Cockfighting—a blood sport in which two roosters specifically bred for aggressiveness are placed beak to beak in a small ring and encouraged to fight to the death—has been around for centuries. Roosters were first bred for fighting in Southeast Asia more than 3,000 years ago, and cockfighting later spread to Greece, Rome and Britain before crossing the Atlantic about 200 years ago. The brutal “sport” found popularity in North, South and Central Americas, and was particularly prevalent in Colonial New York, Philadelphia and Boston. By the 1800s, it had spread to the South and West Coast—but by this time, people had begun to realize how cruel it was, and many states banned it. Today, cockfighting is a crime in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Yet, despite these laws, cockfighting still persists.

Don't roosters naturally fight with each other?

In nature, a rooster may fight another rooster over territory or a mate, but these fights are usually brief and don't involve serious injury. In organized cockfights, however, the roosters' natural instincts are exaggerated. Through breeding, feeding, training, steroids and vitamins, the roosters become killing machines for entertainment. Before a fight, a bird may go through several months of training, which may involve running long obstacle courses and even treadmills, and practice fights with other roosters. Just prior to a fight, most of the bird's feathers are plucked, and the breeder also cuts off the animal's wattles—the combs below the beak—so that his opponent cannot tear them off during the fight.

Do the birds really wear weapons strapped to their legs?

Yes. In the fighting ring, the roosters often wear knives or artificial gaffs—long, sharp, dagger-like attachments—that transform their natural spurs into knives for maximum injury. These steel blades are sharp enough to puncture a lung, pierce an eye or break bones. The fight is defined by the style of weapon strapped to the birds' legs, such as a "short-knife" fight, a "long-knife" fight, or a "gaff" fight. A referee is on hand to supervise the fight, which can last anywhere from a few seconds to 15 minutes. While the rules usually do not require one or both birds to die in order for a winner to be declared, death is often the outcome, due to the severity of the injuries.

Is there illegal gambling and drugs at cockfights?
Besides being cruel to animals, cockfighting is closely connected to other crimes such as gambling, drugs and acts of violence. Illegal weapons have also been found at cockfights because of the large amounts of cash present. Moreover, law enforcement raids across the country have established that cockfights are well attended by gang members, further encouraging venues for violence, illegal drug use and firearms.

Are children allowed to attend cockfights?

Despite unsettling facts, cockfights often inspire a party-like atmosphere in which entire families gather, including children. This often leads to concerns that a child will not only become desensitized toward cruelty to animals, but are at risk of becoming injured by the sparring birds or abused by other people.

Does cockfighting take place in the U.S.?

Although it is illegal, there are still cockfighting rings across the nation. "Cockfighting occurs in all sorts of communities and among all sorts of people," says ASPCA Special Investigator Mark MacDonald. "People can sometimes even buy a box seat, like you would for sports. Bets can range from a few hundred to thousands of dollars, depending on the reputation of the breeder's birds."

Officer MacDonald has observed that cockfights in New York City are often a family-run business passed down through generations. Fights may be held in an abandoned factory, a backyard or even a basement. To avoid suspicion, organizers regularly move the events to new locations. "You have to know someone to enter a cockfight," explains MacDonald. "That's where the undercover part comes in." As the undercover officer develops a relationship with the organizers and attends the fights, he can use this information to obtain a search warrant.

Is cockfighting illegal in the U.S.?

Yes, Cockfighting is illegal in all 50 states and a felony offense in 35 states and the District of Columbia. The possession of birds for fighting purposes is prohibited in 34 states and the District of Columbia.

Is it illegal to be a spectator at a cockfight?

If there is illegal gambling and drugs, yes. Being a spectator at a cockfighting event is illegal in 41 states and the District of Columbia—it is a misdemeanor charge.

Is cockfighting a legal industry in other countries?

Cockfighting is still popular and prevalent in many other countries, such as France, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Belgium, Spain, Haiti, Italy and Malaysia. Many of these countries have well-established arenas with seats or bleachers for spectators surrounding the ring, similar to a wrestling or boxing area. Numerous fights might be held throughout the day, with attendees betting on which birds will lose. Parents often bring along their children for what is considered a day of fun for the entire family. Although there is growing opposition in these countries, cockfighting is still highly popular to the majority who see it as part of their culture.