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Cockfights thrive as Tennessee tradition

Police, activists crack down on big-money blood sport

By Jennifer Brooks • THE TENNESSEAN

The roosters collided in a tangle of glossy feathers and furious squawks, somersaulting madly across the backyard as they pecked and kicked and pounced.

The combat ended abruptly when two weathered hands reached down and hoisted the birds aloft.

"Now, did I do anything to make those birds fight? No. It's just in their nature," Hilary Hood said as the gamecocks tucked under each arm traded baleful orange glares.

For most of his 67 years, Hood raised and fought gamecocks, same as his father and grandfather before him. His North Nashville home is crowded with trophies he won back in the days when cockfighting was sanctioned in other states and Tennesseans could legally take their birds across state lines to fight.

Those days are long gone.

Every state in the union has banned cockfighting as a cruel blood sport. There have been three major cockfighting busts in Middle Tennessee in the past four months alone. Hundreds of people have been arrested and charged, hundreds of gamecocks impounded and euthanized, and tens of thousands of dollars in gambling revenues seized.

"The mentality of cockfighting is hideous," said John Goodwin, manager of animal fighting issues for the Humane Society of the United States. "They have a name for birds that have had an eye gouged out in a fight. They call them 'blinkers.' You'll hear people laughingly describe a rooster choking on its own blood as a 'rattler.' "

In many U.S. cockfights, the roosters are fitted with gaffs — 2- or 3-inch knives or curved ice-pick-like devices that replace the birds' natural heel spurs with something far more lethal. Goodwin, who works to infiltrate and

expose cockfighting operations, was there when state and federal law enforcement raided a massive cockpit in Lewis County last month that led to almost 300 arrests.

"In Lewis County, I personally saw birds with their intestines hanging out, still alive. One bird had its intestines tangled in the feet of the bird it had been fighting," Goodwin said.

Most cockfighting raids end with the confiscated birds being euthanized. Goodwin said animal rescue groups would try to find homes for them, but it's tough to place such aggressive birds.

Cockfighting enthusiasts point out the irony of trading a chicken's 50-50 odds of being killed in a fight to near-certain odds of being tossed in a barrel and gassed after a raid. Cockfighting opponents counter that the chickens' odds flip to 100 percent survival if people would just quit cockfighting.

Hood doesn't buy it. Chickens are killed and eaten by the millions on poultry farms, and no one has passed laws to ban agribusiness.

"At least in a fight, he stands a chance," he said. "If this rooster met Colonel Sanders, what sort of chance do you think he'd have?"

Earlier this year, the Tennessee Senate approved legislation that would have raised the penalty for cockfighting from a misdemeanor to a felony. The House probably will take up the bill next year.

But it's easier to change a law than to change people's hearts and minds.

Nashville banned poultry inside the city limits in the 1970s, but because Hood and his birds were here first, they're grandfathered in.

He says he no longer fights his birds, but he keeps them and breeds them and

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COCKFIGHTING

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pires for the days when he could watch them do battle.

"A rooster who's just won a fight is the proudest thing you'll ever see. He'll just rear back and crow. It makes me want to rear back and crow, too," he said, carrying one of his birds out to the front yard to let it roam around a bit. The bird strutted across the grass, its feathers flashing bronze and red and green in the June sunshine.

"I enjoy looking at them, like a NASCAR fan enjoys looking at the race car. These chickens are beautiful to me," he said.

But those beautiful birds have been bred for thousands of years to fight and die. And their deaths are often painful and bloody. Doesn't that bother him?

"Nah," he said at first, then paused and thought it over. "Well, yes. It hurts me when I fight one of 'em, but I also know he was doing what he was bred to do. And when your bird wins, it really makes you proud."

Arrests are up

On paper, Tennessee banned cockfighting back in 1881. But that prohibition worked about as well as later attempts to ban alcohol. Cockfighting thrived, particularly in East Tennessee and other rural areas.

It's anybody's guess how many cockfights go on in this state on any given weekend.

Goodwin estimates that cockfighting busts have increased 150 percent in recent years.

