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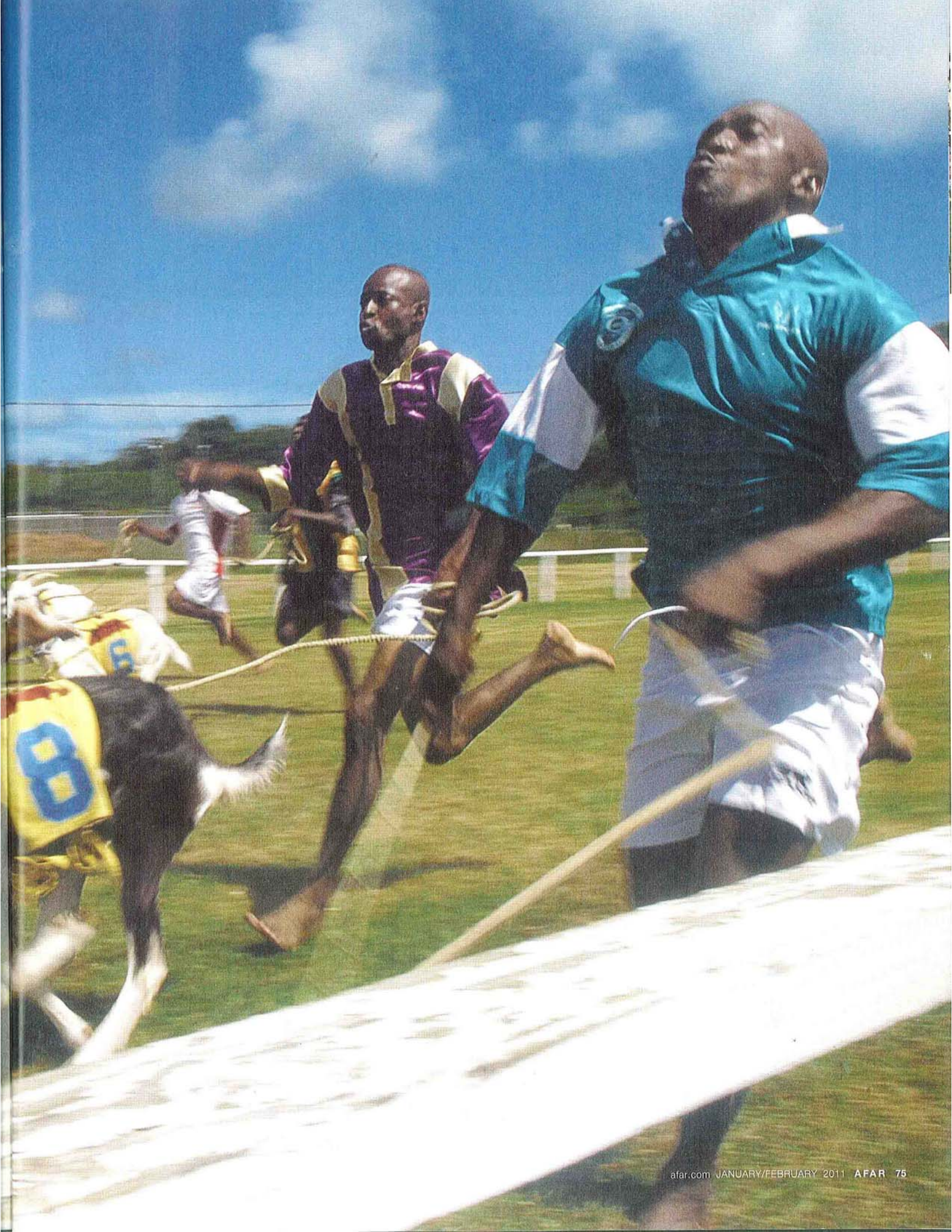
JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011

Ready, Set, Goat!

On the Caribbean island of Tobago, you'll find sand, surf—and the fastest goats on the planet. Now if they'd just run in a straight line...

BY JAMES STURZ







Leron Lezama stood chest-high in the turquoise waters of Buccoo Bay, in southwestern Tobago, flanked by two goats, Lightning and Flex. His uncle Sonny Murray floated behind him with one of their champions, Malta Carib. Can goats swim? Yes. Do they like to? On this spring morning, they huffed and wheezed as they valiantly tried to keep their heads out of the surf. You can lead a goat to water, but can you make him race once he's back on land?

