

GOLDEN AGE RELICS

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FEATURE STORY



COCKFIGHT KINGDOM

Banned since 2009, cockfighting maintains a thriving presence in the nation's shadows – and its military bases

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PostWeekend

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National



Cockfighter Phearum bathes his gamecocks in rice wine every day.
HENG CHIVOAN

The shadowy sport of blood, money and feathers

Despite being technically illegal, cockfighting remains a common past-time in the Kingdom, with participants lured by the excitement, cash and glory

MAY TITTHARA AND
STUART WHITE
Post Weekend

Standing around a dusty ring in Kampong Speu province, a hundred voices yell back and forth, haggling over bets and odds. Savvy gamblers, competing with the din of the crowd, lob questions at trainers as to their fighters' history and provenance.

The odds are finally set, the bets are laid, and the fighters – two bristling gamecocks – are dropped into the ring, where they clash in a storm of feathers and claws. With each slash of the sharp metal spurs attached to their heels, the crowd roars.

Though cockfighting was officially banned in 2009, the bettors at this fight had little to worry about – the matches, which took place last weekend, were hosted on the grounds of an Oudong district military base.

Cockfighting has a long tradition in Cambodia, dating to before the time of Jayavarman VII. Carvings on the wall of the 12th-century Bayon temple depict a scene that wouldn't be out of place today: two groups of men jostling for a better view as two handlers square their birds off in a ring.

The sport remains a common practice, despite being driven underground by the ban. Rarely a week goes by without news of an arena being busted and its unlucky patrons

being made to thumbprint documents promising police never to fight again.

The Professional

Phearum*, a cockfighter from Kampong Speu, has a complicated relationship with the military base game. The stakes there are higher, of course – sometimes there's as much as \$4,000 riding on his bird – but he also likes playing in small village games. Those games, however, can't afford police protection, and when they're busted – a common occurrence – cocks and motorbikes alike are impounded.

But Phearum suspects the officers aren't motivated by a sense of duty as much as a desire to channel cockfighters into the games from which they themselves profit.

"What they do is just for money," he said. "They said that the game is illegal, but in fact they just want us to stop playing in the village and to play in a casino or a big arena that's owned by soldiers and police."

Phearum fights two or three times a month, "but in the big place in Oudong, they fight every day because they pay money to local authorities, journalists and police".

For Phearum, cockfighting has been the family business since his grandfather's day, and even now it's a full-time job.

Every day he wakes before dawn, bathes his gamecocks in rice wine and takes them to watch the sunrise, which gives them strength, he said. He

sponge-bathes the birds three times daily at their regular mealtimes. Their diets rotate every few days, but are always rich in meat and vegetables.

"Sometimes I don't have money to pay for my own food, but my cocks have to have good food, so I don't care about my food," he said. "I care more about my cocks' food."

The best gamecocks come from Vietnam, Phearum said on a recent morning as he fed a bird bits of chopped eel and sliced tomato. Phearum's birds – Vietnamese, of course – cost up to \$400 apiece and, with their red and iridescent-green plumage, couldn't be further from the dull roosters pecking around a nearby trash heap.

If left unattended, the birds would be an easy target for thieves, so every night, Phearum brings them into his small rental room to sleep. His wife is not amused by the practice, he noted, "but she's used to it".

Each day, Phearum runs his cocks through their workouts.

"My job is cockfighting, so I have to train my cocks every day," he said. "I take a mirror [into the pen] and then they see their face and they suppose it's another cock, so they have to run to prepare to fight. When it runs every day, it makes it strong for fighting."

Tossing a cock in a large enclosure, Phearum fetched a four-sided mirrored box and placed it in the middle of the pen under a mesh guard. Sure enough, catching sight of itself in the mirror, the cock flared his feathers and began



Carvings on the wall of the 12th-century Bayon temple, part of the Angkor Wat complex, depict cockfighting. **LISA FINDLEY/ LISAFINDLEY.COM**



A veteran gamecock and a young, flashy upstart go at it in the practice arena. **HENG CHIVOAN**



Sopheak's cocks eat a varied diet. **HENG CHIVOAN**



Gamblers bet up to \$4,000 on fights. **HENG CHIVOAN**



Spurs make cockfighting more dangerous. **HENG CHIVOAN**

sprinting laps around the box.

Despite the emphasis he places on training, Phearum says it's hard to tell what makes a cock great.

"I take a lot of time to train and breed my cocks. Sometimes I think training is [more] important, but sometimes I think breeding is [more] important. Sometimes I am hopeless, because I have trained them for a long time and I take them to fight and my cock loses," he said.

Cock husbandry is time-consuming, he conceded, and even his recent success – one of his birds has four wins under its belt – hasn't endeared the sport to his wife.

"All my [current] cocks have never lost because I spend a lot of my time taking care them," he said. "My wife always blames me – she says I take care of my cocks more than I take care of my family."

Indeed, despite the huge amounts of money that change hands at Phearum's fights, the success of a cock-fighter is tenuous at best, and a streak of bad breaks can be devastating.

"Sometimes we lose," he admitted. "Playing at cockfighting, do not hope to become a rich person. As for me, I lost a lot of money until I had to sell my flat and come to rent a room. It depends on luck."

The Breeder

The cockfighting business is a fickle one. There are generally no winner's purses in Cambodian cockfight-

ing. All the money a fighter can hope to earn comes from betting, making the entire profession, for fighters like Phearum, literally a gamble.

Some, however, largely steer clear of the fighting, like Sopheak*, who prefers to simply raise gamecocks and sell them to others.

