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A Folkloristic Look at Cockfighting

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A FOLKLORISTIC LOOK AT COCKFIGHTING

A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Marian W. Krantz

May 1978

A FOLKLORISTIC LOOK AT COCKFIGHTING

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A FOLKLORISTIC LOOK AT COCKFIGHTING

Marian W. Krantz

May 1978

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Directed by: W. Lynwood Montell, Burt Feintuch, and Robert Teske

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Four Nebraska Cockfighters responded orally to queries about breeding, conditioning, heeling and handling of game fowl, and also about the public image and stereotypes of cockfighting and its participants. Mastery of breeding, conditioning, heeling and handling is what makes a successful cockfighter, while association with the sport means having to face charges of cruelty to animals and accusations that only the seedier segments of society are attracted to it. Cockfighters are prepared to defend and rationalize their sport with a uniform set of excuses. They claim their adversaries are hypocritical in their accusations. Cockfighters also maintain that the Lord created game birds only for fighting. They emphasize that cockfighters are respectable people with a degree of honesty, dignity and pride unknown to other sports. The esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore provided a theoretical perspective to the study. Simply, cockfighters engage in an illegal activity that is regarded by those outside the group as cruel and dehumanizing. Cockfighters, however, realize the exoteric concepts believed about them and are able to refute those concepts on the basis of their own esoteric knowledge.

CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION TO COCKFIGHTING

Few sports can claim greater antiquity than the sport of cockfighting. The actual date of origin cannot be determined but the most devoted patrons declare cockfighting to be the oldest sport in the world. There is some speculation that the sport was instituted about the same time chickens were domesticated, which may have been five thousand years ago.¹

One interesting theory concerning the sport's origin is that cockfighting, like so many other sports, arose from religious ritual. The cock was regarded as a sacred bird and several of the bird's characteristics, for example, his shrill crow at dawn, are indications that cockfighting had a religious origin. In Persian mythology the cock, the "Herald of the Dawn," was the ally of light in the struggle against the dark.² Paralleling this light imagery, it is the cock's crow that signals the new day and ushers out the evils of night.

The New Testament reflects this religious tradition in Mark 14:72: "And immediately the cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, 'Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.' And he broke down and wept." Peter

¹Charles H. McCaghy and Arthur G. Neal, "The Fraternity of Cockfighters: Ethical Embellishments of an Illegal Sport," Journal of Popular Culture 8 (Winter 1974): 557.

²Rudolph Brasch, How Did Sports Begin? (New York: McKay, 1970), p. 74.

renounced Christ before the cock announced the break of day. Before dawn, the "powers of the night" were upon Peter. When the cock's crow dispelled the darkness, Peter suddenly realized what had happened and was remorseful.

Regardless of its date and manner of origin, cockfighting probably began in southern or southeastern Asia, spread to Persia and from there to Greece. The Athenian statesman and commander, Themistocles (528-462 B.C.), has been linked with the introduction of chicken fighting to Europe. Tradition says that Themistocles spied two cocks fighting by the roadside as he was marching with his army against the Persians. Pointing out the bravery of the two cocks, he used it as an example to inspire his troops and enjoined them to imitate the courage and heroism of the birds. His encouraged troops fought strenuously and eventually defeated the Persians. Cockfighting was then ordained to be an annual, patriotic event in Athens. In the absence of chickens, quail were often substituted and pitted against each other.³

Informants stated that the ancient mariners kept game fowl on their ships to help instill a confidence and a fighting spirit in the men on board. The informants gleaned this knowledge from reading cocking journals and from talking with fellow cockfighters.

When they was out there on their ships, why they'd meet another ship and the rooster would crow to keep up morale. There was no other way of relaxation but to fight chickens. And so they would fight chickens. It would break up their monotony and give them a spirit. Because the spirit of the fighting cock was the greatest.⁴

Another informant related the following story about the history of cockfighting.

³Brasch, How Did Sports Begin?, p. 76.

⁴Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

You know, clear back in the time of the ancient Persians, they used to carry gamecocks around with their armies. They would line up a couple cockfights before they went into battle to inspire their men, to show them what gameness was. It was a common practice.⁵

From Greece the sport spread quickly to the entire Mediterranean World. Romans supposedly were the first to hold organized cockfights. The pastime was carried to Western Europe and England by Roman colonizers. In England, it was an increasingly popular sport from the twelfth century onward.⁶

The annual climax of cockfights in England came on Shrove Tuesday--the day before Ash Wednesday. On that day of feasting and revelry, each schoolboy would carry a gamecock to school. The birds were pitted on the schoolroom floor and the losing birds ended up in the schoolmaster's stew pot.

In England, the gamecock rose to royal favor. King Henry VIII allegedly was so fond of the sport that he constructed a cockpit in Westminster palace. It was also in England where the cockfight became known as the "royal diversion."⁷

Today, those knowledgeable about the royal diversion claim that cocks were introduced in America by our English and Irish ancestors. It is said that Spanish explorers also carried the sport across the ocean, which explains its popularity in some Latin American countries.⁸

Regardless of how America became acquainted with cockfighting, it has had a colorful history in this country. According to one

⁵Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

⁶Brasch, How Did Sports Begin?, p. 78.

⁷Frederick W. Hackwood, Old English Sports (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1907), pp. 228-29.

⁸Brasch, How Did Sports Begin?, p. 79.

historian, George Washington enjoyed dancing, cards, shooting, fishing, cockfighting, horse racing and drinking. It is reported that he participated in fights held on the lawn of the White House. Andrew Jackson was also a great fan of cockfighting. His own love of combat was often compared to that of the fighting cock. Abraham Lincoln was another ardent cockfighter and a great referee.⁹

Ben Franklin, himself a devoted fancier, led the fight to select the gamecock for a national symbol. The gamecock lost to the eagle in a very close contest.¹⁰ "The fighting cock got beat out by one vote, by one vote by the eagle, to be our national bird."¹¹

In more recent times, cockfighting and its devotees have increasingly fallen into disfavor with the general public. As a consequence, legislation specifically prohibiting cockfighting as well as legislation with respect to cruelty toward animals that possibly applies to cockfighting has been passed. In Nebraska, the legal status of cockfighting is currently not a major issue with cockers. Informant Ed Taber, maintaining that there is no cockfighting in Nebraska, successfully lobbied against a proposed bill in the 1975 Nebraska Legislature. He took the position that cockfighting is a very, very minor sport in Nebraska.

There aren't four or five fellows in Nebraska that have any cocks to speak of. So I took the stand that cockfighting is so trivial in Nebraska that it was silly to waste time and money to change the existing law. . . . There isn't any cockfighting in

⁹Edward Townsend Booth, Country Life in America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), pp. 65, 104.

¹⁰Ed Taber, "A Short History of Cockfighting," Lincoln, Nebraska, March 1975. (Typewritten.)

¹¹Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

Nebraska. There are only one or two fellows that do any cock-fighting. They go down to Kansas and Oklahoma where it's legal.¹²

Cockfighting in the United States is widespread despite its illegal status in most states. The most activity seems to be centered in the southern states. It is also a popular sport in the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico, Mexico and other Latin American countries. A perusal of a recent issue of Grit and Steel, a magazine devoted to cockfighting, revealed articles or advertisements from over half of the fifty United States and seven different countries, indicating that cockfighting is a viable pastime in those areas.¹³

Cockfighting laws, however, differ widely from state to state. Prohibitions vary from simply possessing the artificial spurs to managing and operating a cockpit. When examined holistically, the various states' laws represent a conglomerate of prohibitions which are susceptible to varying interpretations.¹⁴

The Nebraska law governing cockfighting, section 28-561 of the Reissue Revised Statutes of Nebraska, 1943, reads: "Whoever shall publicly exhibit, or aid and assist in exhibiting, the game commonly

¹²Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

¹³Those states listed in Grit and Steel 77 (January 1976) are, in alphabetical order: Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia. The countries that were listed in the same volume, in alphabetical order, are: Australia, El Salvador, Guam, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Republic of the Philippines, and the United States.

¹⁴A survey of all the applicable laws in each state as well as a listing of the states where cockfighting is not illegal has not been undertaken in this study. A legal search such as that is too time consuming and is not germane to this study.

called cockfighting, shall forfeit and pay a fine not exceeding twenty dollars." In Nebraska, the regular practice of the sport proves that the law is not an effective impediment to the cockfighter.

The sport of fighting cocks is no longer an acceptable sport. What was once a royal diversion is now stereotyped as a sport engaged in by only the seedier segments of society. Despite its current low status in society, its former popularity is reflected in our vocabulary and many cockfighting terms have been adapted into everyday language.

An obvious parallel in word meanings is "pitting" the birds against each other as opponents are pitted against each other. The term in cockfighting refers to both the arena, or pit, where the birds engage in combat and to the referee's command to "Pit the birds" during the course of a fight. Just as the birds are pitted to fight each other, so are human opponents said to be pitted against each other.

The arena used in fighting cocks is called a cockpit. Since it is an area restricted in space, the term was applied to similar small enclosures. Naval tradition borrowed the word in the seventeenth century to describe the warship quarters of the junior officers. The term was aptly applied because these quarters also functioned as first aid stations and during battles often presented a bloody spectacle. The term cockpit was adopted by yet another branch of the military service, when World War One airmen called the confines of their small flying cabins cockpits.¹⁵

Modern theaters have a section called the orchestra pit. This, too, is a parallel in meaning drawn from the hollow circular area used to fight chickens.

¹⁵Brasch, How Did Sports Begin?, pp. 80-81.

The effect of this sport on our vocabulary is far reaching. Words and phrases such as "crestfallen," "cocksure" and "show the white feather" are reflections of the spirit of the gamecock. Crestfallen refers to the bird that gives up fighting. A cock waiting for the death blow stands with his crest drooping listlessly. The phrase "show the white feather" became identified with faintheartedness and intimidation. When a cock decided to give up the fight, he would lift his hackle (the neck feathers on a fowl) and reveal the white colored feathers underneath.

The white feather metaphor may have been derived from another origin. According to some cockers, the best fighting cocks are of a pure breed with coats of black and red feathers. Inferior birds lack courage and are a result of a bad mixture of blood. This poor breeding can be manifested by the appearance of white feathers in the tail of a gamecock. Both explanations come from the cockpit and concur that the white feather is a symbol of weakness and lack of daring.¹⁶

The term cocksure, meaning self-confident, is derived from the attitude of the gamecock who struts around defiantly. Allusion here is also made to the work "cocky," which has a similar meaning.

Phrases that adopt literal meaning from the sport include "feel like a fighting cock," "live like a fighting cock" and "cock of the walk." Game fowl are carefully conditioned before each fight so they will be at their optimum performance level. Thus, to feel like a fighting cock is to be well prepared for and exuberantly equal to the task at hand. To live like a fighting cock is to be fed and housed luxuriously, just as bird owners reputedly care for their birds.

¹⁶ Brasch, How Did Sports Begin?, p. 81.

During the off-season, game fowl are often sent out to neighboring farms where there are no other male birds present. The bird is allowed free range of the farm and often accumulates his own following of hens. In cockfighting jargon, this is called a farm walk. The melodic phrase "cock of the walk" is applied figuratively to humans and denotes the dominant person in a group who has overcome all opposition. The phrase assumes meaning from the practice of "walking" game fowl.¹⁷

A survey of words that both actually and possibly derive meaning from this sport would be a lengthy survey indeed. Included would be additional examples of slang and also technical parallels of meanings. Lest this linguistic endeavor become too tedious, a further analysis will not be attempted.

The sport of fighting cocks has been largely ignored not only by folklorists but also by historians, sociologists and ethnographers. In an attempt to survey literature on this subject, it became evident that existing professional and academic literature was minimal. A bibliography compiled by Gary Foster and an annotated bibliography by Gerald E. Parsons helped to simplify this task.¹⁸

The literature of cockfighting, with the occasional exception of fictional and news writing, tends to be esoteric and practical. Most of the materials is and was written by cockfighters for the purpose of disseminating information about their sport. Cockers want to know

¹⁷The Philological Society, Oxford English Dictionary, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933; reprint ed., 1961), 2:565-78.

¹⁸Gary S. Foster, "Cockfighting: The Social Structure of a Deviant Subculture," M.A. thesis, Western Kentucky University, 1975; and Gerald E. Parsons, Jr., "Cockfighting: A Potential Field of Research." New York Folklore Quarterly (December 1969).

the latest innovations in breeding and conditioning. They are interested in the history of their own breed and other competing breeds of fowl. Cockfighters want to know who won the important derbies and which bloodlines were fought. Their books and periodicals reflect these desires.

A great majority of the cockfighting literature was printed in England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most was of a descriptive and technical nature. Many of these items had short press runs and now can be found only in private collections. One manual, published in more recent times, was invaluable for corroborating oral data for this thesis. A successful cockfighter wrote The Art of Cockfighting¹⁹ as an aid for other cockfighters. It is a fine example of an esoteric and practical publication about cockfighting.