For 85 years, goat racing has been the Caribbean island of Tobago's sporting obsession. Every year, on the Tuesday after Easter, thousands of islanders gather to watch goats scramble along a 100-meter grass course with barefoot human jockeys sprinting behind them, clutching tamarind-branch whips in one hand and nine-foot leashes in the other. What began in 1925 as a working-class alternative to horse racing went big-time in 2010 with the opening of a \$19 million stadium in the 800-person village of Buccoo (pronounced "book-OOO"). The stadium represents a huge bet that the sport will lure tourists to this island just northeast of Venezuela by offering them something—in addition to beaches, coral reefs, and rain forest—they won't find anywhere else. But seriously. Goats?

It was 8 a.m. on Good Friday, and on the athletic field behind Buccoo's primary school, Leron, 23, stood shirtless in khaki shorts, calling jockeys on his BlackBerry to wake them up and induce them to join him for an hour of training. Hymns barreled out of the open door of the Buccoo Moravian church across from the field, where a plaque above the altar reads, *OUR LAMB HAS CONQUERED, LET US FOLLOW HIM.*

As Leron improvised a minicourse with a rope alongside a fence, he explained what goes into winning a race: "First, you've got to teach the goats to walk straight, because naturally they run from side to side. If one goat bolts, then the others go with him. So we take them over long distances, until they learn to move in a straight line. And then we do quite a bit of swimming to build muscle and relax them. But winning's not just about speed. There's skill."

This year, Leron's team of six was a ragtag collection of mostly high-high newcomers with lean flanks and two-inch horns. Leron had his concerns about 3-year-old Flex: "Flex is greedy. Normally, goats eat only the heads of plants, but Flex grew up with sheep, so he eats down to the ground. Now he has a belly." But Lightning was looking good, with rippled haunches, and her half-sister Buccoo Queen seemed as tenacious

as a border collie. I also had to pause before 150-pound Malta Carib, who could have easily rested his snout on the other goats' heads—or sliced through their skulls with his six-inch horns. He was the kind of animal you'd pay good money to see on safari.

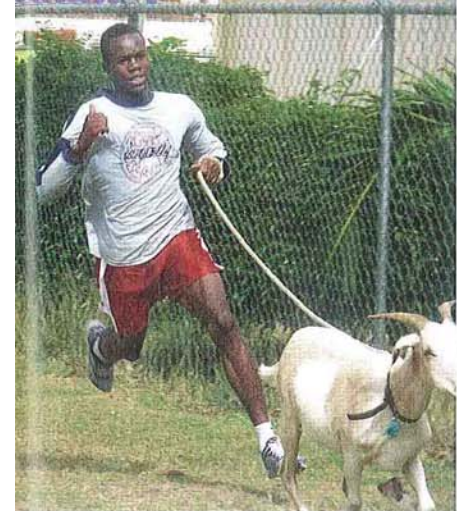
Watching the goats tangle their legs in their leashes, you'd never guess they were athletes. Your average goat can run at a rate of 15 miles per hour, about as fast as a horse's canter. But in Tobago I'd learn that selective breeding and training can transform goats into horned, sometimes bearded, torpedoed. Tobago's racers clock in at closer to 20 miles per hour, just a little slower than world-class human sprinters. Men like Leron's uncle Sonny have their breeding down to a science, combining three or more strains—usually lean dairy goats, such as French Alpines and Swiss Saanens, with meatier Anglo-Nubians or Boers—for agility and strength.

If Leron's goats looked clumsy, his jockeys were another story. Wiry guys in their late teens and early 20s, they wandered onto the field and began to stretch; in Tobago, goat jockeying is the semiprofessional follow-up to high school track. Sheldon Johnson showed up in a red polo shirt and matching red shorts, long and lanky with a chiseled beard. At age 28, he's one of Tobago's senior jockeys, with 12 years of experience behind him. Like Leron, he works as a lifeguard when he's not racing goats.

