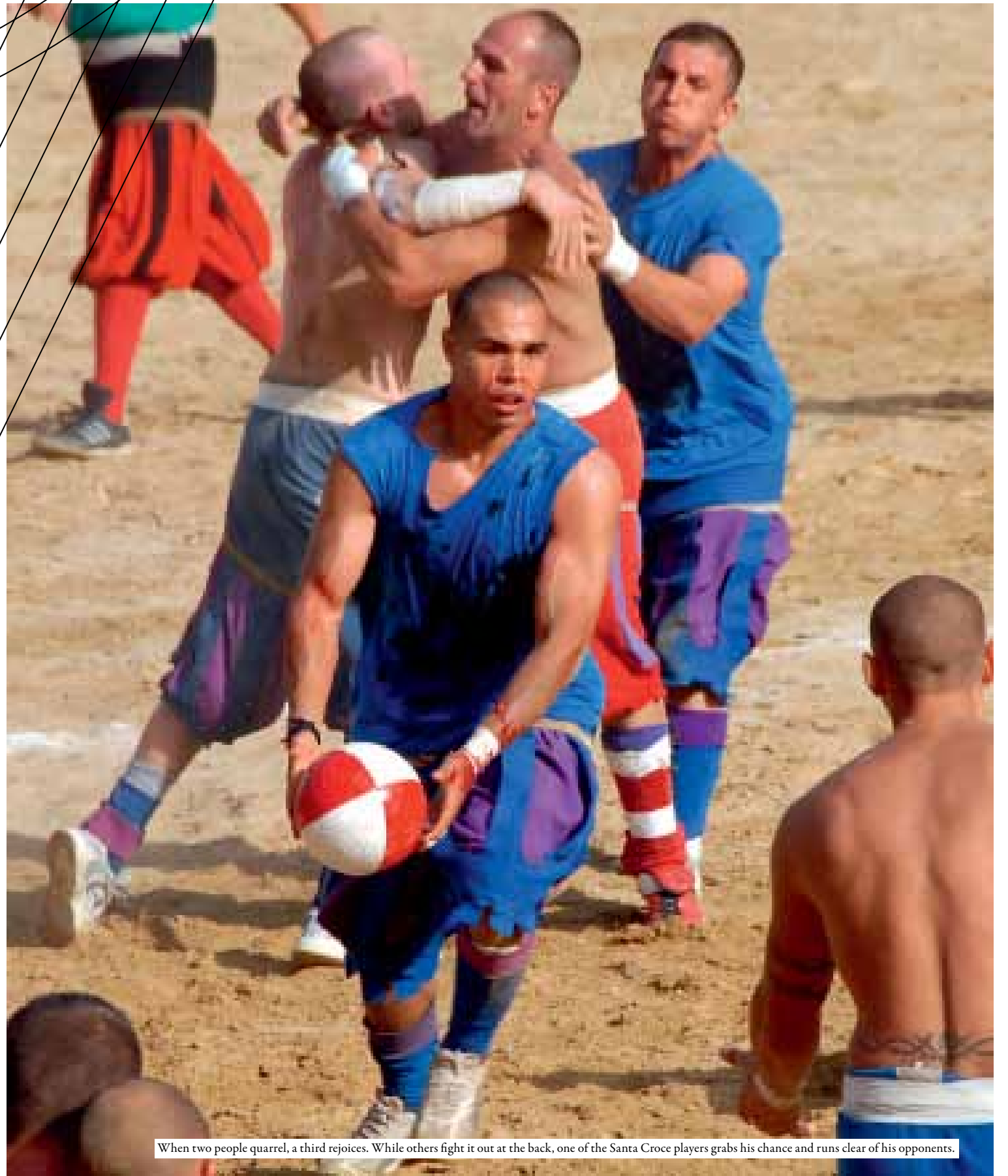


29. Football with fists. Florence is ... Michelangelo's statue of David, the Ponte Vecchio, Botticelli, da Vinci and Caravaggio. Florence is ... the Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral, the Piazza della Signoria, the Palazzo Pitti and the Basilica of Santa Croce. But Florence is also a medieval city built from stone and hard plaster. Visit the cradle of the Renaissance in June and you will discover a side of the city not depicted in romantic postcards or visited by well-trodden tourist paths. That is when Florence shows its brutal face in »Calcio Storico«, or historical football. The game is violent, bloody and archaic. There are as good as no rules but plenty of broken ribs and noses, knocked-out teeth, black eyes and smashed knee-caps. If it hurts, it is allowed. You may attack, hit and throw to the floor your opponents, and have been allowed to do so since the 16th century. Back then it was mainly aristocrats who played historical football. Nowadays it is heavily built men with shaven heads and tattoos on their ripped biceps. On three days each year, around a



When two people quarrel, a third rejoices. While others fight it out at the back, one of the Santa Croce players grabs his chance and runs clear of his opponents.



Fight Club, Italian style: men draw blood doing battle on the historical market square.



photo: MAURITIUS IMAGES



photos: MAURIZIO RUFINO (3)

hundred players practice give-and-take, Florentine style, on the Piazza Santa Croce. These are modern-day gladiators, some of whom begin to cry as the gate to the arena behind them falls shut and a 50-minute journey back to the Middle Ages begins. They are not ashamed of their tears. Anyone who pretends not to be afraid is lying.

If you are not from Florence it may be difficult to understand the attraction of this crude game. But if you study history then you will at least be able to understand it historically. Calcio Storico evolved from the Roman game Harpaston, which was one of the most popular ball-sports of ancient Rome and Greece and consisted of a mixture of boxing, wrestling and rugby. »The Roman legionnaires brought the game to Florence. Over time the Florentines gave it their own rules, and so it became the traditional game of the town,« explains Luciano Artusi, director and organiser of historical football. »Every team consists of 27 players and three positions: goalkeeper, defender and attacker. The aim is to throw the ball into the net on the opponents' back-line. They play in green, white, blue and red costumes, with each colour representing a quarter of the town. Red represents Santa Maria Novella, blue is Santa Croce, white

means Santo Spirito and green is for San Giovanni.« Calcio Storico is about neither money nor trophies, all that counts is fame, honour and recognition.

In the year 2006, historical football reached a turning-point when the game became deadly serious and a mass-punch-up broke out which did not stop until police intervened. The referees had ended the match officially, but players from rival quarters of the city began to attack each other on the square and it went on for over an hour. The city authorities prosecuted numerous players and some of the cases are still pending today. Dark days began for Calcio Storico. Stricter rules made historical football less brutal, but also less spectacular. One of these rules stipulated that nobody over the age of forty was allowed to play any more, since such people often brought long-standing feuds onto the pitch. Today, six years on, anyone can play again provided they have a medical certificate of health, and provided their criminal records have been clean for the past five years. Fists, therefore, fly once again in the name of tradition.