



THE LIÈGE GAME

Text and photos: Pierre Vranken, Belgium

In this article I will describe the past and present of the Liège Game; one of the finest Belgian Game breeds—very hard to breed and no longer as valued as they should be.

The creation of, and ins-and-outs of the Belgian Game, as specified in the Standard, can chronologically be described into three phases.

1. The creation
2. The illegal cock fights
3. The present; unfortunately, this period is described as a drastic revolution, changing the look and aura of the bird completely.

That the Standard Commission allows new birds to be accepted with different traits, makes the hair of many older Game Fowl lovers stand on end. Traits that in the Standard of 1996 were described as disqualifications are now tolerated. Even in spite of the fact that these things are not at all characteristics of the pure Liège Game. The black-blue skin and flesh, brown to black comb and wattles, and pigmented faces are now accepted. Older breeders of the breed know where these phenomena came from and who crossed it in.

These phenomena remain **SERIOUS AND DISQUALIFYING FAULTS** and the birds with them should—like the late poultry judge Marcel Wyffels said—immediately be excluded.

He was also in favour to have all colours that were clearly described in the standard of 1976—and absolutely all— recognised again.

I have pictures of birds, from the years 1900 and 1904, 1970 (and other information) that clearly show the comb and wattles should be red to dark red without black pigmentation. At home we have bred the pure aggressive Liège Game with its specific character and appearance, for over 65 years. THESE BIRDS ARE THE ONLY PURE LIÈGE GAME LEFT.

Whether all this gets us anywhere I don't know, but ignorance, powerlessness and willfulness play major roles and are main causes of the demise of one of our national game fowl breeds and living heritage: THE LIÈGE GAME. It is very painful to see neighboring countries copy all this without argument, knowing full well that they are wrong.

Recently, I had the honour of talking with Mr. Zalenga of the Game Fowl Association of Germany, and went through this whole debate with him. He is now fully aware of the ignorance and politics which are at play in the Belgian Standard Commission and he intends to open a new debate at the next big meeting in Germany. I hope very much that this heralds a new beginning for the preservation of the Liège Game as it was and should be, also in the Netherlands and surrounding countries. One should NOT accept ideas uncritically from those who think they have the wisdom and who adapt the breed standard at their discretion simply to suit themselves.



Above: Pierre Vranken with his National Champion of Belgium, 2012.

1. THE CREATION

The first recognised description dates from 1895. It was a description of the then amalgamated Belgian breeds, namely the Liège, Bruges and Tirlemont Game, and appeared under the name: The Belgian Game. This handbook published by Dr. Lahaye et. al. was called the *Encyclopedie Agronomique et Vétérinaire*. At that time they were already fully into the experimental crossing of Belgian and Asian fowl. The most acceptable—given the importance of nature, character and appearance—was that the Liège Game would be a cross between the Bruges Game and Malay, possibly strengthened with other Asian breeds. By ongoing rigorous selections, they achieved a more upright and robust game fowl. Even its character showed more aggressiveness. The resulting Liège Game, mainly attacks the head of its opponent, while the Bruges attacks the body. The bird should conform to the following description:

HEAD:	Very powerful with very prominent eyebrows.
COMB:	Single and dark red. (Indeed no pigmentation. Also described as triple comb)
EYES:	Placed high in the head, dark, fearless.
EARLOBE & WATTLE:	Small and dark red. (Indeed again no pigmentation nor black or mulberry)
BEAK:	Stout and well curved.
NECK:	Long, strong and upright.
BREAST:	Broad, not too prominent forward, breast bone long, strong and straight.
BACK:	Broad and long, sloping backwards.
WINGS:	Rather short, carried close to the body.
TAIL:	Full and carried low.
LEGS:	Strong, straight and parallel. Blue to dark blue.
SPURS:	Normally set. Spurs on the hens is a plus and should be encouraged.
TOES:	Four straight, long toes, the hind toe prominently touching the ground.
NAILS:	Strong and horn colour.
COLOUR:	All colour varieties are admitted, with preference for self blue, laced blue and blue birchen. Also white and mottled.
WEIGHT:	Cock 4.5 to 5.5 kg. Hen 3.5 to 4 kg.

