

# BULLFIGHTING AND ANIMAL WELFARE

F O Ödberg

State University of Ghent (RUG) and Free University of Brussels (VUB)  
RUG, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Laboratory of Animal Genetics and Husbandry,  
Heidestraat 19, B-9820, Merelbeke, Belgium

## Abstract

---

*Various arguments in favour of and against bullfighting are reviewed. The author advocates a thorough and knowledgeable adaptation, suppressing bloodshed and other sufferings. Through history, the evolution of bullfighting consists of a gradual trend towards the 'art for the art'. Such a solution would not only keep and even stimulate the aesthetic aspects, but has also more chances to save the animals. Strategically speaking, a fight for total suppression is unlikely to succeed anyway or will last too long.*

---

**Keywords:** *animal welfare, bullfighting, horses, Iberic countries, traditions*

## Introduction

The entry of the Iberian peninsula into the European common market, especially of Spain, has inevitably renewed criticism of the corrida or bullfight. However, I am afraid that, as often happens, a part of the animal protection world and of the public is dealing with a subject it has little knowledge of. Furthermore, emotional blockades inhibit people from examining the problem with sober reason. Let me add at once that the use of reason does not mean it should affect our motivation to improve animal welfare. Our ethical values and associated feelings should be the motor of our acts, but these acts should be ruled as much as possible by reason. Otherwise one weakens the cause one wants to defend and one runs the risk of paradoxically proposing the wrong solution which could be even worse for the animal. On the other hand, it is often difficult to induce lucid self-criticism in people whose sensibility has been anaesthetized through their passion (eg a sport, hunting, a tradition) or an economical advantage (eg intensive husbandry farming, zoos, safari parks). This results in unjustified conservatism. I therefore address here the people of good will on both sides, up to now called those 'in favour' and 'opposing' the corrida. On the one hand, I understand perfectly the sincere passion of the tauromachy adept (the 'aficionado') and I will not identify him with snobs seeking some originality, nor with hysterics trying to forge themselves an original personality, nor with sadists. On the other hand, I understand equally well those who are impressed by the brutality and suffering proper to the - essentially Spanish - bullfighting. The media mostly concentrate on those aspects and rarely show and educate the people into the beautiful parts. It is understandable that one then wishes to put an end to those horrors by suppressing simply the corrida.

As stated earlier, the problem is that few people really know what the *corrida* is all about. It would unfortunately take too much space to give here even an introduction to bullfighting (see García Patier 1981, Hay 1976, Anon 1978). I can only give a broad outline. There are two distinct ways of fighting the bull. It can either be fought on foot, the main actor is then called the 'matador', or on horseback, the rider being called the 'rejoneador'. When the bull is fought on foot a *corrida* (which lasts on average 20 minutes) consists of the following successive activities called 'suertes'. After entering the circular arena (the 'ruedo'), the bull is first fought with a large cape (ie induced to charge into it) and is thereafter submitted to stabbings with a lance by a man (the 'picador') mounted on a horse (this is the 'suerte de varas'). One should stress here that the picador does not fight the bull on horseback. He only uses a horse in order to have a higher position. That horse is blindfolded and protected by some kind of mattress. It should remain passive and absorb the bull's charge. Then comes the suerte with the 'banderillas', those six colourful kind of arrows which are planted into its back by a man on foot. Finally, the bull is fought with the *muleta*, a smaller red cloth stiffened with a short stick, and subsequently killed ('suerte de estocada'). Each *corrida* is controlled by a president sitting in the presidential box, eventually helped by assessors. He determines, amongst others, the start of each series of *suertes*.

The bull can also be fought on horseback. The *corrida* then mainly consists of the rider trying to plant a series of *banderillas* into the back of the bull. Therefore, a very agile and well-schooled horse is necessary (see further). In Spain, at the end the bull can be killed by the rider either mounted or dismounted using a special kind of short lance called 'rejón de muerte'.

### Should bullfighting be suppressed or not?

The question should rather be: can it be adapted into a pure aesthetical activity, free of suffering? This is also the option taken by some members of the European Parliament in 1988 (see European Parliament 1988). One must realize that, although interest is subsiding, *aficionados* are still numerous. The *corrida* is still a kind of national institution representing an important socio-economical entity. A head-on fight for total suppression is likely to elicit a nationalistic backlash.

Instead of lingering into fussy details, I deemed it more practical to discuss the problem by reviewing a series of arguments which are often put forward. These are also the arguments most readers are likely to be confronted with.

I will first reply to those used by people who are in favour of maintaining the actual form.

