

# **O R I E N T A L G A M E F O W L C L U B I N T E R N A T I O N A L**



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# HISTORY OF BELGIAN GAMEFOWL BREEDS

By J-M. VANGANSBERG

My research on this subject had led me to the following conclusions :

## THE MYSTERY OF THE ORIGIN

A long time ago Belgian and northern French Game resembled the Old English Game, but were larger. They showed a rather inclined back, rather short legs, long tail and wings. As to the shape, they probably resembled the Jungle cock called Bankiva.

It is possible their larger size was due to the import of crossed Malayoid fowl during Aryan migrations. In his book "Cockfighting all over the World", C.A. Finsterbush writes on the origin of big fowl living in Europe before the Romans came with Caesar to the north of France and Belgium with smaller Bankivoïd game fowl : Finsterbush thinks their origin is crosses between Malay and Bankiva. He calls them "Mongolic".

Another interesting characteristic in the plumage of the original Belgian Fighting cock is the black or blue colour with no trace of red. Nowadays, as the red pigment of Bankivoïd breeds is prevalent, the completely blue or black Belgian strain is very rare, because our national breed was regularly crossed with the red Northern French Game.

The old black (or blue) Belgian strain still exists around Oudenaarde (Audenarde) and at the end of the 19th. century, the Belgian magazine "Chasse et Pêche" described its existence in the same region, between Ath - Lessines - Ninove - Aalst.

Thus, the color of the Belgian strain was originally black or blue, sometimes white, with dark eyes, dark legs (no trace of yellow).

The traditions of the cockers of the west of Belgium and the north of France speak of the myth of the origin of the Belgian Game as being black game cocks obtained by crossing with pheasants. Have we to consider that the Sumatra Game, sometimes called "black pheasant" is responsible of this legend of the origin ? Or perhaps too the Gallus Varius of Java with this pheasant like appearance ? Personally, I have tried crosses with the pheasant called "Colohide" but I got no results further than the first generation. I should be happy if somebody could give me some information on this subject.

THE "COQ GAULOIS" OVER THE CENTURIES

With Caesar, 2000 years ago, Roman soldiers invaded Gaul. They imported their game cocks for amusement. In the Middle Ages, the nobility had game cocks but we have little information about that period.

During the Spanish occupation, some Spanish Game blood entered our birds. Sometimes we can still see some Spanish features coming back in the phenotype of the French Game cocks.

At the beginning of (and during) the 19th. century, Game cocks were imported from Asia (Malays).

Then, the cockers crossed the Malay with local breeds. They based their selection on speed along the French border (west) for steel spurs. In the north and the east of Belgium, they selected for strength, height, weight and endurance (naked heel fighting).

We had then : 1-French Game and "Coq flamand" (= Flemish Game) : speedy.

2-Bruges Game and in the 2nd part of the 19th. century with new crosses with Malays : the "Coq Liégeois" (Liege Game).