Current fictional and sensational articles dealing with cockfighting appear in popular periodicals such as Time, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated and Esquire. These articles are usually written from a journalistic standpoint and have little substance of an academic nature to offer. Cockfighting proves to be a source of lurid news material as well as a novel subject for fictional writing.

An article by Charles McCaghy and Arthur G. Neal included in the Journal of Popular Culture²⁰ proved to be a work of academic significance. These two scholars explored the ethics surrounding the sport. Their observations are corroborated by fieldwork and secondary sources such as game fowl periodicals.

¹⁹Arch Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting (New York: Devon-Adair, 1949).

²⁰McCaghy and Neal, "The Fraternity of Cockfighters," pp. 557-69.

Since about 1879, there have been approximately thirty-two periodicals devoted to game fowl. Most are out of circulation. Currently only three of those are in wide circulation.²¹

There are three magazines right now. The oldest magazine there is, is the Grit and Steel. . . . It started in 1899. . . . It was the Bible, and now it has gone backwards.

That is the best magazine right now there is, Gamecock. . . . They bought that magazine in 1936, I believe it was. Made it into a big magazine. The editor died about seven or eight years ago. I thought the magazine would go to pot. But Sally Marburger, the editor, really built that thing up and it has really gone ahead like nobody's business. . . .

Then there's the Feathered Warrior. It's a smaller magazine. These guys are friends of mine, but it's smaller. Those are the three magazines. Of course, the Feathered Warrior is an old magazine. But it's been in half a dozen different hands in my lifetime that I know of.²²

I liked the Gamecock real well. . . . I mean, it seemed to me there was more reading and more personal write-ups in them. Now, "Joe Blow fought here and his bloodline consists of this and this." Anyway, it told you a more concise picture of what he was fighting. And if you'd been at fighting chickens for many years, then you'd know what the bloodline was and you'd understand it, you know, more precise.²³

Gamecock, with its colorful, slick cover, now surpasses Grit and Steel in terms of popularity. The content of the Gamecock magazine is felt to be more informative than the two rival publications.

Gamecock is, I think, the outstanding one right now. . . . It used to be Grit and Steel, but it's not near as good a magazine as it used to be. . . . Gamecock's got some good articles in it. Different things about chickens. And it's got a lot of articles that the oldtimers has wrote about the olden days and it's a pretty good little magazine.²⁴

These magazines are basically monthly publications. They contain news articles of past events and also announce dates of future derbies.

²¹For a complete list, see Parsons, "Cockfighting: A Potential Field of Research," pp. 287-88.

²²Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

²³Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

²⁴Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

Photographs of cockfighters and their winning birds are often included with the news from the pits, and color photographs of prize birds are solicited for the covers of the magazines. Informative articles on different aspects of cockfighting are basic features of the journals. The publications function as a buying guide and catalog for all types of cocking supplies and accessories, including artificial spurs, weighing scales, wallets and belt buckles. Advertisements are carried that offer chickens for sale at various stages between the egg and the dinner plate.

A series of articles entitled "Profiles of the American Cocker" was published in Grit and Steel magazine. The articles were based on a national survey of cockfighters taken by Clifton D. Bryant of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in collaboration with William C. Capel of Clemson University.²⁵ Results of the study were based on the responses of 533 cockfighters. The study revealed that most American cockers reside in the southeastern area of the United States. The greatest concentration of cockfighters in that area is in the South Atlantic region. Age proved to be no impediment to involvement in the sport. The average age of the respondents was thirty-nine years. Ages ranged, however, from under fifteen to over eighty.

An overwhelming 86 percent of the respondents were married. Fifty-three percent reported blue collar occupations, 38 percent reported having white collar occupations and 17 percent were retired. Income of the respondents fluctuated between under seven thousand

²⁵Bryant and Capel's findings were published in a series of six articles in Grit and Steel, from November, 1974 to May, 1975.

dollars and over fifteen hundred dollars, annually. While the average amount of education reported was completion of high school, some respondents had less than an eighth grade education and some had attended college or trade school. The study does indeed indicate that human participants in cockfighting come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Magazines published in the interest of game fowl fanciers provided a source for a sociological perspective, current information and for prevailing views of cockfighting. A master's thesis by Gary Foster²⁶ provided an ethnographic description of a fight, a sociological study of cockfighters and a fairly complete bibliography.

Foster's master's thesis was a sociological study of cockfighting as viewed in the light of deviant behavior. He enhanced his thesis by including both an account of a cockfight as well as the rules governing the sport. Cockfighting, however, is a complex sport involving more than simply allowing two birds to do battle. A study from a folkloristic standpoint could well complement a sociological study.

Because the realm of cockfighting is so expansive, this thesis will not attempt a full ethnographic analysis of the sport. It will, however, look at specific facets upon which Foster touched only lightly. Any random duplication of information in the two theses will certainly illustrate parallels between the related disciplines of folklore and sociology.

A cockfighter must master certain skills if he wants to be successful. Proper breeding, conditioning, and heeling are all

²⁶Foster, "Cockfighting."

pre-fight activities that have a bearing on the fight's outcome. Skillful handling of the bird in the pit might also make the difference between winning and losing. A folkloristic study of these four tasks will be contained in Chapter II of this thesis.

Chapter III will afford a look at the moral and legal ramifications of the illicit sport. Included will be the rationales employed by cockers to refute accusations of cruelty and deviancy.

In this study, concern for the rules by which an event is staged will be expressed only when needed for clarification. Gambling is a potential thesis subject in itself. It will only be mentioned when it intersects this study. Additionally, this will not be a performance centered study.

The activities around which this study is centered are traditional to the extent that guidelines governing them have not been codified and placed in writing. True, many cockers often purchase booklets containing various programs of conditioning but these programs are far outnumbered by guidelines that circulate orally. Rules and principles which undergird the focal activities with which this thesis is concerned are essentially communicated by word of mouth within esoteric situations. Justifications of the sport, too, are recurring themes in cockfighters' oral traditions.

This study, then, will be a folkloristic study of cockfighting activities combined with a study concerning cockers' rationalizations of their sport. This bipartite study fits neatly into the theoretical framework of the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore.²⁷

²⁷William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), pp. 43-51.

To become a successful cockfighter means mastery of voluminous esoteric knowledge and extravagant outlays of time. Knowledge and practice of skillful breeding, conditioning, heeling and handling techniques characterizes a dedicated cockfighter. Moreover, a successful cockfighter is affiliated with a defensive social group which is equipped with a uniform set of rationalizations and can thereby readily refute moralistic accusations that come from outside the cocking fraternity.

Oral history methodologies were employed to gather the data for this study. Attendance at a cockfight was paramount to formulating interview questions. Taped interviews of four Nebraska cockfighters of various ages, occupations and involvements in the sport were conducted during the course of this study. Library research was used to corroborate oral data and to provide more historical depth.

A lawyer was consulted at the outset as a precaution against making legal violations. It was determined that the study was so innocuous and the Nebraska law dealing with cockfighting was so lenient that there was no serious cause for legal worries.²⁸

The first interview was with Myron Kent, a farmer in his early fifties. The fowl he raises on his farm are used mainly for yard fights among friends. He also referees many yard fights. Unlike most cockfighters, he became acquainted with the sport by affiliation with other cockfighters and not through family tradition.

Oh, I started in 1949. In 1949 I bought my first chickens. I've had chickens ever since. When I was in the army, I had chickens, but of course I couldn't fight them, two years there

²⁸Unrecorded conversation with David Buntain, L.L.B., Lincoln Legal Aid Society, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1 July 1977.

that I couldn't fight them. . . . I bought my first bird from Roy Caves in Beatrice. He sold me a bird, an old gray bird that was a winner, a many time winner. And I fought him and I lost every fight I fought him. He wouldn't get killed and I'd fight him again. And I fought him three times before he got killed. But the bird itself had won several fights.

But, okay, it fought under his hands and he was a professional at what he was doing. And here I fought him as a greenhorn. I didn't know how to condition the bird or how to handle him or nothing else. And so I lost. . . .

We had eighty-seven percent win in the late fifties. In the late fifties, I had an awful good average. . . . I had so many good birds, it was phenomenal. . . .

No, I've never been arrested, but I've been in on everything in the world. . . . On account of the laws I can't afford to be involved in it too deeply. Because I haven't got the money to do it.²⁹

Myron Kent's involvement with the sport has diminished considerably from the time he obtained his first bird and the subsequent peak in the late 1950s. Most of the local cockfighters he fights against now also have a curtailed involvement in the sport. They are involved not to make money but merely for a pastime.

The way we do, we just call somebody and say we're going to have a fight in two weeks and then fight them. You know we don't condition our birds, but then most everybody does. We don't, we just fight them as is.

Some people do all this conditioning for even yard fights because they're out for the almighty dollar, see? But me, hell's bells! I just fight them. And most of them, lot of the other guys do, too. But there are some in the crowd that condition their birds down to a point where they are ready to pop. . . . And which they're right, because they're going to make money doing it.³⁰

Kent's greatest enjoyment of the sport stems from the results of the work of a conscientious cocker. "I like, myself, I like a good, quick fight; a good, quick, honest fight. I enjoy somebody that has bred the birds himself, has worked with them through breeding and then comes out as a winner. Now that's my greatest thrill."³¹

²⁹Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

A staunch supporter of cockfighting, Kent feels the public has the erroneous idea that cockfighting is vicious. According to him, very little can be done to change that image.

Marian Krantz: What do you think it would take to change the public image of cockfighting?

Myron Kent: Nothing, you could never change people's minds. No way. I don't think they could ever change people's minds because people right now have decided that chicken fighting is a bad deal because they have to fight with spurs and what have you. They're not educated. . . . But to me education on fighting chickens is the only way that you could get people to change their mind. . . . ³²

Myron Kent was an obvious choice for an informant. He has previously served as an informant for a shorter paper on cockfighting. He recommended that an interview with Ed Taber be included in the study. "See, somebody like Ed Taber. . . could tell you all about this. To me, he would be the best person in the world to talk to. He's real good. And he's a real gentleman. . . . Now, Ed is a very educated fellow and a real fine fellow."³³

Ed Taber's involvement with cockfighting was a legacy from his father.

See, my father, I grew up, I never knew the time in my lifetime when we didn't have gamecocks around the house. By the time I was six years old, my father, back in Illinois, he fought cocks. They used to do a lot of fighting in the Tri-city area around Rock Island. So I say, it gets in your blood and stays there. . . . But it's something when it gets in your blood.³⁴

Taber, a retired electrician, is still fairly active in cockfighting. He and his partners participate mainly in fights held in states where cockfighting is a legal sport. The 1976-1977 season

³²Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

found him at fights in Oklahoma, Louisiana and Arizona. Currently, he cares for approximately seventy-five birds. He also does all the conditioning exercises for the birds before the fights.

Ed Taber has lived in Lincoln for over thirty years. During that time he owned an electrical business. Because of the low opinion assigned to cockfighting, Taber was always careful not to mix his business with his pleasure. "But I didn't ever bring it into my business because a lot of people would say, 'Gee, that Taber, he must be a barbarian because he fights chickens.'"³⁵ Had that kind of information been made public, Taber may well have lost customers.

Changing this public image, especially in Nebraska, would be a difficult task, according to Taber.

Well, I don't believe you could change enough people's minds. That's the reason we have all these laws against cockfighting, because there aren't enough people in cockfighting to know that complain. You know, there's only one cockfighter in one hundred thousand people. You know what I mean. So you've got nothing to go on.

You never could educate the public because there aren't enough people involved in it. Course, like in Oklahoma, that's different. There are thousands of people probably in Oklahoma. But certainly in Nebraska, you've got a handful. You don't have twenty-five people in Nebraska involved in it. So how you going to go around and talk to them, you know, convert?³⁶

Contrary to his feelings that there are too few interested people in Nebraska that are seriously involved in cockfighting, Ed Taber proved that even one man could make a difference. He successfully lobbied against anti-cockfighting legislation in the 1975 session of the Nebraska Legislature. The bill that Taber disagreed with would have outlawed private as well as public cockfighting and increased the fine to ten to fifteen hundred dollars for the first offense.

³⁵Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

³⁶Ibid.

Ed Taber proved to be a valuable source of not merely oral data but of written material as well. He offered use of recent back issues of the game fowl journals and some of the manuscripts that he distributed to the legislative committee in 1975. He also proofread this manuscript for possible inaccuracies.

Ed Taber provided the introduction to the third informant, Carl Parker. Carl Parker is Taber's partner in the game fowl sport. Parker lives in a small town outside Lincoln where their fowl are also kept. The interview with Mr. Parker was held during the slack time at his steak house, where he is both owner and cook.