1. *The bull enjoys a happy life in the fields until it is transported to the bullfighting ring and confronted to man during 20 minutes*

It is difficult to understand how improving living conditions beforehand vouches the right to make an animal suffer afterwards, whether it lasts 20 minutes or 5 seconds.

Suffering should always be limited and avoided whenever possible. Comparing the fighting bull's life with that of conspecifics in intensive production units makes no sense. The former grow in an adapted natural environment but suffer when killed, the latter sometimes live for years in housing conditions where a wide variety of behaviours cannot be performed but they are usually slaughtered as humanely as possible. All husbandry systems should be optimized.

2. *The 'suerte de varas' is necessary to weaken the bull's aggressivity*

The picador on horseback is allowed to stab the bull's neck up to three times with a lance. This weakens it and injures muscles involved with raising the head. It is also part of the technique of the work with the muleta to induce a low carriage of the head. One must know that a good matador can quickly judge a bull, even a few seconds after it has entered the ruedo and chosen its territory. The preliminary work with the large cape gives him valuable indications how it charges and uses its horns. Armed with this knowledge, matadores can ask the president to skip the suerte de varas or to stab less than three times. The argument about the necessity of that suerte is in contradiction with the actual tendency to breed less aggressive bulls. One often reads in the specialized press articles deploring the too frequent appearance of toros 'mansos', ie 'meek' bulls. There is a breeding problem for the moment. Some people pretend that too much money is involved, mixed with the fact that a big part of the public consists of tourists who are not knowledgeable anyway. Therefore, why should matadores take additional risks? It appears to be a general rule indeed, that where financial factors dominate, the quality of an art or a sport declines. However, a less aggressive bull does not charge in a clear way and can have less predictable reactions. Paradoxically, some matadores can become victims of this situation. Another possible sign of decrease in aggressiveness is the fact one practically never sees 'matar recibiendo', ie killing the bull by inducing it to make a last charge so that it impales itself on the sword. Nowadays one kills practically always by inducing the standing bull to hold its head in the right position with the muleta in the left hand, crossing one's arms and passing over its horns while stabbing with the right hand. Maybe it will surprise the layman, but it is not always that easy to induce a bull to charge when it is exhausted and wounded.

An additional problem has appeared recently: more and more bulls fall through their front knees. I once wondered whether it could be due to a behavioural factor - bulls sometimes fight kneeling - but it seems unlikely. It usually happens when sudden movements or changes in direction take place. It does not seem to be related to any particular genetic strains and is present in various breeding farms. No articular defects have been found apparently. It could result from breeding too heavy, and hence less agile, bulls.

Concerning the welfare of the picador's horse, one will be surprised to hear that the protective mattresses are compulsory only since 1928! Various types have been tried out but the absolute protection has not been found yet.

The suerte de varas is not practised in Portugal. In my opinion, it should be abolished in all countries in order to improve the welfare of the bulls as well as of the horses.

3. ***Bulls do not suffer from the banderillas***

Some aficionados argue that the pain must be light as the bull has a thick skin on its back. Considering the depth of penetration of the barbed heads, one can only be very sceptical. Some others argue that some pain is necessary to stimulate aggression, an argument which is then in contradiction with the supposed effects of the suerte de varas. Banderillas are used in Portugal. As the bull is not killed they have to be pulled out after the corrida, which is very likely to be painful considering the barbed parts which tear through the flesh. Furthermore, as far as I know, the bull is slaughtered the next day. What happens when there is a week-end in between?

Inventive solutions must be found. Either banderillas should not penetrate but stick to the skin, or one should touch symbolically the animal as when practising in private arenas. They should be abolished if no alternative can be found.

4. ***The fact of killing the bull efficiently is part of the corrida ('suerte de estocada')***

It happens indeed that matadores are booed by the 'knowledgeable' public when not able to kill properly and quickly. Indeed, every matador tries to approach the ideal killing. However, instantaneous death practically never happens. Even in the ideal condition in which the sword has penetrated and reached a vital organ at the first thrust, the matador's assistants (the 'peones') must activate the bull in order to hasten death and this can last scores of seconds. Most often the matador has to try several times and sometimes, when the bull is lying down but is still living, he has to sever the spinal cord at the occipito-atlantal junction with the descabello sword or with the cachetero or puntilla (short broad knife).

Fighting and slaughtering the bull is a widespread theme in the mythology of the Mediterranean world (eg the Mythraic cult, the ritual bull-somersaulting of Crete, etc). Many aficionados will argue that the bull's death is the logical consequence of all the preceding suertes and the muleta work in particular. That is one way of constructing a ritual. However, nothing prohibits one from adapting or constructing a new meaningful ritual which eventually may include even more symbolic features. Symbols owe their eternity to their capacity of getting integrated into new systems.

