

Cockfight raid nets birds, one arrest

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos



Animal control officers Jim Boeckl and Mari Ann Merendino load birds up during Sunday's raid on a home in Watsonville.

Animal Watsonville man held; charges include felony cruelty

By JOHN BESSA
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WATSONVILLE — Authorities responding to a reported cockfight seized 75 roosters and arrested the birds' owner during a raid on a Watsonville home Sunday, state Humane Officers said.

Three of the suspected fighting cocks were so severely injured that they had to be put to death, said Skip Prigge, state Humane Officer.

Someone called authorities about 11:30 a.m. to report a cockfight in the residential area at the end of Second Street, Prigge said. Three humane officers and four Watsonville police officers converged on the home's garage less than an hour later.

"They knew we were coming," Prigge said. There were men on the roof of the house. "They all started working like they were doing construction on the house," he said.

A search of the home turned up the

fighting birds, several sets of knives affixed to the roosters' legs, and other evidence the animals were being used for fights, Prigge said.

One of the gravely injured cocks had a 1½-inch gouge on its body that someone had sewn closed. Another had "a hole" under a wing, Prigge said.

"You could actually lift the wing and see down into it. There was actually bird seed coming out of it," he said.

The owner of the birds, Olegario Perez Hurtado, 44, of Watsonville, was arrested on suspicion of felony animal cruelty, possessing a game cock with intent to fight it, training game cocks, possessing fighting implements, possessing hypodermic syringes, and fighting the birds, Prigge said.

The animal cruelty charge is a felony because, authorities allege, Hurtado allowed the bird to be severely in-

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jured and then allowed it to suffer, Prigge said.

The man admitted to training the birds and using them in the past for fights, but denied a cockfight was being conducted at his home on Sunday, Prigge said.

Hurtado was raising the birds to fight in Arizona, where it is legal, said Hurtado's friend, Herman Contreras.

"We breed them and take them to Arizona," Contreras said. "They took five roosters that were worth like \$1,000 each. That's not fair."

Prigge said that in California it is legal to have a fighting cock, as

long as the owner doesn't plan on fighting it, even outside the state.

The three humane officers spent more than three hours trapping the birds in a pen behind the home and putting them in cages and boxes. The fate of the healthy birds has yet to be determined, authorities said. They will be held by the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Prigge said the typical cockfight pits two birds with blades attached to their legs against each other in a small pen. Those watching the fight often bet on it.

In addition to the knives fastened to the birds' trimmed nails, called spurs, fighting cocks also

have trimmed feathers to make them lighter and more agile, Prigge said.

Cockfighting can be lucrative for some bird owners, Prigge said, with winners of "derby" events making as much as \$25,000.

Some travel to other states, Mexico or the Philippines to enter such derbies, he said.

"They're literally in the money," he said.

Prigge said he is investigating as many as 30 people suspected of raising and regularly fighting the birds in the county.

"Every Sunday, guaranteed, there's a fight," he said.