

BLOODLINE Podcast

Episode 4: *Royal Pastime, Rabble Darling, Part 2*

Recorded: March 1, 2021

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Late one evening in a London gaming district in the early 1800s, a well-dressed gentleman enters the Castle Pub of Londons Hockley-in-the-hole gaming district, claiming to be a royal courtier. His master, he explained, had lost more money than he had on hand at the nearby cockpit. Would the owner, he wondered, provide his master a quick loan to pay to the losses?

The strange request would have been uncommon, but only in specifics to the owner, who had surely heard every variety of crooked story, as well as those of fast fortunes and fast company as a business operator in the notorious gaming district that was home to the cockpit, games of chance, prize-fights and theatrical acts, street performers, princes, thieves, scholars, scamps.

So, your lordship needs some cash over at the cockfight, and he can pay it all back tomorrow? Sorry, good sir, but Im not in the habit of handing money out to

At the pub-owner's hesitation, the gentleman offered a pocket watch as collateral, a nice piece that would more than cover the loan.

The only problem was that it made the deal a crime since pawnbrokers required a license from the crown and were never—as a rule—issued to pubs.

In the end, the offer was more than fair at face-value for the pub owner, given the pricey watch, so he proffered the loan and took the watch, apparently unaware or unbelieving the identity of the cockpit borrower.

The next day, a royal messenger arrived at the pub to pay the debt and collect the time piece. , the messenger presented the pub with a pawnbroker's license three brass orbs mounted on the pub's outer façade to indicate to the public that the place was licensed to pawn, all courtesy of the borrower, King George IV.

As the story goes, the license has been re-issued annually by the government ever since, and the Castle Pub, still extant, is the only pub in England with a pawnbroker license.

Your Listening to Bloodline, No. 4: Royal Pasttime, Rabble Darling, Part II.

The story of King George IV is from the pub itself, as told by a few different websites. I didn't bend over backwards to verify it, taking Mark Twain's practical advice of not letting the truth get in the way of a good story. There's no reason to think it's not true. The pub does have the brass orb of a licensed pawnbroker, is located in the old gaming district and King George IV was a regular attendee of the cockfights. Additionally, *Sport In Olden Time*, written by the early 20th century British agricultural historian Sir Walter Gilbey, tells of a similar incident with George IV and the Duke of York, so there's good evidence to suggest part or all of the story is true.

At the end of the last episode, we'd explored cocking in England through the 1600s, and I mentioned that the 18th and early 19th centuries up to the rule of King George IV, was a boom period for cocking in Great Britain, but it's not likely this came in the form of further public acceptance at home, though the British Gamecock—various families of battle-crosses or match-cocks obtained through trial and error, more careful selection of traits and weighing in the 4 to 6 pound range—became famous the world over as the most dominant fighting cocks on the planet.

As far as adoption at home, however, the sport almost certainly was nearing a saturation point among the English. There were cockpits in every part of the island and most parts of the Kingdom, including Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the sport accommodated the poor as readily as the wealthy as one of the primary forms of entertainment.

It'd been adored by the clergy and crown and every person between. For at least the previous 500 years, the country had institutionalized cockfights among school boys annually during the shrovetide tradition, celebrating the valor, bravery and fine qualities of fighting cocks.

Considering all that, the participation numbers wouldn't have had much room to grow.

Instead, the period of the 1700s is characterized by the sport's transformation towards more structure, organization and fair play that began to resemble a modern cockfight, and was an early forerunner of modern team sports (thanks to subscription mains), gave us the earliest forms of sports journalism (with regular reports in the *Racing Journals* and newspapers) and was among the first gaming and entertainment economies formed in the pre-modern era of civilization with the rise of professional competitors and wage-earning jobs to support it.

In this episode, we'll explore British cockfighting and gamefowl landscape of the 18th century, examining some of the earliest adopted rules for the sport and look at the lives and impact to the game from some of the most famous cockfighters and game fowl breeders of the period.