For a period of two years he leased out his steak house and retired from cooking. He was then able to attend many fights. Now that he is back in the kitchen, his involvement is necessarily limited to housing the fowl and attending an occasional fight.

Carl Parker first became involved in cockfighting in 1917 when he was eight years old. "Well I was raised with it. We had fighting chickens ever since I was a kid, ever since I can remember. . . . My dad didn't fight them so much as the neighbors. We used to keep chickens. I was always around them. I've been with Ed Taber for forty-seven years!"³⁷

Parker is skeptical about trying to change public opinion concerning cockfighting.

Well, I don't know if you could change people's minds. I wouldn't know how to go about it. So many people don't realize what's involved in it. They think we make them fight. But they're a peaceable bird. They're tame, they're gentle. . . . They don't bother nothing until they see another rooster and then that's it. That's the way they was made and that's the way they're always going to be.³⁸

³⁷Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

³⁸Ibid.

He seems to feel, however, that education about cockfighting is what the sport needs in order to become socially acceptable.

Taber and Parker steer clear of yard fights. "Used to go, years ago, but we don't anymore. We used to fight right out here, until we got caught. We used to fight at three or four places. We'd fight one place one time and one place another time so people wouldn't get suspicious."³⁹ Today, when Parker can leave his restaurant, he will accompany Taber to fights, especially the ones in Phoenix, Arizona and Sunset, Louisiana.

Depending mainly on how many birds they will fight, these men will travel to fights with six to twelve birds. They use a carrying case, similar to a suitcase, to carry each bird. The birds ride in a station wagon and, in hot weather, in air-conditioned comfort. A third partner travels with them to take care of the handling job.

Of the four informants, Denny Stiers is the youngest and also the newest to the fraternity of cockfighters. Stiers, a farmer in his late twenties, is married and has a young daughter. He became interested in the sport about six years ago.

I suppose probably the gambling got me interested in it at first. And then I got the sport really. I got to being around some of the guys that had them. And I got going to some of the fights and I liked it so I just started raising them. We used to raise and feed a lot of dogs and I know some of the guys that had dogs fought chickens.⁴⁰

About three years ago, Denny Stiers was arrested in a police raid on an Omaha, Nebraska cockpit. Charges of cruelty to animals were subsequently dropped because of a technicality. The wrong address for the pit was listed on the search warrant. Denny Stiers and Ed

³⁹Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁴⁰Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

Taber both believe the punitive raid was an attempt by the Humane Society to obtain public sympathy to facilitate passage of anti-cockfighting measures pending in the Nebraska Legislature.

That brush with the law, however, did nothing to dampen Stiers' enthusiasm for cockfighting. Except for attending a few yard fights, Denny Stiers travels mainly to cockpits where the activity is deemed entirely legal. Since his stock of fowl is still relatively small, he attends most fights to observe and to perhaps place an occasional bet. Like the good cocker which he hopes to become, any money Stiers makes from winning fights or bets goes right back into his birds for supplies, feed, or new pens.

CHAPTER II

BREEDING, CONDITIONING, HEELING AND HANDLING

The sport of fighting cocks is far more complicated than it appears. It involves detailed procedures and techniques to breed and condition the birds to fight other birds which they sense are invading their territory. The outcome of a fight is heavily dependent on proper breeding, conditioning, heeling and handling of the birds. In fact, some bettors plan their betting strategies only after determining the breed of the birds and the care the birds have received.

It does all go to the conditioning and the breed of the bird. That's why they lay, you see me laying odds against this and that one. For the same reason that I know the blood line and the conditioning of the birds and then I knew which one was going to win. I mean, theoretically, which one would win.¹

The breeding of successful fighting chickens starts with brood stock that exhibits the qualities of a good fighting cock.

The main thing is that the chicken has got to be well-bred from good, proven stock. Nobody can take a half-game chicken and a half-chicken and make it a game chicken out of it. You've got to have a good chicken to start with. Both the cock and the hen have to be good.²

A breeder looks for brood stock in the fighting pit. It is there that a cock's gameness is demonstrated. Only from what he observes in the pit can a cockfighter know how a bird will react when faced with an opposing feathered warrior.

¹Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

²Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

. . . see a chicken fight and if he just, say for example, he had good action, and he went to a long drag fight where his gameness was tested. Well, there's a chicken you know. If you liked his qualities at the start and the gameness was there, you wouldn't mind taking him as a brood cock when he recovers.

But a chicken wins a fast fight, you don't know anything about it either, see? Sometimes it will go just two or three minutes. Well, he hasn't been tested. So you don't know if that chicken is a game chicken. You breed him to your chickens, say, "Boy, here's an ace! Pay some money for him." Course the other chickens you get aren't game.³

When determining which cock to choose as a brood fowl, in addition to gameness, aggressiveness from the very start of the fight is one of the qualities a cockfighter will look for. "Aggressiveness, the way they start the action as the fight progress, who is on the top side, you watch them pretty close."⁴

An article in a recent issue of Grit and Steel corroborates and expands this principle.

Aggressiveness is one of the most desirable traits that a gamecock can possess. . . . When looking for desirable traits in our brood fowl, let us not overlook aggressiveness. It ranks right up there with dumb gameness, cutting ability, good fighting style, conformation and every other winning trait that game fowl can inherit from their parent stock. . . .⁵

Physical characteristics of a bird are also important indicators of a bird's degree of gameness. Some features are obvious points that will serve to guide a novice when selecting brood stock. A bird with clear bright eyes suggests alertness and nervous energy. Strong legs and thighs will enable the bird to make clean, hard hits. A small head and tall, straight carriage of the tail feathers are a result of good breeding.⁶

³Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

⁴Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁵Ronole Morris, "Aggressiveness," Grit and Steel, 77 (April 1977): 32-D.

⁶Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting, p. 11.

Unlike a rooster, one cannot tell by a hen's looks whether she is a good producer or not. "The funny part is, you can get a hen that is as docile as you can be and produce the gamest chicken you ever saw. And you've got other hens that are downright ornery and will fight like nobody's business and still they won't throw good game chickens."⁷

Informants agree, however, that a stag or a cock will carry more of the traits from the hen than the traits from the rooster to which she was bred. "The dam will throw more consistency than the sire. The hen will throw more consistency than the goddamn rooster. . . . If you run across a good hen, that hen has more dominant characteristics than the rooster."⁸

The general idea is, you get a good hen and breed it to a rooster and you'll get better chickens than the other way around. There are many people in the game that think the hen has a little more to do with it, transferring the good qualities, than the rooster. That's a debatable subject. I would agree with that. That the hen would be the dominant of the two.⁹

Ed Bentley, a columnist for a cocking journal, summed it up with the following philosophical statement. "In all living creatures (including us humans), each generation is only as good as their mothers were."¹⁰

Another way brood stock is commonly obtained is by relying on the reputation of a professional breeder instead of on personal observation and selection of the stock. Brood stock is obtained then by

⁷Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

⁸Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

⁹Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

¹⁰Ed Bentley, "One Strawshaker to Another," Grit and Steel 74 (June 1972): 32-D.

purchasing roosters and hens from reliable breeders that advertise in the cocking journals.

Now, there is guys that do nothing but breed chickens and they sell their chickens to these guys that fight them. . . . Okay, for example, they sell these birds to them, or give these birds to them on a percentage-wise of the winnings. But then on the other hand, lot of bird raisers raise these birds and sell them to the Islands, in which is all specialties, and what have you. And for fifty dollars a crack. . . . I've sold some, but not to that extent. Just local, you know.¹¹

The three principal game fowl journals all carry advertisements from breeders around the country. Most of the advertisers of gamefowl are honest cockers who dispose of their surplus fowl through selling. "And then some of them fellows raise them to sell. They sell them all over the world--Philippine Islands, Hawaii, Guam, and every place. Some of them guys make lots of money."¹²

Brood stock can be an expensive investment. In a recent issue of Grit and Steel, the price of brood cocks ranged between seventy-five and one hundred and fifty dollars. Brood hens were not as expensive, however. They ranged in price from forty to one hundred dollars. A trio, such as the one described in an advertisement as "an extra select cock and two proven hens,"¹³ can differ in price from one hundred and seventy-five dollars to two hundred and fifty dollars.

The price of stock, of course, depends on the breeder's reputation. The more reputable and reliable the breeder, the more money he can ask for his stock. Upon request a seller will often

¹¹Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

¹²Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

¹³Grit and Steel 76 (February 1975): 61.

furnish references as well as an impressive listing of tournaments and derbies won by his birds.

An individual breeder is advised to check out an advertiser before he buys from him. This is usually done by calling pit operators or other reliable cockers in the area which the advertiser patronizes. A breeder can also study the fight reports in back issues of the cockfighting magazines to ascertain this seller's record in the pit.¹⁴

A cockfighter can expand his rooster yard by buying eggs or even young roosters and hens. The latter are called stags and pullets, respectively. A cockfighter may pay about thirty dollars for fifteen eggs, or he may pay fifteen dollars per setting. Buying eggs is more risky than buying brood stock for there is no guarantee the eggs will hatch. Nor is there a guarantee as to the sex of the birds that will be hatched from the eggs. In addition, the buyer must feed and care for the young for about two unproductive years, or until the birds are mature enough to fight or to breed.

Ed Taber has never spent much money buying brood stock. He claims that there are other ways to obtain brood stock that are safer and cheaper than buying from a professional breeder.

Well, it's pretty dangerous. Now, you take that magazine. Course the prices on those birds are based on the reputation of the fighter. Some of those guys, you'll see there, has got a rooster for two hundred dollars. Well, there's no rooster worth two hundred dollars. But you might buy just as good a one for ten or fifteen from somebody who doesn't have the reputation, see? But these fellows that are selling chickens, I wouldn't want to buy any chickens from them. Because you waste a couple years' time in breeding a chicken before you

¹⁴Ed Bentley, "One Strawshaker to Another," Grit and Steel 74 (June 1972):32-D.

find out they aren't any good. So, the best way to get chickens is to get chickens from your friends.¹⁵

In the fraternity of cockfighters, as this esoteric social group is often referred to, there is always some cocker friend who is glad to start a young fellow off in the right direction with a gift of good brood fowl.

The practice of obtaining chickens from friends instead of purchasing them was echoed by another informant, Carl Parker.

The best way to get chickens is from a friend or somebody like that. The best chickens that change hands, change hands for free. Course, some of those guys have awful good chickens. This Ray Price you know, he's quite a chicken man. He gets one hundred and fifty to two hundred dollars a chicken. But you've got to have a big name, and you've got to have a good reputation. We couldn't do that because we don't, we're not widely enough known. But everybody knows Ray Price. I mean, he fights a lot of chickens and he does a lot of advertising. He gets a good price for them.¹⁶

Myron Kent agreed with that and proceeded to explain the procedure of trading brood stock with others.

And it takes many, many years of studying and friendship. Because you can't buy these birds. You have to get them from friends. I mean, sure you can buy birds. I can buy birds. . . . Now, for example, like these big time boys go to Joe Blow here and say, "Hey, how about us trading a little stock?" or "How about me using your rooster, this rooster for this hen?" That's what it amounts to when you're in the big time. As a general rule then they would just divide the stock.¹⁷

It was the contention of the informants that a cockfighter could best acquire brood stock simply by friendly trading with other cockfighters and not by purchasing expensive brood fowl.

¹⁵Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

¹⁶Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

¹⁷Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

After a choice of brood stock is made, a choice of breeding systems must be made. Members of the cocking fraternity have used all variations of breeding systems. They argue which is the best method of breeding. There are four commonly used systems of game fowl breeding, each serving a particular purpose. The best system of breeding, therefore, is the one that best serves the breeder and his needs. The four breeding systems are inbreeding, linebreeding, outbreeding, and crossbreeding. Diagrams of these systems are included in Appendix 1.

Inbreeding, simply defined, is the mating of closely related birds. It is essential in the development of uniform characteristics in game fowl. While close inbreeding makes the strain more uniform, it may result in disappointing offspring since undesirable traits as well as desirable traits become concentrated.

Linebreeding, on the other hand, is an attempt to breed out undesirable qualities and breed in only the best qualities. To be successful, a linebreeder must carefully select the original stock for gameness and other previously mentioned characteristics. A linebreeder starts with an ace cock which is mated with his daughters and again with his granddaughters. Stags that will not make good fighting cocks are then culled from the brood yard.¹⁸

Inbreeding and linebreeding are just about the same thing. It's just like breeding mother to son, father to daughter. That's what linebreeding is. . . . I never breed mother to son. The only time I would ever do that was if I was wanting some pullets or something for breeding and I'd want all of the same blood that I could get, you know. That'd be the only time I'd ever do it.¹⁹

¹⁸Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting, p. 7.