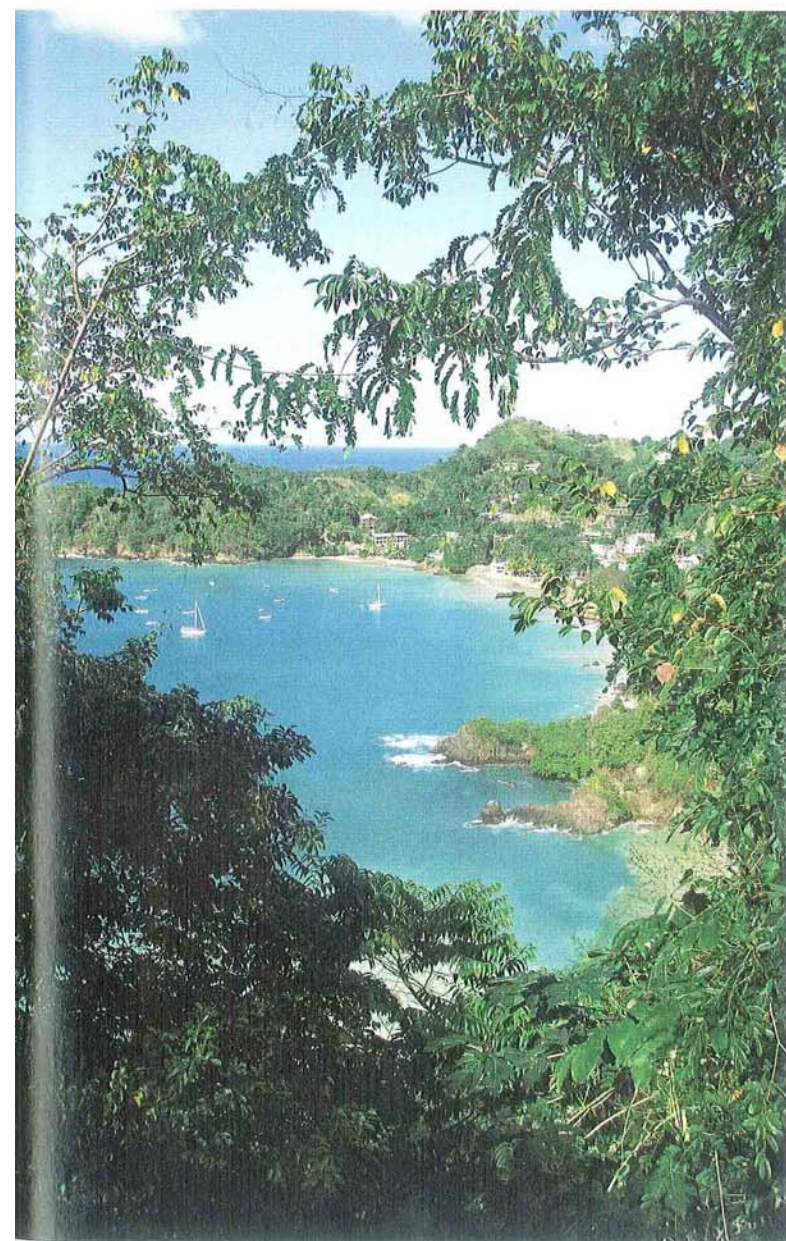
The jockeys took off in heats and practiced running the goats from end to end. "Shake the rope!" Leron coached. "You won't be able to use the whip when you're running and your hands are pumping!" Half of the jockey's challenge is to prod his goat to keep hurtling forward. The other half is to avoid tripping over other goats' leashes when they veer across his path. The final trick is to do all this at breakneck speed: *That's the skill.*

Lightning was fleet. Malta Carib practically galloped like a bronco. Then Buccoo Queen sprinted forward, with Sheldon chasing after her. "You're little, but you're *tallawah!*" Leron said, using the Jamaican word meaning "stubborn and strong." Then Leron looked at me. "This has been a tough week. I've been working





Top, from left: Whatever floats your goat—trainer Leron Lezama takes Flex and Obama for a swim in Buccoo Bay; Flash puts on his game face; Good Friday is training day for jockey Ndu-bisi Hall; the goats aren't the only ones with horns on race day; goats get in the gate at Buccoo's new stadium. Below, Tobago's turquoise waters are home to, among other creatures, goatfish.



them hard, but you don't want to get them too tired before a big event," he said. "We've got a new facility this year. It could be anyone's race."

As Leron's team trained, workers on the other side of the fence were finishing the new stadium. Where once stood a meager shed alongside a field, there were now covered pavilions, an air-conditioned skybox with closed-circuit TVs, staff and veterinary buildings, and locker rooms for jockeys. A 200-car parking lot and a tourism center by the beach were in the works. There was even talk of air-conditioning the goats' paddock.