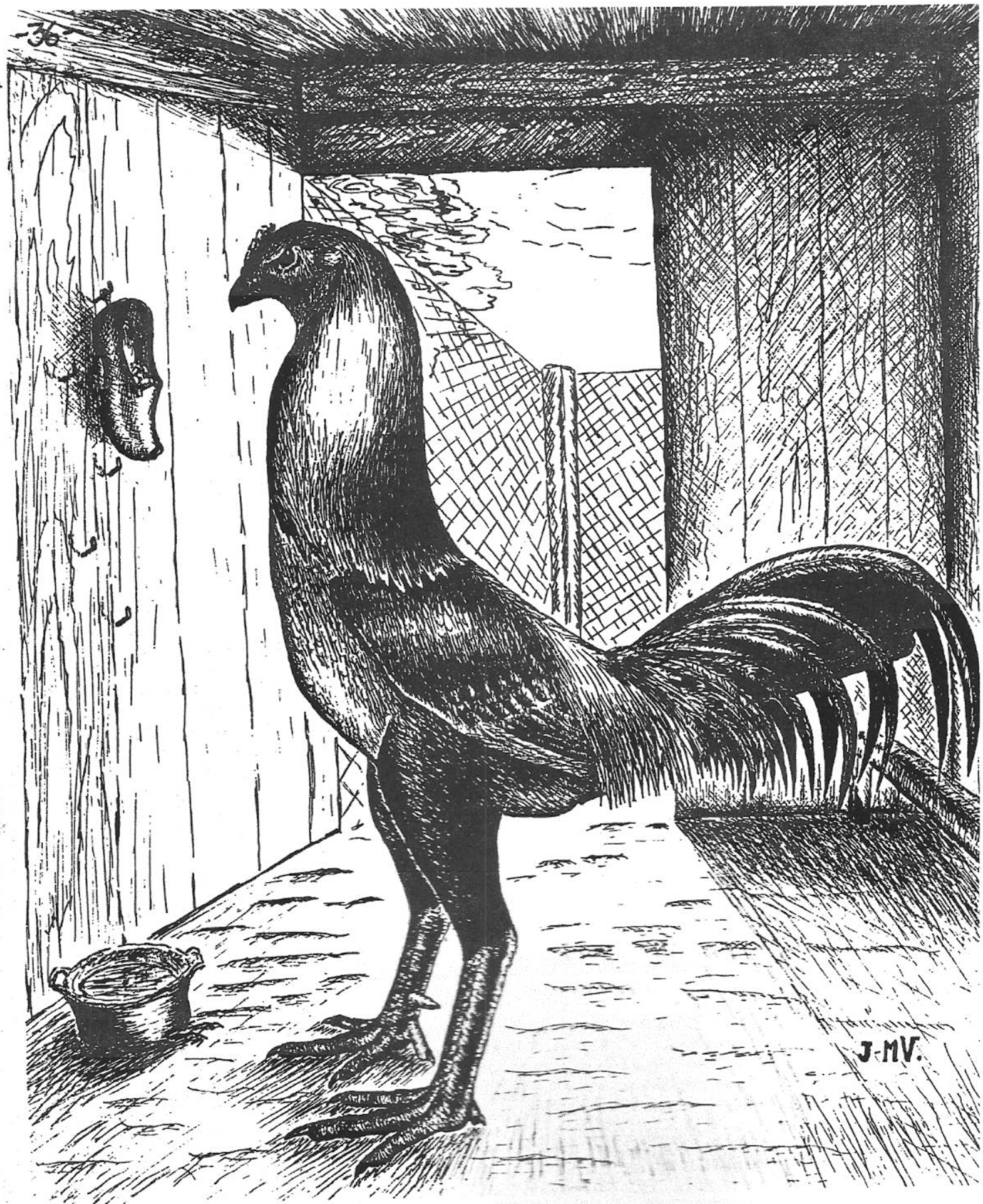
Before these crosses with Malays, Belgian Game cocks (of big size and bankivoïd type) were called "Lombard" (Flemish translation : "Lombaardse haan"). Cockers of some regions of Belgium (Oudenaarde, Charleroi and some parts of northern Belgium) still know this word ; French cockers do not know what a "Lombard" is because most of them have never seen the Malayoïd breeds of eastern Belgium. (This fact is due to the different style of fighting. As they organize no meetings, they have no need to consider the difference).

The Flemish Game was heavier than the French (Around 4,5 kg). Like the French Game, it kicks at the body. The typical endurance breeds (Liege Game, Shamo, ...) use to kick at the head.

BELGIAN GAME BREEDS IN THE 20TH. CENTURY

The "Bruges" faded away, replaced by the "Liege" game (more resistant and taller : this is an advantage because the Liege Game kicks mostly at the head). Nevertheless, in 1908, a "Club du Combattant de Bruges" was formed and made publicity for the breed (for showing) - Weight of both : 5 kg and over.

It seems that until the beginning of the century, people of north-western Belgium used horn spurs for fighting. Now, the breeders of the region of Bruges and some of the region of Antwerp have only Flemish Game or French Game ("Grand Combattant du Nord") in their poultry - yards because, with cars, it is easier to go to the French border than to organize clandestine fights on Belgian soil.



-Earlier the Liège Game was fed in a saucer hung high on a wall, so the cock was alone to be able to eat (because some taller than the hens).  
Drawing by J-M. VANGANSBERG.

-Luikse Vechter, met een klomp om de voeding te plaatsen. (Een tekening van J-M. VANGANSBERG).

