wrong.

As for the bulls, they are tenderly rubbed down with soothing ointments and lulled to sleep by the tones of soft, quiet *gamelan*. And the fastest and finest among them go on to be used as studs, the fathers of future champions. G

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Garuda Indonesia operates regular flights to the international gateway of Surabaya