A few days earlier, I had toured the stadium's grounds with Henry Corder, a Buccoo Village Councilman and former coastguardsman who was getting his feet wet as a racing-goat owner this year—Leron and Sonny were training Buccoo Queen, but she belonged to Henry. Chickens scurried past us as we crossed the pitch. "You don't know how emotional I am about this whole thing!" he told me. "When I was a boy, if people wanted to insult you, they'd ask, 'Did you go to Buccoo School?' because we didn't even have a school. We were a fishing village! Now we'll have the goat-race facility, with restaurants, shops, a beach house, and community center. We used to have a shed, which we'd dress up for races, with room for 600 people, max. Now we'll have thousands." Some Tobagonians wondered if a stadium was what their island needed most. But as Henry effused about Buccoo's transformation, I kept hearing, "If you build it, they will come."

When goat racing got started back in 1925, Easter Tuesday was chosen for Buccoo's championships because Sunday was for feasting, Easter Monday was for thoroughbreds, and Good Friday and Saturday were reserved for marble matches. Marbles and horse races have since disappeared from Tobago, but goats have held their ground, as goats do. Driving around the 116-square-mile island, I found them alongside roads, in front of schools, on golf courses, on the faces of embankments and hills; at night, they showed up in my headlights.

By recent tradition, Easter Monday is when the nearby town of Mount Pleasant holds its annual shakedown goat races, which offer the best indicator of who will win at Buccoo's championships the following day. There's no fancy stadium, but thousands of islanders and tourists crowd inside a walled recreation ground to take in the action.

A day at the races usually consists of a dozen or more heats, with goats grouped by age and ability, and the top goats running three or four times. At Mount Pleasant, the first race began just after noon. Ten jockeys and



their goats filed into the starting gate. Sheldon jockeyed Lightning, and they surged forward to an early lead. Then one jockey fell, and two goats pulled ahead. "Red Cross! Red Cross!" the announcer intoned. "Could some paramedic help the jockey on the track?" Once the hubbub had died down, Lightning had placed second. "When we were training, the track was short," Sheldon admitted, acknowledging they'd both gotten tired. But he was pleased.

Flex was up next. Then three more of Leron's racers, including the mighty Malta Carib. All of them lagged. Leron shook his head glumly. "Malta had a fall getting off the van this morning and banged his front leg. It's not looking good, and we're not going to force him." In fact, Malta Carib was limping.

Halfway through the day, I found Sheldon resting in the shaded jockey area, sipping an energy drink. In the tent area beside him, Malta Carib's fetlock had been wrapped with a bag of ice. As the afternoon progressed, Buccoo Queen took third and Lightning placed second again. By the last race, the winningest goat was the slim Mr. Fox, who took first four times. His owner, Neil Potts, was ebullient: "It takes a lot of hard training, swimming, and running. But Mr. Fox was born a winner!"

Sheldon sighed, "I'll battle them tomorrow."

