


# THE HISTORY OF COCK-FIGHTING

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In cooperation with  
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*Cock-Fighting is a very old sport. Older than our Christian era. Even the Romans liked it, and other tribes and nations long before them. It is believed that this blood sport came to Europe via Persia and from there reached Greece. Cockfighting was already known in Europe when the Romans invaded England in 55 BC. They noticed that the Britons only used their fowl for cockfighting. Also the Celts and Gaul people from Continental Europe knew the sport of cockfighting before the Romans conquered Europe.*



Two Satsumadori cocks fighting.  
Photo courtesy of: Stanislaw Roszkowski

Even further back in time, the people from Southeast Asia (India, Japan, China) knew about it. A 'sport' which used to be popular all over the world. Nowadays it is a sport which has been banned in many countries, although it illegally goes on, also in the USA. In Europe cockfighting is still legal in Northern France and this only in the region Nord - Pas de Calais. Cockfighting is also still legal on the Spanish Canary Islands.

In spite of the ban, we have very nice game breeds nowadays like the Malay, Asil, Shamo and Old English Game, not forgetting the American Game! Reason to describe in short the history of Game.

***Two considerations in advance: this article is no reason to believe that the author likes cockfighting. Secondly, the history can be written from many different views.***

## **Classical antiquity**

Excavations tell us that chickens were first domesticated some 6,000 years ago in China. However the first written proof comes from India where cockfighting took place at principalities, about 1500 years B.C. In the times before Christ, approximately 3,000 years ago during the times of the Phoenicians, Hebrews, and Canaanites, cockfighting was popular. Breeding gamecocks for fighting in a pit was considered an art and trading these birds was profitable. In Egypt, in the

time of Moses, cockfighting was a favourite pastime. During the height of Greek civilization, Themistocles - a general who was preparing to drive away the invading Persians - decided to hold a cockfight the night before the battle to inspire his men by showing the courageous nature of the fighting cock.

The Persians apparently introduced chickens and cockfighting in Greece. This was around 500 BC. Later the Romans adopted many of the Greek habits and customs, including cockfighting.

**Right: Greek Corinthian pottery, dated 700 BC. (Archives W. van Ballekom)**



**Left: Ancient cockfight, time and location unknown. (Archives W. van Ballekom)**

As said the history of cockfighting goes back to Classical Era. Most experts agree that it originated in Southeast Asia.

However, before it even became a sport, the bird was regarded as an admirable animal, drawing respect from men. The fighting cock was a subject of religious worship. The ancient Syrians worshipped the fighting cock as a divinity. The ancient Greeks and Romans associated the fighting cock with the gods Apollo, Mercury and Mars.

An ancient example of worshipping: Cockfighting occurred in the temples and the dead bird which lost the battle was prepared to be presented to the Gods. The bird would be placed in a gold cauldron, soaked in gums and spices. Then its body was burned on an altar and its ashes were placed in a golden pot or urn.

Cockfighting in Europe was a pastime enjoyed both by noble and common people. The Spanish and the English who entered the New World introduced gamefowl and the sport of cockfighting.

### **Roman Times**

The sport of cockfighting already existed in Rome 450 years BC. Well known classical Roman authors like Varro and Columella wrote about cockfighting. They wrote that the best fighting cocks came from Rhodes (echoing Greek writers). Julius Caesar liked cockfighting very much and during his first invasion in Britain



in 55 BC he noticed that the Britons kept gamefowl for cockfighting purposes only; they did not eat them as it was forbidden.

He also wrote that the gamefowl of the Britons were better than the birds of the Romans.

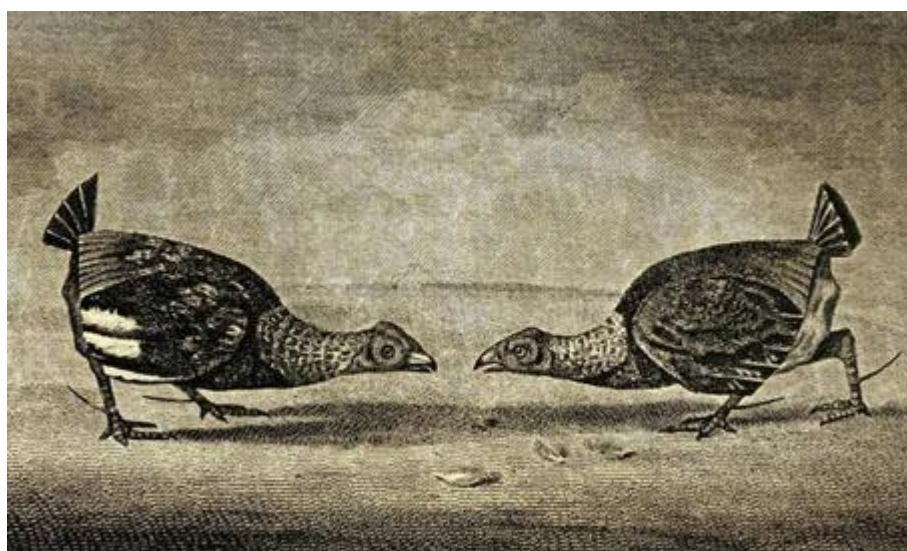
**Left: Cockfight mosaic from Pompei, Italia.  
(Archives W. van Ballekom)**

