Cockfighting

Oh, yes; it’s legal, it’s popular and its roots run deep

Rosters fight. The birds do not like their territory challenged, and they do not like other roosters fooling around with their hens.

About 5,000 years ago, according to historical accounts of cockfighting, someone decided to make a game of it, and cockfighting has been popular throughout parts of the world ever since.

Accounts of the earliest fighting roosters differ, but most cockfighters say the first fighting birds were Asian jungle fowl. They were mean, violently territorial birds, and through crossbreeding, cockfighters worked to make them not only meaner but stronger, faster and smarter.

Historians believe cockfighting probably came to Greece and Rome by way of India or China and by the 1700s was firmly ensconced in England.

Cockfighters: We’re breeding special athletes

Paul Hulin turns on the light in a small room in his cockhouse, where 15 roosters have been separated from the hundreds of others on his farm to train for an upcoming cockfight.

The shelves in the room are lined with cans of corn, green beans, black berries, peas and evaporated milk. A refrigerator in the room holds a few containers of cottage cheese and yogurt. This is not what one would normally think of as chicken feed, but the roosters that fight in pits across the state are no ordinary barnyard birds.

They are special breeds of fowl raised and trained for one thing only — to fight another rooster to the death.

“These are athletes,” Hulin said, stroking a red rooster whose well-defined leg thigh muscles feel as hard as a rock.
ROOTS: Popularity more to do with rural, not Cajun, culture

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rail and tradition practiced mainly in the southeastern United States.

Rural Americans had little to do to entertain themselves — no movies, plays, telephone or television.

Raising and fighting gamefowl, much like rodeo and horse racing, became a source of entertainment uniquely suited to rural areas where agriculture and animal husbandry thrived.

The question of why the sport has remained so popular in Louisiana may have to do less with any connection to Cajun culture than with the fact Acadiana was a fairly isolated rural area well into the 20th century.

Paul Hulin, a New Iberian who has fought roosters for more than five decades, said the sport seems to be strongest in the Acadian parishes of Iberia, St. Martin, Vermilion and Lafayette.

The perfect rural sport

It’s almost the perfect rural sport, Hulin said.

“This was good entertainment for a poor area,” he said. “You get to eat the eggs and pullets, fight the cocks and the loser wound up in a gumbo.”

“Then there wasn’t much else to do in those days, so the roosters were a godsend,” said Gene Landry, an ex-cockfighter who lives in Coteau Holmes.

“Take away all the modern technology and it’s tough to find something to do,” Landry said.

He said he can remember a time when few people in the area had television sets or other forms of modern entertainment.

“I got my first rooster when I was six years old,” he said, “a one-eyed rooster a friend of my dad’s gave to me.”

Landry said he quit breeding and fighting the birds a few years ago after all his friends involved in the sport began dying off or retiring from cockfighting.

“It’s more fun if you have friends to do it with,” he said.

Police can come, but not in uniform

Though efforts have been made to ban the sport since the early 1900s, cockfighting has obstinately endured in much of the rural South and thrives even where it is banned.

“In a lot of places, the joke is that the police can come to fights, but not in uniform,” said Jim Demoruelle, a Ville Platte cockfighter and former director of the Louisiana Gamefowl Breeders Association, an organization that works to keep breeding and fighting the birds legal.

The LGBA is 6,000 members strong, Demoruelle said, but that number probably represents little more than a third of the cockfighters and breeders in the state.

Nationally, the number of cockfighters and breeders is well over 300,000, according to Sandy Johnson, director of administration for the United Gamefowl Breeders Association, of which the LGBA is a chapter.

Latin, Asian influence

The influx of Latin Americans into the United States also has given cockfighting a shot in the arm, according to Bryant, the Virginia professor.

The traditional Southern white working-class cockfighters are now being joined by Asian and Latin American immigrants.

He said cockfighting is so popular in most Latin American nations that a cockpit can be found in many Latin American country clubs, and the activity also remains an extremely popular sport in many Asian countries, especially the Pacific Islands.

In the Philippines, it is considered a national pastime.

Cockfighting audiences pack large arenas on the archipelago, and the sport even has its own television shows.

Hulin, who got his first taste of Filipino cockfights while serving in the U.S. Navy from 1968 to 1961, said he could not find the cockpit “like he had good directions.”

“I passed right by it,” he said. “I thought it was a baseball stadium.”

Who is a cockfighter?

So who are cockfighters? Clifton Bryant, a sociologist at the Louisiana State University, conducted national surveys of cockfighters in 1974 and 1991. Among the findings of his surveys:

- Cockfighters are "extraordinarily normal people, conventional in all respects."
- Most cockfighters have rural backgrounds, coming from small towns or from the countryside.
- They are more likely than others to be and stay married, more likely to go to church than others and more likely to be veterans.
- Cockfighters are largely from the middle-class, employed in such occupations as plumbers, carpenters and some professional occupations.
- "In short, what you would call the norm Rockwell image of Americans," Bryant said. "In many ways they resemble the typical American of the 1940s or 1950s."

Talking about cockfighting

"It has always been a very democratic-type activity. You don't have to be wealthy to own a few birds."

- Clifton Bryant, Virginia sociologist, who has conducted national surveys of cockfighters

"In a lot of places, the joke is that the police can come to fights, but not in uniform."

- Jim Demoruelle, Ville Platte cockfighter and former director of the Louisiana Gamefowl Breeders Association

"This was good entertainment for a poor area. You get to eat the eggs and pullets, fight the cocks and the loser wound up in a gumbo."

- Paul Hulin, Teche Area breeder and cockfighter

"You can't really train a rooster to fight. They have to be bred for that."

- Calvin Dautreuil, Teche Area rooster breeder and cockfighter

"There wasn't much else to do in those days, so the roosters were a godsend. Take away all the modern technology and it's tough to find something to do."

- Gene Landry, Coteau Holmes, retired cockfighter

"This is a seven-day-a-week, 365-day-a-year hobby. I don't take many vacations... It's a labor of love."

- Paul Hulin

History

- About 3,000 years ago, according to historical accounts of cockfighting, someone decided to make a game of it, and cockfighting has been popular throughout much of the world ever since.

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- They were mean, violently territorial birds, and through crossbreeding, cockfighters worked to make them not only meaner but stronger, faster and smarter.

- Historians believe cockfighting probably came to Greece and Rome by way of India or China and by the 1700s was firmly enshrined in England.

- Like many customs, cockfighting traveled overseas with immigrants and gained a strong foothold in the colonies.

- Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson raised gamefowl, and Abraham Lincoln’s nickname of "Honest Abe" is rumored to be a reference to his fairness as a cockfighting referee.