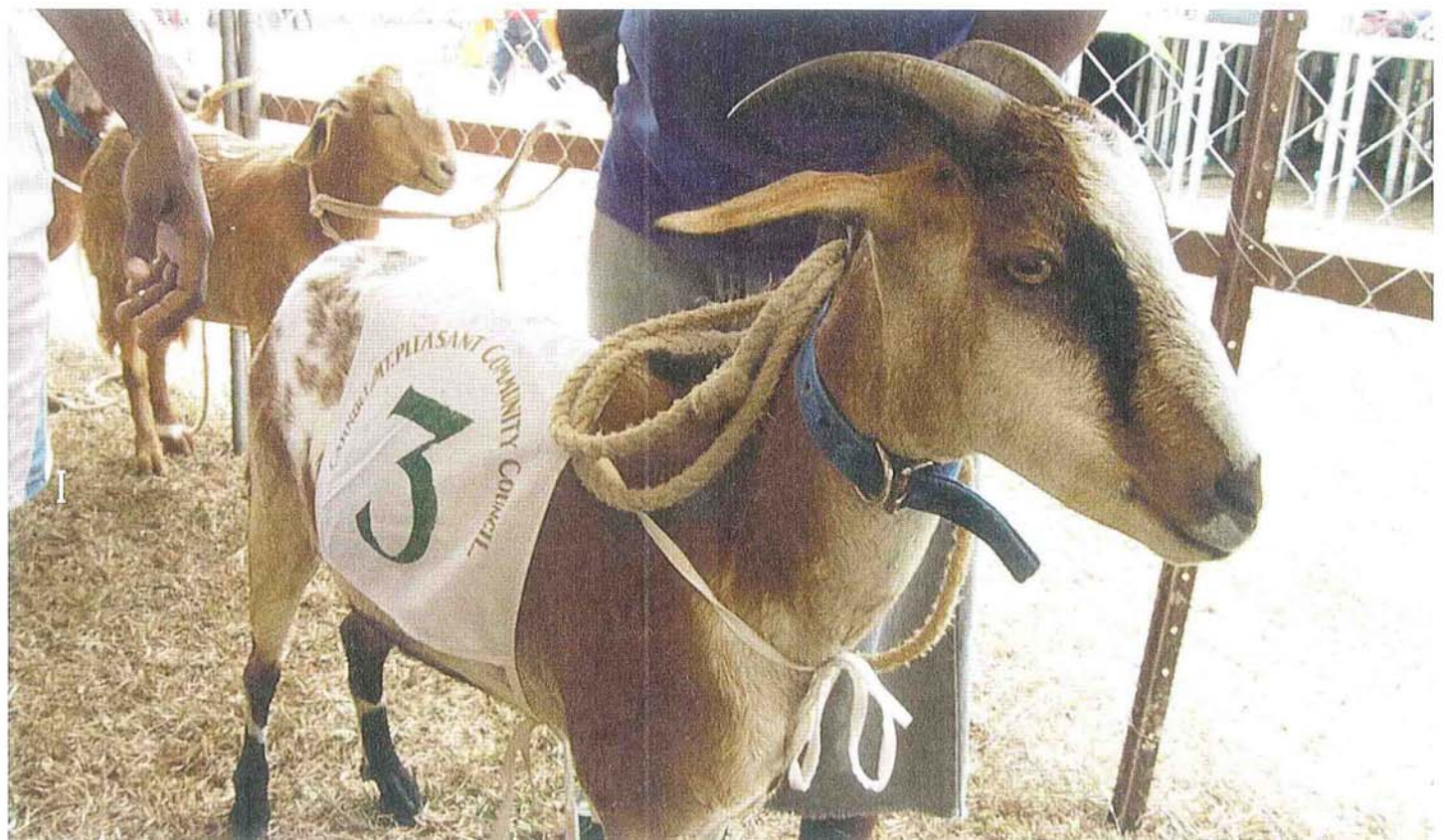
I worried about Malta Carib. Fillies like Lightning and Buccoo Queen

enjoy postracing lives as breeders, but male racers are gelded when they're two months old. Otherwise, they just bare their teeth and spray on the track. (At least that's how Henry explains it.) "I love Malta Carib, and he's my pet," Sonny Murray had told me. "But when he can't win anymore, I'll sell him to the butcher."

Before I left Mount Pleasant's race grounds, I strolled among the food vendors, looking for dinner. I noticed that along with pig's feet, cow's heels, cow's heads, and cow's skin, many were selling portions of goat. "Is that racing goat?" I asked one. "It's curried goat," she laughed back.

I couldn't pass it up. The dish was succulent and good, although I felt an undeniable awkwardness when I had to pick out the shards of bone. I suppose you wouldn't grill horse meat at a derby, but every owner I met in Tobago swore by a goat recipe he liked best. Even Henry recommended goat meat with coconut sauce and dumplings.

The next morning, as I drove into Buccoo, pickup trucks lined Shirvan Road, carrying four-legged racers. Tobago's last horse track, Shirvan Park, burned down in 1985, which made goat racing the only game on the block. Now, I understood, Tobago's goal was to turn that game into a magnet in the Caribbean. Tourists and islanders poured into the complex. In the cool of the skybox, set high above the finish line, I talked with





Top, from left: The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but good luck telling that to a goat; fans pack Buccoo's new stadium; at Buccoo, racing goats are hurried while their cousins are curried; race days offer a chance for Tobagonians to show their true colors. Below, the "3" billy goat's gruff.

