

BELGIAN GAME: ORIGIN & CHARACTERISTICS



Fighting cocks, painting by Frans Snyders, 1620-1640,
Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium.

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'The Belgian game is the largest and most powerful chicken breed in Europe and is noticed as one of the best Game Fowl', so begins Jacque (1858) his monograph of the description of the variety. Since then, the Belgian Game Fowl was favored, first by cockers and later by show breeders. The appearance of the breed, however, changed frequently over time with the result that there are uncertainties arose about the original breed characteristics. In this article we portray in a concise way the origin of this impressive Game Fowl, with a summary of the breed characteristics as they were described in the old poultry books.

Origin

In Flanders and neighbouring regions, roosters have been used for fighting since several centuries. This is apparent from 16th and 17th century paintings of Flemish and Dutch painters (e.g. Snyders and Steen) who depicted fighting cocks in their paintings. These cocks had an average size and showed a bankivoid appearance with a large lush tail. Moreover, the roosters often had a colourful plumage. By increased trade with neighbouring continents, the local fowl were crossed with malayoid fowl.

From the second half of the 19th century there was a strong interest in improving farmyard animals. Already in the first books on this subject (e.g.

Jacque 1858) the gamefowl from Belgium was mentioned. This book reported a very large and heavy Game Fowl, feared in the arena and loved as table fowl. The breed, popularly known as 'Lombards rooster', was an impressive fighter with artificial (metal) spurs attached to the shanks. This Belgian gamefowl was baptized as Bruges Game (In French: Combattant de Bruges).

Two other races were created by further crossing with Asian Game. At the end of the 19th century, in the east of Belgium Liège Game was created, and a few years later, in about the same region, the Tirlemont Game.

The differences in appearance between the three varieties were minimal, but more pronounced in fighting style. The last two breeds were more focused on endurance and fought with natural spurs. So currently there are 3 separate Belgium Game Fowl breeds, being the Bruges Game, Liège Game and Tirlemont Game.

Right: Drawing of a pair of Blue Belgian Game (today known as Liège Game).

Written on the drawing: "My blue game fowl. Bred and reared in Wayennesse, Winners at the Shows. Wayennesse (Rijmenam) Belgium, 22 December 1911, A. Van den Kerckhoven".

Characteristics

In the course of the years, the appearance of the Belgian Game fowl evolved, mainly due to crossings with other gamefowl breeds. In addition, texts about the appearance of the breed were frequently copied by several authors, sometimes with their own interpretation on how the birds had to look. Due to contradictions and different interpretations it became unclear what the original breed of the Belgian Game Fowl looked like.

Nevertheless, there are some characteristics that have been repeatedly described by the authors in the early days of poultry keeping (1850): a large and upright game fowl, richly feathered and well muscled. Also the presence of pigmentation in the face, but not in the skin and flesh, is repeatedly emphasized.

