

## There's More to Cockfighting Than the Fight

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Officer Marty Weigh, a pilot assigned to the Los Angeles Police Department's Air Support Division, was on duty flying his helicopter over Sylmar, a suburb of Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley. As he looked down, he noticed a property with a large number of covered enclosures. It's not illegal to have structures like this on property, but based on the training he received from LAPD's Animal Cruelty Task Force (ACTF), he suspected someone was trying to conceal the fact that the location was being used for animal fighting and training. He called for assistance and thus began a criminal prosecution involving the largest seizure of fighting birds in the City of Los Angeles.

Cockfighting is illegal in every state and all animal fighting that affects interstate commerce is punishable as a federal felony under the Animal Welfare Act. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have made cockfighting a felony offense, 37 states

and the District of Columbia prohibit the possession of birds for fighting, 42 states and the District of Columbia prohibit being a spectator at cockfights, and 13 states prohibit the possession of cockfighting implements.

California has a comprehensive set of laws banning all activities involving cockfighting. It is illegal to conduct cockfights and any person who permits cockfighting on any premises under his or her charge or control, and any person who aids or abets cockfighting, is subject to prosecution. It is illegal to be a spectator. It is illegal to raise or be in possession of fighting birds and gaffs or slashes used for fighting. Of course, if animals are harmed, animal cruelty and neglect charges can be filed. Illegal gambling is associated with cockfights, as are drug dealing, illegal firearms, and other serious crimes.

Cockfighting, and the raising and training of fighting cocks, occurs in many urban communities like Sylmar. It is very common for law enforcement to come upon a location where cockfighting related activities are present, but due to the secretive nature of the sport, no cockfighting is observed. Consequently, just as in dog fighting cases, it is



*Don Cocek, Deputy City Attorney, Los Angeles City Attorney's Office, releasing a hawk he saved.*



important that prosecutors and investigating officers be familiar with the paraphernalia and the activities associated with cockfighting. Something as common as a piece of string or carpeting is a very valuable piece of evidence. The Sylmar case is an example of how suspects can be brought to justice in the absence of an actual fight.

Based on the observations of the police helicopter pilot, Animal Control Officer Troy Boswell from the Los Angeles Department of Animal Services went to the location to investigate. Attempting to locate the property owner, Boswell entered the property and observed a man holding a rooster in his arms and using a tool attached to a door-jam to cut the spur off the rooster's leg. The man told the officer that he was cutting off the spur to stop the rooster from scratching itself. Boswell also saw a shelf with sparring muffs, syringes, and bottles containing liquids. The officer had been trained that these items were commonly used by persons involved in cockfighting.

“**Sparring muffs**” are used to cover the roosters’ spurs so the roosters can be fought without injuring each other. “**Sparring**” is a common way of training roosters as they are prepared and conditioned during their “**keep**,” the training period prior to a fight. “**Syringes**” and “**injectable medications**” are commonly used by persons involved in cockfighting to inject the roosters with vitamins, coagulants, and steroids.



*inside concealed enclosures*

Boswell reported his observations to the ACTF, which checked property records and identified the property owner as a person named Ybarra. The ACTF had aerial photographs taken of the location. The photographs revealed multiple coops in the rear of the property as well as a makeshift structure that might have concealed a fighting pit. Based on their past experience investigating cockfighters, the officers knew that it was common in an urban setting for fighting pits to be covered in an attempt to conceal fighting activities from the police, neighbors, and passersby, and to keep the events from being canceled due to inclement weather (...yes, it rains in LA!). Interestingly, examination of the photographs revealed that the location next door also had multiple covered enclosures possibly housing roosters as well.

ACTF officers went to the property next door to investigate and from the driveway in front of the house, they saw two men near the middle of the property “**hand sparring**,” a variation of sparring two birds where a trainer holds a “**cull**” or “**trash bird**” that has no fighting value and allows it to be used as a moving target by the other bird. When the men saw the officers, they immediately stopped and put the birds into cages.



