In La., cockfighting's biggest battle is outside the pit

By Tanya Barrington

CANTON, La. — Beams of light cut through a stale, smoky haze to the dirt-floored arena where death is on display. Inside the round pen, two fierce roosters crash into each other, trying to jab one another with their three-inch spurs tied to their feet.

Feathers fly in panic, dirt shoots out of the ring and when the tangled birds fall, their owners lunge toward them, pulling the spurs out of the birds' pinioned chests or necks.

Then the men pitch the roosters toward each other again. Death determines the victor. This is Friday night in southern Louisiana, Cockfight night.

In 45 states, cockfighting is illegal, but in Louisiana, it's lawful entertainment, just as it is in Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma.

For the last five years, animal rights activists in those four states have tried to persuade legislators to ban the ancient blood sport. Rural tradition, strong lobbyists and cockfighters' political clout have killed their efforts year after year. Already in Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma, bills have gone down to defeat since January.

But this year in Louisiana, the animal lovers have a new ally: business boosters who want to spruce up the state's image and shore up its sagging oil economy with new industry.

State Rep. Gary Forster, a Republican from New Orleans with the best business voting record in the state, plans to introduce an anti-cockfighting bill this month. He said the ban was necessary for Louisiana to be able to say, "We've caught up with the 21st century."

"I mean, this is really great. Louisiana is now known for television executive Jimmie S. Ross. Recently elected former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke and cockfighting. That's not the kind of image I want to have for my state."

Cockfight supporters also make an economic argument. "If it wasn't for these chickens, there would be a lot of things my kids wouldn't have," said Yvonne Bergeron, whose husband, Alberto, fights roosters as a side business.

"This generates a lot of income for this area," she said. "Our economy is going to hurt if they don't continue this."

The area that would be most affected by a ban is southern Louisiana, Cajun country.

That's where Raymond Cormier runs Cormier's Cockpit & Bar, which is hidden in a battered building in a stop in the road called Canton. Anyone who doesn't know about Cormier's can't find it.

On weekends, however, Cormier (pronounced Co-MYO) puts up a rented roadside marquee to advertise the entertainment. "Fri. nite two

cock gaff. Sunday five cock slaughter. Sun. nite dance."

Cormier is proud of his place, proud of his tradition of fair play and proud of his strict rules. "Anyone fights here will go to jail. Boy or girl," warns a hand-scratched sign over the entrance.

"Those Humane Society people try to turn people against us," said Cormier, 46, a short man with skin the color of bread dough. "They always try and associate us with druggies and junkies, but we were brought up right here, just like them."

He said cockfights were traditional for Cajuns, descendants of the French colonists who came from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755. "My father did it, and my granddad did it. Even the presidents of the United States fought chickens," he said, referring to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

A recent Friday-night fight at Cormier's attracted about 100 men, women and children. Each paid $5 to walk into the dark, narrow hall leading to the arena.

Inside the main room, circular tiers of movie-theater seats surround the dirt pit. The pit, about 20 feet in diameter, is enclosed by a wire fence reaching to the ceiling. Bright lights over the pit spotlight the action.

From a small desk high above the pit, Cormier shouted "15 and 30" above the din, calling the roosters and their owners to the ring. The broad-built birds, with crown feathers brilliant as the autumn leaves and tail feathers green as jade, are matched by weight. Cormier said.

Spectators placed bets among one another as the rooster owners blew on the birds' necks to aggravate them and occasionally held them up toward each other, allowing them to peck their opponents.

"Thirty on the red, thirty on the red" one man shouted into the air. Others hopped up, and like stockbrokers riding a bull market, made frantic hand gestures, apparently secret signals to pass across the arena.

"Pit!" yelled the referee, a young man in his 20s, wearing a baseball cap on his head and a stopwatch around his neck.

Since most cockpits schedule 20 or more fights per night, action in the main arena is brief. If death doesn't come quickly, the two roosters are transferred to the back halls, or "drag pits," where they continue to fight, often up to an hour or more, until one wins.