Within a 10-year period around 1700, cockfights in England adopted artificial spurs and also began using scales to match roosters to weight. The previous system relied on eyeball and hand measurements and was thus an unpredictable variable in the fight. Similarly, artificial spurs standardized the weapons of the fight while reducing the amount of injury to both the winning and losing bird by hastening the fight.

In short, both the application of scales and of artificial spurs aimed to put both cocks on the same playing field at the outset of the fight. A fair fight was appealing to gamblers, but it had the down-chain effect of boosting competition, resulting in higher standard of fowl, adding legitimacy

to the contest and improving the overall demeanor of competitors, and resulting in decreased agitation.

RULES

Keep in mind as we go through this episode that there was a lot going on in England and the world in the 1700s. It was a different time. The economy of the England was booming, as was its population (it doubled during the century), and for most of the 18th century work was done by beasts or by man. Machines wouldn't begin to step in until the latter half of the 18th century when England was at the heart of the Industrial Revolution.

There was no television or radio. Pandemic episodes of the plague rolled through over decades. You may recall from last episode that most of London burned to the ground over the course of a week in the late 1600s. Fires, famine, plague and war were never far from reality.

Amidst all this, cockfights—as well as other entertainments like horse racing, prize fighting and the theatre—sometimes resulted in brawls riots or other violence. When this happened, the proprietors often risked losing their business licenses. Facing this risk, we are given the earliest versions of rulebooks for cockfighting (as well as horseracing). The formation of these rules came strictly out of necessity to protect business interests and pre-date modern team sporting events.

The first known published rules, which I'll call the 19 Rules, were published in the racing calendar in 1747. A complete list of these rules is available on the website at Bloodlinepodcast.com.

Several of the rules deal with spectator conduct, dispute resolution among spectators and penalties for dishonest betting practices, all of which are off-topic to a ruleset about cockfighting, and might better fit under the heading of “House rules”, but again, keep in mind that these rules were the result of the business owners trying to protect their butts by keeping everyone on their best behavior.

Later versions of the rules, which we'll look at, are more specifically directed to the cockfight itself. Counterintuitively, the later rulesets, which focus more specifically on the cockfight itself, had the desired effect of the early rules because they increased fair play and order in the cockfight itself, resulting in less agitation amongst the spectators.

Though pre-occupied with governing spectator conduct, the First 19 Rules still contain some of the seeds of the modern cockfight. Let's look:

The first rule stipulates cocks be fought in good feather and not be overly trimmed, something you'll find in most, if not all, modern rulebooks.

The 19 Rules outline an early scoring system, wherein a losing rooster could be counted out and included a 20 count and multiple 10 counts. What we call “the count” they referred to as the “law” in these early rulebooks. A rooster not showing fight was given 10, 10-second counts, if I understand correctly.

When both stopped fighting and neither rooster had the count, a hobbled rooster was brought in from outside and shown to the combatants one at a time. If only one showed fight against the outside rooster, it was the winner. If both showed signs of fighting, or if neither showed, the fight was a draw.

If at any point during a fight, there is a 40 to 1 bet (10 pounds to 5 shillings) offered on the fight and no one calls it, the odds-favored rooster would be declared winner.

The Master of the Pit is given authority to settle disputes among participants and spectators. If both parties involved request, 4-6 of the most experienced gamesters could assist in the decision. In the event a bet required mediation, each party was to put his wager down plus a six pence ante. After each side was heard and a judgement made, the bet was paid plus the six-pence to the recipient. Continuing to complain or speak of the dispute after judgement was made was punishable by fine.

My favorite rule deals with the practice of basketing, which was the name for the punishment given to someone who was unable to pay a lost wager. If no credit could be secured nor an agreement reached, the offending gambler would be placed in a basket provided for such a purpose and raised by pulley in some conspicuous location visible to everyone for the remainder of the day's fights.

