

## Master Cockfighter by Mark Graham

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**After more than 70 years, Mike Ratliff prepares to retire from his blood sport**

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**"The Chicken Man?" the woman behind the counter asks. "Just go on up the road about a half-mile, like you're fixing to go out of town. Take a left, then a right. You'll see the chickens."**

I'm at the Whistlestop General Store, the only business in Blanket, a Central Texas town with a population of 402.

Everyone, it seems, has heard of the chicken man. And sure enough, I find the house just where she said it would be, nestled behind an overgrown field where a herd of white goats are munching grass. I walk around back and knock on the door.

Mike Ratliff calls me in. He's in the living room, sitting in his recliner, feet propped up on the foot rest. His hands are folded across his little pot belly, and his clunky brown tennis shoes are covered in chicken shit. He invites me to sit and asks his wife, whom he addresses as Baby, if she can fetch us some root beer. He's got two jagged little scars above each of his eyes, one from a horse that kicked him in the head when he was 18 months old, the other from a hatchet his baby brother accidentally hit him with when he was five.

Up close, I notice he sort of looks like a chicken -- nose curved like a beak, long fingernails like talons, white hair that curls up under his hat like feathers. Across the room is Jarrel Hurst, a Ratliff protégé. He's probably pushing 70, but based on his stature (stout) and his demeanor (no-nonsense), he could probably whup my ass if I ever crossed him. He's got his arms folded across his chest, skeptical of my interest in his friend.

Ratliff is perhaps the greatest cockfighter that ever lived. In 1968, he opened the only cockfighting school in America. Over the years he taught an estimated 8,000 students, some from as far away as the Philippines.

Then in November, at the age of 83, Ratliff announced he had taught his last class. The Humane Society rejoiced. They called it the end of an era.

"There's not many of us left," Ratliff says of the cockfighters he grew up with.

"They're all gone. Dead. They're trying to make criminals out of the rest of us."

The sport is under severe attack, Ratliff says gravely. The Humane Society won't stop until it is completely eradicated from the United States. Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico, once the friend of cockfighters, is now doing everything he can to outlaw it in his state, one of only two states where it is still legal.

There was a time you could fight cocks all over, Ratliff says. He fought them in Arizona, Oklahoma and pretty much every state in the South. Fought them in Texas, too, before it became a felony. He points to the long bank of trophies taking up an entire wall. "I've got 97 of them trophies," Ratliff says. "I just need three more to get 100. One of my students will get them for me."

Hurst smiles at his old friend. As they begin to hold forth on the sorry state of the United States of America, particularly its stance on cockfighting, I look around. It's more shrine than living room. Above the mammoth big screen: an oil painting of two cocks fighting. On the TV: the golden bust of a rooster. Next to the TV, nailed to the wall: a toilet seat with a rooster painted on it. Every piece of art, every throw blanket, every knickknack on every shelf is a tribute to cockfighting. Over in one corner of the room I notice a collection of Native American art. A small concession, I guess, to Ratliff's wife.

"People have no damn common sense," Ratliff says, sipping his root beer. "This thing is an industry, this cockfighting is, and it's a way of life. You see the Humane Society is so damn ignorant they don't know anything about common sense. This has been handed down since the beginning of the world. Since 5,000 years before Christ."

"People think these roosters, that we make them fight," Hurst says with a frown. "They're born that way," Ratliff says. "It's inherited from their ancestors like we inherited it from our ancestors."

Hurst asks me what sort of story I'm interested in writing. They've read plenty sympathetic to that damn Humane Society. The way Ratliff sees it, city folks are all mixed up. They shudder at the thought of a racehorse busting a leg, or even a damn squirrel dropping from a tree. Don't they know how beef cattle are slaughtered? A bolt to the head. Chickens are strung up by their hind legs and beheaded. Nothing humane about that.

I explain that I've heard a lot of bad things about cockfighting, and that I've come to hear the other side. Hurst nods, not quite convinced.

"We have nothing to hide," Ratliff says, shrugging his shoulders, like a plea to his old friend. He pops a throat lozenge in his mouth. He's got a lot to say.

Mike Ratliff first discovered cockfighting in Cross Cut, Texas, when he was five years old. "My mother gave me a set of gamecock eggs, and I learned to count by counting them baby chicken eggs. One morning I went out and they had hatched. They was in a little pile, and their heads were real bloody. They had just been pecking each other, fighting, you know? And I was just fascinated by them. I wanted to know what it was that made them fight."

At the age of ten, he and his brother, who were out on horseback hunting for raccoons in the Texas brush, rode up on a circle of Model Ts down by a creek. Within the circle, a group of men were gathered around a pair of roosters fighting. It was the first cockfight Ratliff ever saw, and he was hooked.