DISQUALIFICATIONS:

Too small size, bad stance, dropping wings, and body deformation.

The Total of 100 points was awarded, considered in the following order:

Overall conformation	50 points
Head, beak, eyes	10 points
Comb	20 points
Legs	10 points
Colour	10 points

Note: At present time the birds are heavier.

**Right: Head study of a Liège Game cock bred by Pierre Vranken.
Photo: Willem van Ballekom.**



This complete description was included in the Standard of Bruges and Liège Game LVPK of April 1961. The standard commission comprised J. de Kelper, P. Tiberghin, R. van Ceulebroek, L. v.d. Snickt. Also present were Prof. Dr. R. Willems, J. Detraux, E. Claeysen and A. van Houdt. The latter prepared the definitive Standard description.

Also the character traits of the Liège Game were fully covered and were described as follows:

1. Very quarrelsome towards other roosters and conspecifics. Evidence of the latter: the regular killing one another, and this in a very early stage.
2. Very pugnacious and cruel.
3. A Game type that mainly attacks the head of the opponent.
4. Towards its keeper it can be very quiet and calm but as well very aggressive and ready to attack.
5. In female animals the character traits are a little different.



Above and left: Perfect Liège Game roosters of Pierre Vranken.

They are more tolerant towards other animals, but not against their own kind. When adding a new bird to the group, or a bird that they have not seen for several days, e.g. due to an exhibition, one may be sure that there will follow a fierce battle, sometimes with a fatal outcome. A little tip to try to minimize this is always try to combine the birds after dark. Usually then, the damage will not be too bad. It is better to house all the females of a chosen bloodline together right from day one.

Some say they are good layers, but this is quite wrong—they are rather poor layers and they are bad and unreliable as broodies.

Right: The cock that won Reserve Champion at the 2012 National Show in Ranst (B).

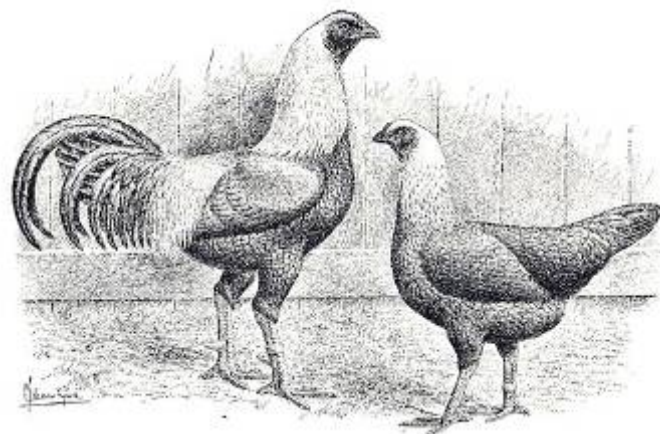
From this initial description to which professors and other academics have contributed one can clearly see the difference to the present Standard. Knowledgeable breeders had already described clearly the colour of the head, comb and wattles, as well as the plumage colours. Then some people decided to unilaterally change many characteristics of the Liège Game, so that now, the bird comes across as a **CROSSED BREED BELGIAN GAME FOWL** that has lost its specific characteristics. Which people have a hand in? There is only one way to describe this: **VESTED SELF-INTEREST.**