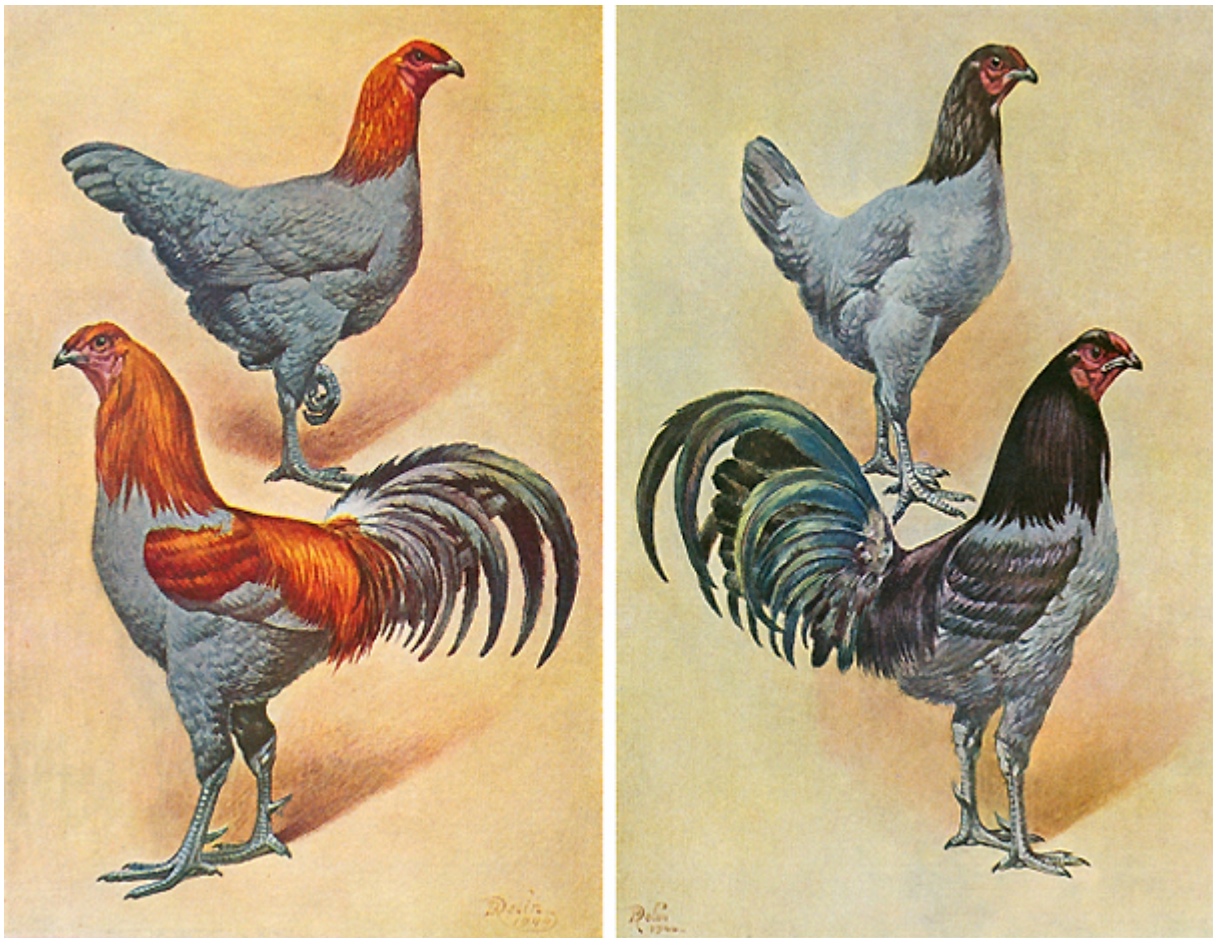
The following sections will briefly display the description of the first reference books, being Wingfield & Johnson (1853), Couchot (1855), Jacque (1858) and Letrone (1859).

Wingfield & Johnson (1853). Bruges. "A large smokey blue fowl, with slate blue unfeathered legs, and small comb, nearly black, but no top-knot or beard. The tail is pointed in the hens, but that of the cock droops. (The one described is



however a very old bird.) Their eggs are white and very large. Weight of cock 6 lbs 2 oz (2,75 kg), of hen 6¾ lbs (2 kg)".

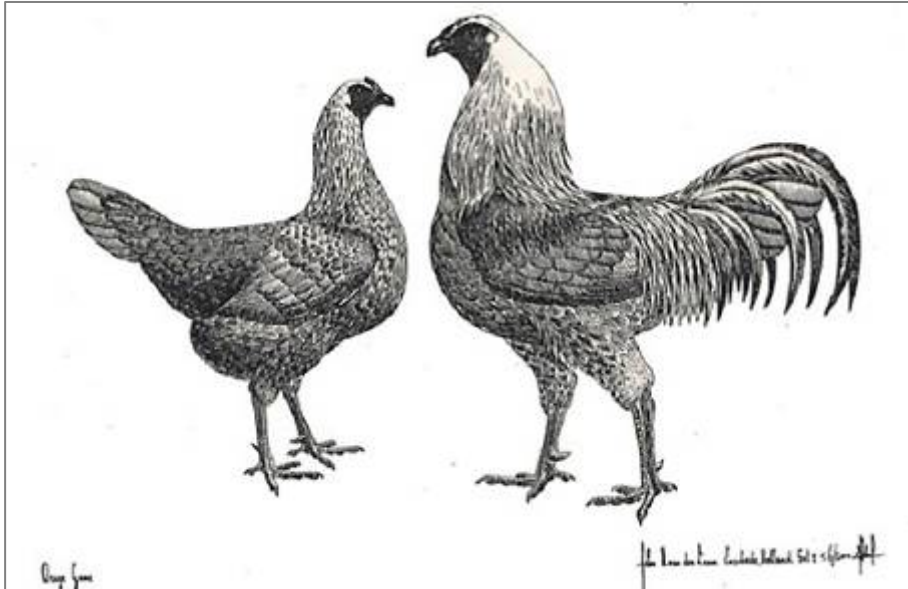
Standard drawing of the Bruges Game, blue yellow birchen (to the left) and the Liege Game, blue, by René Delin (1944).