Shortly after, he was given his first fighting rooster by a man named G.C. Byrd. The rooster won his first fight, to a chicken a pound heavier, which was an extraordinary achievement. Ratliff was so proud he says he named the bird after the man who gave it to him and kept the bird until the day it died.

He would never name another rooster.

Ratliff was always asking other chicken fighters their secrets, but they would never share them. He eventually found an old man who would. "Son," he said,

putting his arm around Ratliff's shoulder, "on the fight day, give them all the yeller corn they can eat. He'll eat all he can hold. Give him all the water he can drink, too."

Ratliff was thrilled. He thought he'd never lose another fight. But he was wrong. The old man was lying to him. Filling the bird with corn and water didn't make him strong -- it made him weak. He could barely hold his head up to fight.

When Ratliff realized he'd been lied to, he decided he'd figure out for himself what made one fighting rooster superior to the other. After fights, he cut the losing roosters open to determine what they were eating that had made them weak. He learned how to recognize the best fighting birds on his farm. He looked for cocks with a natural tendency to fly above their opponents and strike them with their spurs, a claw-like appendage that grows naturally from the side of a rooster's leg. Cocks that struck their opponents on the top of the back, where the vital organs are, were selected for the official rooster-fighting competitions, called derbies.

Ratliff won his first derby in 1951 in Carlsbad, New Mexico. By 1968, he had won more derbies than any man alive. So he started a school to share his secrets. It wasn't a cockfighting school, Ratliff says. It was a school to teach beginning cockers how to care for their birds, how to condition them and how to help them heal if they survived a fight. Classes were two weeks long. Instruction was detailed to the point of teaching the proper way to pick up a bird (one hand on the leg, the other on the breast to avoid hurting them). He even taught a technique for birds that became aggressive toward their owners. Feed them out of your hand, he'd say. At first, they'll peck you, but after a while they will eat the food, be it apples or grain or millet, and you will regain their trust.

Roosters overshadowed every part of Ratliff's life. He worked jobs -- from meat cutter to oil-field pumper -- that allowed him time to feed and care for his chickens. He raised his oldest son, Mike Jr., to become a cockfighting man. Finally, his wife had had enough. In 1974, after 30 years of marriage and three children, she said she wanted a divorce. It's either me or the chickens, she said.

"Well, honey," Ratliff says he told her, "don't let the door catch your shirttail on the way out."

Ratliff plowed on, taking his school on the road. He went all over the South. Once, in Georgia, he ran into two representatives of the Humane Society who protested his habit of killing the vultures and hawks that preyed on his gamefowl. Whenever Ratliff killed a hawk or a fox, he strung its carcass up on a fence around the property where he was holding his school.

There was a fine in Georgia for killing hawks, the man told him. Ratliff wasn't impressed. "We're just killing the damn things that eats our chickens," he says he told the man. "By the way, I'd just as soon hang your ass on that chain-link fence as one of those damn hawks or coyotes, and I mean it. You're just a bunch of damn people who have no business being American."

The Humane Society would always be a pain in Ratliff's ass. As soon as he finished building the cockfighting pit that now stands in Jal, New Mexico, a woman from the organization got a judge to put a padlock on it. Ratliff had to go all the way up to Santa Fe to argue his case.

"Our lawyer says to the judge, 'I understand you love to fish.' The judge nodded. So our lawyer asks him, 'Which is more harmful, to let two roosters fight in their way of thinking or to put a minnow on a hook?' The judge thought about that for about ten seconds. He said, 'I put my minnows on a hook.' Then he hit the gavel and said, 'Case dismissed.'"

But things changed over the years. In 1975, cockfighting was a felony in just a few states. By 2005, it was a felony in 33.

"There's so much people don't understand about cockfighting," Ratliff says, looking at me earnestly. There was a time when people understood it, he says. Now people have dogs and cats instead of kids. "Makes no damn sense."

For the Humane Society of the United States, the eradication of cockfighting has been the top priority since 1998, when citizen groups in Missouri and Arizona passed ballot initiatives that made it illegal in their respective states.

"This is such a black-and-white issue, we shouldn't even be talking about it," says John Goodwin, the deputy manager of animal fighting issues at the Humane Society, based in Washington, D.C. "These are very egregious forms of cruelty that society has simply outgrown."

There is no doubt cockfighting is a brutal sport, and that the roosters suffer an agonizing death. According to a Humane Society brochure, the birds are often drugged with stimulants and steroids to make them unnaturally aggressive. Razor-sharp steel blades are attached to their legs to inflict deep puncture wounds. Legs are broken. Eyes are gouged out. Dying birds are forced to keep fighting.