A spokeswoman for the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation said cockfighting activities in the state peaked in the 1980s then declined steadily in the 1990s. The past decade, however, has seen a resurgence of cockfighting.

The reasons aren't clear, although Tennessee has seen an increase in immigration from Latin America and Asia, where cockfighting is often popular and legal.

Cockfighting can be very big business. The bigger pits offer bleacher seating for hundreds, charge \$15 to \$20 a head for admission and offer all the amenities of a mainstream sporting event — right down to the conces-

sion snacks and souvenir stands where spectators can buy their "I Love Cockfighting" T-shirts for the kids.

At recent cockfighting raids in Hohenwald and Westmoreland, officers found children among the crowds watching the bloody fights.

"It's something I was raised in. It's a family tradition," said Amanda Wilburn, whose father and brother were watching the fight in Hohenwald when federal agents swooped in. The men were arrested.

Her father raises gamecocks, and Wilburn remembers watching the roosters fight when she was no bigger than her 3-year-old niece, who also enjoys watching the birds fight.

"I stood right beside the pit, and I rooted for the red rooster, or the yellow-legged rooster," she said. "It's something we've done for years, and all of a sudden, bam, they're telling us it's a crime."

Congress passes law

The U.S. is a crazy quilt of conflicting cockfighting laws.

In some states, everything connected with cockfighting is a felony, on a par with dog fighting.

Watching a cockfight is a misdemeanor offense in Tennessee — a \$50 fine at most, the same penalty for cockfighting. In several neighboring states, including Alabama, Mississippi and Kentucky, cockfighting is a misdemeanor offense, but watching a fight is perfectly legal.

Breeding gamecocks is legal in Tennessee — except for the purposes of fighting — as is owning cockfighting materials like gaffs.

There are cockfighting Web sites, Internet forums like www.friendsport.com ("Doing our part to bring honor back to cocking,") where enthusiasts can compare notes, thousands of cockfighting videos on sites like YouTube, cockfighting books and cockfighting magazines. Gamecock breeders advertise openly online and in the specialty publications.

When Congress was debating whether to make it a federal offense to cross state lines to engage in cockfighting, the industry hired lobbyists and organized political action committees — Citizens for Preserving Historic

Animal Use and Citizens for the Humane and Ethical Treatment of Animals.

The groups distributed more than \$60,000 in campaign contributions during the 2006 election cycle, but the law passed anyway and the groups have since disbanded.

At least three national cockfighting magazines publish each month: The Gamecock, Grit and Steel and The Feathered Warrior. The Humane Society has filed suit against the U.S. Postal Service, trying to block delivery of the magazines, and has organized boycotts, unsuccessful so far, to persuade Amazon.com to stop linking to the magazine subscriptions and books.

The Humane Society also offers cash bounties of up to \$5,000 to anyone who tips its investigators off to the location of cockfights or dog fights.

"We have the cockfighting industry deeply infiltrated," Goodwin said. "We're just going down the list."

Last Saturday, an undercover investigator hired by the Humane Society released video of cockfights at a 700-seat arena near Jeffersonville, Ky. There, like here, the Humane Society is pushing the legislature to toughen the law and make cockfighting a felony offense.

Cockfighting enthusiasts will never understand why the rest of the world keeps sticking its nose in their pastime.

It's the same pastime that George Washington and Abraham Lincoln and Andy Jackson and Julius Caesar enjoyed, and they don't see why it's now held up to ridicule and revulsion.

"It's not a sport, it's a tradition. It's our tradition," Wilburn said. "They say a lot of gambling money changes hands at these things. Well, so what? These people worked hard for their money, they should get to spend it how they want."

For Hood, looking out for the chickens' rights means depriving him of his.

"I have a right to the pursuit of happiness," he said. "This is what makes me happy."

Animal welfare vs. animal rights: understanding the difference

In the world of animal advocacy, it sometime can be difficult to keep an accurate scorecard between Animal Welfare and Animal Rights groups. One of the keys to telling the difference: if someone says there is no difference, they are on the animal rights side of the debate. As a responsible pet owner, it is critical to recognize the difference and support Animal Welfare organizations.