¹⁹Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

Outbreeding and crossbreeding are similar systems. Both systems are concerned only with one generation of fowl, not several as in linebreeding and inbreeding. Outbreeding is simply mating fowl that are distantly related. The "adding of new blood," as it is commonly called, must be used with caution. Outbreeding tends to increase the pit performance of the next generation but decreases the chances of carrying good traits over to the third generation. Outbreeding produces offspring that tend to be good fighters in the pit but when mated, they also tend to transfer undesirable traits. If outbreeding is practiced, it is recommended to eat the pullets and hens and fight the stags and cocks. Then there will be less of the crossbred fowl to perpetuate the bloodline.

Crossbreeding differs from outbreeding in that the two bloodlines that are crossed are two totally unrelated lines.²⁰ Crossbreeding is similar to outbreeding in that it also improves the pit performance of the next generation of fighting roosters. The same drawback, however, applies to crossbreeding as to outbreeding. The breeding value of the offspring is reduced. "Because sometimes he can't transfer, he's a crossbred chicken and he transfers a lot of bad blood. You can even breed him to some hens you know are game, but you could come up with nothing."²¹

There are many different strains of fowl to choose from when a breeder is selecting brood fowl. Each strain has a different degree of gameness and different other characteristics. Strains are mixed,

²⁰Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting, pp. 15-16.

²¹Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

therefore, with a goal of producing the gamest bird possessing the most and the best traits for fighting. Breeding of gamefowl has been likened to the melting pot idea of the American people--blood from many different breeds are mixed together to produce the finest fighting bird.

On the highest point of the gameness scale are strains from the jungle fowl bloodline. Dunghill cocks are relegated to the lowest position. Cockfighters are quick to laud the jungle fowl and to loathe those fowl called dunghill.

They was outstanding birds. They were called jungle fowl. The jungle fowl had the quality to come back, that when they was about whipped, you know, you thought they was about dead. But the jungle fowl had the bloodline in them that would make them hit just like a mule when they was the next thing to dead. And when they was the next thing to dead, that's when they were the most deadly. They'd win. They'd just knock the other bird stem-winding. Because they had such tremendous power. . . . They had this extra power in them. . . . It gives them the long staying power. That's what they call jungle fowl.²²

A fowl that carries non-game blood is very likely to turn and run when facing an opponent in a match. Such a chicken is given a name of scorn and derision--"dunghill."

The dunghill cock is one that's cold blooded, one that's not pit-game. And it could be anything like a little bit of banty blood or a little bit of any kind of blood that's not, . . . any chicken that's not dead game is dunghill. That's what you hear them called.²³

A large portion of a cockfighter's time is not spent in making breeding decision, but rather in caring for his birds. Preparing a cock for battle is called conditioning. It is a year round process of carefully feeding and exercising the birds. The conditioning procedures are then intensified during the last two to four weeks before a fight.

²²Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

²³Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

Conditioning starts before a cock is a year old by placing him on either a farm walk or a coop walk. A farm walk is basically what it sounds like. A cockfighter will turn his cocks loose on his own land or distribute them to other farmers who can be trusted to care for the cocks. Each cock is turned loose along with four or five hens. The cocks quickly establish territorial rights. Having his own hens and his own territory makes a fighting cock extremely game when he goes to the pit.

Okay, a farm walk is when I take one bird and put it out on a farm here or there and what have you; every different farm in the country and made sure they didn't have another rooster on the farm. . . .

A bird will, a fighting chicken will determine his own walk, in other words, he will be boss of his hens. And so, I'd put two hens out there, using this for an idea, put a couple of hens out there and the hens will make him be cocky, like a bull or like a deer or anything else, I mean, running in the wild.²⁴

Another informant uses farm walks during the moulting season when cocks are not fought. He places his cocks on farms where he knows his chickens will get only the best of care. "But I've got chickens here, and then I've got chickens at a friend's place up at Brownville. And I've got chickens down south here at Sara's folks."²⁵

In the event that cocks cannot be given free range because good, reliable farmers are not available, a coop walk is the alternative. Individual cocks are put into coops, or pens, which are clustered in one area. The coops must be kept far enough apart, however, to prevent the cocks from fighting each other through the wire.

²⁴Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

²⁵Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

The degree of success of a coop walk depends upon the care a fighting cock receives while on the walk. He must be supplied with everything he would get if he were out on a farm walk. The advantage of a coop walk over a farm walk is tighter control. The cocker can control the cock's feed, keep him away from parasites, and protect him from predators.

On a farm walk, a fighting chicken can pick up lice and worms. Cocks often deform their breastbones from improper roosting and there is a possibility they will be killed by a predator of one kind or another. Whatever the disadvantages, however, most cockers maintain that a farm walk makes a better fighting rooster.²⁶

Regardless of which type of walk is used, conditioning for the bird is intensified a few weeks before the fight. One informant stated that it is a common misconception that birds are trained to fight.

You know, they always talk about you train the chickens. You don't train the chickens to fight, you know. . . . So when people say you make him fight, well, you can say that's crazy. . . . They misuse the word "training," training chickens to fight. A chicken is bred to fight. You can't train him to fight. Cause if he don't have it in him in the breeding, he hasn't got it. The only thing you can do is condition him.²⁷

The particular schedule of exercising and feeding for preparing a cock for battle is called a "keep." Depending on the duration of the keep, it could be called a ten-day's keep or two-week's keep or perhaps even a three-week's keep. Keeps are sold through advertisements in the game fowl journals as well as occasionally reprinted

²⁶Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting, pp. 37-42.

²⁷Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

in the journals. They are also passed around orally from cocker to cocker.

Over the years, the exercises for the birds and the amount of time a cocker has to spend with each individual bird has changed.

Well, of course, it's changed a lot from what it used to be. Used to be years ago they used to put them through a rigid two-week's keep, what they call a keep. And they fed them non-fattening foods, and kept the water away from them. Get them in condition like a football player. Get that excess fat off them.

They don't do that so much anymore. The young ones is got away from a lot of that work. That involves a lot of work. . . . The young ones didn't want to do the work. Years ago, they just gave them so much of everything. Now they put them in a pen and let them do the work themselves. It's much easier and they seem to be having good results with it. So I guess it's all right.²⁸

In earlier times exercising took a lot of a cockfighter's time. A cocker could spend twenty to thirty minutes each day with each bird. If a cocker was conditioning eight birds, it could take about four hours of work each day. The exercises involved processes designed to improve the bird's wind and strengthen his legs.

Okay, you took a bird and you put him on a board which was a padded board and you'd do what you call "flirt." And you'd flip them up so they had a tendency to land on their tail. You'd start this off at ten times a day. You'd flip them so they'd have a tendency to land on their tail.

And then, the next thing you did, you, what they call "walking a bird." You would take them and you'd put them on the same board and you'd walk them across. You'd have a tendency to walk them back and forth, cross-step. You'd have your hands on both sides of them. You'd make them side-step. In other words, it'd make him side-step. And when you flip the, it would make them, if they got hit, in other words, if they could land on their tail, and they could get their feet under them right fast when they're hit. That's what it amounts to. And that's the way you condition them. . . .

And this would build up his muscles, that when you come out there, the bird would sit there and talk to you on his roost. He'd sit there and talk to you, just chatter like mad, see? And then you'd throw this feed down there and he'd get down

²⁸ Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

there and just dance around and then he was in shape. Now this is the way they get them in shape.²⁹

Ed Taber contrasts the old ways with the new modern way of conditioning.

Modern cockfighters don't do that anymore. They feed them in a four by four foot pen, you know. They have a roost in there. And they throw their feed in a litter, you see, and let them look for their feed, see, and have them scratch. You know how a chicken scratches. And they strengthen their legs that way, instead of running them on a board.

The modern cockfighters don't condition their birds like oldtimers used to do. . . . The younger generation, they condition the chicken for speed.³⁰

Denny Stiers explained one more important conditioning exercise he does for his birds.

I leave the lights on them. Usually, when we fight down there in Kansas, they're night fights and you fight under the lights. . . . You want to get them used to the lights at night. If they're not used to the lights, you take them into the pit when you're getting ready to fight and they get what you call "moon blindness." The bright light'll hit them in the eye and they'll just stand there. They're not used to the lights and they just kind of stun them for a while.³¹

Each keep comes with a program of feeding. The programs of feeding differ widely and can contradict each other. For example, "Cowen's Fourteen-Day Keep" directs the cockfighter to feed a warm mixture of bread, milk and brown sugar only on the first day. Feed from then on consists of a daily dose of cracked corn and one half of an egg white. "Dave Berg's Method" directs the cocker to feed nothing to the cock the first day. The second day's feeding should consist of a bread, milk, and Epsom Salts mixture. During the remainder of the keep, the rooster may eat a small handful of a mixture containing

²⁹Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

³⁰Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

³¹Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

corn, wheat, barley, and oats, dampened with water to which a small amount of egg white has been added.³² The components of the feed may be similar but the feeding schedule and the amounts of feed used often vary.

Why, you'd give these, oh, everything you could think of. I mean, you'd have so many ounces of corn, so many ounces of milo, so many ounces of oats, a boiled egg. You know, all the way down the line. And even oyster shell, and even down until strychnine.³³

Feed for the rooster depends mainly on personal preference and the experience of the owner. A cockfighter will continue to feed his birds as he has in the past if he has been successful.

You could talk about feed for hours. But naturally, course we mix the grains. Basically, grains is the basis. You've got corn and you've got wheat and you've got oats and you've got milo. Of course, milo is like corn because it's high protein content. Of course, they used to feed barley. You mix the grain.

Of course, they have some of these commercial feed mixes. They have what they call scratch feed which is a mixture of all of them. You buy it that way. Of course, chickens need green stuff. Out there at Denton with the chickens, I've got some Swiss chard planted right there. With Swiss chard, you cut off the leaves and it keeps coming until heavy frost.

So last night, I cut off a hundred of those Swiss chard leaves. They need that. They need green stuff. If a chicken would be running out, they'd be eating insects and all that good stuff you can't give them.³⁴

Each method of feeding has its adherents who will argue the finer points of their own selected method. In a similar manner, the problem of watering is often discussed. Some cockers profess that the rooster may drink as much water as he wants during his pre-fight keep. Others take a differing view and try to dry out their fighting

³²Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting, pp. 52-56.

³³Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

³⁴Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

birds before the battle by giving very little water and perhaps not any on the day of the fight.

Although somewhat biased, Denny Stiers explained the rationale behind both methods.

. . . I give them all they can drink. There's reasons for it. I know the reasons, a lot of guys don't. Uh, when they've got all that water in them, they bleed a lot easier. That's the whole reason for drying them out.

When you dry a bird out, they cut shorter, they don't reach out. It draws them up. It draws their muscles up. I'd rather have one that's got all the reach he can. If it's a good cutting cock, he'll win his fight just right quick.

I've seen lots of guys do it. See, maybe you've met Bud Kelly from Beatrice. . . . And Bud's an old-time cockfighter. He's been doing it for years and he's got set in his ways. And since I've known him, he hasn't won very many fights that I've seen. But his birds all feel the same; they all act the same. They're all too God damn dry.

And one way you can tell it is when one rooster will peck another and he'll bring out a whole mouthful of feathers. That's one of the surest signs. When I'm down at the fights and just betting on other fights, that's one thing I watch out for, whether a rooster's dried out too much.

That's the bad point of having them too dry. But on the other side of it, a rooster that's not dried out, that's got plenty of moisture in it, if he takes a shot in where he bleeds, he's going to go fast, I mean. But any of them will do that if they get hit right. If you hit them in close, they're all going to die, sooner or later.³⁵

The arguments over feeding and watering will probably continue as long as there are cockfighters willing to prepare their roosters for battle. Colonel John Hempel, a well known cocker within the fraternity, gives this last word to the wise.

There is no one magic way to feed your feathered beauties, there is no certain magic, say, to work or exercise him to be his best, there is no pill that will make a mediocre cock into an ace, so just stop looking for them. Good care, proper exercise to develop the lungs and heart, proper amounts of liquid in the daily diet, proper weight without fat, proper rest before

³⁵Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

the fight, and you have done all that can be done for him. If he is a good one, he will probably win for you.³⁶

Winning depends, in part, on proper heeling of the bird.

In Nebraska, as well as throughout most of the United States, heeling a bird is equipping him with artificial steel spurs, or gaffs. Cockfighting is separated into regions in the United States by the type of heels used.

See, they fight in various length heels. And course, the original heels in the eastern part of the country when I went to school back in Washington, D.C., that was what we call inch and a quarter country. That's short heels. An inch and a quarter is from the socket to the point, not the length of the heel. But that's the shortest heel that they use. . . .

Then there's an inch and a half. That's a very common size. Through the Midwest, there's a lot of inch and a half. . . .