At the Royal Cockpit at Newmarket, the basket was over the pit, a painting of this (which you can see at bloodlinepodcast.com) by William Hogarth includes a silhouette of an occupied basket casting its shadow on the pit floor, indicating that this was more than mere threat.

SECOND PUBLICATION OF RULES

By the late-18th century, an updated version of the First 19 Rules had been formed and was published in 1808.

These began with an instruction that allowed participants of the main to inspect their opponents cockhouse prior to weigh in to ensure no ringers were planted in the stalls. There are detailed instructions for weighing and matching cocks as well as inspection of the birds by an official prior to each fight.

Instructions are given for when and how the handlers can interfere with the fight after it begins.

A counting system for scoring matches is described, which is a predecessor to those seen in the McCall and Wortham rules that were popular in the U.S. prior to prohibition. Pit on the short score, cocks would be handled after 10 seconds of inactivity. If both went inactive while the count was running, a fresh cock would be hovelled and brought in and set before the combatants one at a time, each getting five periods of 10 seconds with the hovelled cock. If one showed fight and the other refused, the winner was declared. If both fought against the hovelled cock, or neither, the fight was a draw.

The previous technical victory was still available, should anyone offer 40-to-1 odds and get no takers, the odds-favored cock was the winner. Some specifics for this were drawn up in some versions of the rules. The man placing the bet must put down his hat or cane or some other personal item to act as surety on the cockpit floor and the referee would announce the bet three times, “Will no one call it?”. To call the bet, another person would be required to do the same, tossing his own hat into the ring to claim the wager.

Neither the count-out process or the long-odds rule could supersede a clear winner, where a cock has killed its opponent, even if its opponent was the last to show fight.

A single rule about wagers had by this time won out. All disputes regarding bets were to be settled among spectators and paid according to the pit judge’s decision under penalty of law.

EXPANDING ECONOMY

Both the adoption of rules and the formation subscription mains, where localized teams of cockers would pool resources to compete against neighboring groups, as well as the adoption of professional competitors, had the result of increasing the volume and degree of competitiveness of cocking on the island.

These factors combined with the adoption of artificial spurs to give rise to professional ranks of competitors as well as craftsman to supply them in the 1700s.

The demand for artificial spurs was enough to create a niche trade of gaffmakers to supply the cockers with reliable, sharp and well-built gaffes. London’s Cockspur Street was given its name from the gaffmakers setting up shop there. It was home to well-known gaffmakers Clay, Smith, Foulmin, Garfield and others.

Subscription mains gained traction, opening up large events and bigger prizes to individuals, who alone, may not have the money to make a multi-day main practical, but groups from the same town may pool their roosters and money and challenge a neighboring group, opening mains as an option to more cockers. The larger purses available, very real bragging rights and the logistical challenge of gathering and selecting amongst 10 different chicken yards the best cocks for the main, which would then need to be transported to the pit to be fed out or to another location for the pre-fight routine, made subscription events frequent clients of the professional feeders and other professional cockers and increased the number and frequency of large cocking events, previously reserved for wealthy.

The number of cockpits increased, and more cockpits resulted in more cockfighting, or maybe it is the latter that causes the former? In this case, it doesn’t matter if the chicken came before the egg, just that more cockfights were taking place at more cockpits.

HORSERACING

The period of growth toward a modern version of cockfighting was nearly identical to what the world of horse racing was doing at the same time. Like cockfighting, the racetrack economy increased demand for professional competitors, specifically jockeys, owners and trainers.

Horsing and cockfighting in England had their fortunes yoked at least from the 16th century to the start of the 19th century. Both were tremendously popular attractions that intermingled the social classes by providing wagers and contests to the poor as readily as the wealthy.

The country's largest races and their corresponding cockfight were planned with consideration to one another. Racing was done during one part of the day and cockfights another. The two wager-driven competitions began to professionalize competition around the same period in early 1700s, both trying their hand at standardizing rules to improve fairness, and both struggling to find ways to maintain order at events.