While most of Sopheak's gamecocks resembled the red and green Vietnamese ones kept by Phearum – except for one scruffy old rooster with missing tufts of feathers and thick, sturdy-looking legs – Sopheak's cocks don't fetch as much money. Typically, they sell for between \$80 and \$150.

A crowd of neighbours, children and unofficial assistants gathered as Sopheak prepared for an impromptu sparring match between the old campaigner and one of the flashier cocks. Roosters in hand, the coterie marched through Sopheak's small home, and out the back door onto a dusty volleyball court.

Dropped in the sand together, the cocks immediately locked eyes, their beaks little more than an inch apart, their heads bobbing up and down in unison as each looked for an opening.

Each cock's aim in a fight is to use its wings to propel itself off the ground in order to bring its claws – and in the case of modern cockfights, metal spurs – to bear on its opponent. Sometimes cocks grapple with their necks, not unlike flagging boxers in a clinch.

On the volleyball court, the cocks clashed a few inches above the

ground. Sometimes one cock would feint, letting their opponent pass overhead, then the two would reset, lock eyes again, and joust anew. After a few minutes, Sopheak deemed the birds to have earned their lunch and stopped the fight.

After the dust settled, the flashy red-and-green cock had a pair of new bright red patches of exposed skin on its wings. The scruffy old vet looked none the worse for wear.

The Travelling Salesman

Vuthy*, who had arrived just before the sparring began, straddles the line between breeder and fighter, which, in his telling, are interlinked pursuits.

Perched on a wooden bench in a flashy silver shirt with a presumably fake ruby the size of an almond on one finger, he said that he travelled all over the country setting up matches, both to wager on his birds, and to drum up buyers for their offspring. Each win, in a sense, functions as an advertisement of the quality of his stock.

"I've got a cock from Siem Reap. If it wins, it will become famous, and all the villagers will say cocks from Siem Reap are very strong," he said.

With the word out on Siem Reap cocks, he continued, buyers will start looking for them specifically, and he'll be in a position to meet the demand. Vuthy paid \$3,000 for one cock that had five wins to its name, and now puts the cock out to stud. While there are no stud fees, he said,

he keeps the offspring and sells them for up to \$150 each.

Vuthy usually sticks to small-time village games that don't use spurs, and which police are more likely to tolerate. Like Phearum, he harbours no illusions about making his fortune.

"In cockfighting, you can't be a rich man. I do it just for fun. I do it just to become famous in that village."

The King

The unseen presence of one figure looms over the entire cockfighting community, a cockfighter of near-mythic prowess whose name is constantly on the lips of small-timers and high-rollers alike: Sok An. The deputy prime minister is a renowned lover of the sport, and was even called out by name by Prime Minister Hun Sen in the 2009 speech announcing the cockfighting ban.

"Now, I am ordering Sok An – do you hear?" he asked with a chuckle. "I tell [you] to close the Tonle Bati [arena] or I will bring in the armed forces to surround it."

The reputation of Sok An and his cocks is well known to every cock-fighter, even ones who have never seen either in the flesh.

Phearum, the Kampong Speu cock-fighter, swears that Sok An's cocks are practically unbeatable. Such is the master's confidence in his birds that he would welcome a challenge from a competitor with a 25 per cent weight advantage, and his cock will

still come away victorious, he said.

Sokha*, a cockfight attendee, said that despite An's birds' renown, their fights are exclusive affairs.

"I really want to see Sok An's cocks, because everybody says that his cocks are strong, but I don't know how to get in to see them," he said.

Vuthy claims to have actually visited An's arena. The tycoon's cocks, he claimed, were everything they were rumoured to be, capable of unbelievable feats.

"A lot of people don't want to fight Sok An's cocks," he said. "In the time it takes a cock to attack once, Sok An's cocks can attack 10 times."

A source close to An said that in his prime he brought in cocks from Malaysia, the Philippines and even Mexico. However, he maintained, An had given up the game when it became illegal.

"Sok An liked to do cockfighting in the past, before the prime minister's ban, but since then he stopped. He is a farmer now," he said.

For the love of the game

Back at the military base ring in Kampong Speu, not all those in attendance are cockfighters. Sokha, who paid 2,000 riel for a seat at the match, said one doesn't need to own cocks to enjoy cockfighting, just a little money to make things interesting.

In the old days, however, when cockfights ramped up after the harvest and around the Water Festival, cockfighters played for pride rather than money, Sokha said.

"Like my father, he wanted his neighbours to be proud of his cock, so during the Water Festival, he took it to fight with others in the village. But now when you play, you have to bet money, so it became an illegal game," he added.

Samoeun*, also in attendance, said he had ponied up for his own gamecock, which his friend cares for. Now he unwinds with a cockfight after work two or three times a week, he said.

"In fact, I've loved this sport since I was a child and followed my father, so I am always interested in looking for a good cock to buy for my friend who takes care of them, and I can join in to play when I am free," he said.

In 2006, before the ban, CTN broadcast a cockfighting tournament (Sok An was sitting ringside). Phearum remembers the tourney as a high point in the sport, and hopes it can be resurrected someday. In the meantime, he brushes off the concerns of those who say that the sport is inhumane and should be banned.

"It's a traditional game, and I just want to have fun, so I don't care about people who say it should be illegal," he said. "I've loved it since I was child. I still love it." ■

Additional reporting by Chhay Chanmyda

**Names have been changed to protect identities.*



Playing at cockfighting, do not hope to become a rich person

PHEARUM / COCKFIGHTER