-Combattant de Liège, nourri dans un sautoir, de façon traditionnelle.  
(Dessin de J-M. VANGANSBERG).

Thus, when Belgian cockers created the "Bruges" Game in the 19th. century, their purpose was to obtain a better strain for endurance and heavier birds. A few decades ago, there existed no classes for the different weights and, of course, the heavy birds fought with an advantage.

For shows, the Belgian Federation recognized only the Bruges at the end of the 19th. century. However, the Liege was already a distinct breed for the pit : more resistant and taller. At the beginning of the 20th., two breeds were registered : the "Bruges" and the "Liege". So, the Flemish Game, the most famous fowl for steel fighting, was left aside (because the standards for shows were set by people from the north of Belgium who did not know Flemish Game very well and confused this with the "Combattant du Nord"). However, some good cockers as Mr. Cliquennois of Lille (France) knew very well the difference between the French and the Flemish breeds and Finsterbush's book noted this.

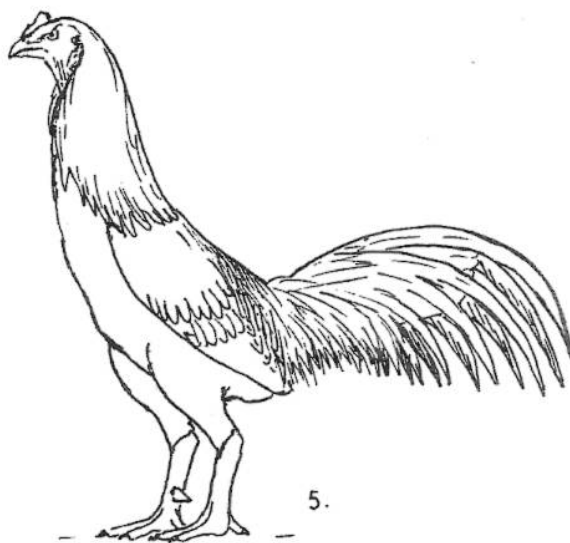
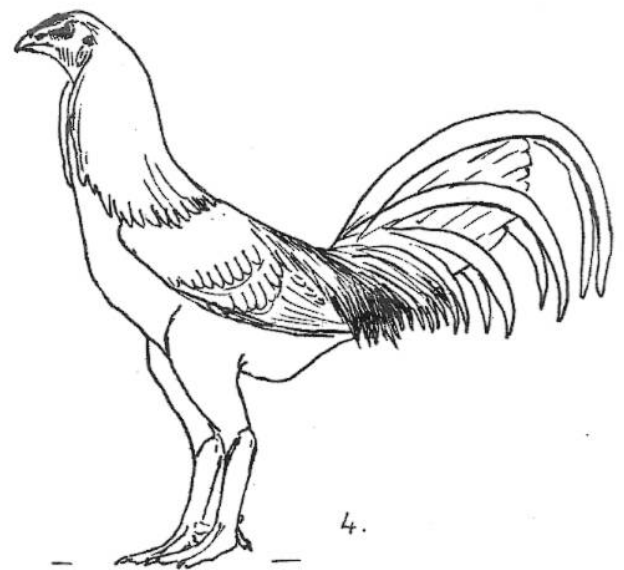
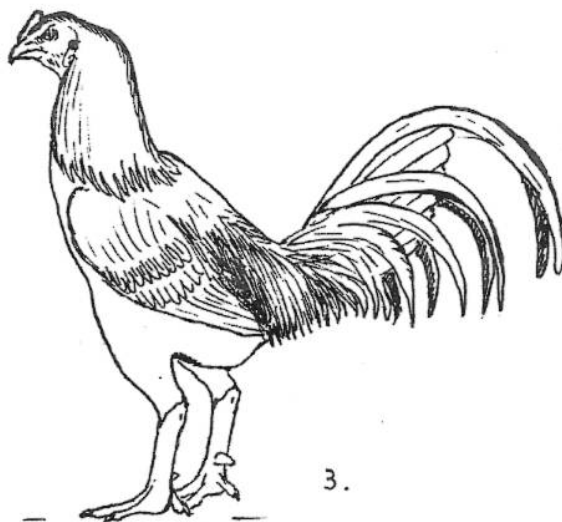
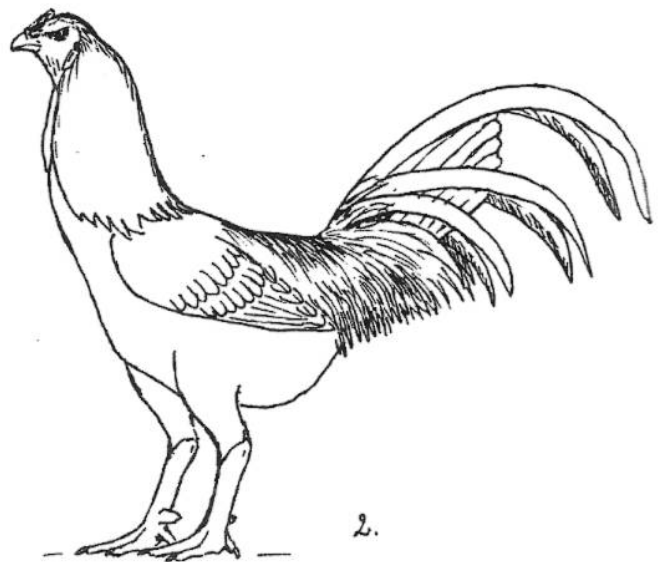
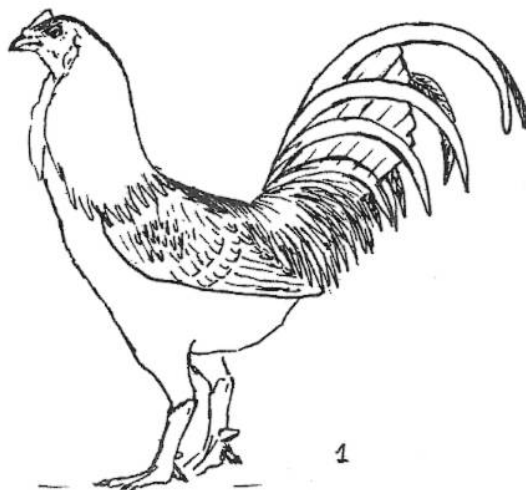
In 1923, the Belgian Federation for the shows amalgamated both the recognized strains under the name "Belgian Game", because they were always mixed. But a few decades ago, the Bruges Game were reverting more and more to the Flemish Game (shorter legs, more Bankivoïd type because some Belgian fanciers bought their brood birds in the cockers yards. The Federation created 2 separate classes in 1960 .

