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Of All Things: All the rage in Manila

By Rhymer Rigby

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The man next to me grabs my sleeve: "You see," he says pointing downwards, "if you had two knives and I had one - but my cock was bigger - I would still have the advantage." The author of this rather arresting statement and I are in the upper stands at Manila's Libertad cockpit. Below us, in the ring, a two-bladed rooster has just been bloodily bested by a larger, single-bladed bird.

Prior to this fight (and on a typical day there are up to 100) I had spent a bit of time in the prep area. There the fighting cocks have vicious, razor-sharp blades tied to their legs by a "gaffer". They are then brought out into a dirt ring, psyched into a furious rage and let loose. After a few seconds of circling, the squawking starts in earnest and the feathers fly.

Inevitably blood is drawn quickly and, if a bird is on the deck, he is picked up by the ref. The contenders are then made to face each other afresh. If they both show some fight, then they're let at it again. If not, a victor is declared. The winner heads off for medical attention and the loser... well, he gets taken out back to meet a fate that will be familiar to poultry the world over.

A cockfight lasts a maximum of 10 minutes and, in the highly unlikely event of both birds making it to this point, a draw is declared. "Each cock," says Jhonny Basa, a Manila-based owner and breeder, "fights only once in a competition. The injuries are too bad for a second time. But they can usually fight again in two weeks."

Later that morning, I am lucky enough to shadow Francisco Frederico, a "cock doctor" (his own description). In between sewing up the savagely slashed victors, he tells me a bit about the Philippines' favourite spectator sport. It is, he explains, a pastime enjoyed at all levels of society: "Even congressmen fight cocks - this cockpit is owned by the local senator; you see him here sometimes." Fights, he adds, can be anything from a pair of Sunday roasts duking it out on a village street to complex derbies. The biggest is the rather literally named World Slasher Cup, which attracts entrants from around the globe and where prizes run

to millions of pesos.

Cockfighting has a history stretching back centuries and was enjoyed in the west until the mid-19th century. Indeed, Abraham Lincoln may have gained his nickname "Honest Abe" for his scrupulously fair refereeing of these fowl fights. However, the sport declined and was outlawed in the UK and, for the most part, the US. It still takes place on a small scale in the Middle East, Latin America, Asia and Spain. But only in the Philippines is it a large part of 21st-century life.

The country has more than 1,500 registered cockpits and many more that are unregistered - more, it is said, than churches. So ubiquitous is cock ownership that even in central Manila you are likely to be woken at 5am by a cacophony of cock-a-doodle-does. A whole support industry has grown up selling rooster boosters, such as costly special feeds, vitamin supplements and anything else that might save your chicken from a lickin'. It is an oft-heard lament among Filipinas that, if a fight is in the offing, the family goes without as the cock gobbles up resources.

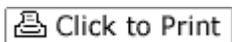
Despite the best efforts of foreign animal-rights groups, the sport shows no sign of loosening its grip on the male Filipino psyche. If anything, it is moving with the times. For, not only are the important fights swanky, big-money affairs - with TV coverage and sponsorship - but plans are afoot to take cockpit gambling online. Philweb Corporation, an internet gaming company, and the government-owned Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corp hope to launch TeleSabong, the world's first web-based cockfight betting site, over the next couple of months. The pair reckon that this will generate some ú600m annually.

For all this, at least one punter in the Libertad crowd is unimpressed. He is from Mindanao, the country's large, southern island. "Chickens are no big deal," he tells me dismissively. "Where I come from, we have horse fighting."

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