

A Bloody Affair

written by Grant Wamack | December 13, 2014



Lost in the *plaza de toros*, I stared down at my crumbled ticket and wondered how the hell I was going to find my seat. A Spanish gentleman wearing a green jacket and matching shades pointed me through a black gated opening which led to stone seats. I stepped up, moving past six rows of spectators, squeezed by some pretty women still wearing colorful Flamenco dresses from *feria*, and managed to find myself sitting in between a Spaniard and a British guy.

I cursed myself for not bringing some alcohol or at least something to munch on, and scanned the relatively full ring. The seats in the *sol* or sunny area were sparsely filled, but the majority of the ring was covered in *sombre* or shade chock full of antsy spectators.

In the middle of the ring was a large circular space filled with with red sand and carefully placed white lines of chalk. Soon enough a bugle sounded, signaling the first act of the *corrida de toros* or bullfight.

Two men on horseback come out followed by the three main maestros or matadors: Enrique Ponce, Juan Jose Padilla, and David “El Fandi” Fandila. Their individual *cuadrillas* or entourages came out as well. The crowd went wild as they bowed and saluted the Chief of Police who was the presiding dignitary of the ring. They retreated behind the solid walls and waited.

A black bull was released into the ring, charging a *banderillero* or bullfighter of silver—a novice bullfighter of sorts. He took his gold and magenta *capote* or cape and swung it to the side as the bull nearly gored him. The bull took a breather, scraped the sand with its hoof and ran after the other *banderilleros*.

An armored man on a horseback labeled a *picador* entered the arena wielding a *vara* or lance. The blindfolded horse rocked a padded covering for protection called a *peto*. The picador kicked the side of the horse, attracting the attention of the bull. The bull ran at him like a freight train, slamming into the horse’s side, nearly knocking it off its feet. Seeing an open opportunity, the picador stabbed his lance into the thick knotted mound of muscle behind the bull’s neck known as the *morillo* and the bull backed away.

The matador Enrique Ponce took center ring brandishing his cape like a special weapon. Two *banderillero*’s taunted the bull behind a semi-section of actual ring. The bull charged, crashing it’s horns into the wall. Rinse, repeat. This time using enough force to break a panel from the wall.

The Brit next to me gasped and turned my way. “Bloody cowardly isn’t it?”

I nodded and kept my eyes fixed on the bull, secretly rooting for him. Ponce called over to the bull and it charged. He sidestepped the bull, deftly wielding his cape. The bull grew tired, huffing and puffing. Blood leaked from the wound in his neck, runny red dripping down its hide and shimmering

in the little sunlight.

Ponce was handed two sharp barbed sticks known as *banderillas* and gave his cape to one of his lackeys. He walked confidently toward the bull waiting for it to charge. It rushed the bullfighter and Ponce leaped in the air, planting both *banderillas* into its upper back. Ponce did this two more times and the bull was severely weakened. Colorful *banderillas* hung off the bull's back like a sick party favor.

A *banderillo* gave Ponce his *estoque*, a thin sword. Ponce confidently strode toward the bull and did a series of fancy passes labeled as *tandas* with his cape. Wearing the bull down, Ponce readied himself for the kill. At the last moment, Ponce quickly thrust the sword in between the bull's shoulder blades and quite possibly into its heart. The bull staggered, blood spurting from its neck like a fountain, and laid down. *Banderillos* swept in just in case the bull had more fight left in him. It laid its head down and a man took a small knife and stabbed it repeatedly making sure it was dead.

Everyone sitting in the ring pulled out white handkerchiefs and cheered for Ponce. The louder the response the more likely the presiding Chair of the Ring would be swayed and the matador awarded for his courage. The Chief of Police stood on a balcony decked out with the Spanish flag and draped a white cloth over the edge.

A man bent down and sawed off the bull's tail and awarded it to Ponce who gladly accepted. He bowed. Music played and a thunderous applause filled the air. While he waved, the bull was hooked up to two horses who drew the body around the ring for everyone to see. I clapped along with everyone else, but I was slightly sickened by the sight of the bull's dead body being dragged along the sand.

Everyone exited the ring and the bugle sounded once again.

The man I came to see was none other than Juan Jose Padilla also known as "The Pirate." He earned the namesake and the eyepatch a few years ago when he was gored by a bull and lost an eye. He came back out of retirement and began fighting again much to everyone's chagrin. When my coworker told me about this guy, I knew I had to see him.