It is important to mention that killing the bull is prohibited by law in Portugal. At the end of the corrida a herd of oxen is introduced, the bull joins the group, and all animals are led away. In my opinion, killing should be abolished in all countries. Alternatively, a system should be developed which ensures that the bull dies instantaneously.

5. ***The adept of tauromachy shows affection for the bull***

One can understand the development of an existential bond between the matador and

the bull as the former knows that both of them can die through the hand or the horns of the other. However, it is difficult to understand how one can really love an animal and make it suffer intentionally. I imagine what is in fact meant is that the real aficionado - who himself runs no risks - does not show any direct animosity towards the bull. He will admire its courage if 'bravo' and despise its cowardice if not aggressive (an example of anthropomorphism by the way). One can enjoy the art of bullfighting in which the bull plays an important instrumental role. However, once it implies suffering for that animal, one can doubt real sympathy is being felt for the animal itself. Many aficionados must feel unconsciously the ambiguity of that situation. They are divided between their passion for the art and the feeling that what is being done to the bull is ethically not right. The same ambiguous psychological state can be found in some riders towards their horses. I am mainly thinking about show jumping riders, military riders, polo competitors and people involved in steeple-chasing. Accomplishing something together can give a lot of happiness and strengthen a deep human-animal bond. The snag comes when that accomplishment implies possible suffering for the latter. The probability can be low but can also reach higher levels such as in cross-country riding or steeplechasing, where every year many horses become lame, are bruised and several even have to be destroyed. There is a confused state of mind in many riders to whom the comradeship with the horse, deepened by the amount of risks run together, is challenged by the awareness that the rider himself is responsible for the possible suffering he is inflicting on his 'friend' without its free consent. Either these riders should face that dilemma clearly in the light of their conscience and evaluate the risks they can take, or they must state honestly that the animal is only a living instrument for them without any sentimental bond, just as one can experience thrilling moments with for example a motorbike.

6. *Traditions should be upheld unchanged*

Although it sounds absurd and immoral, suffering can officially be inflicted upon animals in some countries, such as France, on condition it concerns 'a popular and uninterrupted tradition'. That argument has often been used in favour of the actual form of the corrida, especially in Spain where people sometimes sneer at the Portuguese version.

That argument backfires on its users. I cannot enter into details here, but when one studies the history of bullfighting one notices that the way the bull was fought often changed through the centuries (Fernández 1987, Hay 1976, Anon 1978). There were even periods of prohibition. From a simple hunt within an enclosure, it developed particular rules and emphasis was gradually put on aesthetics. The bullfighting tradition and regulations consist of a progression of reflections influenced by many factors: social, religious, technical, zoo-technical, aesthetical, humanitarian, legal and political. Refusing dogmatically to even consider changes elicits decline more often than renewed dynamism. The bullfighting tradition itself requires to be ready to examine any possible improvement. In any case, the historic trend is a continuous progression towards the principle of 'art for the art'. Similarly, one can appreciate a

nice fencing assault without requiring the fencers to pierce each other. In that sense, although still questionable, Portuguese bullfighting is more developed and civilized than the Spanish one. If one can believe opinion polls, interest for tauromachy is decreasing and the business, although still important, is largely kept alive thanks to tourism which is not a voucher for high standards. Changes could stimulate knowledgeable interest again. Re-thinking the corrida as suggested will have repercussions beyond the organization of each corrida as such. It is likely that new breeding strategies will have to be developed. The inventiveness of toreros will be stimulated to eventually adapt the 'lances' with the large cape and the 'pases' with the muleta or to develop new ones<sup>1</sup>.

### **Tauromachy**

I would now like to present some arguments in order to defend the art of tauromachy.

#### **1. *Tauromachy is an art***

There are indeed moments containing true aesthetic experiences: the work with the cape and the muleta and when the bull is fought<sup>2</sup> on horseback by the rejoneador. As with all arts, the specialist will appreciate a greater number of details than the layman. There are numerous different lances and pases and ways to approach the bull. The art consists of carrying them out correctly, at the right moment, in a beautiful sequence, in accordance to the specific behaviour of each individual bull. Furthermore, one cannot impose one's preference for a given art to other people. One can prefer music to sculpture, and within an art a given style, period or instrument. Everybody should be free however to enjoy his 'thing of beauty'. Of course, art does not justify suffering. Therefore I think bullfighting should be adapted but not suppressed.