In reality, from the pit point of view, the Liege Game was a very distinct breed (with very big shanks and compact plumage). The Bruges Game has never been completely fixed. It was a transitional stage between the Flemish Game and the Liege Game. It has now become more and more assimilated to the Flemish Game (more Bankivoïd) in the shows. Now, Belgian fanciers do not know what name to give and they call everything Belgian Game. It is a problem for the cockers who buy cocks for the pit at the Belgian shows : they cannot distinguish from among a well-fixed type which bird to buy either for speed or for endurance and, in recent years, cockers have bought only Japs (Shamo) at the shows.

GAME COCKS OF TODAY IN BELGIUM

In the West :

The game cocks of the West of Belgium are seldom pure Flemish game. I wrote in the paragraph about the origin of Belgian breeds that the legendary black (or blue) colour of the old Belgian Game cock is almost lost. This is due to the intrusion of red pigment of the French Game. So most of Flemish cocks have red or yellow (gold) feathers but they are very distinct from the French Game by their shape : their back is not so inclined, the extremities of their wings not so low, their size is larger, the color of the face and of the eyes is dark, and the legs are black or dark blue. However these two breeds become more and more mixed and many birds are intermediate between the two. The French cockers have always admitted the paramount quality of the Flemish cocks and often buy broodcocks in Belgium. This fact is well recognized by the French reporter Arnauld de Corbie in his book "Combats de coqs" (1939). This is significant enough, as we say, jokingly, in Belgium, that the best way to make a fortune is to buy a French man at the right price and to resell him at the price at which he values himself.