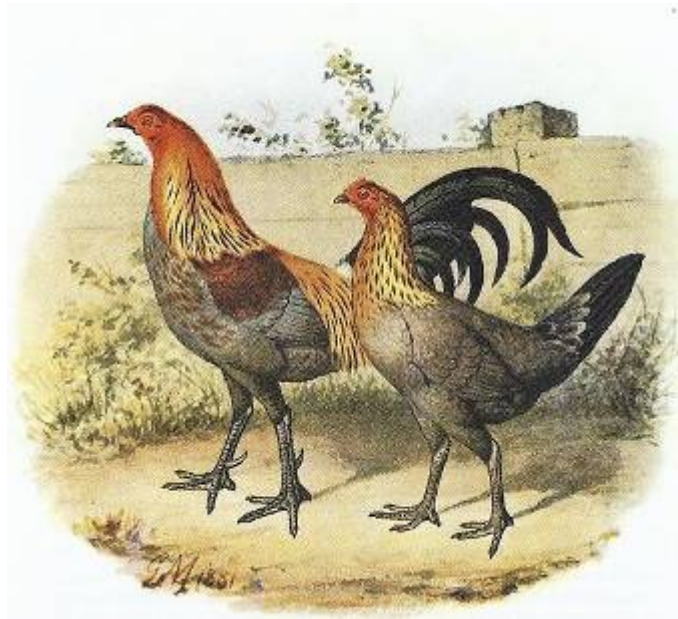
The current judging leaves much to be desired. A young bird of less than one-year-old will always receive the following remarks: too narrow leg stance; too narrow across shoulders; could be slightly larger and heavier. This is nonsense—a bird doesn't grow to full size until 18 to 20 months of age. However, about 80 per cent of birds shown are pullets and cockerels. The late Mr. Marcel Wyffels was the only one who judged these young birds in a positive way. If he had good expectations of a young bird, then a score of around 95 points was awarded—now these young birds only get up to a maximum score of 93 points.

Note: Regarding the history, it is also quite possible that at that time the large Aseel was used in addition to the Malays as they were already present in Europe. Below two drawings: the Malay, 19th century (left) and the classic Belgian gamefowl, Bruges Game (right). Both varieties are the heritage of Liège Game.



(See the undeniable similarities in the drawing on the next page.)





Above: Belgian Game (Liège-type) end of 19th century.

2. THE ILLEGAL GAMES

Cock fights have existed since time immemorial. This sport was not—as many claim—an amusement for the working class, but rather, in the Middle Ages mostly an entertainment for students of the Bourgeoisie. It was such a success that the Bishop of Bordeaux banned cock fights on penalty of excommunication. In 1860, cock fighting was forbidden in France by the imperial government, under the pretext of animal abuse. This prohibition also came to Belgium, and associations that were allegedly committed to animal welfare took their chance. Around 1900 there was a general prohibition in Belgium. However, this had an adverse effect and cock fights became an illegal activity and increased in number dramatically.

The fights in our regions especially took place in winter and spring; according to our research this had everything to do with the incrossing of the Asian varieties. When our winter begins, it is spring in the far east and the beginning of the breeding season. Cocks become more aggressive at this time when they are defending their territory, annexing as many females as possible and simultaneously eliminating rivals. The cockerels follow their instincts and the same process. Breeders with years of experience understand this behavior, knowing that the males increase their physical fitness levels—they are in motion all the time, often clapping their wings and picking up all sorts of twigs and branches from the ground. Their intake of food is limited—they and they alone decide their weight, no matter what effort you make. The cockerels won't grow now, but remain as they are with the result that at the exhibitions the remarks on the judge's card: too narrow body shape, too narrow leg stance, head still too small and pointed. This is why one should first breed Game Fowl for several years and after that become a judge. Attempting to compare a stag and a cock makes a nonsense of judging.

Previously, when the incubators were still very scarce, every game fowl keeper had a dozen bantams in the yard helping to breed chicks in the autumn. The bantams acted as incubators and asked only a dry place with some warmth. A hayloft where a chimney radiated some warmth was an ideal brooding place.

To stimulate the adult females to start laying, bags full of pine needles from the forest were brought home and used as a 15cm. thick litter. This litter had several advantages; the birds had a dry soft surface and the formic acid left by ants kept parasites away, so

that no insecticides had to be used. All these activities had only one goal: the sooner they could breed, the faster the young roosters would be ready to fight.



*Deze haan is z'n
agressieve aard niet
verloren. Zodra
je je tussen hem
en z'n hennen
begeeft komt bij in
opstand...*



Left: This cock has not lost its aggressiveness; as soon as you step between him and his hens, he is ready to attack. Photo archives Avicultura, taken at Pierre Vranken's.

