The Violent Chickens

Archaic, Cruel, Against the Low—But Still Going Strong.

By STEVE CULPEPPER

Everybody loves their own form of violence. One man watches people like himself, but bigger, but tradition into each other on the football field. Another likes movies where a lot of bad men with guns knock each other off, one by one. Everyone slows down on the highway to get a quick glimpse into fresh wreckage. We go out of our way to watch a building or a house burn down. We are fascinated by violence. Watching violence apparently fills some deep needs within us. Yet we all (at least most of us) feel that violence is wrong, and we denounce it. No one understands why they are thrilled by violence when they know that it is bad.

Since there is this conflict within us, between an enjoyment of violence and an aversion to violence, there is also a confounding of our ability to judge the matter objectively. The common examples of violence I mentioned above are permissively (though usually secretly) enjoyed, but since society tolerates some “bad” things, it scorns others. And this brings us to the question in point: Cockfighting?

HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

A lot of people (usually people who have never seen a cockfight) feel that the sport of cockfighting is archaic and cruel. It is archaic, in fact it is reputed to be the world’s oldest spectator sport, and in measuring its cruelty, let’s first compare it to the average chicken’s alternative existence. The average chicken is a female white leghorn that lays eggs twenty-one and one-half hours out of every day, for two years or so, and is then slaughtered. These birds sit inside cramped cages throughout the day throughout their lives. They are fed chemicals and additives of all sorts to make them eat and lay eggs. They are hybridized and genetically tampered with to such a degree that they cannot even support their own weight. They are just raw material for fast food.

This treatment and extermination of the chicken is certainly unpleasant (for more on the chicken see a remarkable book by Page Smith and Charles Dalbie called The Chicken Book). Many would call the poultry business cruel, and the fact is that every day, even today, on some individual poultry farm/factories alone, as many as 300,000 chickens are dispatched, not as dead animals, but as packaged products. And while congressmen and teachers and preachers and antivivisectionists and almost everybody eats chicken, it is suffered that the ancient sport of cockfighting is to be illegal, immoral and cruel, as they pass laws to get rid of it.

Of course the most ancient of sports is going to occur (it is illegal almost everywhere, and it flourishes almost everywhere), there is something there that people have found and still do find to be gratifying, there is something there, in the idea of the cockfight, that has made it an ancient tradition. Margaret Mead describes the feathered combatants as “detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own.”

So there we have it, the classic confrontation of two competitive males eager to vanquish the other and prove his own superiority. And what better metaphor than that of two cocks fighting. So let us go now, you and I, while the cockpits are still lit, to Jay’s Bar in Cankton, La. It’s Saturday night. We are on Highway 93, north of Lafayette, and in the flat middle of Cajun country. As we approach Cankton, Jay’s is on our left. It is a squat building, surrounded by cars and trucks in the front, and by trucks and chicken coops in the back. The sign just says music and dancing, and there is also a suspicious picture on the sign of a white rooster on a circle of blue.

KEEP THOSE BIRDS COOL.

So let’s go inside. Hot going on. There is a nasal Cajun band, a big sprawling and dark dance floor, lots of people and dancing, and the conversation is in some odd language. We get a beer and head towards a furtively-lit hallway at the back. There in the middle of a crowded little room, surrounded by wooden bleachers, is a dirt pit enclosed in chicken wire, and
Philippines, and other foreign countries, "Slashers" are the fashion. They mean just that; "slashers" are like scalpels attached to the rooster's legs. These fights don't last very long, of course; one of the birds is killed right off, but most serious cockers don't like such extravagant weapons—-the fight becomes less a match than a spectacle.

I have talked all around the rooster, but I haven't talked about him. He is a magnificent bird, slim and supple with the stance of a true gladiator. The fighting cocks have long, exotic tail feathers, and beautifully colored hackles around their necks which ruffle up during a fight and look something like an Elizabethan collar. There are many different breeds and cross-bred variations, but not all cocks born to be fighters, fight. Some never show any fighting spirit and are consigned to the barnyard. Others are capable, from infancy on, of wielding their spurs just like grown birds. A bird either has it or he doesn't. If he wasn't a born fighter, then he can't be taught to fight; if he can fight, all the owner can do is exercise, train, and coax him into developing his skill.

SECRET RECIPES, FOLK CONCOCTIONS
The training includes a lot of running to strengthen the bird and increase his stamina. The trainers will also hold the bird between its legs and run him along, flipping him, much in the same way a gymnastic instructor will teach a beginning tumbler. This builds up the bird's coordination and quickens his reflexes. The owners of fighting cocks all have their own special ways of training a bird. This includes secret recipes for feed and folk-formula concoctions to make their roosters bigger, stronger, madder and tougher.

The roosters that finally make it to the pit are not ordinary farm roosters. They are very special, some special enough to be worth up to $500. A prize fighting cock is also valuable for breeding. In researching this I was told of a man in Tangipahoa who makes (or used to make) his living breeding fighting cocks and exporting them to Hawaii and the Philippines (where a good bird will bring a better price). I couldn't get in touch with any big-time professionals, though; they stay in the country and mind their own business.

MORE SHOCKED BY CRAWBOILS
Since cockfighting is against the law, I encountered a bit of difficulty in talking to people about it, but this seemed to be only natural clandestine reticence. Actually, the law's attitude towards cockfighting (according to the Attorney General's Office) is one of toleration. The cockers themselves wouldn't allow any pictures taken inside their pit; in fact, they wouldn't allow any pictures taken outside, either. According to Jay, most of the cockers are a bunch of old-timers who would just as soon not have any publicity. They've fought their birds for years and have seen opinions and legislation and attitudes come and go, and they don't see what the big deal is. To tell the truth, when I first came to South Louisiana, I was more shocked by watching live crawfish being dumped into boiling water than I was by these cockfights.

If you are seriously or casually interested in cockfighting, I might suggest you go to Jay's. It only costs a dollar to get in. And after having actually seen a cockfight, if you then aren't overcome by cultural biases, you might want to become an aficionado of the sport. To read up on the history of cockfighting, and the subject in general, you can find a book called The History of Cockfighting in the library, or you can read The Chicken Book, which I mentioned earlier. If you are still interested, there are supposed to be a few cockfighting journals; the one whose name I know is Grit and Steel, although I don't know where in the world you can find a newstand that carries it.