### **United Kingdom**

The earliest written references on cockfighting in England date from the period of King Henry II (1154 - 1189). Many English Kings like James I, William III and Charles II loved cockfighting. King Henry VIII even build his own cockpit at his Whitehall Palace at Westminster. The game became a national sport at one point, and exclusive schools were required to teach students the points of cockfighting, such as breeding, walking, and conditioning of the gamecock.

At its very height of popularity, even the clergy encouraged the sport. Church yards and inside of the churches were used as an arena for cockfighting. In 1654, cockfighting was declared illegal in England by law by Oliver Cromwell. But the nobility as well as the simple man of the street kept on cocking and despite the ban on the sport, fights were still organized all over England even in public.

Then in 1849 during the reign of Queen Victoria the legal sport finally came to an end by the 1849 Act for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. However, at present day illegal cockfighting still flourishes all over Britain.



**Left: Trimmed gamecocks.  
Engraving by J. Scott.  
(Archives W. van Ballekom)**

Cockfights have historically taken place in cockpits, which are round arenas bounded by wood, Plexiglas, or chicken wire.

Stadium seating might be offered at more posh facilities, but at 'brush pits' the audience might stand or sit on primitive benches or old car seats.

Betting would commence before the fight and continue throughout. Gambling has been central to the pastime. Cockfights would usually be arranged in sets called derbies, in which the cockfighter whose birds won the most fights of the day, won the derby.

The birds would be held in the arms of the owners or trainers while they pecked at each other; this was termed 'billing'. Then the birds would be turned loose from lines drawn in the sand and allowed to peck or lash out with their spurs. When they became too entangled to continue, the fight would be stopped and the cocks carefully separated. Then the fight would recommence from lines drawn in the sand.

**Right: Trimmed Old English Game cock, source HP Clarke 1848. (Archives W. van Ballekom)**



### American History

The sport of cockfighting in the United States was actually a continuation of the old cockfighting culture in the Old World. Famous American presidents who were lovers of the game were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln. The last one was nicknamed "Honest Abe" due to his qualities as a cockfighting referee.

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**Left: Advert for cockfights, USA Kentucky State. Source: history-ky-gov (Archives W. van Ballekom)**

Cockfighting was socially acceptable and encouraged for a gentleman to have a flock of gamecocks and to be an expert on the sport. At one point, the United

States became a center for cockfighting activities and events. Cockfights were even held in the committee rooms of the president. It is said that the fighting-cock almost became the national emblem. It lost by one vote to the American eagle. Cockfighting was the second most popular sport after horse racing. Everyone went to these fights, and people from every class owned gamecocks.

The story below is taken from Storey's Illustrated Guide by Ekarius (2007). An illustrative story how one thought about cockfighting (in 1775):

"... Captain John Caldwell of the Kent company, part of 'the Delaware Regiment' was a devoted gamecock owner. He and his troops, who had been called up at the start of the American Revolution (second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century), were still fighting during the final months of the conflict. They gained a reputation for bravery and competence in battles with the British at Trenton, Princeton, White Plains and Long Island. During down times the company often staged cockfights with a blue feathered breed dubbed the Kent County Blue Hen. Word spread that these 'Blue Hens' Chickens' were the birds to beat. In time the regiment became

known by the nickname 'Blue Hens' Chickens', in respect for the fighting abilities of both its soldiers and its chickens ...".

This story is about the Blue Hen of Delaware. Nowadays it is the State's bird of Delaware and Mascot of University of Delaware.

Cockfighting reached its peak in British North America between 1750 and 1800. Cockfighting was pretty popular all over North America but extremely popular in the southern states especially in the state of Louisiana. American cockfighters reared and fought gamecocks which were bred and selected to desired fighting qualities. They have produced very distinctive fighting fowl like the famous Hatch, Kelso, Whitehackles and other strains. Cockfighting declined when the Civil War started.