-VECHTHOENDERRASSEN VAN BELGIE. De "Vlaamse Vechter" (1) en de "Limburgse Vechter" (5) zijn niet voor de tentoonstelling erkend; Nr2 : Brugse Vechter; Nr3 : Tiense Vechter ; Nr4: Luikse Vechter.

-COMBATTANTS DE BELGIQUE. Le "Combattant Flamand" (1) et le "Combattant Limbourgeois" (5) ne sont pas reconnus pour les expositions; N°2: C. de Bruges; N°3: C. de Tirlemont; N°4: C. de Liège.

-BELGIUM GAMEFOWL. The "Flemish Game" (1) and the "Limbourg Game" (5) are not recognized for the shows; Nr2: Bruges Game; Nr3: Tirlemont Game; Nr4 : Liège Game.

The general weight of the Flemish cocks seems to be higher now than at the beginning of the century : most of them weigh between 4,5 and 5,5 kg, sometimes we can see bigger cocks : up to 6 kg and rarely 7 kg (more than 15 lbs !!!) ready for battle. As the strains of the west are heavier (although very speedy) than any other breeds, the cockers very rarely cross with other breeds nowadays (some tried with Malay or Liege Game but the offspring are too slow, so they must cross selectively for 2 years - or more - for a good result and it becomes too expensive).

In the Flemish strain, we never see muffed cocks, but we often meet tufted cocks. They always have wattles and never a dewlap. Some very good strains have some white in the earlobes. The eggs of the Flemish hens are white. These are good layers.

#### In the East :

Unlike the Flemish, the pure Liege Game have no tuft. It has no dewlap, but little wattles. The comb is triple or single (with a single comb, the wattles are always larger). The eyebrows are very prominent. The hackles do not hang in front of the neck. The Liégeois are very tall with very long legs and powerful shanks, but the thighs are not as bulky as those of the Flemish (which is a sprinter) : the muscles of the Liège Game are longer. He has great staying power. Its plumage is closer but not even as Oriental breeds. The good Liège cocks are 70 to 80 cm high. After 1920, it was recognized as the best breed for naked heel battles and no cocker spoke any more of Bruges Game. Many Liège Game were grey (black or blue grey), often with brown shoulders ; the others were black red or blue red. Most fowls had light blue shanks. The eyes of the pure Liege were light brown, those of the hens being a little darker. Good style for Liège Game, was to push the opponent with the breast when the latter was preparing to kick. Thus the good Liège cock tired out his opponent, which made it easier for him to strike at his opponent's head afterwards. With the thinner artificial spurs, the pure Liège Game was too slow to win and a new breed is born in the district of Limbourg : "The Limbourgeois" or "Limbourg Game". This breed is a cross with the Shamo. These birds generally look like the Shamo with few differences : sometimes blue or white shanks sometimes a higher tail, or some various features showing that they are not pure Shamo. They generally are also heavier than most Shamo. Their eyes are almost always yellow (sometimes orange) and the comb triple. Many have a dewlap.

Now, the cockers of the east are looking for birds of bigger size to improve this new breed and a few years ago big oriental game cocks from Taiwan were imported. The pure Liège Game is now very rare and the cockers have regrets for the incredible gameness of their old giant breed. The last pure examples are to be found around Charleroi where the cockers used thick horn spurs until 1978. The fights were held in Jeumont, France, close to the Belgian border, a famous place in the history of cockfighting because, a few decades ago, crowds of cockers from districts of Limbourg and Liège came there to organize battles quietly. This "gallodrome" came to an end in 1988. To improve the speed of their cocks the cockers of the east now import French Game cocks. This is the new fashion.

For the shows, the National Federation now admit a dewlap for the Bruges or the Liège Game. This is an error : these breeds, when pure, have no dewlap ; only the Limbourg Game often have a dewlap. The tuft is also admitted for the Liège Game : this is also an error. Bruges Game is described with a low tail (under 20 degrees) : only non fixed crosses with Malay had low tails. (However, the magazine "Chasse et Pêche" at the beginning of the 20th. century, and books with standards of the same time described the Bruges with a tail at 90 degrees). Why these errors ? Because, in Belgium, the standards are still established by judges who do not breed gamefowl and who never go to the pit.