They entered the 19th century side-by-side with as much popular support as they'd ever enjoyed. Both zeroed in on standardized rules suitable to their new modern identities and professional wage-earners. For cockfighting, these newer rules detailed the progression of the contest, which were effective in suiting the needs of the cockfighters, pit owners and other vested interests, while also curbing disagreement and unrest without much mention of spectator conduct.

From William Sketchley's 1814 publication, "The Cocker" we learn what advancements had been made in the standards of care, breeding and even which bloodlines were most in demand.

Among the bloodlines that were popular in the early 19th century were: Black-reds, Piles, Silver black-breasted Ducks (duckwings), Birchin Ducks, Dark Greys, Mealy Greys, Blacks, Spangles, Furnaces, Pole-cats, Cuckoos, Gingers, Red Duns, Duns and Smokey Duns.

Of the list, the Piles (a family established by Charles II) were noted cutters with the lighter-colored family being especially effective strikers, but suffered from weak constitution and could be unpredictable in offspring.

SENTIMENT AND CONTEXT

While the structure, organization and economy surrounding cockfights began to resemble the modern form seen in the U.S. by the late 20th century, the 1700s was not a period that closely resembled life in the latter half of the 20th century, and was even further removed from life in the 1500s.

To provide some idea of how the population felt about cocking, consider how the sport was treated by the kings who didn't participate in it:

Henry VIII built the Royal Cockpit with adjoining lodgings at Westminster as part of Whitehall Palace sometime after 1509, and while Henry VIII's surviving daily accounts detail his affinity for gambling, there is no mention of any spending, winning or losses at the cockpit, which suggests he wasn't a cocker, but included the building for the enjoyment of others on his court.

George II and his son, George III, reigned for just over 90 years, 1727 thru 1820 and neither appear to have taken a personal interest in gamefowl, but both owned fowl which were tended by the King's Master of Gamecocks. George II appointed the foremost feeder of the period, Joseph Gilliver, to the position, and George III employed his son William Gilliver. As the Master of Gamecocks, the Gillivers were responsible for feeding and fighting the king's gamecocks in the Royal Cockpit. Like Henry VIII's construction of a royal cockpit at Westminster—appears to have been a gesture by the sovereign to acknowledge the passions of his people.

For a sliver of insight into life in England and attitudes toward gamefowl at the outset of the 18th century, I refer to *The Royal Pastime*, a book published in 1709. It was written by Robert Howlett and dedicated to his benefactor Sir T.V. Knight.

Sir TV, we learn in the dedication, is from a family of cockers. His grandfather, we are told, “lay there bleeding and dying ... was thus (like a good subject) heard to say , My King and a good Cock I ever loved, and like a good cock in my dread sovereign's service I shall now expire.”

His father and uncles passed the trade to him early on, and he pursued it passionately until he left for war, where he fought for King William III “in the bloody Irish fields” of Athlone and Cannough against the French as part of the Nine Years War. He then returned home across the Atlantic in the winter to rejoin friends and tenants and neighbors and old acquaintances at his manor-house for Christmas.

The following spring, Sir TV returned to fighting, eventually winding up in the siege of Namure, considered Williams' most significant military win of the war, but at some point in the battle, Sir TV suffers an injury that will cost him a limb, presumably a leg, though the author says Sir TV was unencumbered by it in the moment “...yet limping still fought on, and charged as unconcern'd as if you had had no Wound upon you until his Majesty was Pleased to give particular orders to have you brought off.”

After he had lost the leg and recovered from the injury, Sir TV joined King William at the Hague, laid down his arms and kissed the King's Hand.

I offer this to show that, even for the wealthiest classes, combat was often brutal and fought in open fields or in-seige of walled cities, and when called to do so, young men were expected to enter into such bloodbaths without hesitation or regard to danger or injury, and continue straight to either victory or death unless ordered to do otherwise.

