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When Bad Chickens Come Home to Roost, Results Can Be Good

The Joneses Have Rehab Plan For Drugged Gamecocks; Cozy Hens and Isolation

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PRINCESS ANNE, Md. -- Felipe, an orange-feathered rooster from Pennsylvania, faced near-certain death when police busted his cockfighting match on a rural compound in 2001. Instead, he checked into the Eastern Shore Chicken Sanctuary.

After three weeks of psychological treatment, the 1½-foot-tall fowl kicked his drug habit and stopped picking fights. Today, he lives peacefully with 200 other feathered residents at the center, often cozing up to a flock of Florida hens.

Felipe was lucky. Most of the millions of roosters bred for cockfighting in the U.S. face a gruesome end. If they're not slaughtered during combat, they are often euthanized after police break up illegal tournaments.




Saturn

Cockfights are legal only in Louisiana and New Mexico, but illegal combats and betting are common throughout the country, where there are an estimated 100,000 gamecock breeders. The fights, which take place in an enclosed area, end when one of the duelers dies or one of the handlers concedes victory. They can last more than 30 minutes and can generate tens of thousands of dollars in winnings.

To prepare the birds, breeders trim their combs, wattles and earlobes to reduce weight. They inject the roosters with testosterone and methamphetamines and snip their spurs -- nails on the back of rooster legs -- replacing them with 3-inch steel blades. The roosters fly up into the air and dig the blades into rivals' flesh.

Fight survivors are generally considered too violent to be saved, and some states have laws requiring that they be killed. In California 5,000 roosters have been eliminated over the past five years, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

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Most farmed-animal sanctuaries accept hens, but few take in roosters. And even animal-rights groups generally say it's not worth their time to rehabilitate fighting roosters. In fact they often oversee the euthanasia, which usually involves injecting a poison into the roosters' chest.

"It would take a staff years to rehabilitate these birds," says Martin Mersereau, a manager at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, an animal-rights group.

Not so, says Patrice Jones, co-director of the Eastern Shore Chicken Sanctuary, an unusual rehab center for chickens that also accepts gamecocks.

Ms. Jones, who holds a master's in clinical psychology, says rehabilitation of the former fighters consists of detoxification and behavioral modification, which includes punishing bad behavior. The retired combatants also undergo "systematic desensitization," or gradual exposure to what they've been trained to fear. In this case: other roosters.

Some 50 former fighting roosters have checked into the sanctuary since it was founded five years ago. Ms. Jones says that even the most ferocious fowl take at most several weeks to pacify. "After they're rehabbed, they end up being the sweetest roosters here," she says.

Ms. Jones, who teaches public speaking at the University of Maryland, Eastern Shore, and her domestic partner Miriam Jones, a high-school English teacher, founded the sanctuary when they moved to the Delmarva Peninsula. There, more than 500 million chickens are slaughtered each year at the processing plants of chicken-meat producers such as Perdue Farms and Tyson Foods. Longtime animal-rights activists, the couple would find stray escapees on the roads and started taking them in.

As they collected more feathered residents, they converted their garage into a coop with hay and rows of perches. With financial help from family, friends and other donors, they expanded the center over three outbuildings and three foraging yards on 2½ wooded acres. Today, it costs the couple \$10,000 a year to run the center.

In late 2001, a concerned citizen phoned the Joneses to inform them that police had busted a cockfighting ring on a Pennsylvania farm and that a local humane society had rounded up some 20 roosters in order to euthanize them.

The Joneses agreed to take in Felipe and two other survivors. When they brought him to the sanctuary, Felipe's chest and leg feathers had been shaved off by his handler and his bottom beak was cracked. He was so aggressive that he would fly up at any other bird that crossed his path, Patrice Jones recalls.

For the first two days of his rehabilitation, Ms. Jones kept Felipe in a cage out of sight -- but within earshot -- of other birds, allowing him to adjust to the clucking of hens and roosters. When she took him out to the yard, Ms. Jones would calm Felipe by clutching him close to her chest so he could feel her heart beat. Slowly, she let him mingle with the other birds and when he picked a fight, Ms. Jones would lock him up. After three weeks, Felipe gave up.

"Roosters fight from fear of death, not from natural aggression," says Ms. Jones.

On a recent hot afternoon, a cacophony of rooster crows, hen clucks and raspy duck quacks swirled around the sanctuary as Pablo, a former Alabama fighting rooster with green-and-black tail feathers, dust-bathed and stretched out in the sun. Saturn, a white-feathered rooster who needed three full weeks of rehab, napped in the main coop with the hens. Julio, a raggedy-looking former fighter who was found in a Bronx schoolyard, lay in the shade.

At 3 p.m., two U.S. Department of Agriculture employees pulled into the Jones' driveway, past a sign with the words "Respect our Animals. They are our Family." They unloaded two roosters, a hen and a duck. The spurs on one rooster, found running down Georgia Avenue in Washington, D.C., had been

ground to stubs -- the clear sign of a cockfight combatant.

After two days of captivity, Blackbeard, a graceful rooster with multicolored feathers, had already relaxed, Patrice Jones says. He got into a short scuffle with a rooster called Sunshine and befriended Bollywood, a juvenile broiler rooster.

As for Felipe, he now spends most of his days taking walks and foraging for food in the woods. At night, he sleeps in the woods, often cuddling up with Ebony and Blackbird, two black hens from Florida.

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