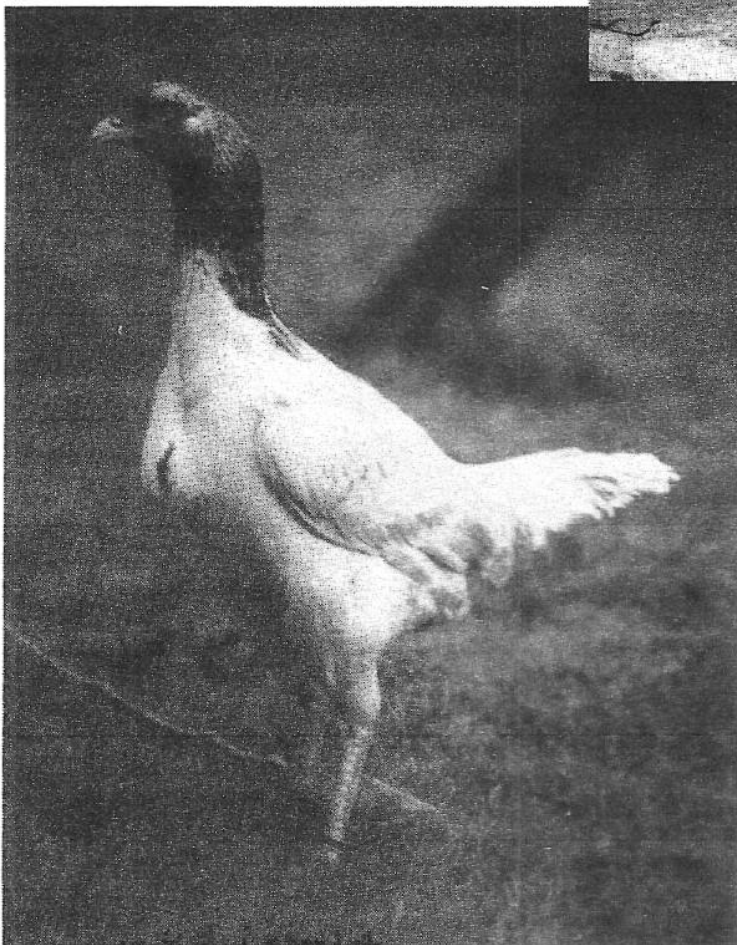
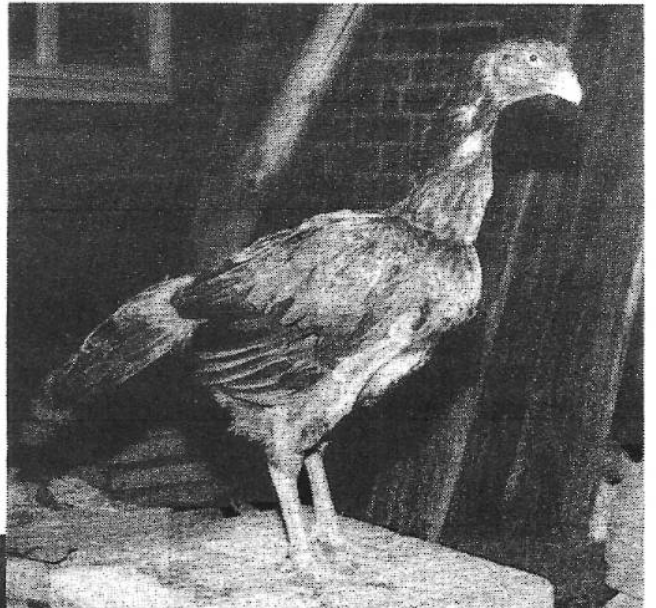
-Poule Grand Asil du Nord de l'Inde (origine : province de Haryana, Inde).

-Grote Noord-Indië Asil hen (oorsprong : provincie Haryana, Indië).

-Large Northern India Asil hen (origin : province of Haryana, India).

(Propriétaire - Eigenaar - Owner : J-M. VANGANSBERG).

(Photo : J-M. VANGANSBERG).



-Poule Grand Asil de type élané (origine : Madagascar)

-Grote Asil hen met slank type (oorsprong : Madagascar)

-Large Asil hen, slender type (origin : Madagascar).

Propriétaire - Eigenaar - Owner : R. Lamarque).

(Photo : J-M. VANGANSBERG).