



Sonny Murray's star animal, Obama, a three-year-old goat with a silky black coat streaked with white, stares out of his pen at Murray's Buccoo home.



Murray creates ornate seashell handicraft when he's not working to prepare his goats for the annual racing event.



Leron Lezama, a cricketer and upcoming goat breeder, drops by early on Easter Monday morning to help Sonny Murray bathe his goats before their race later that day.



Most of the decades' worth of awards that Murray has won have been lost to natural disasters over the years. The few that remain dot his living room and have pride of place on this shelf over his bed.



Sonny Murray and Scorpion have a face off over leaving the goat pen.

# The men who cheer at goats

MARK LYNDERSAY

Sonny Murray first got involved with goat racing in Tobago when he was just eight years old.

The sport was already well established, beginning in 1925 when the people of Tobago decided that they wanted their own races, ones that didn't require expensive horses to run.

Murray, 65, has been around long enough to see the sport mature from humble beginnings on Chance Street, move to Rosehill, where rails were built out of bamboo and swamp wood. The races are now run at several multipurpose facilities on the island.

Murray has served as a president of the island's Goat Racing Committee and continues to raise four goats for racing, one of which he's lost to pregnancy.

"Once they have a litter, you can't race them anymore," Murray said. "The blood loss, you see. They never run the same way again."

Except for that, goats run according to performance, not by gender, with three classifications, A, B, C1 and C2, introduced in 1979, which govern the groupings for races. It's an equality that isn't accorded to jockeys, and the small number of female riders are relegated to their own women's only races.

For all the years he's been a breeder and organiser of goat racing, Murray has never been a jockey.

"I couldn't run," he explained, "them goat fast!"

It is, on first blush, a goofy-looking sport. Goats don't care about lanes, and the riders run alongside, and most often behind their wil-

ful charges. The goats will sometimes dig in their heels on their way to the starting gate, refusing to obey the jockeys, glaring back at them with baleful intensity.

What probably began as a parody of the moneyed pretensions of horse racing now gets taken quite seriously. There are just a few rules, and the two that spectators need to be aware of are that jockeys run barefoot and must be attached to their animals at the finish line.

The barefoot riders, attached to the goats by a regulation length nine-foot rope, chase the goats during the 100 metre run. Their job is to keep the goats roughly on the track to finish the race while keeping pace with the animals.

Murray alternates his two riders who will, altogether, run 15 races at each event, each man running a 100 metre race flat out every time.

The athletes flex their muscles before each of their races, limbering up for the challenge of keeping up with their goat. Murray supplies his riders with a fine silk shirt for their run.

"It's a festival," he said, "we want people to look the part."

The big event for the Easter goat and crab racing season is run at Buccoo on the Tuesday after the end of the long weekend, adding an unofficial half-day to the vacation for the serious goat racing connoisseur, but a well attended, though smaller race event takes place at Mt Pleasant on Easter Monday. This year a night race was added to the calendar on Easter Friday night.

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Leaving his home on Easter Monday's race day, a smartly dressed Sonny Murray carries his jockey's race shirt.



Off to the races in an improvised pen built into a pickup truck created by Murray's twin brother Charles, are Obama, in the foreground, Scorpion and Fay.

## A day at the races



Ndbusli Hall and Akeem Holder walk Fay and Scorpion through a practice run at the Mt Pleasant grounds. Goats are rarely trained on race grounds to reduce their familiarity with the space.



Carlan Sealy tightens the jockey's bib on Akeem Holder before his race. Fay had run the jockey up against the railing on the first race of the day and he suffered the indignity of finishing the race without his animal.



Holder, jockeying Scorpion, moves in from the far right in the second race of the day on Easter Monday. Scorpion did not place in this race, but won the derby later in the day. Obama would place second in the derby in the Tuesday race at Buccoo.