"The fact is that they've had to breed gamecocks to be artificially aggressive and to demonstrate a much higher level of gameness than their natural ancestors," Goodwin says.

Besides cruelty, there are other reasons to ban the sport, Goodwin says. Illegal gambling is the norm at every cockfight, he says, and drug dealing is rampant. On top of that, cockfights can contribute to violence. In the last year, there were two fatal shootings at cockfights in Texas, one in May in Starr County that left two men dead, and another in September in Fort Bend County, near Houston, that left one dead and sent another to the hospital in critical condition.

In several states, including Hawaii and South Carolina, cops and government officials have been arrested for running interference for illegal cockfighting pits. "These are people that in most of the country their activity is illegal," Goodwin says. "So you mix crime, the blood and cruelty, the high-stakes gambling, you mix the firearms that people bring to protect the money that they bring to gamble, and sometimes you end up with really bad results."

On June 11, 2005, with police helicopters hovering overhead, dozens of federal agents swooped down on what was perhaps the largest illegal cockfighting pit in the United States. Called Del Rio, the Eastern Tennessee pit was reportedly owned by Don Poteat, the former president of the United Gamefowl Breeders Association, the largest cockfighting organization in the United States.

When the officers arrived, a tournament was in progress. Those who tried to flee were stopped by police helicopters and the squad cars that lined the perimeter. All told, 144 participants were arrested that day. Three hundred birds were seized as well as \$40,000 in cash, likely the pot the competitors were fighting their birds for.

In a press release days later, the Humane Society called the raid "the latest in a series of major blows to the world of illegal animal fighting." On Internet message boards used by cockfighters, the raid was dubbed Black Saturday. "I don't know how this will work out, but it don't look good," one poster wrote on the site gamerooster.com. "We got a war on our hands," another declared.

Despite the laws against it, cockfighting flourishes throughout the United States, but especially in the South. According to a booklet from the United Gamefowl Breeders Association, there were 4,848 gamefowl breeders in Texas in 2002, which is more than just about anywhere except Alabama and Indiana, Goodwin says. Cockfighting has been illegal in Texas since 1907 and is now a felony.

But there are loopholes. In Texas and other states in the South where cockfighting is illegal, it is not illegal to own a game bird or to watch a cockfight. In Alabama, where it is legal to both own a fighting rooster and to watch a fight, participation in a cockfight is only a misdemeanor and punishable by a \$50 fine.

The only way to stop cockfighting, Goodwin says, is to make it a felony in all 50 states. "If you can win \$10,000 to \$15,000, you're willing to risk a \$200

misdemeanor fine," he says. In states where participation in a cockfight is a felony, most cockfighters take their birds to neighboring states where it is legal.

Enter H.R. 137, a federal bill that was introduced two weeks ago by

Congressman Elton Gallegly of California. The bill will make the interstate transportation of gamefowl, currently a federal misdemeanor, into a federal felony, which means the hundreds of cockfighters from Texas who travel to New Mexico and Louisiana to fight their roosters will be risking a whole lot to do so. It won't be long before cockfighting's illegal in New Mexico, too, Goodwin says. And

then the organization will turn its entire focus to the last place where the blood sport is still allowed to thrive: the backwoods of Louisiana.

"We don't want to count our chickens before they hatch," Goodwin says, "but I think it's safe to say that cockfighting is on its last leg."

"C'mon," Ratliff says. "I've got something to show you outside. You won't believe it. It will imprint your brain and you'll know what we're talking about."

He gingerly walks outside, with me and Hurst in tow. Riding the scooter he uses to get around his farm, we drive out to a row of holding pens where he once kept roosters that were in training. He points to a panel of sheet metal that separates two of the cages. There's a crude hole in the middle. The other day, he says, he came out here to find one rooster had pecked his way through the sheet metal to get to a rooster on the other side. By the time he found them, one rooster was dead and the other had lost its eye.

"See, we don't make them fight," he says. "It's what God put them on this earth to do."

He drives into the field and stops in front of one of the roosters. "This rooster will be 16 years old next spring," he says, pointing to the bird. "Now he'll hit you because he's miserable. When they get old, they don't want to be picked up." He steps from his scooter and reaches down to pick up the bird. "Come here, buddy. I know you know me."

The rooster pecks at him, drawing blood, but Ratliff doesn't flinch. Instead, he cradles the bird and begins stroking its head. Before long, it's as calm as a cat in his arms. "I pick him up just to be ornery once a week or once a month because he's been a favorite. He'll die in my yard. I fought him one time 15 years ago." He looks down at the rooster, which has closed its eyes. "He loves that petting. He's just like a woman, he loves to be rubbed."

