High noon in Sunset

At stake: Future of cockfighting

By Pat Harrington

Acadiana correspondent

SUNSET — Cockfighting is the issue.

The opponents are cockfighting supporters and animal rights activists.

The face-off is here on Saturday.

Sunset has earned the reputation of being the “Cockfighting Capital of the Nation.” Many local residents even proudly boast it is the cockfighting capital of the world, because the town draws spectators and event participants from several other countries.

But this state is one of only five states in the nation where cockfighting is still legally permitted. The other states which allow it are Missouri, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona.

Because of Sunset’s widely known reputation, it is also the target of animal rights proponents who want to make a stand and attempt to get the state Legislature to ban the activity. They claim it’s a bloodsport and outright display of cruelty to animals.

Cockfighting supporters, however, say it is part of local culture and an integral part of the economy.

Sandy Johnson, director of the United Game Fowl Breeders Association, reports it is a $3 million export industry for the state, and locally, Sunset Mayor John Olivier says cockfighting has a huge economic impact on the community.

“It’s our biggest industry,” Olivier said.

Although he did not discuss dollar amounts, Olivier did say at an earlier city council meeting that cockfighting was Sunset’s major tourism draw and boosted business for local merchants such as stores, restaurants and gas stations.

Most local people either support cockfighting or they simply aren’t concerned about it at all. They cannot understand why their town is becoming the focal point of a statewide protest. Residents would prefer not to be bothered with all the attention.

However, cockfighting has some strong opposition in the state. The Coalition of Louisiana Animal Advocates is lobbying to get legislation passed to outlaw cockfighting.

“It is not our destiny to be the last state in the Union to outlaw cockfighting,” COLAA president James Riopelle said.

Rep. Garey Foster, R-New Orleans, agreed and said in news reports that he felt he could get cockfighting banned next year.

The animal rights group plans a major protest Saturday from 9:30 am-noon outside the Sunset Recreation Club’s cockfighting facility to increase awareness and win support for their cause.

The issue will not be considered in the Legislature this year, however. Whether or not the protest is successful, it would be 1997 before any action could be taken to change the legal status of cockfighting in the state.

Bloodsport or Cultural Icon?

Against

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COLAA president James Riopelle

For

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Sunset Mayor John Olivier

At Stake

In Louisiana, cockfighting is a $3 million a year export industry, according to Sandy Johnson, director of the United Game Fowl Breeders Association.

Protest Planned

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