Sir TV's disregard in battle for his injury exemplifies the desired behavior of the annual shrovetide cockfights in grammar schools of the time.

The picture painted of Sir TV is a lord who extends a generous and gentle hand to the people in his care, his tenants, neighbors, the poor, but who is without regard or reason in battle.

The opening lines from the *Royal Pastime*, published 1709, illustrate the esteem for cocking held by it's British practitioners at the outset of the 1700s. The author, Robert Howlett, writes:

“Amongst all the pleasures and delights this lower sphere affords to mortals here on earth, there is nothing more taking with the heroic, and truly generous soul, than the noble and most princely pastime of cockfighting, which really is in itself a recreation becoming the greatest **potentate**, and surely most suitable to all such whose natural genius prompts them on to finalize their valor in the field of honor, where, like the cock fitted for battle with their bright arms, they move their fortune, and so raise themselves to the highest pitch of glory.”

Beyond reverence for the sport itself, Howlett’s prose illustrates a deep admiration for gamecocks by cockers of the time, who wrote extensive lines of verse dedicated to the fowl, and the beneficial effects they had on man, many of which are preserved. From *Royal Pastime*, quoting a poem of the time:

“---and some more martial are,
But cocking fits a man for peace,
Or war;
It makes men bold and forward
For the field,
And learns them there rather to
Die than yield.
Cocking does also constancy
Create,
And arms a Man to Wrestle with
His fate;
Be it more happy, or severe, his
Mind,
Is still the same to a brave end
Inclin’d.”

Another poem from the same book:

“No Bird can with the well-bred cock
compare,
No creature less than man shall with
Him share;
The honor bravely won by dint of
Sword,
From fiercest foes in open field
Where blood,
Flowing from dying warriors fatal
Wounds.
Breeds richest rubies in Bellona’s
Grounds.”

By George II's ascension in 1722, cockfight reports and advertisements filed regularly in the London papers as well as the annual Racing Calendar. These reports took up as much space in the London papers as the annual high crimes tribunal (Assizes trials) and royal birthday announcements, Gilbey says.

The cockpit was a regular stop for most foreign dignitary caravans. During Grand Duke Nicholas 1817 visit to the island, he attended a main with the Russian ambassador Duke of Devonshire and Sir William Congreve as well as General Kutusoff, where the group spent an hour and a half watching 5 cockfights and appeared amused at their first such event.

Event advertisements, or public notices, were common for pits at Bridgnorth, Stoke, Worcester, Wellington, Dudley and Lichfield, all of which were within a day's journey of Brmingham in the south. Further north, big mains were common at Duddleston Hall and the site of the Preston race track.

The sport gave several London roads their names, some of which still exist today. A 1761 map of London lists: **10 locations named "Cock Alley". There were 9 "Cock Courts", and eight "Cock Yards", 4 "Cock Lanes" in addition to Cock Hill, Cockpit Alley, Cockpit Buildings, Cockpit Street, Court and Yard as well as Cocks' Rent.**

I hope I've made it clear throughout this episode, the influence cocking had on the culture, language, economies of gaming, the English language, agricultural breeding practices and even infrastructure of the country in this episode. In the next episode, we'll get to know some of the colorful and influential people involved in cockfighting in England during this period.

If you're a visual learner or just want to read a little more on these topics, I encourage everyone to visit the website at Bloodlinepodcast.com, where you'll find bibliographical lists of texts consulted, photos to accompany each episode and links to outside sites for further reading. You can also join the discussion at the Bloodline Podcast Facebook group: just search for Bloodline Podcast under the Groups tab on Facebook.

Bloodline Podcast is made by me, Jesse Sidlauskas. Music for the episode is Lobo Loco, "You Get the Blues".

I'd like to thank everyone so far for their encouragement in this project. We've had members of the community from all over the world sharing episodes with their friends and give feedback to me, proving to me how universal the universal sport is, so to all our Friends-in-sport, thanks and keep sharing.

Until next time, y'all keep'em crowing.