Couchot (1855). *Game Fowl, originally from the United Kingdom, is also distributed in Belgium and the Netherlands. There lives the Bruges Game, with bluish plumage. It has a normal size, the double comb is cut off, and the wattles are poorly developed. The female often has a single comb. The skin is white, the legs are olive brown, and the cocks are armed with strong sharp spurs. The decorative feathers of the cock are gold, and black and yellow at the hen. The cock has an independent and aggressive character. The hen is a good mother, a less good layer. This variety produces good capons, but they take long to fatten".*

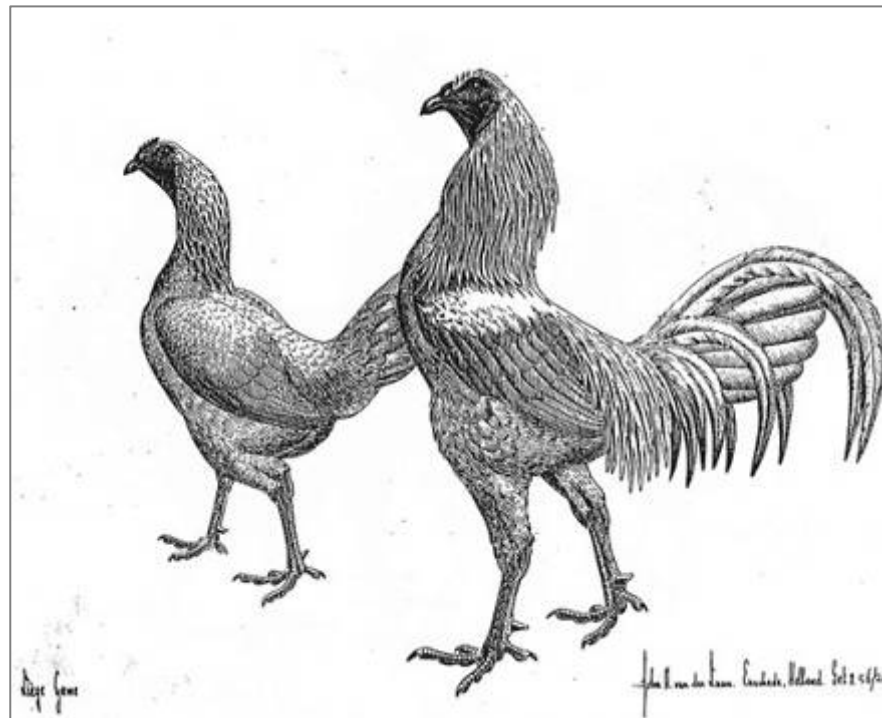
Jacque (1858). *Race de Bruges. "Behaviour and looks are of a British Fighter, the size and weight of a Malay. It is the largest and strongest breed of Europe, and acknowledged as the best. The body is very large, and firmly supported by strong and muscular legs. The tight feathering partially conceals the volume. The head of the cock is strong, the comb is small and usually dubbed, neither single nor double, falling to one side, and blackish in young birds. When the chickens mature, the comb will become redder, but the black in the face still maintains, especially on the cheeks. The earlobes and wattles are voluminous. The cock has an evil eye. The neck is long and covered with a fairly short but full neck hackle. The feet and toes are dark, powerful and of remarkable size. The cock usually weighs 4 kg, but sometimes from 4.5 to 5 kg. The preferred colour of the cock*