Furthermore, the art is linked to a deep existential feeling. It is an art where the artist is confronted with death at every creation. He puts his life at risk in order to express himself. One must know the Iberic soul to understand that. Existential anxiety can give a depth to every act of one's life which is impossible to describe. The corrida allows it to express itself in accordance with the Mediterranean temperament. This also requires a certain degree of dignity. Therefore, a true

---

<sup>1</sup>'Lances' and 'pases' are the various movements performed with respectively the cape and the muleta. There are basic and classical ones, but several were invented by great toreros at various developmental stages of bullfighting.

<sup>2</sup>The right words in Spanish are 'lidar' or 'torear' which do not have the same semantic contents as 'fighting', but I cannot find a better translation without having to use longer periphrases and explanations which would induce me to wander away from the core of the subject of this study.

aficionado will feel uncomfortable when corridas are attended by half-naked tourists dressed in dubious T-shirts and carrying beer cans.

## 2. *Appreciation of the corrida on horseback*

Let me first mention that here too, of course, the type of banderillas used should be adapted just as those used in the corrida on foot.

In order to place these banderillas the rider must induce the bull to charge and then avoid him. There are many different ways to do so and they also have to be executed correctly and as elegantly as possible. The good rejoneador has schooled his horse to such an extent that they perform a real ballet around the bull. Besides the specific schooling, most rejoneadores also train their horses for the High School, the highest level of equestrian art. It is easy to understand that both go together, as good High School training makes the horse extremely supple and responsive to the aids<sup>3</sup>. The life of horse and rider of course depends on those qualities. Many rejoneadores are excellent riders, able to school their horses at a level at least equalling the olympic one (ie the Grand Prix in dressage riding). I write 'at least', because many of them are able to present a horse better schooled than what one can see nowadays in official dressage competitions. The common tendency is to proceed too quickly and with too much coercion (Ödberg 1987). The riding principles of the 18th century are rarely remembered. The adage 'where art ends, violence begins' is often forgotten. The 'old French school', as that way of riding is often called, requires of course more tact, feeling and know-how. It may appear paradoxical, but that school has been essentially preserved in Portugal and Spain. This is due partially to the fact that the Andalusian and Lusitanian breeds are very well suited for that type of riding, but also because the rejoneadores require extremely well equilibrated horses, reacting essentially to the seat and not to the reins. They often need both hands to plant the banderillas. It may sound strange but one can say that bullfighting has contributed to the preservation of a riding technique which emphasizes progression, simplicity, gentleness and which results in naturalness in the horses' gaits and attitudes.

One must also mention that nowadays the bull has 7 to 8 cm cut off its horns or these are covered by leather balls. It may be dangerous to make statements without accurate statistics, but horses are very seldom touched or pushed by the bull and I do not think I am far from reality by saying that there is even no possible comparison with the amount of horses wounded or killed every year in steeplechases, cross-countries or show jumpings. I would like to address myself now specially to the British readers. There is a strong anti-corrida movement in their country. I would like to urge them to act also in order to improve the fate of thousands of racing and riding horses in Britain (as much as elsewhere).

---

<sup>3</sup>Aids: the signals given by the rider to a horse with his weight, his legs and his hands.

### 3. *Does the elicitation of aggression affect welfare?*

Let us imagine an ideal form of corrida as I am advocating without any bloodshed (excepting the possible maiming of the toreros, but they made a free choice). One could still object that the fact of inducing the bull to charge is reducing its welfare. As is often the case with animal welfare problems, one cannot give a black-or-white answer. Data, as scientific as possible, should determine the probability of suffering, but at a given point one has to make an ethical decision (which in itself is determined by cultural and personal factors) based on that probability.

Put in ethological terms, the question should be: does eliciting aggressive behaviour repeatedly within a short period affect the bull's welfare? Two remarks: first, fighting bulls have been genetically selected for a low threshold for aggressiveness. The fact it is possible to tame bulls through early experience, as is the case with several 'wild' animals, does not reduce the importance of genetic predisposition. Second, which type of stimulus induces the bull to charge, ie what particular motivation is involved? Aggression can be shown to protect the young, defend a territory, defend a food source, maintain a hierarchical status, react to pain, cope with the consequences of repetitive frustration, etc. As far as I know, no scientific study has ever tried to analyze this concerning the fighting bull. Of course, several of the reasons mentioned can be excluded right away. I would rather suggest we are dealing with extremely low thresholds for territorial (a bull very quickly prefers a part of the ruedo) and/or (inter-specific) hierarchical aggression. Although it is not a scientific statement, I can image with difficulty that that form of aggression for such animals would be associated with a feeling of suffering. Measurement of physiological variables during a bloodless corrida could give clues as to whether or not one can talk about stress. It is possible that as the animal is acting - ie is able to carry out an aggressive behaviour -, Cannon's 'fight-flight' condition would prevail above the 'submission-withdrawal' one (Henry & Stephens 1977; for a review see Ödberg 1989). Furthermore, it has since long been demonstrated in different species, especially those selected for aggressiveness, that the performance of an aggressive behaviour can be used as reward in a conditioning procedure (Thompson 1963, 1964; for a more recent review see Archer 1988 pp 152-154). It is forbidden to use the same bull twice or to fight a bull before it is chosen for a given corrida; it becomes too dangerous due to accumulation of experience and will tend to go for the man instead of being lured into the cape or muleta. If this was not the case, I would not be surprised if one could develop bulls whose reactions get even stronger due to an additional conditioning process, instead of weaning them away through 'lack of success'. To summarize, without pretending or knowing whether bulls 'enjoy' charging, one can say that there is only a small chance that the bull's welfare would be affected in a bloodless corrida through inducing it to charge.



