

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor  
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Aggressive behavior is a common characteristic in all manner of beasts and humans. It seems more manifest in males than in females and, as with all qualities, a balance is necessary: too strong aggression carries one set of disadvantages, too weak another.

Aggression appears to be the outcome of a long evolutionary process closely connected with sexual reproduction and is evidently beneficial to the reproductive success of the individual male. For example, although an aggressive male may sire more progeny than a less aggressive one, the former is subject to greater risk of injury or even death in some organisms from younger or fitter competitors. For millennia humans have exploited male aggression in various animals for entertainment, especially for gambling. This letter is about some of the species we have bred for fighting and the motives for doing so.

Under natural conditions, aggressive male competition is seldom fatal, but lethal encounters do occur among highly territorial carnivores such as tigers and wolves. Since all domestic dogs are descended from wolves, it is not surprising that it was relatively easy to select for aggression in certain dog breeds, particularly among the large terriers. As recently as 1947 in rural California, I had a long discussion with a cotton farmer about his scarred English bull terrier. I had been familiar with the breed since childhood (a relative across the road had had them as pets), and I knew that they had been used for fighting since the late XVIII century. The farmer's dog was a retired pit bull that had evidently earned his master a considerable sum. Although dog fighting had long been illegal in California at the time, Bull terriers, Staffordshires and Airedales were still fought surreptitiously. According to my informant, owners stopped fights as soon as the winner was clearly apparent. Today I would be surprised if you could find an organized dog fight anywhere in the United States. It was a cruel and bloody spectacle judging from his description, and I like to think that it no longer exists.

The same cannot be said of cock fighting for I believe it continues to be illicitly practiced in isolated barns of rural America and cocks are still commonly fought in parts of the Caribbean and the Philippines. Perhaps cockfighting has endured longer than dog fighting because most people are not as emotionally attached to chickens as they are to dogs. Game chickens, like large terriers, were bred for aggression so successfully that cockfighting reached its zenith in mid-XIX century England. The landed gentry bred birds not only for gameness but for uniform plumage patterns as well. Thus an aficionado entering a cockpit gallery had but to glance at the cock's plumage to identify its owner. Only the prosperous gentry could afford plumage identification because gameness and feather color are not genetically linked, so one had to have almost double the number of birds in a breeding flock to achieve both qualities.

Gamecocks have naturally long “heel” spurs which were originally filed to a sharp point. Later on as the “sport” gained notoriety, steel spurs were strapped to the cocks’ feet to insure more lethal wounds. With their introduction, more encounters ended in the death of the loser or frequently in that of both birds. Owners followed elaborate training protocols to improve their cocks’ fighting ability and considerable literature developed describing the latest techniques.

The practice probably originated in southeast Asia where wild jungle fowl still live. They closely resemble bantams. We are not sure when domestic fowl first reached Europe, although I saw recently in the Musée D’Orsay in Paris a painting by Jean Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) titled “Young Greeks fighting cocks.” In the foreground are two nineteenth-century-looking game cocks ready to fight; in the background, two young classical Greeks look on. I am sure that as an artist Gérôme never gave much thought to whether cock fighting actually occurred in classical Greece.

Because cold-blooded animals generally are less appealing to humans than warm-blooded ones, fish fighting still seems to thrive, especially in Thailand. The species used is the Siamese fighting fish -- Betta splendens (Betta-warrior) -- a native to eastern India, Burma, Malaysia and Thailand. It was introduced to Europe as an aquarium fish about 1900 and selective breeding has enhanced its bright colors. The male builds a bubble nest under the leaves of floating plants such as water lilies and aggressively defends the area around the nest from intruding males. This behavior made them ideal candidates for fights. When two males are confined in small glass bowls, they tear at each other’s fins and usually compete to the death. They are easily bred in home aquaria and little effort goes into selection for aggressiveness because it is already so firmly fixed in their makeup.

Betting also remains a primary incentive for camel fighting as still practiced in Turkey despite being officially banned in 1967. My friend Jeffrey Short actually witnessed such a contest when he was stationed in Turkey right after World War II. That fight occurred in a small stadium in Ankara (the capital), where it attracted a large crowd of bettors. Preliminary activity resembled an American horse race in that the bettors jostled around the animals in an effort to select the winner before placing their wager. The event officially began when a magnificently caparisoned estrous female was led between the two male contestants, who in turn drooled foam from their mouths as camels are wont to do when stimulated. Thus inspired, each male tries to place his neck over that of his opponent in order to force him to the ground. If successful, according to Jeff, the dominant male would then attempt to stomp on the head of its rival to finish him off. At this point the two owners and their miscellaneous helpers pull hard on ropes trailing from each camel to separate them. From this seeming chaos, if all goes as it should, the defeated camel hightails it to the far end of the stadium where the owner could regain control of his beast and prepare to fight it once again.

A report in The New York Times of 19 January 2000 described a recent camel fight in the small town of Selcuk (also known as Akincilar) on Turkey's west coast. I was fascinated to note that the photo of the camel in the foreground indicated it to be a hybrid between the two-humped Bactrian and the one-humped Arabian. The animal was padded for the fight and only the head, neck and left foreleg were visible. Turkey is one of the few places where the two species overlap as draft animals. They can interbreed and the first generation cross (F-1) is generally larger and stronger than either parent, making them ideal candidates for combat. The hybrids, however, are generally infertile when bred to each other so that exceptional fighters are bred back to a pure strain of either parent.

A few other large mammals are still fought for gambling entertainment. A Nepalese colleague told me that farmers there still occasionally fight bulls, but the practice is becoming increasingly rare. The value of a bull in prime condition is too high to risk its being injured in combat. In the heyday of the fabulously wealthy maharajahs, those in Rajastan and Mysore actually trained bull elephants to fight each other, and this practice evidently developed from an archaic use of elephants as beasts of war. Indeed, there are still some old prints of battle elephants storming the walls of a town. Today in Thailand's famed Surin Elephant Round-up, they actually reenact a duel on elephant-back. The two combatants are tuskers with elaborate howdahs manned by costumed warriors and accompanied by foot soldiers in traditional uniforms. The mock battle is a spectacular display of two well-trained elephants put on for the edification of the large crowds who come to Serin annually for this event.

What does the ubiquitous custom of using animal surrogates to fight each other say about humans? Are we so inherently violent that we consider boxing, staged wrestling, or even the mayhem of professional hockey and football rewarding entertainment? Violence and savagery are as ubiquitous today as they were at the dawn of our civilization. Transferring our aggressive instincts to animals, be they fish or elephants, seems to me unfair. Nature is red enough "in tooth and claw" without our having to exploit these beastly behaviors for our own amusement. The pendulum seems to be slowly swinging away from taking advantage of animal aggression and the so-called blood sports in general. And humans seem to be paying more attention to our aggressive habits. We have finally recognized that males are inherently violent and do not have to be taught to be aggressive. Michael Ghiglieri's recent book, The Dark Side of Man: Tracing the Origins of Male Violence, is an excellent analysis of the problem. The better we understand the causes of our aggression, the greater the chance that we can reduce or at least contain it so that our grandchildren may indeed enjoy a less violent and more peaceful world.

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P.S. I have also enclosed an excerpt from National Public Radio's Morning Edition (6 March 2000) as a follow-up to my February 2000 letter about floods.