"These birds are like my babies," he says, looking out across his yard. "I love them like they were my children."

Ratliff is done with his school, but his legacy will live on. He's got an instructional video that sells for \$500. He suggests I attend a cockfight sometime, maybe at the Bayou Club of Louisiana, where they fight in an arena with glass walls. Or I could try the Legion Club of Jal, the pit he built so many years ago. There are illegal brush fights all the time here in Texas, and he hears about them, but I never will.

"If you ever do go to a cockfight, it will be unlike anything you've ever seen," he says. "Who knows -- you might even like it."

The Legion Club of Jal occupies a big white building not far from Highway 128, a lonely road that runs through southeastern New Mexico, just across the Texas border. From the highway, which cuts through mesquite and sage, the building looks like an old slaughterhouse. It is one of the last places in America where it is still legal to fight roosters.

On this cool January morning, a hundred men are gathered inside, talking bloodlines and chicken feed. They are oil field workers from Midland and flea market merchants from up the road in Hobbs. They wear coveralls and camo, steel-toed shitkickers and alligator-skinned cowboy boots. Chatting above the din of the crowing roosters, they lean on the waist-high railing of the drag pits, where the fights will end and the chickens finally bow their heads in the dirt and die. At the big metal door, where trespassers are warned to stay out, a little Mexican man sits hunched over a whirring machine, sharpening the blades that will be attached to the roosters' legs. Cigarette smoke hangs above it all.

A man with watery eyes and a perpetual frown waddles over to me and fishes two black-and-white photos from his pocket. "These are from when this pit was first built," he tells me. Like so many men here, he says Ratliff taught him the secrets of chicken fighting.

"To tell you the truth, I wish he wouldn't have said anything about retiring," says a man in coveralls. "The Humane Society had a field day with that one."

A little man named Eliseo Lopez nods. "The Humane Society, they're trying to kill us."

"They're liars," someone else says.

"They're communists."

"They're terrorists."

"Your ancestors fought chickens," Lopez tells me, pointing his stubby finger into my chest. "George Washington was a cockfighter. Abraham Lincoln was a referee. It's a part of your heritage."

"You're eventually going to have the biggest revolution the United States has ever seen because people are tired of their freedoms being taken away," someone else says. "Before you know it, hunting will be illegal."

It's nearly 2 p.m., and the fights are about to start. But first, the president of the New Mexico Game Fowl Breeders Association, Ronnie Barron, has something to say. He mounts the steps of a small platform and takes a microphone. Standing a few feet above the crowd, he lays out their plight. The last year was a bad one for the organization, he says. The New Mexico legislature nearly banned cockfighting. Governor Bill Richardson, once the friend of cockfighters, is now against us, Anderson says.

"The son of a bitch," the little man says through gritted teeth. "I don't even consider him Hispanic."

But we won't go down without a fight, Barron says. Call your representatives, write a letter to Richardson, but most important, make your voice heard on the Senate floor if it comes to a vote. "This is your way of life," he says.

When he finishes, he hands the microphone to a Hispanic man, who offers the same speech in Spanish. His voice rising like a tent-revival preacher, the crowd erupts in applause and shouting as he finishes. For a few minutes, there is concerned conversation about the future of the sport and that "son of a bitch" Humane Society. And then the conversation shifts back to the business of the day, because already, the president of the Legion Club of Jal is about to call the first fight.

In the narrow hallways where the roosters are kept, there's a palpable feeling of tension. The birds might feel it, but they have no idea what they're in for.

Over the loudspeaker, the numbers of the first two competitors are called. It's a Texas schoolteacher versus a man with a shaved head. Those who haven't already moved to the main arena rush over, hoping to find a seat with a decent view.

"You ready to see your first chicken fight?" a man named Hector asks. He had been explaining the fine art of the chicken fight when the numbers were called. He is 22, from Roswell, New Mexico. He's a rookie but learning fast. Animated and quick to smile, he wears a tilted Yankees cap and a gold cross. Perhaps he is the future of the sport.

He leads me through the crowd and we find a spot to stand near the pit, a metal cage beneath four fluorescent lights. A rusty gate is opened for the handlers, who are carrying their roosters in the crook of their arms, petting them nervously. The schoolteacher kisses his rooster's head. He removes the scabbard from the curved, inch-long blade on its leg.

"Bill 'em up," the referee says. They are beautiful birds. One is an orange red; the other has a white head, a red body and bluish tail feathers.

