

Hogging the Limelight

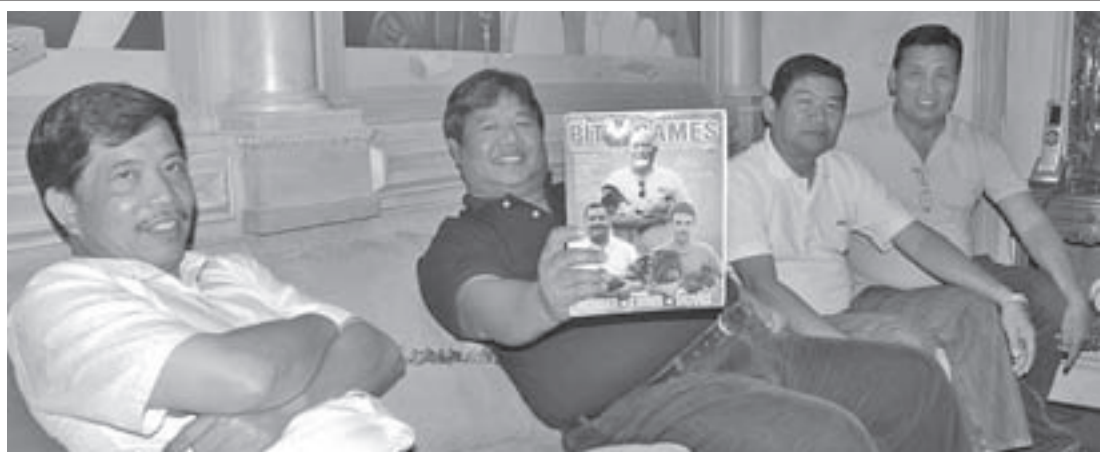
A funny, 'fowl' thing happened after the Hog Expo in Iowa

by RENE VILLAROMAN
AJPress

LOS ANGELES – Every year a delegation from the Philippines' swine breeding industry travel to

Iowa to attend the annual World Hog Expo held every May. At least that's the delegation's stated mission. But, some members of that same group are representatives of

the Philippines' game-fowl breeding industry who, after the Iowa expo, traveled to Southern states, like Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas, to look for ways to improve



COCKFIGHTING AFFICIANADOS. (from left to right) Dr. Eulalio Lorenzo DVM, Manny Berbano, Laney dela Torres and Loy Seisa.
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the health and fighting ability of game cocks used in the country's number one sport, cock-fighting, a sport that is legal in the Philippines.

This year, Manny Berbano, publisher and editor of *Pit Games*, a glossy magazine dedicated to cock-fighting in the Philippines, Dr. Eulalio Lorenzo, DVM, a veterinarian and game-fowl breeder, and Laney de la Torre, owner of one of the country's largest game fowl breeding farms in Bacolod. They stayed at the Los Angeles home of fellow cockfighting aficionado Loy Seison.

A P500-billion national sport, according to Berbano, with eight to ten percent of the total 84 million population of the Philippines is involved in cockfighting. For instance, the twice-a-year Slasher's Cup held in the giant Araneta Coliseum in January and May, offers a top purse of P10 million. The Candelaria Derby, which honors the Nuestra Senora de Candelaria, in the Visayan city of Iloilo, is the second largest, according to Berbano. The sport is so popular

that the Philippine government had to throw its support to it. "It is not a culture of gambling, as it is commonly believed," says Berbano.

"As a sport, it has surpassed basketball in receipts and attendance," Berbano revealed. "It is held every day in tupadas (illegal cockfights)," Berbano said. To regulate the sport, the local governments are now empowered to issue permits to barangays (government units) to regulate cockfighting in the villages. The upsurge in the popularity of the sport benefits a lot more than the aficionados. The game-fowl feed, medicine, and the construction industries are also benefiting from the windfall. "The lumber industry benefits because of the number of cockpits being constructed around the country," Berbano noted. Of the 114 cities in the nation, only two have not built cockpits: Baguio City (summer capital) and Manila, the nation's capital. Out of the nation's 1,491 municipalities (towns), 1,000 already have cockpits. Zamboanga City, in Mindanao, has the most: five cockpits.

Berbano told Asian Journal that the country is very thankful to Paul Watson, a *Los Angeles Times* and *Time Magazine* writer, who attended a Slasher's Derby at the Araneta Coliseum two years ago. Berbano recalls with relish how Watson was shocked to discover that cockfighting indeed transcends a very wide spectrum of Philippine society. "When we arrived at the Coliseum, Peping Cojuangco and Nene Araneta were already there," Berbano relates. "There were so many photographers covering the derby; it looked like a scene in Hollywood, with paparazzi chasing celebrities around," Berbano said. "Paul sat next to me and he noticed the giant billboard that announced the 'Thrilla' in Manila," the historic heavyweight fight between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier in the early 1970s, and he was doubly surprised. After that experience, all of Watson's biases against the sport were debunked.

This year, the National Bakbakan Derby will be held simultaneously, where it is expected to attract more than 2000 entries in 25 cockpits across the Philippines. The prizes will top P20 million and the best of the unbeaten game cocks will be fighting at the Araneta Coliseum. Then there is the National Ten Stag Bakbakan Derby being promoted by the National Federation of Game-fowl Breeders headed by Ricardo Palmares, Jr. At present, the NFGB has a membership of 29 breeders. The creation of the National Game-fowl Training Center is also stressing the training of all aficionados and professionalizing the sport.

Laney de la Torre is one of the country's top breeders with 3000 heads of gamefowl in his Bacolod City farm. One of his champion game-fowls has beaten one of Larry Ronero's (of Louisiana) game-fowls in the 70s. De la Torre said that Ronero had refused his invitation to come and compete again in the Philippines again. Ronero said that he did not want to come to the Philippines to be beaten by Filipino cock-fighters.

The breeding of a champion game-fowl takes many arcane approaches, according to de la Torre. "Our Filipino handlers and feeders are one of the best in the world," De la Torre said. "Although Filipino breeders import materials from the U.S., they are good breeders that can mix one bloodline with another to improve the health and ability of game-fowl and transform them into brave and champion fighting cocks," De la Torre said. "I don't know why other international breeders (mostly Americans and Asians) still come to the Philippines even though they are losing there," De la Torre asked. "For instance Larry Ronero used to come to the Philippines during the 1970s, but he lost there most of the time," De la Torre recalls.

De la Torre began his career as a handler/gaffer in 1977. He started breeding in 1990. "As a handler, you must be focused to your job," he advised. "And you must be open to ideas and suggestions." He said that breeders should understand the complexity of mixing bloodlines in order to improve the fighting ability of game-fowls and to understand the early stages of a disease. He said that his province is an ideal place to breed game-fowls because it hardly ever experience violent storms that bring too much water that soak up the ground. The island of Negros is made up of sandy loam, which does not become sticky when it gets rained on; the water is flushed down immediately. Thus bacteria do not thrive.

"In the Philippines, cock-fighting is a venerable sport," defines Berbano. The champions are on the cover of magazines and are considered as celebrities in their own right," Berbano said. "If you are a politician, cock-fighting can put you in office because there are many cock-fighting aficionados."

"It represents the true meaning of the Filipinos' honesty, integrity and fair play. That's the name of the game," Berbano explained. "The passion of Filipinos for the national pastime is incomparable anywhere in the world because this is where you can rub shoulders with the high and mighty of society and the lowly people of the barrio." ■

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