A Fighting Chance

The federal farm bill could turn Louisiana’s cockfighters into felons. Page 22
State Cockfighting Laws

*Cockfighting is illegal only in Louisiana, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

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Cockfighting is illegal in the District of Columbia. It is a felony to host a cockfight or possess a fighting rooster, but it is a misdemeanor to be a spectator at a cockfight. Cockfights are still legal in the U.S. Territories of American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

Source: Humane Society of the United States

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Cockfighting is as old as Methuselah. Page Smith and Charles Daniel write in The Chicken Book that cockfighting is "the oldest sport known to man." The modern game fowl is believed to be descended from the Indian red jungle fowl. From ancient India the sport spread to Persia and China. It was introduced in Greece around the sixth century B.C. The ancient Greeks fought and used cocks for religious purposes. Young men were required to attend the fights to learn about courage and fortitude.

In 186 A.D., St. Augustine wrote about a cockfight in De Ordine. He wondered why the birds fought with one another and why humans were so fascinated with the spectacle. He was struggling with the existence of evil in a world ruled by a loving God. He concluded that without evil, there would be no good in the world, that the ugly confirms the beauty in our lives.

In England, under the reign of King Henry VIII, cockfighting flourished. It was primarily a rich man's sport. The high entry fees usually kept the common man from entering the cocks, but it was the poor who cared for the birds. In 1834, Parliament declared cockfighting illegal. Smith and Daniel write, "In the long run it made little difference. The world did not seem to improve very much and cockfighting went on rather as before. In England, as elsewhere, it was to prove ineradicable."

Cockfighting is still common in France, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Belgium, Spain, Haiti, Italy, and Southeast Asia, where the sport holds religious and cultural overtones. Today, the Philippines is considered the cockfighting capital of the world. Sunset, north of Lafayette, is considered the cockfighting capital of the nation.

In the United States, cockfighting was widespread throughout the South by the early 1700s. There was a new justification of the sport that the British hadn't considered — its democracy. Smith and Daniel write, "The wealthy sportsman who wished to participate did so on the terms of the common man, the small hardscrabble farmer, the rancher of modest means, the cowboy or hired hand, the drifter, the mechanic. It's rumored that Presidents George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson raised game fowl and that President Abraham Lincoln's nickname of "Honest Abe" came from his fairness as a referee of cockfights.

In the United States, cockfighting is legal only in Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Despite the sport being an illegal activity virtually everywhere, Daniel and Page note that cockfighting is "almost everywhere forbidden and almost everywhere practiced."

On Feb. 13, the U.S. Senate passed a farm bill that in part prohibits the transportation of fighting roosters across state lines. The House passed its version of the bill last year. Federal law already prohibits the shipping of animals for fighting purposes, but birds can still be shipped to Louisiana, Oklahoma, and New Mexico, where cockfighting is still legal, and cockfighters in the legal states can ship their birds out of their state to other parts of the world. If the farm bill is signed into law, it will make it a felony to transport fighting fowl across state lines, even to the states where it's still legal.

Nolan Dugas is a cockfighter who isn't worried about the pending federal legislation. "They're not going to stop us," he says. "They've been trying for years and years."

Cockfighting is in Dugas' blood. His father fought roosters and he's been doing it for as long as he can remember. At age 65, he's a grandfather, with three grown children and three grandchildren. He worked for Evangeline Maid Bread for 18 years before retiring. Then he worked another 20 years for Community Coffee Company before retiring a second time. These days, he only works for his chickens.
Dugas is a man of few words, with a penetrating stare and a thick Cajun accent. Dressed in a black hat and flannel shirt, he yells to be heard over the 25 cocks crowing like it's dawn in his backyard. The roosters are separated in individual cages. They strut around in circles, each one acting as if it is the rightful ruler of the yard.

Dugas spends about $300 a month keeping the birds healthy. He has to make sure that their cages are mended and that the birds are well fed. He feeds them vitamins, deworming medication and "the best feed on the market"—a diet of corn, wheat, barley and oats. He says, "A rooster will only give you in the pit what you give him at home."

The money he spends isn't an investment, though. It's just an expenditure of his hobby. It's lucky if he breaks even in the long run and doesn't mind losing the money. The enjoyment he gets out of raising, training and fighting the roosters is compensation for the financial loss.

He knows that there are those who object to his hobby, but "I don't have nothing to hide, me. Maybe they just think it's cruel." He says cockfighting is like fishing or hunting. It's "no crueler than killing a dove with a shotgun." Like other cockfighters, Dugas enjoys "testing" his roosters with other game fowl breeders. He likes to go on Sunday afternoons. On a Friday or Saturday night there could be as many as 300 to 400 people packed into one cockpit. Dugas tries to ignore the nights like that. He says, "It's too much."