You really have to have some balls or loose screws if you come back from a life threatening injury to fight bulls—again. Think about it. Padilla no longer has the normal, wide angle field of vision we're accustomed to. Imagine large gaping blind spots, a loss of peripheral vision and throw in a pissed off 1600 pound bull fighting for dear life.

A black bull was released into the ring, angry as hell. Some of the amateur matadors jumped beyond the wall. Padilla stood his ground and slid through the sand on his knees—arching his back—and swung his cape to his left. The bull ran through the cape and his chin scraped the ground. It reminded me of a basketball player having his ankles broken by a nasty cross-over. The crowd loved it and I was impressed.

Padilla did everything Ponce did, but with a little bit more flair and grace. After stabbing the bull with harpoon edged banderillas, Padilla went through a series of passes even going as so far to smack the bull's ass and tapping its wet nose.



When it came time to kill the bull, Padilla cleanly slid his estoque through the shoulder blades, but the bull didn't go down immediately. Instead it took a few unsteady steps forward and Padilla rubbed the bull's hide treating it like an old friend—guiding it into the valley of death. I felt like I was witnessing an intimate moment in between the bull and Padilla—a man who knew death like the back of his hands.

The bull laid down, dying, and Padilla bent down whispering into its ears. I wish I could hear what being said even if my Spanish was shaky. Padilla gained the upmost respect from me and it seemed the crowd as well based off their enormous response.

The crowd cheered and waved their white handkerchiefs, waiting for the Chief's verdict. I could barely see his head, but he took two handkerchiefs and draped them over the edge of the balcony.

A Spaniard sawed off two ears from the bull and handed them to Padilla. Padilla put his feet together, held the ears like trophies and bowed. Bouquets, shawls, and hats were thrown at his feet. He went around the ring and waved like a rockstar.

Two horses were forced into the ring by a man carrying a black whip. The bull's carcass was attached to the horses and they dragged it around like a lump of meat and everyone cheered.

The third fight with David Fandila was okay, but it was nothing to write home about. The only extraordinary thing that happened was the end of the fight. Everyone waved their white cloths and the Chief of Police didn't drape one single white cloth over the balcony. I was embarrassed for the matador even though I agreed with the verdict. Anyone would look sub-par after Padilla's spectacular display of skill.

I got bored once the fourth bull came out. I'm not sure if it was a lack of sleep or short attention span, but I thought about leaving and heading out to feria, but I paid a pretty penny for my ticket and I was going to sit it out.

Sure enough, a syrupy shadow descended over the bullring and I shivered. Ponce came back out and went through the motions. Things changed once the picador entered the arena. The bull barreled toward the man on horseback and slammed its horns underneath the horse. The horse-rider wobbled and the bull backed up and bowled into the horse's legs. The horse fell over and bayed.

I stood up, feeling a thick knot form inside my chest as I watched the bull ram the blindfolded horse. It must have been terrifying to lay there in complete darkness with nothing more than a thin layer of armor keeping you from the brink of death. Matadors crowded the bull yelling "toro" over and

over, but the bull wouldn't get off the horse.

"Is it dead?" the Brit asked.

"I don't know," I said.

Maybe this was the dance of life and death Hemingway touched on in his book *Death in the Afternoon*. I thought back to a number of dead bodies I saw at funerals my grandma would play piano at, but this was different. This was somewhat more visceral. The essence of death shoved in my face. Everyone here played a part in this fight rather it be the matador, the bull, the horse, or even the spectator. We all had a hand in this sport.

They managed to get the bull off the horse and I wondered if it was still alive. The matadors forced the horse back to its feet and it seemed to be okay, but still shaken. After all the commotion you would think they would let the horse go home. Instead, they let the bull charge the horse again and I silently prayed events wouldn't repeat themselves. The picador stabbed the bull twice and left the ring.

Padilla was great his second time around and so was Fandila, but I thought I'd seen enough. Three hours later, the matadors came out together and were presented trophies and posed with their families. Part of me felt they some of them should be commended and another part of me felt guilty by association.

Feeling dazed, I exited the bullring and images of the six dead bulls were still fresh in my mind. I wondered how noble this sport really was. People crowded extravagant horse-drawn carriages housing bullfighters and their families. Reminded me of royalty. A group of Spanish pre-teen boys walked by excitedly chattering about the bull ears they somehow acquired. They carried them in the palm of their hands like delicate doves.