

# Buffalo soldiers

THAT RUSTLE IN THE FOLIAGE ISN'T A TIGER – IT'S THE ONSLAUGHT OF A CHARIOT. LITTLE KNOWN TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD, THE TRADITIONAL BALINESE SPORT OF BUFFALO RACING IS ONE OF ASIA'S MOST EXCITING SPORTS AND BEST-KEPT SECRETS

WORDS | MARK EVELEIGH  
IMAGES | MARK EVELEIGH & CRAIG PUSEY

It is a typically peaceful and picturesque Indonesian dawn. Mist clings to western Bali's muscular green hills and coats the valleys in milky layers. Further westward, on the distant horizon, the highest Javanese volcanoes are already reflecting the first gold-tinged heat of the day. The sound of birdsong carries clearly across a patchwork of paddies that resemble a romantic English watercolour. Paddy workers hurry along a muddy dyke, swinging their conical hats in calloused hands. They are clearly intent on getting the main labours of the day completed before the equatorial sun shows its full power and the jungle humidity kicks in.

At this early hour, all still seems as bright and sharp as a new pin. This is a perfect morning for a solitary stroll, yet I'm standing on a paddy dyke in Bali's wild western Jembrana regency with a crowd of about 100 other early risers. The crowd is strangely silent and apart from a single sarong-clad form that hurries along in the wake of the paddy-workers, there are no women in sight.

We strain our ears at the distant hint of clanking bells and shield our eyes as the first rays of the sun burnish a billowing cloud of dust that rises from far down the dirt track. The sarong-clad woman picks up her skirts and dashes into the paddy field, just as a bizarre vehicle erupts from the cover of a copse of banana trees in a mighty rumble.

Two galloping bulls, driven by a wild figure with reins in one hand and a heavy wooden *cosh* in the other, are charging flat out towards us, as though intent on a barbarian massacre. A flag billows like a battle standard above the scarlet-shirted charioteer. Over the din of clattering wheels, I hear the maniacal cheer of what sounds like an Apache war-whoop.

These fearsome chariots are not in fact some otherworldly death-squad, but rather competitors in the unique Balinese sport of *makepung*, or buffalo chariot racing. Somehow the charioteer manages to stay on his feet as he flails at his steeds' massive leathery rumps. The bulls are perfectly matched in size and ⇒





colour. As they draw closer, I can see that their cloth-covered horns are flattened along their backs and that a carved wooden dragon rears up between the bulls' heads. In an instant, the crazily bucking chariot has thundered past, within a couple of metres of the crowd.

Jembrana reGENCY is the most traditional and least known part of this lovely island. It is primarily an agricultural region, where the farming way of life has changed little over the centuries. The area is known for the water buffalo that still work the paddy fields, and for its Javanese-style wooden carts, forerunners of these apparently flimsy racing platforms that are still used to carry produce and supplies.

Some say that makepung races were first introduced to the region by Madurese immigrants to celebrate the end of the rice harvest. Essentially, however, they have evolved as the natural outcome of the farmer's perennial challenge to get his produce to market as quickly as possible.

Races take place most Sundays between July and October and tournaments progress with two or sometimes three chariots racing at a time. Chariots fight neck-and-neck for the limited space of a single dirt track and it is not uncommon for racers, vehicles and animals to take a tumble into the paddy mud. Makepung is not a sport to be taken lightly; serious injuries and even death among racers (and occasionally spectators) are not unheard of. At their most dramatic, these two-buffalo-power two-wheel-drives are capable of making the international rally circuit look positively tame.

Later in the morning I wander up to the finish line where Balinese friends introduce me to race-team manager Wayan Cisdema. He is happy with his team's performance – they romped home easily ahead of the competition. I ask why the backs of his bulls are devoid of the blood specks that are so common that they seem almost part of the colourful costume of

a racing buffalo. What I really want to hear of course, as an animal-loving Westerner, is that Wayan prohibits excessive use of the jockey's nail-spiked wooden cosh. But the team manager is coldly logical: "They were already very fast," he shrugs, "so it wasn't necessary. *Lebih cepat, kurang darah.*"

"More fast, less blood." It sounds like an equation that the tough-looking 40-year-old army captain may have picked up from some boot-camp training session. But buffalo racing is what Wayan seems to concentrate all his energy on. He has been up since well before dawn preparing his bulls and blessing them at the family temple. His sons help to wash the animals and strap on their decorated harnesses. Their hooves are oiled and their horns are bound in silk ribbons. (Less wealthy racers will race a relatively simple cart and might make do with striped football socks as horn decorations.)

Wayan's lightweight bamboo chariot, with its dragon and snake carvings, was certainly the most spectacular at this morning's race, and his five-year-old bulls have already proved that they have enough stamina to cover the two kilometre dirt track course at speeds of close to 60 miles per hour.



This may only be a training run but, this being Bali, money has already changed hands among the gambling contingent in the audience. As with the local penchant for cockfighting, betting is common and, although Wayan races primarily for fun, there is also big money involved. Wayan's bulls are worth more money in stud fees with every race that they win. At about 200 kilograms, they are smaller than the heavy agricultural buffalo and would be of little use in the fields. Instead, they are specially chosen and nurtured for a life that (apart from the cosh) is relatively privileged. The strength of these racing bloodlines has led to a breed of buffalo that is resistant to many of the diseases that infect their less fortunate contemporaries. White bulls are particularly favoured, and owners might pay as much as US\$3,000 for the perfect partner for a good bull.