and hen is completely slate blue. Only the tail of the blue cocks is a little darker. Self blue cocks without any other colour in their ornamental feathers, are rare. Mostly they have golden neck hackle, red shoulders, some brown or blackish in the breast, and a black tail. They also exist in the cuckoo colour. The hen does not exceed the cock, she has only part of his qualities. Her comb is small and shriveled, the wattles and cheeks are blackish gray in the adult females. The plumes, when slate blue, are lightly flamed. Both the cocks and hens come in other colours too, from splash to completely black, but also yellow, blue and red. I prefer the most fully black birds. The black is more intense, and produces a strange effect with the black wattles and face. Moreover, they are very strong individuals. Another variety is dark brown, almost black. This gives the biggest cocks and hens. There is also a cuckoo colour with seven bars instead of four”.



A Drawing of the Bruges Game (left) and the Liège Game (below) by the Dutch artist John A. van der Laan (1975).

Letrone (1859). Race belge de Bruges. “This is a variety of the ‘Combattant du Nord’ (French game). There are two varieties with different plumage colour, black and slate blue. The blue have variations from light to dark, and even with white ground colour, so there are also almost white birds. They are strong for the fight. The beak is long and curved, the comb is small, and so are the wattles, which are dubbed at a young age. The breed has strong muscles, an upright stance, long spurs, is warm-blooded and evil, and has a slow moult.



The cock of the Bruges Game has a round and well-proportioned body, long black blue legs, long toes and strong nails. The comb is small, blackish and single. The breed has short wattles, a dark eye, and a long curved beak. The neck hackle feathers are long, thin, same as the saddle hackle, yellow-orange with brown

streaking, the rest black, with some red spots on the wings. The thighs have short plumes of a velvet black color. There is also a grayish or slate blue variety, with the neck, back and saddle straw yellow, the wings with fire-like spots, some of them at a white base.

The cock weighs 3.5 kg, has white flesh as a young animal, which is later getting slightly darker. The hen is a good layer of large eggs, whose meat is only tasteful in young animals. She weighs 3 kg. They do not breed. The black cocks have fire-coloured spots on the wingshield, and neck hackle alternating black and yellow. The slate blue hen sometimes has some reddish plumes. The breed is easy to grow, but has a slow growth".

Photos of the three Belgian Game Fowl breeds.

Left: Bruges Game in blue yellow birchen (breeder: Paul Struys)

Middle: Liège Game in blue (breeder: Gerald Louette)

Right: Tirlemont Game in blue silver Duckwing (breeder: Guy Brockmans)



The three breeds differ in type and stance, the Bruges Game with its large and powerful appearance, the back hardly sloping, the Liège Game and Tirlemont Game more slender and upright, the latter also having a white beak and white legs.

The distinction between the Bruges and Liège variety mainly concerned a different fighting style, but obviously this could not be judged in the exhibition pen. To distinguish between the two varieties at the show, the Liège Game was wanted to stand higher on the legs, and wanted in other plumage colours than the Bruges Game, that typically had a slate blue colour.

The first official standard of the breed 'Grand Combattant de Bruges' (Bruges Large Game) dates from 1909 (Chasse et Pêche), and describes the back of the Bruges Game to be in a fairly horizontal position. However, the earlier cited texts speak of a large and UPRIGHT gamefowl. Thus, one could say that the present day Liège Game resembles mostly the type of the Belgian gamefowl as it was described in the old books.

Head study of Liège Game, male (l), female (r) The very dark eye is surrounded by a black eye cere. A dark pigmentation is clearly present in the face, with the comb, wattles and earlobes dark red coloured.



This article is a summary of a meeting organized by The Vechthoenderclub Belgium on 11 June 2011, regarding unclear data in the standard of the three Belgian Gamefowl breeds.

The Vechthoenderclub Belgium (<http://www.bloggen.be/vechthoenders>) brings together breeders and experts of all gamefowl breeds and promotes their preservation and promotion.

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