On the first Sunday afternoon of Lent, it already feels like spring. Inside the M&M Cockpit, a gray metal building outside of Rayne, a couple dozen men — white, black and Hispanic — stand around sipping beer and soft drinks at the bar just inside the front door.

"We're all color-blind out here," Dugas says. "We come to fight our roosters."

There are four large cockpits in Louisiana — the Sunset Recreation Club in Sunset, the Hickory Recreation Club in Pearl River, the Bayou Club in Vinton and Pinney Woods in Vermilion. It's not uncommon for some 700 people to be present for a fight at the larger pits. There are about a dozen more medium-sized pits and at least 60 community cockpits throughout Louisiana. The M&M is one of the smaller, community pits.

The front and back doors are open and a breeze slip through and stirs the air under the fluorescent lights. Hand-lettered signs on the walls are reminders that no bird found drugged with stimulants or poison will be disqualified without exception. Other signs state that no one under 21 years of age is allowed to purchase alcohol. A few boys hover around the men, being seen and not heard. They're waiting to help ready the birds for the fight.

The cockpit is in the larger room through a door in the back. It's an octagon platform walled in with wire from its base to the ceiling. Inside the pit are two smaller cages with ropes attached to the top, extending to pulleys on the ceiling. Instead of pitting the cocks against one another with handlers, the birds are dropped inside the smaller cages.

Rope from the side of the pit lifts the two cages into the air and the birds are left facing one another. A photography darkroom timer is strapped to the wire wall of the pit. There are two small sinks with faucets at both ends of the pit. Six levels of painted gray plywood bleachers circle the cockpit.

Derbies are usually larger weekend events. In a four-cock derby, a cockfighter pays an entry fee to fight four of his cocks. He could pay anywhere from $100 to $600 in entry fees to enter them. It's winner take-all and if there's a tie, the pot is split in half between the two winning cockfighters.

Dugas has brought only one rooster with him this afternoon. The only fighting it has done is in Dugas' backyard. It's part of conditioning the cock for the pit. During these practice bouts, the bird's spurs are covered with the tiny gloves that resemble boxing gloves. The birds spar without inflicting severe damage to one another.

Asked if he thinks his bird will win, Dugas says, "If I didn't think he would win, I wouldn't have fed him like I did for the last year and a half."

Dugas removes his rooster from a wooden box and weighs it on a scale. A man with a baseball cap and a T-shirt tucked into his blue jeans looks to see how much the bird weighs. On his shirt is an image of Obama bin Laden with crosshairs on his forehead. It reads, "You can run but you can't hide!" The man's brought four roosters with him and one of his birds weighs within a couple of ounces of Dugas'.

The men agree to pit the two birds against one another for 20 minutes and to outfist them with gaffs. 1 1/4 inches long. The gaff is a small pick with a pointed end. After the natural spur has been filed down, gaffs are placed over the spurs of the roosters' legs.

Opponents of cockfighting say that stripping the weapons from the cocks' legs is too much. Cockfighters say it's crueler not to use them. Natural spurs vary in length and hardness and could give a cock with better spurs the upper hand in a fight. They say the weapons are equalizers, ensuring that each gamecock stands a fighting chance in the pit.

There's also the short and long knife, small knives that are slightly curved and sharp on one side. The short knife is any knife less than 1 1/16 inches and the long knife is any knife longer than that. Only one knife is attached to a gamecock's leftover leg.

Cockfighting is legal in the state of Louisiana. The weapons are more deadly than the gaffs and the fights are quicker. Dugas fights his cocks with gaffs only. He says, "I can't see feeding a rooster for two years to watch a fight that fast." One cockfighter, who asked to remain nameless, said that the "lucky luck of the knife" was corrupting the sport, placing less emphasis on gameness and more on betting.

The roosters are dropped into the smaller cages through a hatch door. A judge enters the ring and sets the timer. When the cages are lifted into the air, the timer starts counting down the 20 minutes and the birds are left in the pit to fight.

Dugas has $200 riding on the fight. His opponent matched the money, collecting bets from some of the spectators to make a pool. There's more betting in the stands. Bets are made verbally and anyone can take you up on Continued on Page 26
Lobbying Money Isn’t Chicken Feed

In 2001, the Humane Society of the United States spent nearly $1 million lobbying Congress to support animal rights initiatives. Wayne Pacelle, HSUS’ senior vice president for communications and government affairs, says that only about one-tenth of that amount ($100,000) was spent lobbying specifically against cockfighting.

“The cockfighting lobbyists spend a far greater sum,” Pacelle says. According to the U.S. Senate Office of Public Records, when it comes to lobbying neither side appears to have the upper hand.

There are two organizations trying to keep cockfighting alive — the United Gamefowl Breeders Association and the Animal American Husbandry Coalition. AAGC paid the lobbying firm Part, Romani, DeConcini & Symms $80,000 in 2001.

