

Cockfighting is Fowl Play

By Reg P. Wydeven
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When I was in the 4th grade, our class hatched eggs in an incubator. I was one of the lucky students that got to take one of the chicks home. I named my chick George and I fed him crushed Cheerios every day. He soon outgrew his coop and my parents' patience, so we gave him to a friend who lived on a farm.

That's why I love the *Seinfeld* episode where Jerry and Kramer raise a rooster named Little Jerry. Like I did with George, they love and care for Little Jerry by giving him rubdowns and steam baths and by monitoring his high protein diet.

The Seinfeld gang then travels in the middle of the night to the private back room of a small bodega to allow Little Jerry to compete in his first cockfight. The crowd gathers in secrecy under the cover of night to attend the match because like 46 other states, cockfighting is illegal in New York.

After Jerry and Kramer see the size of Little Jerry's opponent, they realize just how brutal the sport is and why it is illegal. Because he fears for Little Jerry's life, Kramer dives into the concrete pit that serves as the cockfighting ring to save Little Jerry. He is then shredded by the opposing rooster's beak, talons and razor-sharp spurs that are affixed to his feet, a common practice in the industry.

Citing the viciousness of the sport, Oklahoma became the 48th state to ban cockfighting. In 2002, a state law was passed outlawing its practice. The U.S. Supreme Court recently declined to hear the cockfighting industry's appeal to overturn the ban, so Oklahoma's prohibition on the sport will stand.

Now only New Mexico and Louisiana remain as the only states that allow cockfighting. Cockfighters are bracing for the inevitable push from animal rights activists to ban the sport in those states as well.

Cockfighters in the Sooner State were also hurt by another law passed in 2002. This law, signed by President Bush, makes it a federal crime to transport roosters across state lines to engage in cockfights. Therefore, because they can't simply make longer commutes to their matches, many Oklahoma cockfighters flew the coop and moved their operations to New Mexico or Louisiana.

While this may seem like a lot of trouble just to let some birds box, experts estimate cockfighting is a billion dollar a year industry, and one with a huge lobbying effort. The high cost of chicken feed, cement and other supplies for coops and fighting pits, makes it expensive to raise chickens, as my parents can attest.

Though illegal, cockfighting is still popular in many rural areas, mainly in the South. Supporters, such as the United Gamefowl Breeders Association, claim it is part of agricultural heritage, as it instills responsibility in children by teaching them how to breed, care for and match roosters against one another in fights.

Animal activists, such as the Humane Society and P.E.T.A., respond by saying if parents want to teach their children responsibility, buy them a goldfish. They assert cockfighting is inhumane, as most matches result in one of the birds being killed and the other crippled. Unlike the sports of hunting and fishing, cockfighting is not used as a means of controlling animal populations or for food – it is intended merely for the enjoyment of its spectators.

I'm just glad my George never participated in a cockfight. Because he was such a skinny rooster, if he had fought, it probably would have been in the featherweight division.

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