**Left: Head study of a Madagascar Game cock.  
Photo: Luuk Hans.**

#### **Other parts of the world**

In many countries cockfighting is illegal and forbidden, but not everywhere! Many countries have developed their own breeds for cockfighting. Many breeds are crosses - the Malay, Aseel and the OEG have often been used to create a fierce fighter. In the old days in America for instance, many breeds were named after their creator, as described above. Most of these breeds have disappeared now. Another example are the Latin American countries that each have created their own gamefowl, like the Navajeros in Peru.



**Right: (English) Oxford Game.  
Photo: Rupert Stephenson.**

Many foreign game fowl breeds still exist today. Some are very beautiful, in particular the long-tailed breeds. Countries like Japan and Indonesia have many genuine game-breeds; several are still well-known and famous, like the Shamo from Japan and the Sumatra from Indonesia. Often people don't realize that breeds like the Sumatra and the Satsumadori started as fighting fowl. Other breeds, like Malay, Aseel, Shamo and Old English Game look more like fighting machines. Most gamefowl breeds in other parts of the world resemble the Malay.

**Right: Aseel.  
Photo Archives AE.**

It is often said that this breed was used to improve the fighting spirit. Many breeds are crosses, but some have very old roots like the smaller Reza and the larger Kulang Asil in India and the Shamo varieties like the Yakido in Japan. Cockfighting used to be very popular in many countries and in some it still is. Also the naked neck Madagascar Game and the Bruges Game in Belgium are very old and still popular.



**Left: Head study of a Malay cock.  
Photo AE.  
Below: Bruges Game.  
Photo Dirk de Jong.**

### **In the pit**

In Europe well-built cockpits existed before the New World was settled. Londoners could attend fights at such establishments as the Royal Pit at Westminster. This brick and timber structure operated for 110 years. Westminster fights led to the creation of the 'Rules and Order of Cocking'. American fights however typically required no fixed location. Combatants—there are records of events in which fifty to sixty pairs of birds fought—met in areas marked by a rope or in an open space between buildings. Roosters competed with birds of similar weight,



much like boxers and wrestlers do today. Combat lasted until one gamecock killed the other, or neither could fight any longer. The finality of death eliminated questions about the victor or the settling of bets.



**Above: Japan, cockfight with Longtail Fowl. (Archives W. van Ballekom)**

At a cockfight people visited old friends and made new ones. Some concluded business transactions. Others attended nearby dances after the competition. During the games, spectators cheered, drank, ate, and swore.

In the United States when fight is getting slow, the birds are moved from the main pit to pits on the side (known as drag-pits) to fight till the bitter end. In some countries the natural spur of the cock is cut and heeled instead with metal gaffs, which were slightly curved and sharp pointed like ice picks.

**Right: Two American-English gaffs. (Archives W. van Ballekom)**



### **Abandonment**

Authorities occasionally tried to suppress cockfighting. In 1752, in the UK the College of William and Mary directed its students to avoid them. Georgia prohibited them in 1775. The Continental Congress and several states passed legislation condemning the sport. After the Revolutionary War, some citizens of

the new United States looked upon cockfighting as an unsavoury residual of English culture and advocated its abandonment.



**Above: Balinese cockfight emotions by Keller, 2012. (Archives W. van Ballekom)**



**Left: American Game rooster tethered by a string. US. Photo: Luuk Hans.**

**Right: Satsumadori cock. Photo: Wanda Zwart.**

Governments do worry about the social disruption on households, in particular if a lot of betting takes place. Betting can be devastating for household incomes! In some

### **Present day**

Nowadays, cockfighting still takes place. Although forbidden in most Western countries it still takes place in the US, mostly by immigrants. In many countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia cockfighting is still allowed.





countries therefore too much is at stake. It will be difficult to ban this bloody sport totally. Nevertheless cockfighting has also brought some nice-looking breeds to the Western World. Many poultry fanciers all over the world still breed these robust and fearless fighting fowl. Either for fighting or exhibition purposes and preservation of these old living heritage breeds which are a part of many cultures around the world.

**Right: A pair of Shamo in the US. Photo: Luuk Hans.**

### **Summary**

Cockfighting is forbidden in many countries around the world. Luckily. A lot of game-breeds can be found at an exhibition nowadays. A good development. However, the character of game-breeds must also be preserved. An alternative for the bloody cockfighting must be found in order to have these characters preserved. Gamefowl breeds are robust, arrogant-looking and proud birds, but mostly very friendly to men, even the cocks; let us keep it that way!



**Below: Cockfights were very popular, so there are many artifacts resembling fighting cocks; these are metal figurines. Photo: Luuk Hans.**



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