From nine months, the young cocks were prepared to fight in an arena. Popularly this was called the 'try'. A leather sheath, filled with cotton wool was put on the legs and spurs and they were played against each other in a small space. This was also to examine how each bird fought. Before this sparring took place, the birds had already been housed in separate cages for several weeks.

When the time came, two regions agreed on the location and number of cocks, while it was also reported whether old or one-eyed birds were to be present. The latter sometimes had lost an eye in a previous battle. Always cocks of the same age or one-eyed were matched against each other. The appointment was usually in a cafe in the neighborhood, and the pit was behind the cemetery wall or in an orchard. This pit was a circle of about three metres diameter and surrounded with chicken wire.

Before the game the cocks were fitted with extra horn spurs on their own spurs, by a qualified person. These fake spurs were made from old roosters spurs, prepared on a leather

sheath and wrapped with special cord to the leg of the cock optionally topped with cotton wool. The length of the spurs varied from 3.5 to 6 centimetres. Once this was done, the birds were placed opposite each other in the arena. A fight took 45 minutes—or until one of the two adversaries stayed down, died or walked away. The latter, however, was a disgrace, and the owner soon got the same nickname. Fight until death was the message.

There was also a difference in pits; there was the 'common pit' where up to 25 € was wagered, while the 'large pit' had unlimited stakes with only the best cocks competing. In those days, birds barely two-months-old were already being sold for 200 € and more. Illegal gambling brought the cock fights into disrepute. Thousands of francs were wagered, leading to family dramas. Because of this phenomenon the gendarmerie adopted even more rigorous actions against the sport.

However, to return to the fighter: In case of "the Liège Game" it was mainly a matter of purchasing the right birds. The knowledge of genetics and line breeding was crucial. One had to have gained knowledge for years to compete effectively in a large pit, and had still no guarantee to win.

Once one had sufficient knowledge about the Liège Game and possessed the right

bloodline, he could come out with his birds.

That the Liège Game was one of the best fighters, is underlined with the following facts. At home we have bred the Liège Game for more than 65 years and also took our cocks to cock fights. With one cock, we entered the big pit nine times during two years; always he came out the winner and all the fights ended within 15 minutes. Another of our cocks was six times a winner in his first year. Hybrids of all kinds, mostly called 'Japanese Game' (Shamo crossings), could not beat our cocks.

This proves once more that the Liège Game is a bird with character and a real fighting machine. Fortunately this is all in the past, because one had to have a heart of stone to participate in the sport. Shed tears do not lie and I cried a river.

3. THE PRESENT



Many are called but few are chosen to breed the Liège fighter in all its purity and character, with love, patience and a little trial and error. Some prefer to show crossbreds that look something like the Liège Game, but are not, and this makes me quite upset. I have resisted this tooth and nail but unfortunately, it is a losing battle. I will not give up, and will be using my experience to submit new evidence to the standard commission. Are the numbers of these look-alike birds perhaps the reason the standard is constantly being changed? This is certainly not a positive situation for the Belgian Game breeds. The lack of knowledge of some judges sometimes borders on the impossible. Novice breeders, who view birds at a show that clearly have other breeds crossed in, then sees those birds awarded high marks. This has to be to the detriment of both the Fancy and the Belgian Game breeds in particular.

**Right: White skin of the Liège Game.
Photo: Willem van Ballekom.**

People who do not comply with the purity of the breed are unfortunately being rewarded today. The shortsightedness of those who have written the present Breed Standard—in particular those that have insisted on further changes to the Liège Game—is discussed by many fanciers. So many breeders have quit to where the number of breeders of the Liège Game has been reduced to just a handful. Unfortunately, these people's word seems to be law—knowledge or no knowledge.



I like to give this advice to new breeders who feel attracted to start breeding any Belgian Game breed: Purchase only pure bred Liège Game, even if they show minor faults. Breed them with love and especially keep the purity of the breed alive. Even though the Standard description of the breed is forever being changed, there are still some enthusiastic breeders committed to this noble Belgian Game breed.

Note: In the meantime a website was launched on the Liège Game (and also a bit on the Bruges Game and Tirlémont Game) <http://luiksevechter.weebly.com/index.html> (The website is in Dutch only.)