Chief Secretary Orville London, Tobago's highest-ranking elected official. "Tourists complain about the sameness of activities in the Caribbean," he told me, as crowds on the other side of the glass pressed against the track's railings, "but now we have the opportunity to translate what's an already long-standing event into a new sporting event on the international calendar. Here, we have the reef and beach, but we'll have goat racing and betting, too. And this won't just be on Easter Tuesday but offered to cruise ships whenever they come in." Looking out over the pitch, I saw that where Mount Pleasant had parched turf, Buccoo's course was vibrant green—thanks to an underground irrigation system.

The first race took off after the national anthem, addresses and invocations by a half-dozen island dignitaries, and the release of balloons. The ceremony dragged on, and mostly everyone in the bleachers wanted the races to get started. Soca hits from Carnival, two months before, blared through speakers, until a trumpeter took to the field. Then Sheldon and Lightning entered the gate for the first of 15 races, involving 51 goats, representing the island's two-dozen owners. Tourists marveled as the goats dashed, surprised at their trajectories and at the races' brevity, perhaps. The Tobagonians around me cheered—for the goats and the jockeys, and for their new stadium, too. Had anyone ever watched a finer test of strength and skill in a finer venue on the planet? Again, Lightning came in second, beaten by another Neil Potts racer. Near the finish line, money changed hands. Buccoo's bookie, Marlon Melville, goes by the name of Porridge and brings a certain Swiss rigor to his vocation, having lived in Zurich for four years. Throughout the day, bettors thronged around him as he set the odds. Occasionally, trainers bet against their own animals.

Indeed, as in any professional sport, money has its place. First prize in a heat at Buccoo pays up to \$350, with nearly as much for second or third. After a day at the races, an owner might head home with several thousand dollars in winnings (jockeys get up to 30 percent of the purse), on an island where you can fill your gas tank for \$20. But it still takes time for a goat to pay off as an investment. Racing kids go for \$250; then there's boarding, training, veterinarian visits, congratulatory molasses, fodder, and fees. When goats start to lose, they're kept until after the rainy season so they can be fattened on fresh grass, because butchers buy by the pound.

On Tuesday, Flex had the same luck as the day before, failing to win, place, or show in six straight races. If his belly didn't help him on the track, eventually it would serve him on the scale. Buccoo Queen fared better,

showing twice in her three races. By late afternoon at Buccoo, the seats and grounds were packed with 15,000 fans; some were wagering, others dancing in their seats. When I toured the new paddock, Malta Carib was also there. "What were we going to do? Leave him at home on a big race day?" Leron said. "But he's not going to race. He's injured." As the day wore on, a sullen Malta Carib filled his stall with urine and droppings.

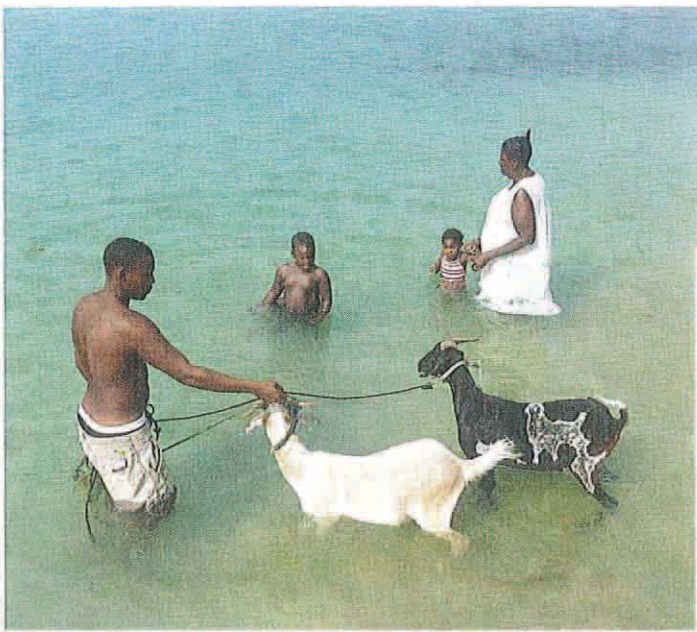
For Buccoo's ninth race, Sheldon and Lightning returned to the field. Dusk was approaching, and there were concerns about visibility. Then Lightning surged forward. Leron held up his index finger. "They're first! No more seconds!"

In Race 12, Leron entered another of his goats, and Sheldon jockeyed a Neil Potts racer. Leron's goat placed second, but Sheldon went down. Leron frowned. "It's always up to the jockey who he runs with, because that's where the money is. But Sheldon got boxed in and tripped, and he's hurt his foot with a strain or a sprain." Paramedics came onto the course and transferred Sheldon to an ambulance.

