Breeder's feisty birds not chicken-hearted

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OPELOUSAS - The tricolor roosters strutting with the tenacity of gladiators inside their triangular pens still fascinate J.A. Latola. Latola, an 86-year-old Opelousas resident, got his first fighting rooster when he was 14.

It quickly killed another rooster owned by a neighbor, and Latola, who remembers his father's amazement at the youthful cardsharks.

Since then, Latola has almost continually bred and sometimes fought roosters throughout Louisiana, one of only three states where the controversial sport that has been the target of animaw groups is still legal.

Although Latola admits there is not much about the bird he raises, he has come to love his life-long hobby.

Unlike most domestic pets, the roosters and hens mating behind Latola's house just north of Opelousas have no affectionate names. They're identified by their bloodlines, such as Rhode Island Reds, Griffins and White Rockers.

The eggs of fight-ready roosters and hens are shipped from Latola's 2-acre farm on a weekly basis to various parts of the country. The roosters that eggs produce may someday be fitted with sharpened spurs for bloody combat in cockpits.

Despite their high, attractive numbers, delicate legs and radiant colors, these roosters aren't suitable for human consumption. "They're bred to fight," said Latola, who moved to Opelousas several years ago after working at different times as a St. Landry Parish farmer, one-field boss, and in Louisiana's oil fields.

Fighting instincts inherent in the birds force Latola to keep his roosters carefully caged. If by accidental several roosters wander out of their pens, the roosters will fight one another without provocation, especially during mating season, he said.

Fencing is also often a problem. "They will fight all day long if you let them," said Latola.

Rooster fighting has endured as a sport for many centuries, said Jon Donlon, director of the Center for the Study of Controversial Leisure in Baton Rouge. The purpose of the nonprofit center, which is funded by grants, is to accumulate data for the study, debate and discourse of leisure activities that could be considered controversial, Donlon said.

Donlon said cockfighting was introduced to North America by the Spaniards exploring the southern and southwestern parts of the continent. English settlers brought the sport to the Atlantic Coast; he said.

"There is evidence that, when the Spanish set up military garrisons, cockfighting was used to train men to stay on their toes militarily," Donlon said. "The Persians tried to suppress (cockfighting) because they considered it contrary to what we consider proper social behavior." Latola finds it difficult to describe his attachment to raising birds for cockfighting.

"I've just always liked a good, game chicken. I don't know what caused that, but it's just something that I've always loved to do," he said.

Like owners of domestic pets, Latola greases over the sudden loss of a champion rooster.

"There was one rooster - a five-time winner - a fellow gave me about a year ago. He broke his beak and was unfit to fight. "I had no choice but to destroy it, and that just about killed me. I got his son and daughter out there in the yard, and now they are too big. You don't find many roosters like that. It was just a pity," Latola said.

However, there are times when breeders become linked emotionally to their roosters, Latola said.

You get attached to one when it wins a few fights, and then you lose some that won a few fights. I made $1,000 off him in a derby. That was as good a chicken as you would ever put in a pit," he said.

Raising fighting chickens is what Latola calls "a poor man's business." A person's class status can determine the kind of animal the person raises for sport, he said.

"Those who had money went into the horse business. The poor man who couldn't buy a horse raised fighting roosters. There's a lot of people in it and over 100 kinds of breeds," he said.

Like thoroughbred-horse owners and breeders of other animals, preserving the integrity of the fighting chickens' bloodlines is important, Latola said.

"You crossbred and then what do you get?" he asked.

Carefully secured inside Latola's wooden pens resembling A-frame houses are what he calls his "pure Cubans." The smallish roosters came from a line that traditionally fights against violent hits to the head. During the past 12 years Latola has occasionally bred other varieties such as "pure Spanish" and "Packet Beams."

The nature birds Latola raises usually sell for about $25, while buyers purchase his hens' eggs for $2.50 per dozen.

"You can't make a fortune doing it. I certainly ain't made no money, but I love to fool with it. You got to love to fool with it," he said.

Latola also advertises regularly in national trade magazines and ships his eggs twice weekly all over the United States. Recently, eggs were sent to a client in France, Latola said.

He takes pride in his ability to care for the 15 or so birds secured in pens.

"You can't put a hen or rooster from a pure bloodline in a pen and not give it the best care. You want the eggs to hatch," said Latola.

Latola's championship birds Latola owns eat dry pellets purchased at any feed store. Sometimes, he said, his roosters and hens dine on dry dog food. Caring for roosters is similar to caring for pets, he said.

"To me, you cannot raise and fight the birds if you're going to be lazy. You have to tend to them every day," he said. "At the end of 10 or 11 months, the birds weigh from 3 to 4 pounds and are usually ready to fight. But it's like breeding other animals. You keep records of everything."

The records Latola keeps are usually noted in spiral notebooks and include the names of hens and the number of eggs that the hens hatch according to the day of the week, he said.

Latola said caring for the hens is also important.

"They are one of the best for laying. You keep records of how many eggs they lay, so you know which ones produce best and how much," he said.

Latola, a native of Church Point in Acadia Parish, is a staunch defender of the state's legalization of cockfighting.

"Why did the Lord put (fighting roosters) there if not to fight? People in those humane societies forget that the fryer you just ate after it was hatched never had a chance to live, (while) a game chicken is still enjoying life. It was bred to fight," Latola said.

Latola contends cockfighting generates money in towns that otherwise wouldn't be that well off economically.

Still, cockfighting is openly opposed by groups such as the Coalition of Louisiana Animal Activists.

Louisiana, Oklahoma and New Mexico are the only states where cockfighting is legal, said David Marcanet, vice president of the Louisiana Animal Control Association. The organization opposes cockfighting.

"It's always an activity that we have been opposed to. It's amazing that in the 20th century there are still people who believe that a chicken is not an animal, and that they have no feelings," Marcanet said.

Because chickens and game roosters are not regarded under state law as animals, they are not protected by animal cruelty regulations, said Marcanet.

He said Louisiana's cockfighting industry has established in the state Legislature a strong lobby which has assured that the sport remains legal.

Marcanet says that cockfighting tournaments also generate such ancillary illegal activities as drug use, prostitution and gambling.

"If you just put two roosters fighting in a confined pit, that wouldn't bring any interest. The other game do's," he said.

Donlon said cockfighting has begun to diminish nationwide because of urban development.

"Urban sprawl means that things done by were considered more rural people are becoming more distant," he said.

Despite its decline in the United States, Donlon said cockfighting is still a popular sport worldwide.

"In Central and South America, (cockfighting) is very common," said Donlon.

Donlon said he is not sure why cockfighting remains legalized in the state.