Of course, in Hawaii, the Philippines and places like that, they fight with knife slashers. You generally tie one on a leg because they are pretty big and they can't handle it. They'd be cutting themselves.³⁷

They fight in inch and a quarter heels in the East, inch and a half heels in the Midwest, and the rest of the country is long heels. Seventy-five percent of all American cockfighting is long heels--two inches on up. The average length is, I'd say, two and a half inches, though some are up to three inches.³⁸

All informants agreed on the point of regionalism. "They fight, the only short heels that I know of that they fight anymore is back east, in the northeast. And it's all short heels, inch and a quarter regulations."³⁹

One and a half inch heels are used commonly in the Midwest.

It is claimed that these gaffs are the most killing of all. Losers

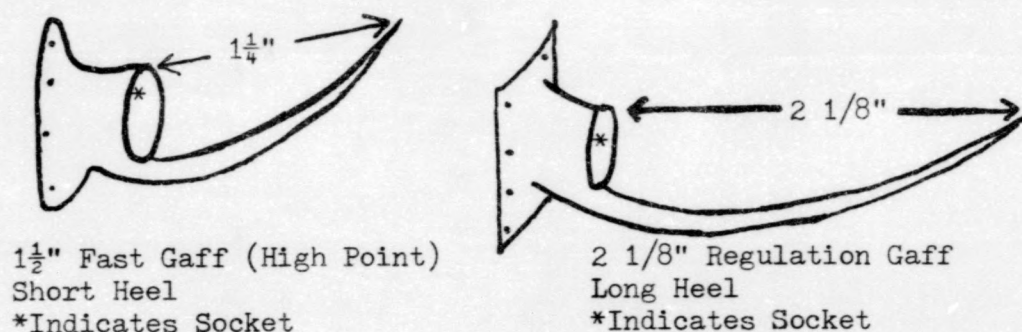
³⁶Colonel John Hempel, "Especially for Beginners," Grit and Steel 76 (February 1975): 33-B.

³⁷Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

³⁸Conversation with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 31 March 1978.

³⁹Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977; and Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting, pp. 68-69.

are most often carried out of the pit, never to fight again. The extra quarter inch in the long heels permits penetration to vital spots that short heels just cannot reach. On the other hand, short heels do not hang, or become inextricably caught in the opposing bird, nearly as often as do long heels. Short heels, therefore, do not impair the cutting movements of a fighting rooster's legs, giving him an advantage.



Gaffs used in various sections of the United States have one feature in common, however. The tapering blade is round from point to socket, regardless of the length or style. Short heels are distinguished from long heels by the distance between the tip of the spur and the top of the socket. (After the bird's natural spur has been removed, the stub fits into the socket of the gaff.) Height of the point in relation to the socket when held perpendicular determines whether heels are classified as regulation, fast, or slow. Points on regulation gaffs are exactly level with the top of the socket. Points on fast heels are usually one eighth inch above the top of the socket. Conversely, points on slow heels are one eighth to one fourth inch below the top of the socket.

Since the invention of self-setting sockets, there is no mystery to tying on gaffs. Self-setting sockets can fit on a rooster's

natural spur only one way. Previous to this, a cocker could position the spur so the points would tilt up or down or high or low. Now, it is just a matter of typing the gaffs on.

Each cocker has his own gaff box which holds all the supplies one needs to properly heel a rooster. Gaff boxes differ in degree of aesthetic qualities. One informant uses a small fishing tackle box, while another informant has a box that was made especially for him. Two fighting roosters are elaborately painted on the lid and his name is tooled in the leather handle.

Myron Kent explained about gaff boxes and the supplies that are kept in them.

They're called gaff box. Mine was a little box I got over here at the store. I always keep the tape to build up for the gaff, moleskin to put around each side of their ankle, or leg, for a cushion. And then I always carry a piece of chalk in there for when you saw off their spur; when you saw off their spur they become a cock; and then the chalk to make it quit bleeding. And I always have the gaff saw and I always have the string to tie them up and then of course several pairs of spurs.⁴⁰

Tape is wrapped around the rooster's shank or ankle, to pad it and to make the gaff fit securely. This padding is commonly called packing. When the rooster's natural spurs are sawed off with what looks like a miniature coping saw, the resultant bleeding is checked by rubbing the stub with the soft chalk. Narrow strips of moleskin are wound around the chicken's legs and wrapped criss-cross over the stub until the socket of the gaff will fit. The moleskin also acts as a cushion for the gaff to rest on. Grocery string or waxed dental floss are types of string commonly used to tie the gaff securely on the rooster's ankle.

⁴⁰Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

The gaffs themselves are an expensive part of cockfighting equipment.

They are terrible. If you're lucky enough to get some used ones, you can get them for twenty to twenty-five dollars a pair. New, anymore, I'll show you some new ones. New ones run about, I suppose good heels will average about fifty dollars a pair. It depends, really, on what kind of treatment you give as to how long they'll last. If you take care of them, if you're lucky enough not to break one, they'll last a lifetime.⁴¹

Gaffs should be cleaned after every fight and polished periodically to keep them in their best condition. During the off season, they may be sent to various companies to be refinished.⁴² "And what you do, you send them in and they'll cut the leathers off them, put on new leathers, polish and sharpen them."⁴³

Gaffs are sometimes dishonestly used in a chicken fight.

They'll file them flat on one side. They're supposed to be perfectly round from the point to the hub. Sometimes, they'll file them flat. . . . Putting flats on a gaff or taking a file and knocking a little diamond notch in the end of them or thin blades to where they'll go in and when you pull it out, you know it's going to tear a hell of a hole.⁴⁴

It is the duty of a good handler to examine the gaffs of the opposing cock to protect himself against such unfair methods. The handler, who may or may not be the owner, is the one who takes charge of a cock in the pit during a battle. The handler attends to the needs of the cock during a fight. A mentally and physically alert handler can often make the difference between winning and losing a battle.

⁴¹Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁴²In a perusal of recent issues of the cockfighting journals, gaffs were advertised to sell from thirty-five to sixty dollars per pair. No refinishing services were advertised in the journals.

⁴³Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁴⁴Ibid.

During the twenty-second interval between pittings in a fight, a handler will quickly smooth the feathers on his bird, remove broken feathers, clean dirt from the bird's face, eyes or beak and nurse any injuries the bird may have sustained. Informants were in general agreement that resting the bird between pittings was the best technique for reviving him.

. . . there isn't too much you can do, you know. There's a lot of phony stuff that fellows think that they've seen other people do. You see, they have a twenty-five⁴⁵ second rest between pittings. Because a game chicken has great recuperative powers, they can come back fast. You'd be surprised how fast they can come back when they're hurt. So resting them.

A lot of fellows will take a chicken and they'll fidget with them and they'll do a lot of this and that and expend his energy. While the smart boys, they just put them on the ground and have them there. You know, they don't even touch them, you see. Boy, you'll revive them. When the referee says, "Get them ready," and "Pit!" boy, why, just set that chicken on his score and he's revived. . . . There's actually nothing much that I don't think you can do, outside of resting them.⁴⁶

A good handler soon learns to hold a bird to let him rest himself comfortably. Sometimes, however, a bird will receive injuries such as a rattle or a brain blow that can be effectively nursed by the handler. Experience and talking with other good handlers are the key methods of learning skillful handling techniques.

A common injury is a rattle.

Well, when they get hit in the lungs, see, why naturally, it punctures the lung and the blood comes through, see and he'll choke to death. Lot depends on where it is, see. Sometimes, it's only a neck rattle and they'll rattle like the dickens and

⁴⁵There is a twenty second interval between the referee's commands of "Handle" and "Get them ready." There is an additional five seconds between the commands of "Get them ready" and "Pit!" hence twenty-five seconds total rest time.

⁴⁶Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

you'll think they are going to die. But they'll kick it out and first thing you know, they'll come back and win.⁴⁷

A bird with a rattle is best left to rest. If the injury is not too serious, the bird will cough it up himself.

A "blinked" cock is one that has been blinded in one eye. It is not a serious matter and the handler can pit the cock with his good eye toward his opponent. This will lessen the possibility of the opposing cock advancing on the blind side. Keeping the bird's head warm by gently blowing on it will help the blinked bird.

A vitally placed blow to the back of a chicken's brain can temporarily paralyze him. Time and rest will usually bring about recovery. A skillful handler can expedite recovery by increasing blood circulation to the area. Blowing on the chicken's skull and massaging the chicken's head have been found to effectively increase circulation. The handler of the affected bird should stall for as much time as possible.⁴⁸

Denny Stiers handles his own birds during a fight and uses reviving techniques that he has learned from other handlers.

Well, the only thing I ever do, other than just try to keep a rooster cool when it's hot. That's the main thing. When they get hit where they'll bleed, what I mean by that is right in under the wing. They can take a shot about anywhere else. Except if they get hit through the lungs or something, they're going to go fast and I don't care whether you've got them dried out or whether you've got them shot full of vitamin K⁴⁹ or what, if you hit them in there, it's going to be all over.

Uh, when they get throat rattles, sometimes, I, if it's been bad and I knew it was just a throat rattle, I've sucked the blood out of their throat. . . . When I've had them get hit in the spine,

⁴⁷Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

⁴⁸Ruport, The Art of Cockfighting, pp. 82-87.

⁴⁹Vitamin K is a blood coagulant.

"get coupled" is what they call it when they're hit in the spine, they'll lose control of their legs. If I've had one get coupled or something, sometimes I'll work his legs up in between pittings. Work them up and down to try to get him to have some feelings back in his legs. But it doesn't always work. . . .

In my opinion, the best thing you can do for a cock in between pittings is to set him down on the ground and let him collect himself, you know, by himself. If I've got a bird that's too hurt to do that, I'll stick my thumbs up, hold their wings up to where they can get some air up under their wings, just trying to cool them off.

I'll cool them with a sponge, you know, with water. Clean their head up, like that. Sometimes I'll put the sponge, not cold water, but just put a wet sponge under their tail to cool them off, down around their vent and everything.⁵⁰

Using water to cool off a fighting bird is a controversial practice among cockfighters.

You see, lots of times, maybe they'll put water on them. Maybe on their vent or someplace like that. And sometimes they'll put water on their head. But if a chicken isn't game, you know, lots of times you put a little water to cool them off and they'll quit faster, see. So one of the things you got to know, you don't know for sure if you're doing them any good or not.⁵¹

While Ed Taber was skeptical of trying to cool down a bird, Carl Parker was more convinced.

Well, I think a bird that's been fighting a long time and is hot, I think it does it harm. It cools him off, you know and you just relax them. . . . I don't think it does a bit of good. I've watched it, down through the years, and I'm satisfied that it won't do any good.⁵²

Of four informants, Denny Stiers is the only one that actively handles any longer. One informant felt he was too old to handle any longer. "You've got to have a young, active fellow for that. Well, you've got to move, see."⁵³

⁵⁰Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁵¹Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

⁵²Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁵³Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

Myron Kent used to handle lots of birds. He learned from watching others. So did Denny Stiers.

Trial and error mainly. . . . I was lucky, I had, when I first got into it, a friend over at Tarkio, Missouri. He was with us when we got arrested in Omaha. And he is a rural mail carrier. . . . And he was scared he was going to lose his job over there and he sold out to us.

We've spent many hours together and many twelve-packs trying to prime him into giving me some information. I've pumped him for everything I could pump him for. Because he fought cocks for pert near thirty years. He knew. He had a lot of information.

[He learned most from talking with other cockfighters.] That's where I've learned a lot. A lot of what I've learned. I still don't know it all. I'm a long way from that, I wish I did.⁵⁴

Women are beginning to get into the handling part of the game, also. According to Carl Parker, what was considered a man's sport is now accessible to women, and for the better.

I like to see the gals handle them. I think they do a nice job of it. I don't see anything wrong with it, at all. I like to see them. Mrs. Holt, in Oklahoma, is very good. She's a pro at it. She is strictly for her chickens. She never takes her eyes off her chicken and she's right there. I would say she's a good handler.

I think probably more girls will handle as time goes on. It's just like it is with everything. There are more ladies going to fights than there used to be. Well, you know how it is. There's just more women everyplace. Used to be was you hardly ever seen any. The women folks just didn't go.

Marian Krantz: Was it considered a man's sport?

Carl Parker: More or less, yes.

Marian Krantz: But you say you like to see the women there?

Carl Parker: Yeah, I think it helps the crowd. Well, most men still have respect for the ladies. And they're more careful of what they say and what they do, how they act. I think it's a good thing for the sport, I really do.⁵⁵

This same male chivalry also keeps women out of the pit.

Because a lady don't want, you know, I mean, because the male population don't want to see a lady get hit with a steel.

⁵⁴ Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁵⁵ Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

And a lady don't want to get hit with a steel. Because a lot of times, you know, a steel will hit you and run through your arm. I don't know. Like that day you was there, the guy that got it in the leg. Well, now, most of the times a lady don't want to do that. The little hole it makes won't leave much of a scar. But nevertheless, you just don't see this.⁵⁶

To become a successful cockfighter means to expend large amounts of time going to fights and talking with those in the fraternity. A considerable amount of esoteric knowledge must be amassed and assimilated. An entire study could be devoted to that subject.

