

# A royal battle

Switzerland is home to many unique and fascinating traditions. Canton Valais boasts one of the most unusual and exciting of them all. Join *Swiss News* on a journey to this rugged and beautiful region to experience the spectacle of the *Combat de Reines*, where cow fights cow to determine who will be crowned queen.

By Matthew Beattie | Cows get a lot of bad press these days. Apparently, their flatulence is contributing to global warming, their grazing is putting the rainforests at risk and eating too much beef will send you to the all-you-can-eat buffet in the sky faster than you can say 'cholesterol'.

I'm no expert, but it strikes me the blame lies with mankind – cows are merely convenient scapegoats. After all, cows don't cut down trees. Neither do they influence what we choose to eat.

I, for one, am a huge fan of cows. They have shaped the culture, landscape and traditions of Switzerland like nothing else. Without them, I couldn't stink out my fridge with the fine cheeses for which this land is justifiably famous; nor could I sit in mountain fields where herds of curious bovines amble over to stand

next to me in companionable solidarity when I go hiking.

## In the midst of potential royalty

I first heard about the fighting cows of Valais shortly after I moved to Switzerland in 2005 and had been waiting for an opportunity to satisfy my curiosity ever since. I was therefore delighted when *Swiss News* asked me to attend the season's first *Combat de Reines* (Battle of the Queens) in St. Maurice to write a feature on this unique tradition.

Fighting cows come exclusively from the *Hérens* breed of cattle; however, it is an entirely female pursuit. The bulls don't fight, but concentrate instead on the role of siring future generations. Originating from the *Val d'Hérens* (Hérens Valley) in Canton Valais, close to the town of Sion,

there are few breeds better suited to the rugged terrain and difficult climate conditions of the region.

Dr. Gerda Fellay is a breeder of *Hérens*, and the previous owner of a 'Queen of the Cows' prize-winner. Some families struggle for generations before one of their cows wins that title. But in only five years of breeding *Hérens*, Fellay already had one such prize-winner. She hopes to repeat that success with Bouboule, who will make her fighting debut at the St. Maurice *Combat de Reines*.

A Danish-born psychotherapist with her own successful practice in Sion, Fellay seems an unlikely candidate for success in the world of cow combat. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I join her at her stables in bright morning sunshine the day before the



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These ladies get down to business at a regional fight in St. Maurice



competition. As soon as she arrives, the cows run to greet her. *Hérens* are markedly different from some of the breeds more commonly seen in Switzerland. Slightly smaller than Swiss Brown cows, and with a stocky, almost square build, their coats range from dark brown to black.

#### A 'moo-tual' understanding

Fellay sets about preparing breakfast for her hungry charges as I ask her what attracted her to breeding cattle.

"I grew up on a farm in Denmark," she explains. "I have always enjoyed working with cows. For me, coming to the stables and tending to the cows is a way of completely removing myself from everyday life stresses."

With a busy practice to run, Fellay has many demands on her time. Howev-

er, the fields of psychiatric care and keeping cows are not mutually exclusive. A visit to the stables can really help to open up some of her younger patients, she says. Her cows also benefit from her comprehensive understanding of psychology, she explains, while securing the cows to the feeding trough.

"There's a bit of a conflict going on at the moment," she tells me. "If I don't follow the order of the herd for tying them up to feed, then the balance [is] upset. Each cow has its place and if I disrupt the order, they fight."

#### Natural instincts

Fighting is a natural trait in all cows, but *Hérens* have developed the instinct and skill more than any other. Fellay and her native Valaisier friend Narcisse Praz dis-

cuss their theories on the origins of this behaviour with me over lunch later that day.

"The reason that *Hérens* fight," Praz tells me, "is because they had to. It was about competing for limited food and space in a very difficult environment. Some of the mountain pastures were so small and narrow it wasn't possible for all the cows to lie down. Therefore, the cows who were strongest were able to secure the best food and enough space to spread out."

Praz remembers life in the region when the majority of residents still made their living from agriculture. "I came from a small village of around 400 people. Everybody kept one or two cows. If you had more, you were considered rich," he reminisces.

When summer arrived, the cows were put into a collective group called an *Alpage* and taken to high pastures to graze.

"It is when the cows were brought together that they would begin to fight. It is these fights that form the basis of the sport fighting we know today," he says.

#### Rules of combat

The first organised cow fight took place in 1922, but it wasn't until the 1960s when television ownership became more commonplace that its popularity took off.

The rules are simple. Cows are placed into categories according to weight (as with boxing), with the smallest in Category Three and the largest in Category One. With over 150 cows taking part in every regional event, such as the one in St. Maurice, each category is sub-divided into three groups to prevent too many cows from being in the arena at once. For example, if Category One has 31 combatants, then there will be 11 in the first group and 10 in each of the others.

The best from each group will then be pitted against each other to determine the winners. The victors from each regional championship will then compete in the cantonal finals. This year, the season will reach its exciting climax near Sion on May 10, when the top cows from each region will compete for the ultimate honour of the cantonal title.

A good fighting cow will not move around the arena very much. Rather, she will stand and defend her patch of ground, locking horns with each cow that comes to challenge her position.



Bouboule and Gerda Fellay on their way into the arena

Cows are not forced to fight and they are free to withdraw from a confrontation at will. If a cow withdraws three times, then she is removed from the arena and eliminated from the round. The remaining cows continue to fight until the dominant cow in each group has won.

For most *Hérens* breeders, their cows mean everything. The idea of placing them at unnecessary risk is unthinkable. Although injuries can sometimes occur during fights, they are generally superficial. Organisers expend a great deal of effort to make sure they are avoided as much as possible. Officials patrol the arena to ensure the cows don't attack others that are already fighting. Horns are checked for sharpness and if they pose an injury risk, they are blunted.

Fair play is the rule, and the only wagers made among the owners are light-hearted – for meals or drinks.

### Fight day

I join Fellay the following day in St. Maurice. She has brought two of her cows to

compete, but Bouboule is the most promising prospect.

Anybody who doubts the intelligence of cows is ill informed: Bouboule remembers me from my stable visit the previous day and nuzzles against me. She is oblivious to the throng of people and cows surrounding her. Titania, the other cow, is restless – missing her calf back at the stable. Fellay decides that she will send her home without fighting, leaving only Bouboule to carry her hopes.

It is early afternoon before Bouboule takes to the ring in the first group of Category One cows. Dust and gravel fly as the cows lock horns in a test of skill, strength and strategy. I crouch in the restricted area at the edge of the arena alongside breeders, photographers and journalists with my camera at the ready, waiting to capture Bouboule's moment of victory.

Unfortunately, it's not to be. Although she is one of the biggest cows and stands her ground, she is not in the mood to fight. She is eliminated early on and the competition continues. I remain in the

arena taking pictures of the continuing battles, occasionally repositioning myself to get the best angle.

Suddenly, a cow decides she has had enough of fighting and makes a run for the arena exit. All that block her way are an official and a camera-toting *Swiss News* journalist. Guess which of us she aims for?

With 700 kilos of determined moo bearing down on me, I vault the metal barriers with an alacrity I never knew I had. With my camera and a very small piece of dignity still intact, I make my way to console Fellay and Bouboule.

### See for yourself

Regional cow fights take place throughout the months of March, April and May. The **cantonal final** will take place in Vétroz, near Sion, on **May 10**.

[www.agrivalais.ch/agritourisme](http://www.agrivalais.ch/agritourisme)  
[www.racedherens.ch](http://www.racedherens.ch)  
[www.wallis.ch](http://www.wallis.ch)