

A Tribute To Chesney, A Former Cockfighting Rooster

*(He was a lover,
not a fighter!)*

Animals are often a product of what *we* make them out to be. Usually their behaviors are a direct result of *our* behaviors or are a result of the restrictions we place on them.

Chesney, a very handsome and colorful rooster, came into the Happy Trails rescue program through a cockfighting raid in Lorain County several years ago. He was only one of 44 chickens that had been confiscated in this case.

Chesney feather's were brilliant, rich shades of dark-reds, red-browns, and red-blacks. He was a thing of beauty to look at, but not at first.

Like all the other roosters, Chesney arrived with all the feathers having been shaved from his stomach and all the way down his legs. He delicate skin was burned red from the razor. His once crowning glory, his comb, had ruthlessly been cut off by his owners. No anesthetics are ever used — usually a knife is sufficient to slice the comb off. This is all part of the preparation for a rooster to fight. The feathers are shaved because it's a blood sport — they can get to each others vital organs much easier this way. The combs are cut off so they get less blood in their eyes because a comb will bleed a great deal when cut open with a sharp claw.



Happy Trails volunteer, Janet Cobb, holds Chesney the rooster, at one of our many community events.

Chesney's spurs had also been cut off the back of his legs. This procedure is done so that the spurs can be replaced with something even more lethal — a metal band that is secured around the leg that has a razor blade attached. This can make the rooster a fierce competitor in the eyes of their owners, for when roosters fight, they fight with talons flying first — hence, out come the razor blades to do the most damage.

During a period of recovery, we worked with the chickens to really get to know them. Chesney was one of many who really took to their caretakers.

He loved to be held. *LOVED* it! He

would fall asleep in your arms while you were holding him, and get so comfortable that on more than one occasion people asked if the chicken had died. He was merely content and felt safe in the arms of his human friends.

Chesney became an ambassador for Happy Trails, as well as a teacher and a professor at several schools and universities. You think I'm kidding! Chesney made appearances at many educational institutions, including the University Of Akron, my alma mater. He and I have regularly been given the opportunity to speak to the students in the Ethics, Intro To Social Problems and Social Problems classes. It's one thing to explain to students how animal fighting affects our neighborhood and communities and what animal fighting is all about. It's quite another thing to hand a rooster to them that they can hold, pet, and experience, knowing that it used to be an animal that had to fight for it's life. He had a way of bringing the story home for the

students.

Chesney also humored us and made public appearances at many, many community events. He was always a good sport when he had multiple little hands petting him at once. *Never* did he even consider biting or pecking at a person. *Not once*.

Could this truly have been the same bird that arrived at Happy Trails with a shaved chest, a comb that was cut-off, and was so aggressively violent with other roosters that he fought through the metal wire of his cage and actually ripped off the ends of his own toes? What type of life was this poor, pathetic creature forced to live? Kill or be killed...something that was not of his own choosing, but rather something he was forced to do. For fun. For sport. For someone's sick amusement.

And yet, here he was at Happy Trails, enjoying life visiting with small children, teaching students what incredible personalities roosters have, and helping to bring about an awareness of the horrors and the reality of cockfighting.

Everyone at Happy Trails loved Chesney, and he was a favorite pick when volunteers got to choose animals to take

I'm sure that Chesney would have signed autographs if he could! He was quite the local celebrity, and he was very patient while multiple little curious hands or old wrinkled hands would pet him.



to a special event. Chesney even visited nursing homes through the Happy Trails Farm Animal Visitation Program. *What? A former cockfighter bringing joy and happiness to the elderly residents of nursing homes? Why, yes he did!* Chesney was very cooperative and would tolerate much handling, petting and smooching.

The one thing that we were always very conscious of was the fact that sometimes Chesney's stubs of his toes hurt. He had to have arthritis in them, and as he began to get older, he sat down more and more. We began to retire Chesney from having to attend too many activities.

The last week of his life we could tell that he really wasn't feeling very well. He would twist his neck around and tuck his beak backwards into the warmth of his

feathers as he napped under the soft glow of his own personal heat lamp. I would pick him up and hold him every day and let him know how much we loved him and appreciated everything that he had gone through. We kept hoping that he was just having an "off" week, but I think deep down we all knew better. Finally, sensing that his time to cross into the world of the spirit was very close, we had him scheduled to go to the vet the next morning. When we can't repair or help an animal to heal, often the kindest thing to do is to provide it with a humane euthanasia.

However, morning feeding time came on Monday, February 1st, and we realized that Chesney had passed on during the night — he had chosen on his own accord to graduate and move on.



All the cockfighting roosters arrived with their combs cut off, their stomach and legs shaved, and their spurs cut off. Many of them are incredibly sweet to people, and have fantastic personalities.

I find it absolutely amazing that if this bird were to have stayed in the company of cockfighters, he would have been labeled as a winner, as a dangerous fighter. Not by his own choice, but because he was forced to fight — because of the situation his owners would put him in.

But put him in caring, loving hands, and he was fantastic with calm and gentle people and developed lasting relationships with the people who grew to know and love him. No-one would have known what joy and

happiness he could have brought into the lives of the nursing home residents if he were never given the chance.

We will all certainly miss Chesney. His life-lesson to us shows us that anyone can definitely overcome their past, and leave a positive influence on the world in which we live. Here's a thought — consider the animals in the world around you and ask yourself if they are a product of their environment, an environment that we as humans created? What lives could they influence and what lessons could they teach if only given the chance? Think of the animals such as those on factory farms — chickens in battery cages, pigs in gestation crates, geese being force-fed with tubes on foie gras farms, small baby calves used for veal and chained to small calf hutches, and so on.

As for Chesney, he is somewhere now busy chasing bugs, scratching about in warm, loose dirt with toes that no longer hurt, and taking long dirt baths in some soft rays of sunshine. This incredible, gentle creature deserves all this and more. Perhaps he'll even make friends with those he was forced to fight, in a world where there is nothing but a complete and blissful feeling of peace and love for each other.

On behalf of Chesney and all the chickens who suffer daily in the hands of cockfighting proponents, please report suspected animal fighting to your local authorities. Having to fight for your life at the expense of another's death is certainly no way to force *any* animal to live. What have



Realizing that he was safe at Happy Trails and that a new life was about to begin, gave Chesney something to crow about!

we become when we turn a blind eye to the actions of those in our communities who endorse such behavior?

Thanks, Chesney, for showing us that what is often reflected on the surface is not really what's down deep in one's soul. The mask of being an aggressive, cockfighting rooster was simply a forced persona for this sweet, gentle creature.

Make your toes no longer hurt, may your beak no longer be cracked or broken, may your spirit heal and soar, may you be able to perch as high as you'd like with no restrictions, may you have someone to gently hold you while you take a well deserved nap — that, Chesney, is our wish for you!