The final race is the Champ of Champs, featuring the day's top finishers. Before the cheering crowd, Sheldon emerged limping from the paddock to jockey Lightning. The stadium's speakers blasted "Oh, What a Night!" Then, without a hush, the racers took off. Sheldon and Lightning sprinted forward and passed Mr. Fox, but then fell back, before surging forward again for third, behind a triumphant Smart Money, while Mr. Fox languished in their dust. Night had fallen, and the prize money was awarded in the dark. Trainers moved their goats into pickups and waited for the crowds to clear.

As the spectators and athletes dispersed, I pondered what I'd seen. Goats and men had sprinted down the grass, and other men and women had cheered. Some had come for the love of the sport; others to embrace the island's traditions. Others for the money. Or the glory. Would Buccoo's new stadium fill with tourists, and become Henry Corder's Field of Dreams? Would goat racing beguile the Caribbean, as the people of Tobago hoped? I didn't have those answers, but I knew for certain that this sport was real. And that for people like Leron, Sheldon, and Henry—and all the islanders who came to watch—these races mattered. And I knew one more thing: I was hungry. And there was time for another helping of goat. **A**

JAMES STURZ wrote about bog snorkeling in Wales for AFAR's premier issue. He is profiled on page 8.



Ready, Set, Goat!

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The 2011 goat racing championships will be held in Buccoo, Tobago, on April 26. But there's more to the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago than goats. You can spot 400 bird species on the islands, and snorkel or scuba dive among some of the Caribbean's most vibrant coral reefs.

LODGING

Blue Haven Hotel

Just outside Tobago's capital, Scarborough, the Blue Haven sits on the beach where the fictional character Robinson Crusoe supposedly washed up in Daniel Defoe's book of the same name. Updated since it first attracted Hollywood stars—Rita Hayworth and Robert Mitchum stayed here while shooting *Fire Down Below* in 1957—all 55 rooms offer views of Bacolet Bay. Doubles from \$185, Bacolet Bay, 868-660-7400, bluehavenhotel.com

Bacolet Beach Club

Marble floors, four-poster beds draped with netting, and private decks add to the getaway feel of this hillside resort above Bacolet Bay. An infinity pool bordered by wooden decks seems to merge with the waves breaking gently on the secluded beach. The open-air Café Havana serves tropical cocktails and cuisine with an Asian-Cuban twist. Doubles from \$190, Bacolet Bay, 868-639-2357, bacoletbeachclub.com

PRICING KEY FOR DINING

\$ = entrées \$10 and under
 \$\$ = \$11–\$19
 \$\$\$ = \$20–\$30
 \$\$\$\$ = more than \$30

Manta Lodge

The fishing village of Speyside, on the northeast corner of Tobago, lies in close proximity to both the rain forest and excellent snorkeling and diving spots. The Manta Lodge's 21 rooms feature verandas with ocean views, and its Green Moray restaurant dishes up local fare such as *buljol* (spicy, salted fish) accompanied by hearty bread. Doubles from \$110, Speyside, 866-486-2246, mantalodge.com

DINING

Jemma's Seaview Kitchen

In a seaside tree-house setting with spectacular views, Jemma's cooks turn out huge portions of lobster, fish stew, and a variety of Creole classics such as beans and rice. \$\$\$, Speyside, 868-660-4066

Beach Food Kiosks

At the eateries lined up along Store Bay, one of the island's most popular public beaches, you can get classic Tobagonian fare—curried goat, anyone?—that draws from a wide range of ethnic influences. Try Miss Joyce, Miss Trim, Miss Esmie's, or Miss Jean's. \$, Store Bay Beach

Sasha and Michelle Under the Tree

Every Sunday night in Buccoo, a massive outdoor party convenes. Food sellers and craftspeople set up their stalls, steel drum bands play live music early in the evening, and dance-hall music blasts from huge speakers deep into the night. Fuel up at the all-you-can-eat buffet presided over by the loquacious Sasha (a nurse by day) and her daughter. \$, Buccoo

SUGGESTED READING

History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago, by Eric Williams

A&B PUBLISHERS GROUP

The country's first prime minister, who served from 1961 until his death in 1981, documents the roots and evolution of Trinidadian culture.