

## Cockfighting

**Abored by Animal Rights activists, Cockfighting is probably the most widely practiced illegal blood sport in the world.**

In July 2008, police raided the home of *Cher Kong*, 35, in the United States after an anonymous tip-off from a neighbour. When the police arrived they peered through a basement window and saw a group of 20 men gathered in a circle laughing and rooting. When they entered the basement, the walls were spattered with blood. Two Taiwanese fighting cocks lay dead on the floor as two others circled each other cheered on by the spectators. *Cher Kong* was charged with the felony offence of cruelty to animals and organizing cock fights. In all, 29 Taiwanese fighting cocks were recovered by The Humane Society from the East Bethel (MN) home.

Though illegal in most countries, (the Philippines, Mexico, Guam and the Spanish Canary Islands being notable exceptions) fuelled by gambling, cockfighting is a multimillion dollar industry which flourishes throughout Asia.

Cockfighting (*gai chun*) dates back 6000 years and is reportedly the oldest spectator sport. Cockfighting was a common pastime in the Indus Valley Civilization by 2000 BC. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2008)—on the origins of cockfighting—states:

The game fowl is probably the nearest to the Indian red jungle fowl (*Gallus ferrugineus*), from which all domestic chickens are believed to be descended.

Cockfighting spread from Asia after the Persian armies conquered India in the 4th century B.C. The Persians adopted the sport and are widely believed to be responsible for its introduction to the Mediterranean through military conquest and trade.

The sea-faring Phoenicians (from modern day Lebanon) are also thought to be responsible for the widespread distribution of game fowl from the orient to Africa, the Middle East, and along the European coast. The Romans introduced the sport into Northern Europe. In the British Isles, there still exists a breed of gamecock known as the Pyles strain of *Charles II* (1630-1685) that is a highly sought after by breeders.

Cockfighting in Ancient Greece was a popular pursuit not only for entertainment, but also as a model for personal courage in the face of danger. One of the more famous stories of cockfighting involves *Themistocles*, (c. 524–460 BC), the highly esteemed Athenian General. On the eve of battle against the Persians, his troops witnessed two cocks fighting beside the road. Reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Henry V's* speech to his men before battle, *Themistocles* took this occasion to inspire his soldiers:

"Behold, these do not fight for their household gods, for their monuments of their ancestors, for glory, for liberty, or the safety of their children, but only because the one will not give way to the other."

The Persians were defeated and the anniversary of the victory was celebrated every year in Athens with cockfights held in an amphitheatre specially built for the occasion. The night before battle, *Alexander the Great* (356–323 BC), would also stage cock fights to inspire his soldiers with the qualities of courage and valor.

Cocks possess congenital aggression towards all males of the same species. They fight for breeding rights whether cheered on by spectators or not. Early organizers of the sport introduced rules to the spectacle.

The complicated set of rules define both the responsibilities of the handlers and the limitations placed on their interference with the birds while actually fighting. If a cock turns away three times and refuses to engage its opponent, it is considered a knockout. Cockfighting matches were held in a circular arena called a cockpit and in England were often held in association with race meets.

Posters which were part of the Racing Calendar in the 1770s referred to following 'the usual rules of cockfighting as it is practiced in London and Newmarket' - which included a count to ten in the case of a knockout. The ten count and weight classes in cockfighting were adopted by bare-knuckle prize fighting and eventually professional boxing, e.g. bantamweight, lightweight and middleweight.

Though every town of any size boasted a cockpit, aristocrats in England were known to hold matches in their drawing rooms. This pastime was a common enough practice to prompt furniture makers to offer ornately carved, cockfighting chairs. It is said that the new wife of the 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Derby (1752-1834) - who famously lost 5000 guineas in a cockfight tournament to celebrated breeder Joseph Gilliver in 1830 - prevailed upon him to end the practice of cockfighting in their drawing room. Cockfighting was eventually banned in England in 1834. Massachusetts was the first American state to ban cockfighting in 1836 - Louisiana was the last in 2007.

Famous American enthusiasts of the sport all of whom raised and fought birds include George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Despite now being illegal in all 50 states, more than half the 170 pages of the May issue of *Gamecock*, a 62-year-old monthly magazine that claims 16,000 subscribers, are advertisements intended for cockfighters.

After 73 people were arrested at a \$40,000 cock fighting tournament in Randolph County, North Carolina in February 2009, John Goodman of The Humane Society commented,

"If you can win a \$40,000 prize, what kind of deterrent is a \$200 misdemeanor penalty going to be?"

20 fighting cocks were already dead when police arrived on the scene and another 139 were recovered from the property, some so badly mutilated from previous fights they had to be destroyed.

In Bali cockfighting is known as *tajen*. The Indonesian government banned the sport in 1981 because of its association with excessive gambling. The *bebebotoh* (*tajen* gamblers) were known to sacrifice their property and even their families in bouts of frenzied gambling. However, it is still practiced today in an ancient ritual called *tabuh rah* (pouring blood). The spilled blood of the loser is offered to appease evil spirits. In *tajen* the cocks are armed with a sharp knife called a *taj*.

Cockfighting in the Philippines is called "*Sabong*". It is one of the Philippines' national sports. There are both legal and illegal cockfights in the Philippines. Legal cockfights are held in cockpits every week. Illegal or unlicensed cockfights, called *tupada*, are organized in an underground network in rural areas out of sight of official scrutiny. In both kinds of cockfight, sharp knives are attached to the left leg of the cock. Gloves are used for training purposes only. *Sabong* and illegal *tupada*, are judged by a referee called *sentensyador*, whose verdict is final and not subject to any appeal.

Estimates of the number of roosters fought - and killed - each year in the Philippines range from 7 million to 13 million.

In Thailand, cockfighting was already popular by the time Ayutthaya was established as the capital of the Thai Kingdom in A.D.1350. Though illegal, it is still common today. *Chavalit* (not his real name) runs a Guest House approximately 3 kilometers from Don Muang Airport in Bangkok. He is also a cock breeder and has an impressive collection of fighting cocks which are housed separately in round, bamboo cages. The birds were superbly conditioned.

A local farmer arrived with his own fighting cock and a challenge. Money changed hands. The two birds were carefully groomed and then placed in the cockpit without any metal *gaffs* attached to their legs. The two opponents immediately sized each other up, hackles flared as they attacked - kicking, pecking, weaving – attack and counter attack in a rapid flurry of naked aggression. The fight lasted two rounds. Chavalit's bird won by a knockout. The weaker bird simply gave up and lay quite still, exhausted, panting heavily on the ground. Both birds were picked up by their handlers and carefully cleaned. The defeated bird had a severe cut which was meticulously sewn up with a needle and thread by its handler.

*Chavalit* showed me a newspaper which advertised prize-winning cocks for sale. He told me that his best bird had won him over 50,000 baht in competition. Owners of nationally recognized champions can make as much as 200,000 baht per fight. The eggs fertilized by prize-winning cocks are highly sought after and are smuggled to destinations like India, the Philippines, Dubai and the Arab Emirates.

Animal Rights Activists abhor the sport of cockfighting. And yet it is probably the most widely practiced, illegal blood sport in the world. Advocates of the sport often cite cultural and religious relevance as reasons for the perpetuation of cockfighting as a sport. Fights to the death are rare in Thailand yet the birds do suffer immense physical trauma unnecessarily.

To paraphrase John Goodman of The Humane Society: When the financial rewards of cockfighting outweigh the risks of severe legal penalties, what deterrent is there?