### Controlling welfare before the corrida

Up to now I have dealt mainly with what happens to the bull during the corrida. Some people maintain that unlawful acts happen before the event, eg stuffing the nostrils and ears with cottonwool, putting vaseline on the eyes, beating with clubs, etc. Normally a veterinary surgeon, present before and during the fight, has to declare that each bull meets the requirements (health, age, weight). It would be worthwhile to examine how the independence of this man could be guaranteed and protected by law and his competence extended explicitly to the bull's welfare. It is funny to mention that in Spain it is forbidden by law to file away a few centimetres of the horns of bulls which are going to be fought on foot (Fernández 1987); police inspectors are in charge of controlling this. Just as we are accustomed to the size of our car, the bull knows where the tips of its horns are. Reducing their length makes a bull safer (although the story goes that the bull 'Islero' who killed Manolete in 1947 had been 'horn-shaved').

Another important point, but which will be dealt with through European directives concerning all animals, is the correct transport of the bulls from the breeding farm to the bullfighting ring. Correct housing and management of the animals between unloading and the corrida should also be ensured.

### The way forward

I advocate that the development of bloodless bullfighting with the emphasis on the 'art for the art' would be the best option for two reasons:

- greater chances of acceptance by the countries concerned (Spain, Portugal, France), and thus save the bulls from suffering;
- preservation of the true artistic and existential aspects.

This should be implemented and enforced mainly through European legislation but also through rules and initiatives taken within the bullfighting organizations leading to the following measures being applied in all countries:

#### 1. *During the corrida itself*

- suppression of the suerte de vara (picador's work);
- suppression of the suerte de estocada (killing of the bull), or in a last resort the development of an instantaneous humane killing method;
- adaptation of the banderillas or suppression if not possible;
- encouragement of the artistic creativity of the toreros.

#### 2. *Outside the corrida*

- better control of the care of the bulls;
- application of the European directives concerning animal transport;
- zoo-technical improvement of the breed and adaptation to the new conditions through genetic selection and ethological study of the importance of early experience and husbandry methods; not killing fighting bulls any more should improve selection possibilities and represent a more accurate screening than the

actual 'tienta' (testing the young cows and bulls before reproduction); furthermore, the tienta involves also some bloodshed;

- a better education of people into the true art of tauromachy.

If such measures cannot be implemented, then it is clear that the artistic value alone of tauromachy does not allow us to let the bulls suffer and that bullfighting should be prohibited completely.

### Literature

Anon 1978 *La Corrida*. (simultaneously in four languages: Spanish, French, English, German) Ediciones Castell: Barcelona (good short introduction)

Archer J 1988 *The Behavioural Biology of Aggression*. University Press: Cambridge

European Parliament 1988 *Sitzungsdokumente A2-356/88, Serie A*

Fernandez T R 1987 *Reglamentación de las Corridas de Toros*. Espasa-Calpe: Madrid

García Patier C 1981 *Diccionario Taurino Ilustrado*. Editorial Cometa: Madrid

Hay D 1976 *The Bullfight*. New English Library: London

Henry J P, Stephens P M 1977 *Stress, Health and the Social Environment*. Springer: New York

Ödberg F O 1987 Chronic stress in riding horses. *Equine Veterinary Journal* 19: 268-269

Ödberg F O 1989 Behavioral coping in chronic stress conditions. In Blanchard R J, Brain P F, Blanchard D C, Parmigiani S (eds) *Ethoexperimental Approaches to the Study of Behavior*. Kluwer Academic Publishers: Dordrecht

Thompson T I 1963 Visual reinforcement in Siamese fighting fish. *Science* 141: 55-57

Thompson T I 1964 Visual reinforcement in fighting cocks. *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* 7: 45-49