Breeding is a slow process that is often unpredictable. Successful breeding takes many years of trial and error. Very few have a flair for successful breeding of game fowl. Breeders of topnotch fighting cocks are hard to find. These Nebraska informants are breeders of game fowl who are not consistently successful, but they enjoy the sport as much as the topnotch breeders.

A proven breeder cannot win, however, if he cannot also prove himself to have a competency for conditioning his fowl. It takes a long time for a cockfighter to decide what type of feeding and conditioning schedules he will use for his birds. New ideas are always being traded and must be tried. Putting birds in the proper condition comes only after years of experimentation and experience.

When it comes down to the final test, no amount of breeding or conditioning can overcome a poor job of handling. By an unwise nursing practice or even a moment's inattention, an unskilled handler can do more harm than good.

To be successful, a cockfighter must acquire a great deal of knowledge and put that knowledge into practice. It is only through

⁵⁶Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

years of study and practice that a cockfighter can hope to become a consistent winner.

CHAPTER III

RATIONALES FOR COCKFIGHTING

"Our sport is constantly and continually harassed by the infamous 'Society' and the misguided souls whom they have convinced that to stalk and prey upon cockers is a virtue."¹ Contemporary members of the cocking community are chronically confronted with criticisms of their sport. While these criticisms attack the sport, labeling it as cruel and inhumane, cockfighters themselves are usually described as poor and trashy. These criticisms do not even take into account that most cockfight fanciers are breaking the law.

The two central issues that cockfighters must face, then, do not deal with legal prohibitions. Rather, cockfighters are accused of participation in a cruel sport which presumably exerts a foul influence on those associated with it. Cockfighting supposedly attracts some of society's less desirable members.

The preceding chapter investigated the specialized techniques employed by cockfighters when involved in their sport. This chapter will elaborate upon the ubiquitous rationales that cockfighters are prepared to use when sanctioning the activity. A dedicated cockfighter is one who has assimilated a considerable amount of esoteric knowledge pertaining to cockfighting. This knowledge is used, in part, to help defend himself and his actions against the accusations of outsiders.

¹Jim Moyer, "Endangered Species," Gamecock 39 (March 1977): p. 41.

Cockfighters are prepared to defend and rationalize their sport with a uniform set of excuses. They claim their adversaries are hypocritical since many opponents of cockfighting approve of other socially acceptable sports that embody cruelty toward humans and other animals. Cockfighters also maintain that the Lord created game birds for the express purpose of fighting. Cruelty is, then, denying them the freedom to do so. Furthermore, cockfighters feel their sport is patriotic and part of our American heritage. They also emphasize that contrary to popular opinion, the participants are respectable people with a degree of honesty, dignity and pride unknown to other sports. Because of these excuses, legal prohibitions become meaningless to cockfighters and are essentially ignored.

According to informants, cockfighting is more humane and sometimes even less cruel than many popular sports.

Boxing is just as cruel as chicken fighting. Prize fighting, Indianapolis speed race, bull-dogging with these Brahma bulls and things like that, I'm opposed to that. Nobody goes to Indianapolis to see who's going to win the race. They go there to see who's going to get killed. After the race is over, they don't know who won it. They'll go to rodeos to see who's going to get hurt. In a fight ring, you've heard them say, "Kill that so-and-so!" I can't see any more harm to fighting chickens, or as much as some of these other sports, because a chicken, if it don't want to fight, ain't going to fight. . . . I really don't see any disgrace to fight chickens as to fight humans.²

In his unpublished manuscript, Ed Taber, a very literate supporter of cockfighting, discussed cruelty in the light of other activities. He implied that those who object to cockfighting are often ambiguous in their condemnations.

In developing this so called cruelty theme, we know of very few sports which are conducted in which cruelty in some form is

²Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

not involved. What we might say about cruelty in other sports is only to draw a comparison, because we are very much in favor of all of them.

In horse racing, man-motivated cruelty is inflicted to make the horse run faster. He is hurt to bring this about. Why isn't horse racing outlawed because of this cruelty. Those persons who are organized against cruelty surely would want to outlaw horse racing if they were consistent. . . . How about hunting where birds are wounded and left to die or eat lead pellets and be poisoned?

Would you say football playing didn't involve pain? Our modern archery is another sport where arrows pierce its victim through the eye, body or some other vital organ to either suffer and live or possibly die.³

Cockfighters frequently defend the sport by comparing it with various other activities. This rationalization surfaces periodically in the cockfighting journals. In one article, the author extolls the honesty of the fighting bird, claiming the bird does not know how, nor can he be taught how, to throw a fight. The author continues with further comparisons.

Boxing . . . the fight was worse than any cockfight I've ever seen. . . . A man's life is involved. Yet, one is legal and the other is not. Also, look at all the gambling that is done.

Horse racing. . . . We beat the horse to make him run faster. . . . You take a jockey on a race horse. He'll whip him, use an electric shocker on him, anything to make him go on. But if a rooster gets all he wants, he can leave the pit.

Have you ever seen a fisherman load his hook with a worm? . . . He gets a worm which is alive and runs the needle right down the center of his body. . . . After the fish is caught he is put in a box or on a line to smother until dead. How cruel is that?

Hunting . . . we shoot at everything that moves. Sometimes people have been known to be the victims of a hunter's folly. . . . Yet, hunting is legal.⁴

Even Abraham Lincoln, himself an avid cockfighter, reputedly defended that activity on the same grounds.

³Ed Taber, "Cruelty to Animals," Lincoln, Nebraska, March 1975. (Typewritten.)

⁴Earl Thomas, "Cockfighting," Gamecock 39 (March 1977): 49.

Abraham Lincoln said to a group of citizens, who wished to wipe out gamecock fighting by Federal Law, "As long as the Almighty permits intelligent men, created in his image and likeness, to fight in public and kill each other while the world looks on approvingly, it's not for me to deprive the chickens of the same privilege."⁵

Denny Stiers has a somewhat sportsmanlike attitude toward the issue of cruelty in sports. He does not measure the morality of a sport with an unreliable yardstick that gauges how much violence and bloodshed is involved. He simply feels that any person should be allowed to participate in any activity of his own choosing.

In my opinion, dog fighting and cockfighting ain't nothing alike. Oh, I don't like dog fighting. Personally, I don't like it. I've raised dogs all my life and been around them. I feel for them and we used to sell a lot of dogs. I mean, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it. I just don't want to take anybody's sport away from anybody.⁶

Compared to almost all other sports, as cockfighters are quick to point out, cockfighting is not cruel. It is inherent in each rooster to fight other roosters.

A true gamecock, his nature is to destroy that other rooster. We don't know whether it's a sexual response or what it is. It probably is because actually, in the natural state, a cock has his, a bunch of hens out in the woods and another rooster would crow, challenge it. And they'd fight and if the other rooster was victorious, well, then, he takes the flock. So that's the nature.⁷

According to Ed Taber, it is more than breeding that gives these birds the desire to battle each other. Fighting cocks are endowed by their Creator with an instinct to battle. It is in breeding different strains that this desire becomes weakened.

⁵Ed Bentley, "One Strawshaker to Another," Grit and Steel 74 (June 1972): 32-C.

⁶Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

⁷Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

Gamecocks were created to fight to the finish with each other. They were not made to fight. [Underlining in original] They do have a choice. They are given the God given right to fight. . . . As far as we know, the maker, divine or physical, who put this world of ours together, put the gamecock into this world with an instinctive desire to destroy or eliminate any male of the species any time they are exposed to each other. In their natural habitat, a conflict takes place and the fight goes on until one is either killed, beaten into helplessness or decides to hide his face and run away. He does have a choice, and gentlemen, if you ever saw a cock lose his courage and run away, you would see a very dejected breeder. There had to be some sort of conflict of genes in breeding to bring about this disaster.⁸

Cockfighters maintain that the desire to battle opposing game fowl is an inherent trait of their birds. Cruelty, then, is denying that instinct and restraining the birds from fighting. "But to me, that's all they're good for. That's all they've been bred for. They've just been bred to fight, that's all they know. Because they can't, they're not good to eat. Because you'd have to cook the heck out of them."⁹

This ideology provokes the argument that the fighting instinct is altered by breeding and conditioning, use of artificial spurs, and supplying opportunities for the birds to meet and fight each other. Informants responded that few creatures are raised under more humane conditions than are game fowl. Judging from the previous chapter, it is clear that a conscientious cocker will give his birds the best of shelter, food, and physical care. An owner will indeed have each bird become the "cock of the walk." This is unlike many commercial poultry breeders whose fowl live in cramped conditions and are force fed in an attempt to produce the finest eggs or flesh.¹⁰

⁸Ed Taber, "The Use of Stimulants in Cockfighting," Lincoln, Nebraska, March 1975. (Typewritten.)

⁹Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

¹⁰McCaghy and Neal, "The Fraternity of Cockfighters," p. 562.

The fighting nature of the bird may be enhanced by breeding and conditioning, but the bird is not forced to fight. Ed Taber, who calls himself the "mouthpiece" for cockers in Nebraska, contends that propagandists lead the public into thinking game fowl have no choice.

The opponents of cockfighting would lead the unsuspecting public to think that the gamecock is forced to fight. A statement of that sort has to come from someone who knows nothing about a gamecock. There is absolutely nothing that can be done by anyone to make two gamecocks fight. We would like to emphasize this point very strongly because those who oppose cockfighting either don't know any better, or are purposely putting out this information to influence the public to get on their band wagon. . . .

We conclude by saying the cock has a chance to fight for his life or run away, which has to be better than wringing his neck or chopping his head off.¹¹

Another informant elaborated and implied that cockfighting should be preferable to other methods and reasons for killing poultry. "You see, them two chickens fighting is better than cutting his head off with an ax. This way he's at least got a chance by fighting his own size."¹²

The issue of artificial spurs, again, has the "do-gooders and bleeding hearts" on the one hand calling it cruelty and the "blood thirsty degenerates" on the other hand declaring it more humane and less violent than fighting with natural spurs. "Contrary to what the usually uninformed writers put in the papers and magazines, in many fights the steel spur terminates the fight quickly without any sign of bleeding."¹³

¹¹Ed Taber, "Cruelty to Animals," Lincoln, Nebraska, March 1975. (Typewritten.)

¹²Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

¹³Ed Taber, "The Use of Stimulants in Cockfighting," Lincoln, Nebraska, March 1975. (Typewritten.)

Cockfighters acclaim the use of artificial steel spurs over natural spurs. Their rationale is that steel spurs have historical precedence and they also make for a speedier, cleaner death.

Why artificial spurs instead of natural spurs? Artificial spurs of some sort have been used for centuries for a very definite reason. In the jungle in their natural state, the cocks would use their natural spurs which are round and somewhat blunt at the very end. In this way in an engagement, both birds would be very battered because of the length of time it would normally take to decide the victor. Maybe both would die. . . .

By using artificial spurs, the speed of a bird and his natural hitting power which he gets by the use of his legs shortens a fight and usually one does not get hurt very much. . . . Many fights are terminated without any sign of blood.¹⁴

Myron Kent related a gory account of a hypothetical fight without the use of artificial spurs. A peculiar sense of concern for the bird's well-being is indicated in this account.

It's better to fight with the gaffs on, yes. For the simple reason, if you fight them without the gaffs, it's the most bloody thing you ever saw in your life. . . . They'll knock one another's bills off and their spurs off and what have you and they'll fight for an hour before one another is killed. And their head gets all swelled up and their eyes all swell up. And, okay, with the steel, they place the spur where they'll kill one another. . . .

Without spurs, sometimes they'll kill right away. The next time it'll go for an hour or two hours until they're just completely exhausted. And I don't like this. I don't like this because it's just too blood curdling. Now, this to me would be wrong, fighting with natural steel.¹⁵

Informants explained one other reason for using artificial spurs. Ed Taber observes that chickens cannot feel pain. "They'll drive a spur right through their head, you know. Course, I say, as far as we know, they're immune to pain. Cause if they weren't, they wouldn't fight."¹⁶

¹⁴Ed Taber, "Cruelty to Animals," Lincoln, Nebraska, March 1975. (Typewritten.)

¹⁵Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

¹⁶Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

Carl Parker, while not quite as certain as Ed Taber, maintains the same sentiment.

