

PLAN WOULD END LEGALIZED BRUTALITY

By Lorraine L. Janeczko

On a cramped dirt battlefield surrounded by a stained low wooden wall, two roosters in a methamphetamine-induced frenzy cut and slash each other with three-inch-long, razor-sharp, steel, icepick-like gaffs that have replaced their clipped-off, shorter natural spurs.

All night, for up to 90 minutes a battle, I watch blood spurt from slashed breasts, punctured lungs, broken wings and gouged eyes. Amid the smell of sweat and raw flesh, screaming spectators are gambling up to \$5,000 a match on which bird lives and which one dies.

Surviving birds are subjected to the "blinker derby" - a fight among birds who have had their eyes gouged out and/or the "battle royal," where all the birds are placed into one pit to fight until only one survives. More than 100 birds will die on a given night in prolonged, excruciating pain, and many thousands of dollars will change hands.

While most civilized societies outlawed the barbarity of cockfighting in the 1800s, Missouri remains one of the last five states - along with Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico and Louisiana - where it remains legal. In 1990, the Humane Society of Missouri reported cockfighting activity in at least 65 of our 115 counties. The number has since grown and includes St. Charles, Franklin Jefferson counties and St. Louis city.

Horrifically, except for dog against dog, all animal fighting is legal in Missouri.

Missouri allows bear wrestling, where often drunken bar and tavern customers use a defanged and declawed bear with surgically severed wrist muscles as a punching bag. Missouri allows animal "baiting" - the attacking, provoking or harassing of an animal by other animals for training, entertainment, betting or other profit. In baiting, people use dogs to attack and kill a defenseless bear or bull tethered to a stake in the ground.

Missouri allows every other conceivable combination of gruesome animal fighting for entertainment and profit.

Animal fighting steals from our backyards. According to In Defense of Animals, a national organization that collects data on pet theft, Missouri has the highest pet theft rate in the country. Thieves steal our dogs and cats and sell them to "bunchers," who resell them as bait or attackers for pit bull and other animal fights. Some bunchers earn more than \$100,000 a year from this despicable activity.

Animal fighting slashes the fabric of society. The Humane Society of the United States reports that illegal drugs, weapons and gambling are common at these events and that minor children attend and sometimes participate. They become desensitized to cruelty toward animals and humans. The last thing we need our children exposed to is more violence.

Animal fighting wasn't always legal here. In 1873, cockfighting, bull baiting and all animal fighting were declared illegal by the Missouri General Assembly. It remained so until 1985, when the state Supreme Court reversed the conviction of a man from Ralls County on grounds that the law was too vague.

On Nov. 3, we have the opportunity to vote on a statute that will again outlaw all animal fighting. The statute is straightforward, unattached to any legislation and concerns animal fighting only. It does not in any way restrict hunting or fishing, with or without live bait. It exempts animals used in rodeos, motion pictures and television, animals used to hunt, track, pursue or take wildlife and animals used in agriculture to herd, work or identify livestock according to recognized methods of animal husbandry. It does not prohibit breeding, rearing, showing and slaughtering of poultry not intended for use in cockfighting.

The American Veterinary Medical Association believes cockfighting should be a felony. In Missouri, dog fighting is a Class D felony for organizers and a misdemeanor for spectators. Cockfighting and all blood sports should carry the same penalties.

Proposition A has been endorsed by more than 45 local and national organizations, including the Missouri Sheriffs' Association; Missouri Animal Control Association; Children and Families Inc.; Veterinarians Against Animal Fighting and more than 25 Missouri state senators and representatives.

You can help end this legalized brutality by voting yes on Proposition A. Let's not allow Missouri to be infamously labeled the last state in the country to allow the horror of animal fighting.

Lorraine L. Janeczko is a St. Louis freelance writer and a volunteer with Missourians against Cockfighting.

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