

MOCTAR BA

LA COURSE

The horse, the rider, and the long road home.

There is a story we tend to tell about the racehorse, and it usually starts in England, on green turf, with silks and a winner's circle. La Course begins somewhere else: earlier, and closer to home. The horse has crossed the West African Sahel since the first millennium BC. The empires of Mali, Songhai, and Bornu were built on its back, and the horseman became a marker of lineage, leadership, and survival. That heritage never left. Senegal holds West Africa's largest horse population, roughly 400,000 head, and four breeds of its own: the M'Bayar of Baol, the Fleuve of the river valley, the Foutanké bred for the race, and the little M'Par of Cayor.

Most of these photographs were made on race Sundays at the Hippodrome Ndiaw Macodou in Thiès, where the track is sand, the rail is close enough to touch, and the whole city seems to fit into one grandstand. Moctar Ba was born into this world, in the barracks of the Dakar Mounted Squadron of the Presidential Guard, where his father served as an equerry and was crowned Senegal's Show Jumping Champion in 1996. His black and white photographs hold the movement, the effort, and the quiet authority of horse and rider. Not spectacle. Continuity.

The room reads like a race day. Walk it in order: the bond, the break, the record, the crowd. It ends, as the story does, with a single rider and open ground.

01 THE BOND / LE LIEN

Before there is a race, there is a walk. A groom leads a horse under the concrete arches of the hippodrome at a pace the horse sets, a boy in a Rockets jersey holding the lead with two fingers. Another walks the length of the stands at the shoulder of a mounted jockey, in slides, unhurried, while the police hold the crowd off the sand. A rider's bare hand rests flat on a warm neck. This is where La Course begins, because this is where every race day begins: in the long hours of care that the crowd never sees.

In Senegal the horse is not equipment. It is kept close to the household, fed and groomed and known by name, and the boys who tend it inherit the work the way one inherits land or a trade. Look closely at the bridle on this wall: leather gris-gris, beadwork, and silver pendants braided into the straps, protection dressed onto the horse the way a mother dresses a child for a feast day. Look at the saddle cloths printed with the name of the écurie, the racing stable that is often a family before it is a business. Look at how rarely anyone pulls a rope tight. The animal is not being moved. It is being accompanied.

Everything that follows on these walls, the speed, the noise, the glory, rests on the quiet in these frames. The bond comes first. The race is only what the bond looks like at full gallop.

02 THE BREAK / LE DÉPART

The gate opens and the day changes register. What was a walk becomes a wall of sand and muscle, and for a few seconds the race is pure noise: hooves on the sand track, breath, the crowd rising. There is no turf here, no manicured green. The going at Thiès is sand, the same ground the Sahel horse has worked for a thousand years, and it comes up in sheets behind the field. Then the noise sorts itself. A horse finds clean air on the outside. A rider goes still in the way only the confident go still. The pack that left the gate as one animal begins, subtly, to become winners and the rest.

Moctar Ba shoots the break from inside the ride. We see the backs of the jockeys as they leave us, a wall of numbered cloths and braced shoulders. We see the field come through the turn in the grey light of the hivernage, mud-dark, ten wide, past the leaning rail posts. We see the leader emerge along the banners with the race still undecided behind him. It is the view the groom has, and the family at the rail, and the écurie whose name is printed on the saddle cloth: everyone who has given the horse its hours and now can do nothing but watch.

This is also the oldest image in the show. Riders leaving together, watched by the people who raised them: the Sahel knew this sight long before any grandstand was built. The gate is new. The going out is not.

03 THE RECORD / LE TÉMOIGNAGE

Who gets remembered is never an accident. Across Africa, the mounted figure has always been a way of saying who holds standing: in the terracotta riders of Djenné, made at the heart of the Mali Empire, and in every portrait of a horseman since. On the American turf the record was kept selectively. Black horsemen trained and rode the champions of early American racing, won the first Kentucky Derby in 1875, then were written out of the sport within a generation. La Course keeps its record differently. It writes people in.

Here is a mounted officer of the Dakar Mounted Squadron of the Presidential Guard, on his grey, in the kepi with the flaming grenade, the cape and the braided fourragère. For Moctar Ba this is the most personal image in the room: he was born in the military barracks where this unit is based, and his father served there as an equerry, captained its show jumping team, and was crowned Senegal's Show Jumping Champion in 1996. Here is Aminata Mbengue Ndiaye, former Minister of Agriculture, in the stands among the public she served, because in Senegal the horse is a matter of state as much as of sport. Here is Fallou Diop, one of Senegal's most celebrated jockeys, photographed in his youth, whip still raised, carried from the sand on shoulders. Here is the jockey Modou Ndiaye Gadiaga, his name across his breeches, in the star-spangled silks of écurie E-Thiouh. And here is the Senegalese horse itself, a grey led in profile past the shuttered windows: the living archive of the M'Bayar, the Fleuve, the Foutanké, and the M'Par.

A wall of witnesses. This is what the record looks like when it is kept by people who intend to remember.

04 THE SPECTACLE / LE PUBLIC

A race Sunday at Thiès is never only a race. It is the week's appointment, the family outing, the argument, the fashion show, the concert. The program that circulates through the stands says it plainly: DIM. 30 MAI, Hippodrome Ndiaw Macodou, Thiès. The tribunes fill with boubous and New York caps, dark glasses and prayer beads, phones raised to film. The sabar drummers gather at the rail, and a griot in a white grand boubou lifts his voice over the drums to praise a horse the way his predecessors praised kings, which is fitting, because the horse was once how you knew a king. When the winner comes home, the clock stops at 2:21.04, the fists go up against the sun, and the crowd pours over the rail to lay hands on the animal as if the victory were stored in its coat.

This wall is the sound of the exhibition. The emotion runs in every direction: the jockey shouting past the post with his goggles still up on his helmet, the boy in silks too big for him walking through the paddock crowd with his whole future in front of him, the spectators who watch, bet, sing, mourn, and celebrate as one body. Moctar Ba stands inside it, not above it. His camera is one more face in the crowd.

And then the day empties. The exhibition closes with Tirage: a single rider at first light, galloping bareback across open scrubland at the edge of the city, no rail, no stands, no prize. This is the image the whole story has been riding toward. The crowds go home. The riding continues, as it has for a thousand years. The race was never only about winning. It was about staying on the horse.

SCAN FOR THE EXHIBITION

All photographs by Moctar Ba

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