If he gets a wing broke or a leg broke, he don't know it. He never makes a sound. It's a question of whether they can feel pain or not. They get the gaffs in them, they never flinch. Now a half-game chicken will. He'll squawk to beat the dickens. He'll just squawk. A game chicken won't. You'll see them, got their legs broke, their wings broke and they'll just keep fighting. They must have feeling, though.¹⁷

Proponents of cockfighting attempt to refute criticism by asserting that theirs is a patriotic activity. There was a discussion recently in the Oklahoma Legislature concerning outlawing cockfighting in that state. Lawmakers that were pro-cockfighting cited early American patriots, such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln, who were ardent fans. Oklahoma Representative John Monks commented that countries outlawing cockfighting have turned from great world powers to meek nations. "Look at the British Empire. King Henry VIII had a royal cockfighting pit. Now look at England . . . a toothless pussycat. In every country of the world taken over by communists, one of the first things they do is outlaw cockfighting."¹⁸

Another admirable attribute of cockfighting is that it is an activity for all members of the family. Cockfighting is portrayed as a family oriented sport and a healthy, learning experience for children that helps build character. "Our children help raise baby chicks and love it. They learn responsibilities of care and feeding. On weekends, WE KNOW where our children are--they are with us--cleaning

¹⁷Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

¹⁸"Lawmakers Wrap Cockfighting in Patriotism," The Sunday Oklahoman, n.p., n.d. (Mimeographed.)

ckicken pens, building coops, watering, etc. They are busy, not out getting into trouble."¹⁹

Carl Parker echoes that opinion. "I'd lot rather have my children at a chicken fight than around home doing something else they weren't supposed to. I don't have any children, but that's the way I feel about it."²⁰

Cockfighters can neutralize the accusations that cockfighting is a cruel sport by their countercharge that their opponents are hypocritical and often ambiguous in their assumptions. Cockfighters can further build up the reputation of their sport by citing examples of patriotism and family participation. Remaining, however, is the assumption that cockfighting draws its fans from society's disreputable elements and that the sport itself exerts a corrupting influence on the human participants.

Cockfighters are aware of this derogatory image held by the public. Informants emphasized that it was a totally false assumption. Cockfighters are highly respectable people that are drawn from all levels of the socioeconomic scale. "There was a time in the early days of this country of ours when the lowly gamecock was NOT held in such low esteem and contempt. Nor was cockfighting considered to attract only a collection of contemptible degenerates."²¹

"In other words, this is not the sport of just a bunch of low brows. This sport attracts doctors and lawyers and priests and bankers and people of all walks of life."²²

¹⁹Danna Dranon, "The Courage to Speak Up," Gamecock 40 (May 1977): 61.

²⁰Interview with Carl Parker, Denton, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

²¹Jim Moyer, "The Endangered Species," Gamecock 39 (March 1977): 41.

²²Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

You won't find a more honorable bunch of guys. There're some, I suppose, some cheats or crooks in it, but I think you're going to find that in just about anything. Oh, all of them that I've met in just the last few years that I've been fighting, there's some of them that are as nice of people that you've ever wanted to be around, as far as I'm concerned.

There's all sorts of them. I've met preachers that were cockfighters. We've got one friend up at Sioux City. He's what he is, he's district or area manager for Equitable Life Insurance.

And you get south, down in Kansas City, where we fight down there, there might be, oh, four or five millionaires sitting, in their overalls, sitting in the pit there on a Saturday night.²³

Myron Kent upholds the image that each cockfighter has a scrupulous sense of honor.

Most cockfighters are gentlemen. For the simple reason that you never see a fight between chicken fighters. You never see a fight between chicken fighters because a chicken fighter, when they make a bet, that's it. The fight you see is between chicken fighters and spectators. For the simple reason that somebody up there in the goddamn crowd is trying to knock down on the chicken fighter.²⁴

Ed Taber related a story to help illustrate the fact that cockfighting is an honorable sport.

I have a number of priests who are cockfighting friends, you know. Used to be up in Sioux City, there's a priest up there who has a parish in South Dakota. Course, it's a small, real small parish. This priest goes to cockfights, a very genteel sort of man. But he drank a little.

Anyway, he'd get his Mass over in a hurry so he could get away to come to the cockfights. Course he wasn't telling his parish. But a couple of them said, "Here's two dollars, Father, bet it for me." He was a funny guy.

But he had game chickens running around out there, you know. It must have been a real small town. I heard this story, the chickens were running in and out of the church, you know. This was a town of maybe one hundred and fifty people, I don't know.

Oh, he was a wonderful guy, real high class. But I imagine his drinking probably kept him in a parish in a small town.²⁵

²³Interview with Denny Stiers, Nemaha, Nebraska, 28 July 1977.

²⁴Interview with Myron Kent, Tecumseh, Nebraska, 6 July 1977.

²⁵Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

Cockfighters have historical precedence on their side. They do not have to base their defenses solely on the character of contemporary participants. Defenders link cockfighting with American heritage. to destroy cockfighting by outlawing it would be destroying a basic part of our American heritage. In an impassioned letter to Nebraska Congressman John McCollister, Ed Taber defended it on those grounds.

". . . This is our Bicentennial year, when we celebrate the Declaration of Independence. Many of those same forefathers of ours . . . were avid devotees of the ancient, centuries old sport of cockfighting. Our heritage came from them, and theirs from their forefathers in England. Now you are being asked to vote to take this right away from us who have cherished it for our lifetime. . . .

Your vote against gamecocks would be destroying more than a two hundred year heritage. In all probability, game fowl were right on the boat that landed at Jamestown in 1608.²⁶

The gamecock is a bird to emulate, thereby promoting courage and loyalty and a variety of virtues that are evidenced in the cockpit. During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Soldiers fighting in the area that is now Delaware, manifested such bravery and stamina that they were compared to fighting cocks thrown by a blue hen chicken. Consequently, Delaware is sometimes known as the Blue Hen State.²⁷ The gamecock still provides a model of inspiration as a mascot for the athletes of the University of South Carolina.

That cockfighting is viewed as a cruel sport and participation in it may deaden one's feelings toward humanity are typical reasons for outlawing the sport. However, fanciers of the sport will not abandon it simply because legislation against it has been supported by those

²⁶Ed Taber, "Letter to Nebraska Congressman John Y. McCollister," Lincoln, Nebraska, 2 February 1976. (Handwritten.)

²⁷Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 41-42.

two notions. The legal prohibitions are largely ignored by cock-fighters. In a discussion concerning the current legal status of cockfighting in Nebraska, Sara Stiers, the wife of informant Denny Stiers, stated that the actual legal status of cockfighting did not matter. "Only the way we look at it, it's legal."²⁸

Reinforcing this disregard for the law is that anti-cock-fighting laws are sporadically enforced.²⁹ ". . . and of course in most cases, you know, why if there's ever a chicken fight, why the law knows about it and won't bother it unless there's some trouble or something. By the law, I mean sheriffs and deputies."³⁰ In fact, one spectator at a fight admitted that even the county attorney fought chickens and would attend fights "in an unofficial capacity."

Legislation against cruelty towards animals may contain loopholes in the statutory language whereby the law does not specifically apply to cockfighting. In Oklahoma in 1963, Judge Kirksey Nix interpreted a State law that dealt with fights between animals. "Noting that a distinction was made between living creatures in the Holy Scriptures . . . as beasts of the fields, fish of the sea and fowls

²⁸Conversation with Sara Stiers, Steinauer, Nebraska, 5 June 1977.

²⁹Economics may be a reason why such laws are not always enforced. In the Omaha raid seven men were arrested and seventy-one cocks were confiscated. Charges were subsequently dropped, so the maximum fine of twenty dollars each was not imposed. Ironically, the cost to the county for the entire faux pas far exceeded the total of one hundred and forty dollars that would have been collected had there been convictions. The grain bill for the roosters alone totalled one hundred and twenty dollars. The cost of the arresting deputies, court workers, trucks to haul the birds from the fight scene and the building of coops for them cannot be determined.

³⁰Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

of the air, Judge Nix said the statute applied only to animals and not to gamecocks."³¹

Nebraska's law is not without loopholes. The current law simply states that public cockfighting is punishable by a twenty dollar fine. Ed Taber explained how the law was circumvented in Nebraska.

Some of the boys about fifteen years ago, got together and decided that if you had a private game club that you could legally fight chickens in Nebraska. They talked to a few lawyers and the lawyers thought it might stick. And so they organized two or three game fowl clubs and got incorporated in the state of Nebraska; which actually made it legal, as the interpretation of the law goes, to fight amongst your members.³²

Historical arguments and moral arguments provide grounds for disregarding the legal prohibitions of cockfighting. The existence of cockfighting in antiquity and its popularity among great men of the past provide traditional evidence of its social worth in cultivating ideal life styles. And, in view of the large number of both active cockfighters and those who merely attend the fights, it appears that few are concerned about breaking the law.

³¹"Lawmakers Wrap Cockfighting in Patriotism," The Sunday Oklahoman, n.p., n.d. (Mimeographed.)

³²Interview with Ed Taber, Lincoln, Nebraska, 13 July 1977.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMATION

The central purpose of this study was to increase the amount of academic research dealing with a particular aspect of folklife--cockfighting. Cockfighting is a verdant field for scholarly endeavors, especially for folklorists. It has been only sporadically studied by scholars in various disciplines, however, and the academic literature that surrounds it is minimal. The preceding chapters delineated part of the in-group knowledge that is assimilated by cockfighters in the performance of their sport.

Oral interviews and printed materials of a corroborative nature comprise the basic ingredients of this study. Questions concerning cockfighting were formulated after attending a cockfight and reviewing the available literature. Four informants responded orally to queries about breeding, conditioning, heeling and handling of the birds, and also about the public image and stereotypes of cockfighting and its participants.

The informants agreed that breeding of successful fighting fowl starts with good brood stock. If the parents, the dam more so than the sire, exhibit qualities of gameness and aggressiveness, the chances of breeding premium birds are greatly enhanced. Brood stock can be obtained through advertisements in cocking journals or through friends. Trading with friends for stock, a more traditional manner than purchasing stock, is the surest manner to increase one's yard of fowl.

The four commonly used systems of breeding game fowl are inbreeding, linebreeding, outbreeding and crossbreeding. Inbreeding is mating brother to sister. It is used in an attempt to obtain uniform characteristics in game fowl. Conversely, linebreeding is used to breed out undesirable qualities. The sire is bred to a dam, then to daughters from that mating and again to granddaughters from the second mating.

Outbreeding is adding new blood to the strain by mating with a distant cousin. Crossbreeding is mating with a totally unrelated strain. The advantage in these two systems is that pit performance in the second generation (or the mixed generation) is usually greatly improved. The disadvantage is that many undesirable characteristics may be transferred by the second generation mating.

The name of the game for those who have established strains of fowl, however, is conditioning. Conditioning is a year round process of preparing cocks to do battle. From the middle of June until Thanksgiving, cockers will put their birds out on walks. During that time, which is the off-season for cockfighting, the rooster is allowed free range.¹ Each rooster will quickly attract a following of four or five hens and establish territorial rights. This walk encourages the cock to be game when he goes to the pit.

Conditioning for a bird is intensified a few weeks before the fight. This intensive conditioning is called a keep and is often mistaken for training birds to fight. Cockfighters maintain that birds

¹The peak season for cockfighting is late winter and early spring, though some fight from November to June. By February or March, roosters have had time to be recovered from moulting and the weather will not yet be too hot to fight.

are not trained to fight. They claim the fighting instinct is an innate desire arising from breeding.

Winning depends, in part, on proper heeling. Equipping the birds with artificial spurs shortens the duration of a fight by making each cut with the spurs more deadly. Today, heeling is not the challenge it once was. Self-setting sockets take away much of the guesswork in positioning the socket on the bird's legs. Self-setting sockets fit over a natural spur only the right way. Gaff boxes hold all the supplies necessary for proper heeling such as moleskin, chalk and a gaff saw.

A good handler will examine the gaffs on the opposing bird to be sure no foul play is involved. With the exception of the referee, the handler is the only person that is allowed to touch the bird during the course of a fight. He attends to the needs of the bird and nurses the bird during the twenty second rest periods.

Mastery of these activities of breeding, conditioning, heeling and handling is what makes a cockfighter successful. Informants stated that it takes years of involvement with the sport to become successful at it. Association with the sport also means having to face charges of cruelty to animals and accusations that only the seedier segments of society are attracted to it.

Hard core cockfighters are prepared to defend their sport with a uniform set of excuses. They maintain that theirs is not a cruel sport for the simple reason that game fowl were created only for fighting. Cruelty would be not allowing them to do so. Cockfighters claim their adversaries are hypocritical. Opponents of cockfighting are often in favor of more socially acceptable sports that are just as cruel.

Popular sports, such as boxing or horse racing are frequently cited as examples of brutal sports. The fact that human beings are involved in these sports makes them seem even more so. The human element in horse racing, for example, differs from the human element in cockfighting. In horse racing, cruelty is inflicted by man to make the horse run faster. In cockfighting, the man only enhances the likelihood for a bird to win. The bird is not forced to fight as a horse is forced to run.