At their most dramatic, these two-buffalo-power two-wheel-drives are capable of making the international rally circuit look positively tame

This is important since teams not only win by speed but also pick up points for appearance and style. Fine black bulls wear golden crowns and scarlet tassels draped between their lyre-shaped horns. White bulls – so sparsely covered in hair that they are literally pink – are bedecked with mirrors and bells.

The jockeys are a particularly tough and fearless breed, and often attain the reputation of local heroes among their followers. There are two main teams in Negara, the provincial capital. There is Ijo Gading Timur (from east of Ijo Gading River) and Ijo Gading Barat (from west of the river). Crashes are

common but another occupational hazard is a trancelike state that one old man described as "speed-craze". Apparently the adrenaline and excitement of the race can be so intense that many highly strung young racers can have trouble restraining their "need for speed" even after they have crossed the line.

As I stand talking to Wayan, one young charioteer crosses the finishing line and hauls back on the reins to ease his bulls to a standstill. All is quiet and calm for a moment but as the crowd closes around offering encouragement and congratulations, the young man inexplicably begins flailing at his

PREVIOUS PAGE: A jockey urges his buffalos on in the final moments of the race  
LEFT: A pastel sunrise over Bali's Jembrana reGENCY; white buffalos are particularly prized for racing  
ABOVE: Wealthy participants often decorate their chariots with elaborate wooden carvings; a local farmer follows the races intently



bulls with renewed vigour. It seems that he is trying to charge his chariot into the crowd. His eyes are wild and glazed and his movements erratic. Drivers and bystanders fight to hold the bulls still while other men leap into the chariot to drag the young man down before he causes any harm. He seems to have been taken over by a will that is not his own, and as the men pry the club from his fingers the driver passes out entirely.

Wayan shrugs and describes it simply as "a common emotional reaction". But I feel that I've had a fleeting insight into what the old Malay word *amok* really means. Back in ⇒





ABOVE: A chariot owner prepares his team for a race  
 RIGHT: The Negara area is known for its beautiful rice paddies  
 BELOW: Winning jockeys are praised as local heroes

Teams also pick up points for appearance and style. Fine black bulls wear golden crowns and scarlet tassels draped between their lyre-shaped horns

1999, local “speed-craze” hit a fever pitch in Jembrana province when top Formula One circuit designer Herman Tilke recommended to his boss, Bernie Ecclestone, that a 120-hectare site in Negara would be the perfect location for a new international F1 circuit. For a short while, it looked as if the future of Jembrana racing spirit would be associated less with the rattle of buffalo-carts and more with the roar of Ferraris. With motocross and road-race championships already taking place at the Perancak Circuit, the plans were seen by some as a vital boost to tourism in this isolated area of Bali. Others, however, saw it

as a death knell for local culture in this sleepy agricultural province. Emotions ran high for weeks leading up to the decision, but the plans eventually fell through. Perhaps this was indeed the hand of Providence stepping in to protect this unique cultural practice for future generations. These days, on any peaceful Sunday morning in Bali’s Jembrana countryside, visitors are still likely to feel a very long way from the fast-paced excitement of Formula 1... until, that is, they start to hear the echoing war-whoops of charioteers and the thunder of charging buffalo ringing around the mountains. 🐃



## EXPERIENCE BALI:

### FOR BUFFALO RACING: THE MAKEPUNG “FIXTURES LIST”

On any given Sunday morning between July and October, garishly decorated chariots will charge through the area to one race meeting or another on the outskirts of Negara in western Bali. The Bupati Cup takes place in August and is named after the head of the Jembrana district government, while the Governor’s Cup (October) is dedicated to the head of the Bali provincial government. Organised races usually start at 8am but local training runs often begin earlier.

### FOR NATURE: TAMAN NASIONAL BALI BARAT

Taman Nasional Bali Barat (West Bali National Park) is a protected area of rainforested slopes, mangroves, savannah, turquoise reefs and pristine beaches stretching across 57,000 hectares. Bali is one of the planet’s most attractive tourist destinations yet this wilderness remains almost totally unknown and represents one of Indonesia’s finest trekking areas. The area is home to more than 300 bird species and wildlife sightings include macaque, Java deer, sambar, python, leaf monkeys and monitor lizards. Sadly, the last Balinese tiger was shot here in 1937.

### FOR LUXURY: PURI DAJUMA COTTAGES

Stay at the Puri Dajuma Cottages in Pekutatan and be on location for the early morning start at the buffalo races. Expert staff at this unforgettably beautiful beachside property, some 40 minutes from Negara, can arrange guided tours to the buffalo races (combined with a visit to a nearby turtle conservation programme). [WWW.DAJUMA.COM](http://WWW.DAJUMA.COM)

### WITH ETIHAD AIRWAYS:

Etihad Airways operates a direct flight service between Abu Dhabi and Jakarta, Indonesia, every day. [WWW.ETIHADAIRWAYS.COM](http://WWW.ETIHADAIRWAYS.COM)