

## "...AND THEY'RE OFF!"

At the blast of a trumpet, the official in charge raised a white cloth and let it fall to the ground. The starting gates at one end of the track flew open, and the drivers charged out on their lightweight chariots, racing counter-clockwise around the track.

The chariots were normally pulled by two or four horses, but for added excitement six or eight horses might be used. The more horses there were, the harder the chariot was to control. To stop themselves from falling off, drivers wound the reins around their bodies. Each driver wore a light helmet and carried a dagger, so he could cut himself free from the wreckage if his chariot overturned.

Here you can see chariots rounding the corner in a race at the Circus Maximus.

At the end of each of the seven laps, a marker in the shape of an egg or a dolphin was turned over.

Up to 12 chariots competed in each race, with as many as 24 races in a day.

The track measured 550m x 180m (1,800ft x 600ft).

## TAKING THE CORNER

The most hair-raising part of the race came as the drivers turned the tight corner at each end of the track. Jostling for position, they tried to stay as close as possible to the central barrier - or *spina*. Chariots often collided, resulting in spectacular crashes, and it was quite common for drivers to be badly injured or even killed.

## FAME AND FORTUNE

Most drivers were slaves, but some were professionals who were paid large amounts of money to compete. Race winners were rewarded with more money, a palm leaf of victory and, of course, instant fame. The life of a chariot-driver was glamorous, but could be short - many drivers died in their early 20s.

## TEAM SPIRIT

Most chariot-drivers belonged to one of four teams - red, blue, white or green - and the best drivers were idolized by their team's supporters. Fans placed bets on their favourite team before a race, and cheered their drivers on noisily. Passions ran so high that serious riots sometimes broke out between rival groups of supporters.

The palm leaf was the Roman symbol of victory.

This Egyptian monument, called an obelisk, was brought to Rome by the Emperor Augustus.