In the drag pits, the roosters often peek out each other's eyes. They falter when the owners set them down, sometimes splitting up blood or wheezing from damaged lungs.

Still, proponents of the fighting see it as sport, just like boxing. And, indeed, at Cormier's, the spectators appear to be upstanding, hard-working families, often chatting about church or school between matches.

"That rooster that we fight is just like the bird hunters shoot," Cormier said. "And at least we give them a fair chance. We're not sitting out there waiting for them with a 12-gauge."

Report from Cajun country

Arthur G. Greenstein

The Philadelphia Inquirer
Raymond Cormier, in the main cockpit at his bar, is proud of his place and its strict rules.

Joe Lopez, 18, who owns about 200 fighting roosters, said: "We ought to be able to fight. This is our living. This ain't no worse than horse racing."

State Rep. Raymond "LaLa" LaLonde, a Democrat from nearby Lafayette, is set on killing any bill that would anger his constituents.

"I probably love animals more than lots of animal activists, but I believe in human rights, too. If I thought this was a major contributor to the demise of Louisiana morality, I'd be against it," LaLonde said.

"While many animal activists are meeting and speculating about all this," he said, "they are probably doing it at a wine-and-cheese party, eating little chicken drumettes. Where do they think those came from? Somebody killed those chickens."

Nita Hemeter, head of the Jefferson Parish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' anti-cockfighting drive, said she had heard the drumette argument before.

"They always say that people eat chicken and there is cruelty in farming," she said, "but it's not like we're taking big burlap bags of people to watch chickens get slaughtered for entertainment."

Hemeter also helped a New Orleans physician find a Cajun band to record a song about the cruelty of cockfighting. Sung in Cajun French, the song's lyrics tell of a young boy who pleads with his pet rooster to refrain from crowing so his dad will not take the rooster to the fights.

"Most people I talk to are appalled to learn that cockfighting is still legal," she said. "Other states are going on to other animal-rights issues, but here in Louisiana we're starting at the bottom."

Only five years ago, the Louisiana legislature decreed dogfighting illegal, and in 1974, the state's attorney general ruled that Louisiana's animal-cruelty act did not apply to fowl.

"People say it's part of the Cajun culture," Hemeter said. "OK, so it's someone's culture, but so was slavery and so was throwing Christians to the lions."

**Lotteries**

**Pennsylvania**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DAILY</strong></td>
<td>9 6 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIG 4</strong></td>
<td>0 2 3 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 13.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WILD CARD LOTTO</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 12.</td>
<td>06 07 08 14 16 39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUPER 7</strong></td>
<td>55 64 65 76 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 10.</td>
<td>10 27 28 30 32 34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**New Jersey**

| **PICK 3** | 6 4 9 |
| May 12. |      |
| **PICK 4** | 2 3 6 0 |
| May 12. | 06 07 08 14 16 39 |

**Delaware**

| **LOTTO** | 1 1 9 0 |
| May 12. | 02 04 07 08 10 33 |

The Philadelphia Inquirer (USPS 435000) is published daily by Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc., 400 N. Broad St., P.O. Box 8283, Philadelphia 19101. Second Class Postage paid at Philadelphia. The Associated Press is entitled exclusively to the use of reproduction of all local news printed in this newspaper as well as AP news dispatches.

Postmaster: Send address changes to The Philadelphia Inquirer, 400 N. Broad St., P.O. Box 8283, Philadelphia 19101.

To contact the news departments:
General information: 854-4500
Arts/Entertainment: 854-5617
Business News: 854-2450
City Desk: 854-4500
Editorial Board: 854-4531
Foreign Desk: 854-2400
Inquirer Magazine (Sunday): 854-4880
Daily Magazine: 854-5797
National Desk: 854-2410
New Jersey Desk: 854-4500
Pennsylvania/Suburban Desk: 854-4500
Photography Department: 854-2620

215 6-24 K 10 2 17