



Bull run

The sheer power of this annual bull race in Indonesia leaves spectators breathless. >16

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Biting motivation: Since they have to hang onto their 'steeds' with both hands wrapped in the tails, these bull racers cannot carry a whip, so to make their bulls go faster, they nip the tails at strategic moments in the race, as this man is doing. — ART CHEN/The Star

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Ready, set.... It takes 10 people to keep each pair of bulls calm before their race, and to coax them into the padi field. The instant the men step away, the bulls charge ahead.



Raging bulls: These photographers suddenly found themselves the target of two charging bulls. One photographer from China dropped his expensive camera and 200mm zoom lens into the thick mud. He was lucky – last year, an Indonesian photographer ended up with a broken leg after such a charge!

Guts and gumption

A 400-year-old annual tradition in a remote area of Indonesia is today celebrated by hundreds of visitors from around the world for its display of sheer power and teamwork between man and animal.



Poetry in motion: This image of a pair of charging bulls was captured with a slow shutter speed to display the fluidity of movement these behemoths can demonstrate in this ancient bull race in Indonesia. Inset above is a racer captured with a normal shutter speed. – Photos by ART CHEN/The Star



Oops! A slip of the hand and this farmer heads for a mouthful of mud amidst cheers and jeers.



Winning steed: Idris proudly posing with his father's bull, Jigo, which fetched the highest price at last year's race, 21mil rupiah (a little less than RM7,000).

By CHIN MUI YOON
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UNDER the searing midday sun, throats are parched and shirts are soaked, yet the hundreds of spectators are not restive. They are

patiently awaiting the charging of the bulls across a muddy padi field. Considering this is a little-known spot in Indonesia – Batu Sangkar in the Tanah Datar regency of West Sumatra – it's amazing that the spectators hail from as far away as China, Japan and Europe. Among the crowd are more than 300 photographers who have done much to publicise this sport internationally, having been drawn to capture on film the dramatic twists and turns of the annual *Pacu Jawi*, or Buffalos' Race. This race has been held for some 400 years at the end of the padi harvesting season at Batu Sangkar; the bulls are raced across the padi fields to help prepare the ground for the next planting. This year, the event took place on Feb 11. The fittest and sturdiest bulls are yoked together in a wooden harness with the farmer, sportingly called a jockey for the duration, balancing on the harness and gripping the animals' tails to drive them forward. Sometimes, to get the bulls to run faster, the jockey delivers a little nip to the end of their tails! While the race might not be a very pleasant experience for the bulls, the spectacle of the animals thundering across the field, sending up showers of mud and water everywhere, and guided only by slight, barefoot handlers is pure photographic heaven for the shutterbugs.

The combination of brute power and human grit makes for explosive photos indeed. Accidents have befallen both racers and photographers. The thick mud, which gets everywhere, is so slippery that it's nearly impossible to grip the harness well, and so the competitors frequently tumble. And when the bulls rampage out of control, as a pair or two invariably do, it's the spectators' turn to get a mud bath. This year, a Chinese photographer knocked off his feet ended up with his camera and a 200mm lens completely soaked in mud. He was lucky; last year, an Indonesian lensman faced the wrath of the bulls and came away with a broken leg. Some 600 bulls driven by 50 farmers were showcased this year in different rounds. The winning bulls are not the fastest or those that won the most number of races; winners are judged by their ability to run in a straight line and whether both animals are cooperating. Aside from the day-long race, bull breeders and buyers keep up a hearty trade on the sidelines especially for the animals that have proven themselves on the field.

■ **How to get there:** Batu Sangkar is a three-hour 4WD drive away from Padang, West Sumatra's capital and largest city. Air access is via Padang's Minangkabau International Airport, the main gateway to the region.



Pride at stake: Competitors must have the strength, control and skill to drive their bulls forward in as straight a line as possible, using only a simple harness to balance on and nips of the bulls' tails to urge the animals on! Naturally, many riders tumble into the slippery mud – fortunately for them, though, they are not tied to the harness, so most end up with just a mud bath and dented pride rather than broken bones or more serious injuries.