Animal welfare is defined by the American Veterinary Medical Association as "The ethical responsibility of ensuring animal well being". Some of the primary activities this includes are:

- The responsible use of animals for human purposes, such as companionship, food, fiber, recreation, work, education, exhibition, and research conducted for the benefit of both humans and animals, is consistent with the Veterinarian's Oath.

- Decisions regarding animal care, use, and welfare shall be made by balancing scientific knowledge and professional judgment with consideration of ethical and societal values.

- Animals must be provided water, food, proper handling, health care, and an environment appropriate to their care and use, with thoughtful consideration for their species-typical biology and behavior.

- Animals should be cared for in ways that minimize fear, pain, stress, and suffering.

- Procedures related to animal housing, management, care, and use should be continuously evaluated, and when indicated, refined or replaced.

- Conservation and management of animal populations should be humane, socially responsible, and scientifically prudent.

- Animals shall be treated with respect and dignity throughout their lives and, when necessary, provided a humane death.

- The veterinary profession shall continually strive to improve animal health and welfare through scientific research, education, collaboration, advocacy, and the development of legislation and regulations.

(retrieved 7-5-09 from AVMA.com, "Issues in Animal Welfare")

The other half of the equation are animal rights groups. These include well-known names like PETA and HSUS, as well as many of the local shelters that they support in the guise of animal welfare groups. These organizations:

- Advocate pure veganism
- Object to any form of companion animal in principle and any planned breeding of companion animals in practice
- Seek to outlaw all forms of medical research requiring any type of animal other than human

- Seek to outlaw any form of medicine requiring animal inputs, such as natural forms of insulin

- Seek to outlaw the use of any form of animal skin for use in clothing or other manufacturing

- Oppose any form of animal cruelty

The one goal they both share is the ending of animal cruelty. Where the true difference lies is in the definition of cruelty. To the animal rights activist, the 20,000 years we have shared with dogs as companions, cooperative hunters, and fellow herdsmen is a form of slavery and cruelty rather than a beneficial relationship for both species.

Know the facts before you donate to an organization.

STUDENTS ATTENDING OFF-CAMPUS ROTATIONS

Whether serving a rotation within your country or abroad: Check security and other issues of concern with fellow students who have completed the rotation you plan to visit.

Studying Abroad

Students from all nations should be aware of the following.

- Studying abroad can be a fun and safe experience but it is important to realize that you are subject to the laws and customs of another country.
- Although most trips abroad are trouble free, being prepared will go a long way to avoid the possibility of serious and, at times, life-changing situations.
- Become familiar with the basic laws and customs of the country you plan to visit before you travel.
- Find out whether your school offers additional country-specific information for students who are planning to study, travel, or work abroad.
- Check the Consulate from your Country of residence for travel advisories.

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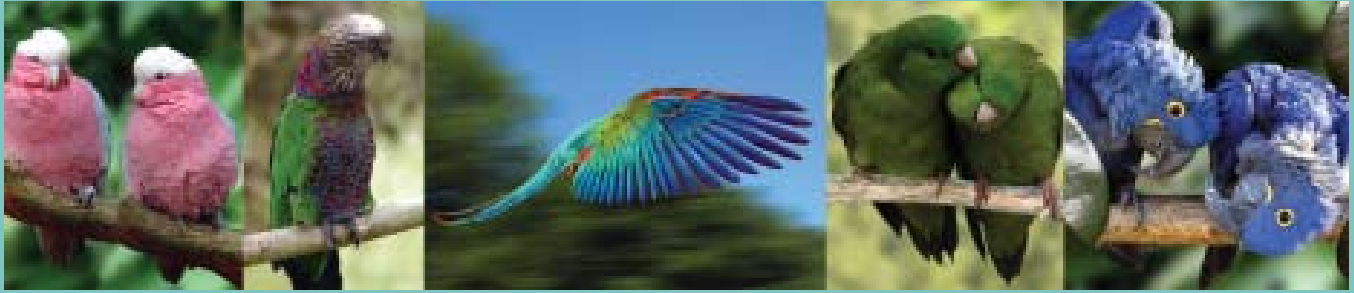
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