They are brought beak to beak. Their handlers rock back and forth on their heels, letting the roosters peck at each other. The feathers around the roosters' heads, called the hackles, flare out like a fan. The referee makes two chalk lines about eight feet apart on the dirt floor. The schoolteacher stands behind one line with his bird, and his opponent takes his place behind the other. The ref gives a signal, the birds are placed on the ground, and then they are let go.

Cockfighting has been compared to boxing, but I can see few similarities. Unlike boxing, there is no stalking of the opponent, no tentative jabs to test reflexes and reactions. Instead, the birds break at each other without hesitation. They are vicious, unrelenting and singular in purpose. There is only one boxer I have ever seen who attacked his opponent the way a rooster attacks his, and that is Mike Tyson in his prime. He fought with rage in his eyes, each punch going for the knockout. Roosters fight the same way. It is a blur of color and flapping of wings

and scratching and clawing and suddenly one rooster is on its back, or hobbling away in a panic, its wing or leg broken.

It's hard to follow the action, to see the knives do their damage, and usually there is little visible blood. In fights like this one, where short knives are used, it's usually over within minutes. One rooster will strike a lethal blow, and the other will fall to its back. The hurt bird will attempt to keep fighting, and sometimes it will run away. Usually the bird that is hurt first is the bird that loses.

One of the roosters is hobbling around. The other stalks it, lunging in with his beak. The birds flap their wings, they flail in the dirt, their talons are tangled and the referee calls for their handlers to pick them up.

One sucks the blood from his bird's beak, to keep the bird from drowning in its own blood. The other blows into a wound that appears to be under a wing.

"What's he doing?" I ask Hector.

"His bird's going into shock."

One of the birds, the one that appears closest to death, is slapped under its beak again and again by its handler. Finally, its eyes open. I wonder why the referee doesn't stop the fight. Hector explains that even when it appears that all hope is gone, a dying bird can land the perfect shot and cause a mortal wound.

When the fight is finally over and one bird is dead, and the other appears close to it, the two men, their hands stained in blood, shake hands and leave the pit to make way for the next fight.

As Hector talks about the importance of cockfighting in Mexican culture, and how this latest effort to ban it in New Mexico is flat-out racist, my eyes follow the loser as he pushes his way through the crowd. He carries the dead bird by its legs. As he nears the hallway where the rest of his birds are kept, he drops it unceremoniously in a trash can.

I wait until Hector's finished talking and wish him good luck. I walk over to the trash can and peer down at the bird. To my surprise, it's not dead. It looks up, flaps its blood-soaked wings and tries to get out of the bucket. He bobs his head, his beak dripping blood. His eyes flutter open.

Two boys, walking by, notice him. One of the boys picks up a Styrofoam cup and whacks the bird in the head. The bird stops for a moment and then starts bobbing its head again. The boy hits him again with the cup, smiles at his friend and walks away. The rooster looks up out of the bucket one more time, bobs his head and then closes his eyes. His head slowly lowers into the paper cups and the tamales that surround him. He is finally dead.

On and on the fights go, one after the other, long into the night. I see a bird's guts spill out of him like rubber bands. I see another, near death, pull off the improbable victory with a lucky shot that cuts an opponent's artery. I see fights that last for minutes, and others that go to the drag pits and last for nearly an hour. I see birds sprinkled with blood, and birds that are made to fight when they are going stiff and cold.

I meet a third-generation cockfighter, who tells me how much the sport means to his family and his Mexican-American culture. "Who's to say one culture is superior to the other?" he asks me. "What's the difference between this and bullfighting, or horse racing?" Another tells me he has no problem with the Humane Society protecting dogs and cats, but chickens are different. "So you're telling me it's okay to wring a bird's neck and put it in a frying pan, but you can't let it do what it was genetically born to do? This ain't like dog fighting. We don't mistreat these birds, and we don't make them fight."

I stay as long as I can and then I say goodbye to Hector and the others I've met. I've seen enough killing for one day.

The last time I see the Chicken Man he is seated in his scooter looking out at the field where he keeps his stag roosters, which are not quite old enough to fight. Each one has a rubber cord around its leg, which is attached to a stake in the ground, giving it maybe five feet to walk. There are hundreds of them, stretching out in long rows across the dirt field. Some have white heads and red bodies, others are orange from the head to the tailfeathers. They crow loudly, one in response to the other. They look strong and proud and fit.

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I ask Ratliff what he'll do with all them, now that he's retired. "Probably just give them away," he says. "But not just to anyone. I'll give them to a cocker, someone who can carry on the tradition."

And then he hurries inside, before the rain starts falling.