Cockfighting is viewed by cockfighters as a patriotic and wholesome activity. Cockfighters will often cite references to America's early history and the role the game fowl has played. All members of the family are able to enjoy this sport. It is an activity that can teach responsibility and help develop character.

Cockfighters are aware of the derogatory public image of their sport. They know, however, that their sport actually attracts members from the entire socioeconomic scale. Informants listed people by occupations who they know are devotees of the sport. Invariably, they mentioned the highly respected occupations of doctors, lawyers and clergymen.

Game fowl fanciers do not have to rely on contemporary examples for defense. Since cockfighting is an old sport, many historical personages have been connected with it. Listing of some of the earliest presidents and statesmen of the United States is the usual defense.

Opponents of cockfighting often claim that association with the bloodthirsty sport of cockfighting exerts a negative influence on one's moral standards. The fact that game fowl have been used to inspire and rally armies to victory clearly refutes that accusation. Cockfighting does not lower moral standards. Instead it is touted as promoting humanistic virtues.

In view of these rationales, legal prohibitions take on very little meaning. Anti-cockfighting laws are sporadically enforced. Moreover, loopholes in the laws often provide means whereby individuals can engage in cockfighting without fear of being arrested.

The illegal status of cockfighting is one factor that defines cockfighters as a particular group. The specialized knowledge that one must acquire to become a cockfighter contributes to beliefs about the sport. Most of the American populace holds cockfighters in contempt and considers them to be an abominable breed of people. Isolation because of illegal ramifications, possession of peculiar knowledge, the supposition that cockfighters are riffraff--all permit cockfighting and its participants to be studied in accordance with the esoteric-exoteric factor in folklore.

In the context of this study, the esoteric applies to what cockfighters think of themselves and what they suppose others think of them. The exoteric part includes the public's opinion of cockfighters as well as what the public assumes cockfighters feel about public opinion. A group sense of belonging frequently gives rise to the esoteric part of this factor and serves to defend and strengthen that sense. Cockfighters manifest this group sense of belonging especially when they refer to themselves as a "fraternity of cockfighters." Exoteric folklore about a group is more likely to occur if that group is particularly distinctive. It is possible, however, for a group to be aware of exoteric beliefs and either recognize them tolerantly or reject them.

The exoteric interpretation of cockfighters includes charges of cruelty to animals and corruption of morals. The esoteric self-image of cockfighters, however, reflect humanity, patriotism and even virtue.

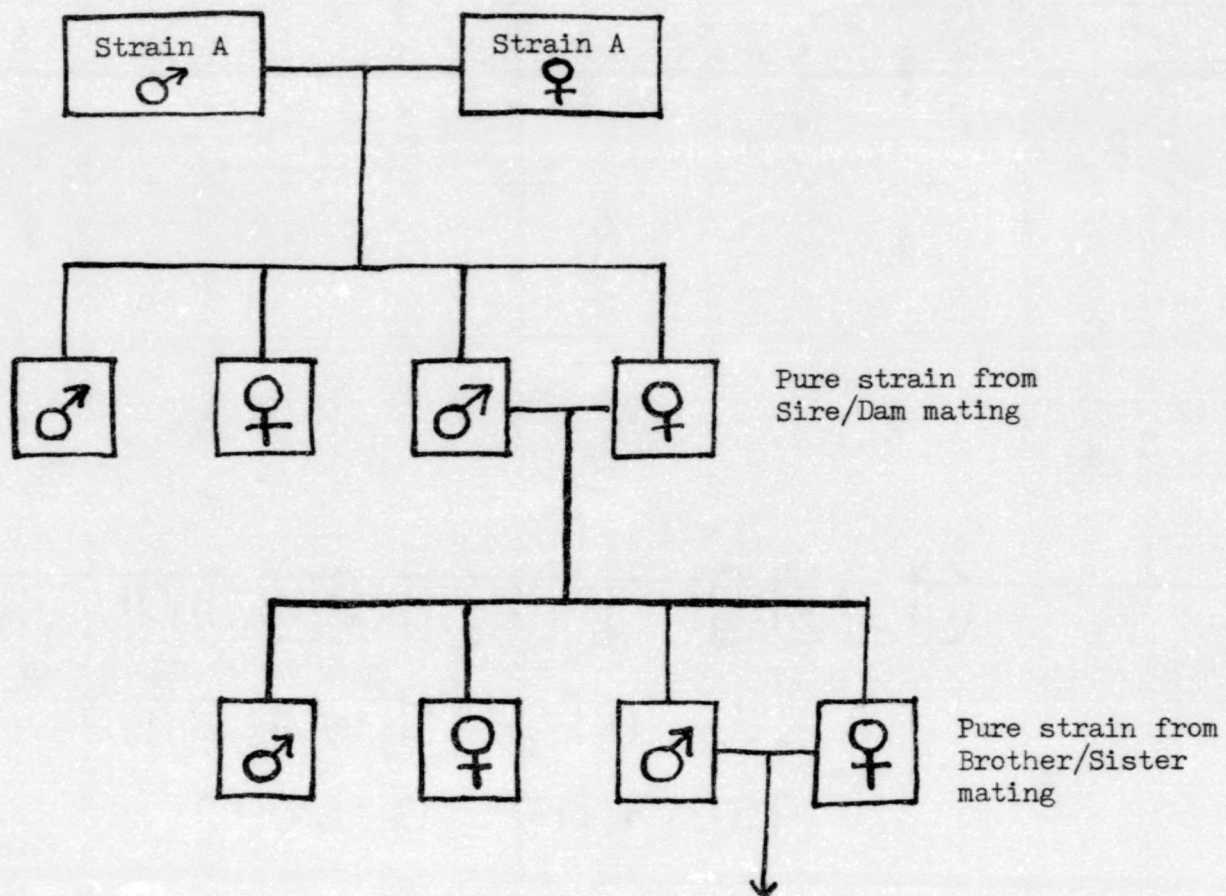
These esoteric-exoteric considerations and the rationalizations that have arisen from them were previously delineated in Chapter III.

Giving even more strength to the esoteric-exoteric idea of interpretation as it relates to cockfighting are the data contained in Chapter I. The data indicated, in part, that the informants sense public disapproval but feel that the disapproval arises from public ignorance. Informants suggested that widespread acceptance of specialized cockfighting information would dispel most of the disapproval.

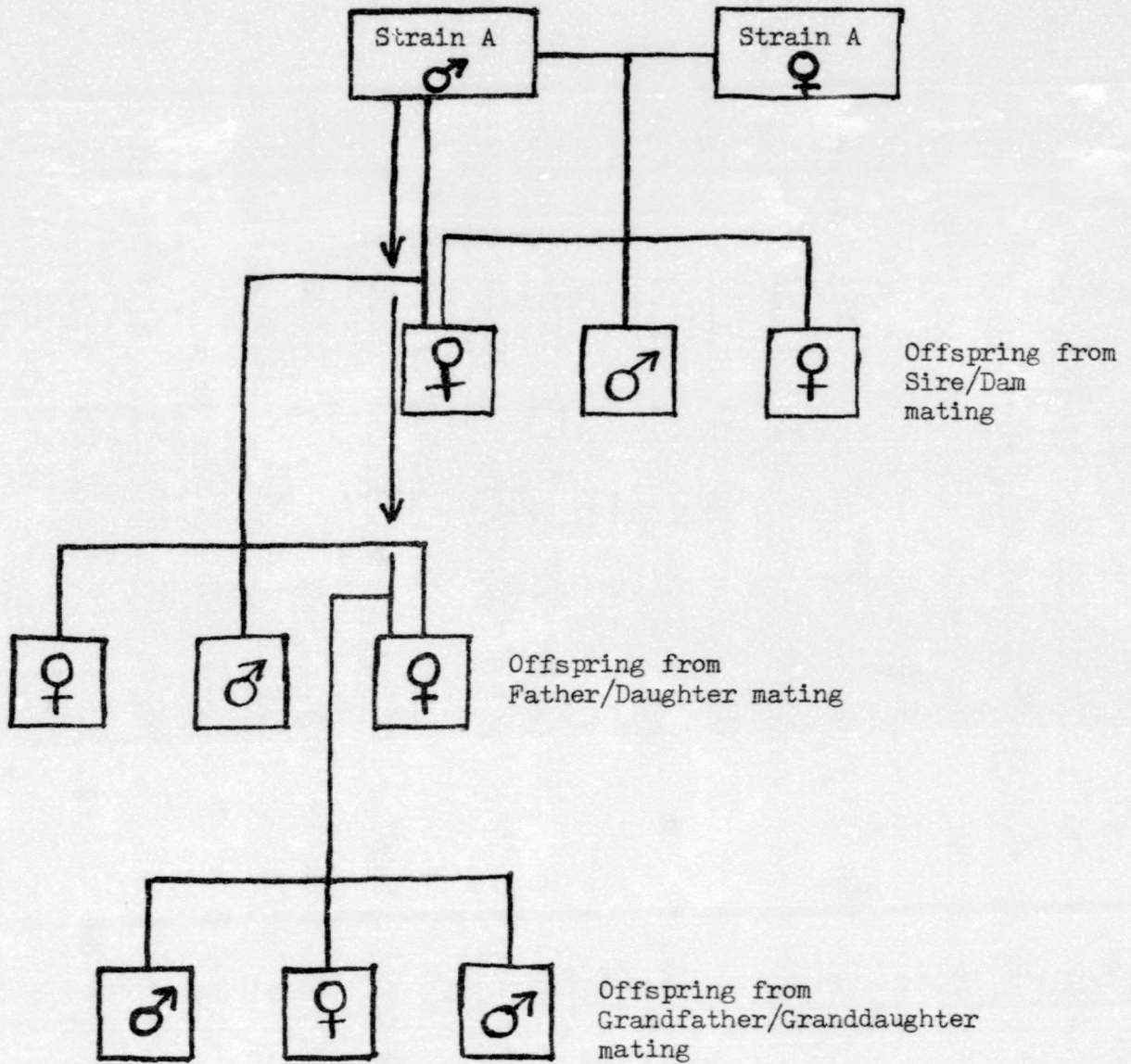
The esoteric-exoteric concepts which have surfaced during the course of this study provide a theoretical perspective to the practical aspects outlined here. The knowledge assimilated within the cocking fraternity, in part, enables cockfighters to defend themselves against the public criticisms that prevail against them. Simply, cockfighters engage in an illegal activity that is regarded by those outside the fraternity as cruel and dehumanizing. Cockfighters, however, realize the exoteric concepts believed about them and are able to refute those concepts on the basis of their own esoteric knowledge.

APPENDIX 1: BREEDING SYSTEMS

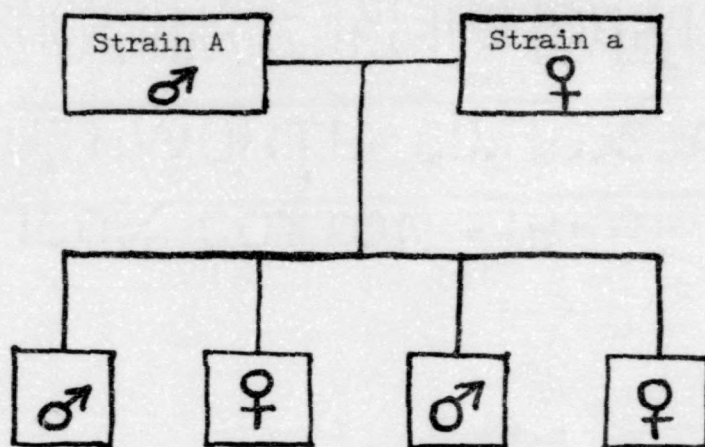
Inbreeding



Linebreeding

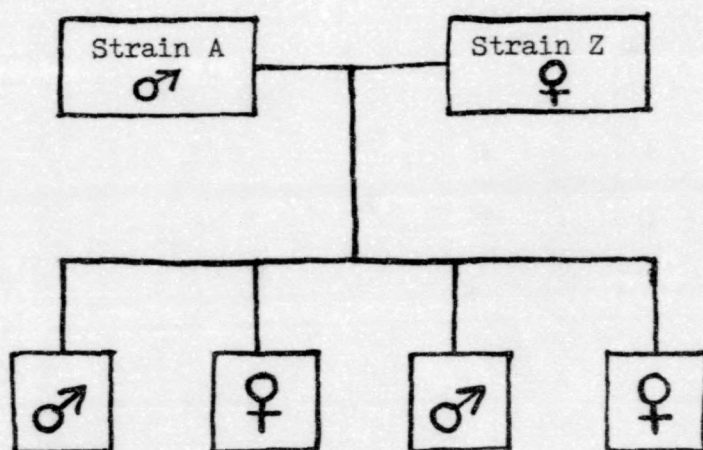


Outbreeding



Outbred Offspring
from mating two
related strains

Crossbreeding



Crossbred Offspring
from mating two
unrelated strains

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