*slasers*

The person living in the house, Calderon, told the officers they could look around and the officers observed other cages each containing just one rooster, a typical manner of housing roosters by cockfighters. Due to the aggression of roosters trained to fight, the animals have to be maintained without direct contact with one another so they cannot cause each other injury. Each of these roosters had been “**dubbed**,” i.e., their combs, wattles, and earlobes had been removed. The dubbing is usually done with scissors without the use of anesthesia. Cockfighters normally dub their roosters to lower the bird’s overall body weight and because injury during a fight to any of these locations can cause profuse bleeding. The roosters had the natural spurs on their legs cut to about a half-inch stump. It is on these stumps that “**gaffs**” or “**slashers**” are attached to the bird’s leg. The officers also observed that the roosters’ feathers had been plucked, called “**cutting out**,” where feathers in certain areas are plucked out to lower the rooster’s body weight prior to a fight. The officers also saw perforated “**cardboard boxes**” used by cockfighters to transport roosters to and from fighting locations.

Based on the observations, a search warrant was obtained and served on both locations by officers from LAPD and the Department of Animal Services (LADAS). Accompanying the officers were members of the veterinary staff of LADAS. The area was secured and Calderon’s property was searched first.

Slasher blades were found in several stalls on Calderon’s property as well as “**waxed string**.” Waxed string is commonly used to attach the slasher blade to the rooster’s leg prior to a fight. Sparring muffs were found in another stall in a bucket under a “**flirt table**,” a table covered with carpeting. A rooster is tossed onto the table on its back by the handler. The rooster then flips over to get back on its feet. This technique is repeated over and over to increase the rooster’s agility in preparation for a fight. In a file cabinet in one of the stalls, officers recovered sparring muffs, slashers, “**mounting blocks**” used to attach the blades to the roosters’ legs, papers with step-by-step instructions on how to attach the blades, and “**leg bands**” used to inventory and identify the roosters during a fight. A search of Calderon’s bedroom recovered unregistered weapons, ammunition, and several bird medications; one medication was in a box depicting two roosters engaged in a cockfight. The officers also searched for safes containing cash and jewelry from the gambling that occurs during cockfights, but none were found.

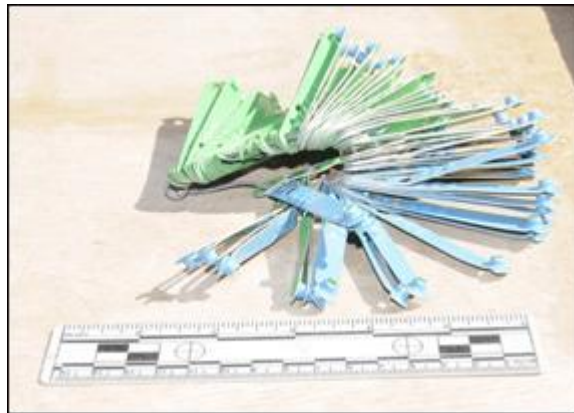


*flirt table*

A search was conducted at Ybarra’s property next door and the officers recovered sparring muffs, slasher blades, mounting blocks, and a “**blade gauge**” used to measure the lengths of the blades tied to the rooster’s legs. The officers also found suture kits, rifles, and cockfighting magazines. Two covered rooms were discovered which were used as arenas. Both rooms had dirt floors and visible on the ground were “**scratch lines**,” parallel lines drawn approximately six to eight feet apart on the floor upon which the birds are released at the start of a cockfight.

The officers called Ybarra and asked him to come to the location so they could talk to him. He said he'd be there in a few minutes, but he arrived over an hour later. When the officers asked him: "What took so long?" he replied: "I was sure that I was going to be arrested, so I took a shower, put on clean clothes, and called my attorney." As he was being interviewed, his cell phone kept ringing. The people who rented the enclosures from him, the owners of the birds, were calling trying to find out what was happening. He asked them to come to the location but no one showed up.

Although the LAPD ACTF and LADAS officers did not come upon the scene while a cockfight was actually taking place, the locations had all the makings of an active cockfighting operation: altered roosters, training facilities, cockfighting paraphernalia, fighting arenas, guns and ammunition. Both suspects were prosecuted for misdemeanor violations of possession of fighting birds and possession of gaffs and slashers used for fighting. Both defendants pleaded guilty to illegal possession of gaffs and slashers, were placed on three years' probation, and were ordered to do 45 days of freeway cleanup. The terms of their probation included a ban on owning, possessing, maintaining, or caring for any fowl, plus the removal of the bird-keeping structures from the properties.



*leg bands*

In all, 1538 fighting cocks were seized from Ybarra's property and 696 from Calderon's, thus making this the largest seizure of fighting birds in LAPD history. Each suspect relinquished the animals to the Department of Animal Services and all 2234 birds were humanely euthanized.

A worker on one of the properties told the officers: "I know they fight the birds, I'm not stupid. You don't have birds like this for any other reason, you know."