Cockfighting
A gentleman’s sport

By Timothy Beacham
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It’s Saturday night in Sunset, Louisiana, the “Monte Carlo” of the cockfighting world.

The master of ceremonies introduces the fighters to the bustling crowd of bettors and spectators. After a healthy amount of showmanship and braggadocio on the part of the handlers, the fight begins and the fighters square off, sizing each other up and looking for weaknesses and openings.

They charge one another and upwards they go, shooting four feet above the ground in a mass of flying feathers, each throwing deadly punches bent on the defeat of the other.

The green-legged Kelso takes the first of many blows and staggered from the force of it before charging his opponent again. The Hatch parole for a second before striking again with the two-inch gaff tied to his leg. As the Kelso loses his patience and blindly charges, the Hatch half-jumps-half flies over him, burying the gaff deep into the side of his opponent.

“Handle!” cries the referee as the Kelso stumbles to the floor of the pit. The Hatch, quick to seize the opportunity of an easy kill, darts forward and almost delivers a fatal blow to the wounded before he is scooped up by his handler.

The Kelso’s owner gathers his fallen champion in his arms and begins a series of treatments in an attempt to help his bird stay alive.

Good bloodlines don’t come cheaply in this sport and although the Kelso lost the match and may never fight again, he has many good years as a breeder left in him.

Some call it a blood sport. Others call it barbaric. But for the man and women who participate in the fighting of gamecocks, it’s not only a way of life, it’s a “gentleman’s sport.”

Roland Lormand has devoted the past 15 years of his life to the training and fighting of these ornately feathered birds.

While recent public opposition to the sport has drawn local and national coverage, nothing has been said for the time and effort that goes into a sport many consider to be one of honor and fairness, according to Lormand.

“I think the national portrayal

has over 200 head of gamecocks in his keep right now, a number which he considers “a little low.”

“I usually have 300 to 400,” he says, smiling as he walks among the tin tepees that speckle the keep.

Gamecocks are extremely territorial birds. The reason they fight is pure domain-based. Within the keep, the stags (young roosters) and cocks are kept tethered to their own little territory with rubber cording which keeps them from invading another bird’s area and decimating the population.

“If these birds were kept loose,” Lormand said matter-of-factly, you would have only one left by the end of the day.

The training of a gamecock into a fighting champion is no easy feat. Lormand spends an average of five hours daily, tending to the needs of his birds. During the fighting season (December-June), a bird is chosen for its nature as a fighter and for an intense three-week period of stamina build-up and dieting.

The first week you tame ‘em down,” Lormand said, “You have to get them used to the noise of the pit and also relax them to the idea of being handled.

The next two weeks are ones of heavy physical exercise for the birds, as they are “flown” and “run” to build up muscle and stamina as well as reduce fat.

The training is slowed down as the fight day approaches and in the one-to-two days before the fight, the bird is “blacked-out.”

A blackout in the gamecock world is a way of building up power in the bird. The cock is kept in darkness and isolation and is sparsely fed. The blackout is important to the bird so he can remain focused on the fight as well as not lose any energy he may need in the pit.

In the fighting world there are breeders and fighters. “A breeder breeds the birds for perfection, crossing lines for optimum traits,” Lormand explained. Of the well over 500 varieties of gamecock in existence, each has its own particular trait and style of fighting in the pit. A good breeder knows that a Kelso for instance, is an aggressive bird with an excellent “cut” or punch. The addition of the bloodline of a Grey, which is a bird known for its stamina and caution,

An avid gamecock breeder, Roland Lormand has been raising game cocks for about 15 years now.

Lormand spends an average of five hours each day tending to and training his birds for the 6 month fighting season, and in his words, “it’s a way of life.”

would hopefully lend those traits to the already deadly fighter.

An owner known as a fighter doesn’t usually deal with breeding except in researching the birds he buys for the fight. Most of his participation in the sport is limited to the purchase of champion fighters in order to win a large purse in the fight.

Lormand is a breeder. He toys with the bloodlines of Kelso, Hatch, Murphys, Clarets and other birds, hoping to build a dynasty line of champions from the different varieties he buys. Some are air freighted in from as far as California. Other come from as close as New Iberia and Youngsville.

Sometines, Lormand will introduce a “Jap” or Asian jungle bird into the bloodlines. The jungle birds are typically wild and used for breeding ferocity into an existing strain of fowl. “You always strive for something better,” Lormand said. “You see something you like and try to capture it in a bird...to refine a bloodline.”

But it is not always easy. Some breeders spend years trying to refine a particular trait, only to fail.

“Sometimes you come up with nothing after two or three years of breeding,” Lormand said.

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According to Lormand, the most important and rewarding aspect of the “gentleman’s sport” is caring for and rearing the bird properly. This goes hand in hand with what Lormand calls a misconception about the sport.

Lormand believes that people who don’t know the sport don’t understand everything that goes into it.

For Lormand, it’s not just the bird winning or losing the fight, it’s a way to take his mind off everyday life and focusing on something that brings satisfaction to him. And that involves both a deep commitment and a sense of honor for both the birds and the sport.

“THERE is an awful lot of time and money spent on the birds,” he said. “We don’t want to just lose them in a fight. But it’s more than that.”

“People portray us as cruel, that we would destroy a losing bird. But I’m gonna save this bird,” Lormand said as he cradles an injured bird in his arms.