The UGBA paid the lobbying firm of Meyers & Associates $40,000 in the first half of 2001. Records for the UGBA were not available for the second half of the year. If the numbers for UGBA in the second half of the year are $40,000 (which the other three lobbying reports indicate were standard amounts) thecockfighters overspent the HSUS’ efforts by only $60,000 last year.

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cockfighters from other states will cross
the state line to go to cockfights and the breeders
who ship fowl out of Louisiana would be
felons. He says, “I think this bill walks all over
our constitution and our freedoms.”

The federal legislation would regulate
interstate commerce, but cockfighters say it’s
a violation of states’ rights and that individu-
als are being regulated by the federal gov-
ernment under the guise of regulating inter-
state commerce.

“The Humane Society and the animal rights
people have big bucks and we’re little fish,”
Massa says. “They want to give us 15 years (for
violating the law) and it would be a felony.
Some people don’t get that for killing other
people, beating their wives and abusing
children. They’re going to make criminals out of
people who are law-abiding citizens with fami-
lies. We’ve got more to look at than people
fighting and shipping chickens.”

Massa says that cockfighters are being vil-
fied, and he doesn’t “think what we’re doing is
outrageous or anything worse than what’s
going on throughout the whole country.”

F
Frederick Hawley says that cockfighters
are “perceived to be ignorant, gap-
toothed rednecks,” and that criminal
activities at cockfights are minimal. What
concerns him more is that “when you have made
cockfighting illegal, you kind of draw it into
the arms of criminals and criminal activities. These
moral crusaders who want to make it illegal
need to think about this.”

Hawley is a criminal justice professor at
Western Carolina University in Cullowhee,
N.C. He has been studying cockfighting for the
last 25 years and is writing a book on the sub-
ject. He says there’s a dual dichotomy between
the upper class and lower working class and
those who live in rural areas and urban areas.

“You’re not going to find cockpits in
upper class neighborhoods,” Hawley says. He
adds that cockfighters are “men of the 1860s,
when people had to struggle more and die
more in the process. They’re Social Darwin-
ists without Darwin.”

Clifton D. Bryant has also been studying
cockfighting for the last 25 years. As a professor
of sociology at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va.,
his primary area of study is deviant behavior —
any type of behavior that violates some type of
norm, from robbing a bank to crumbling crack-
ners in your soup, from blowing up a building to
be alcançing at the table. He says deviant behavior
covers a multitude of sins.

“What you have is a clash of cultural norms,”
Bryant says. “The cockfighters’ norms are different
from the norms you encounter in the city today.”

Cockfighting is a symbol of a larger picture
that some refer to as a culture clash between the
old way of doing things and the new.

Bryant’s research indicates that cockfighters
are “extremely normal people. They’re very
Norman Rockwell. These folks are ordinary
Americans. They’re more likely to be married
and to be religious people. They have jobs and
they work at it. They just so happen to raise
cocks and like to go fight them.”

Bryant says that society is suffering from “the
Rambi syndrome.”

“For several generations now we’ve been
indoctrinated that animals are simply people
with fur,” he says. “We’re giving human quali-
ties to animals.”

Bryant asserts that there is still redeeming
social value in killing animals. The slaughtering
of a hog builds social solidarity in a communi-
ty. Hunting with a parent brings you closer to
them. You may be killing animals, but there is
something to be gained from it. He says, “It is
my assertion that quality time is worth the sacri-
ifice of the animal.”

In 1972, Clifford Geertz, professor of social
sciences at the Institute for Advanced Studies in
Princeton, N.J., published the article Deep Play:
Games on the Balinese Cockfight in the journal
Daedalus. He tells the story of how he and his
wife, while conducting research in Bali, where
virtually ignored by the locals until they fled
with the rest of the townpeople from a raid on a
cockfight.

Geertz described the conditioning, han-
dling, fighting and betting that characterizes
Balinese cockfighting.

“What it does is what, for other peoples with
other temperaments and other conventions,
Learn and Crime and Punishment; it catches up
these themes — death, masculinity, rage, pride,
tox, beneficence, chance — and, ordering them
into an encompassing structure, presents them
in such a way as to throw into relief a particular
view of their essential nature,” Geertz says.

Geertz concludes that the cockfight is an
interpretation by a group of people of their
own experiences and a retelling of that story
to themselves.

“The slaughter in the cock ring is not a de-
piction of how things literally are among men,
what is almost worse, of how, from a particular
angle, they imaginatively are,” he writes.

There are two contrasting world views here.
Which one will triumph is yet to be seen. If the
farm bill is signed into law, it may thin out the
cockfighters’ ranks. But if the past has any lesson
to teach us, it’s that cockfighting won’t be wiped
from the face of the earth.

The story is as old as Methuselah.

R. Reese Fuller is senior writer for The Times.
and bass player for The Pine Villains. Phone him at
237-3560, ext. 122, or e-mail him at
reec.fuller@timesofacadiana.com.