

= Vinkensport =

Vinkensport (Dutch for " finch sport ") is a competitive animal sport in which male common chaffinches are made to compete for the highest number of bird calls in an hour . Also called vinken-zetting (" finch sitting ") , it is primarily active in the Dutch @-@ speaking region of Flanders in Belgium .

Vinkensport traces its origins to competitions held by Flemish merchants in 1596 , and is considered part of traditional Flemish culture . As of 2007 , it was estimated that there are over 13 @,@ 000 enthusiasts , called vinkeniers (" finchers ") , breeding 10 @,@ 000 birds every year . Animal rights activists have opposed the sport for much of its history .

= = Description = =

In a contest , a row of small cages , each housing a single male finch , are lined up approximately six feet apart along a street . The close proximity of the cages increases the number of calls , as the birds sing for mates and to establish territory . A timekeeper begins and ends the contest with a red flag . Every time a bird sings a correct terminating flourish to their call ? most often transcribed as susk @-@ e @-@ wiet ? a tally mark in chalk is made on a long wooden stick . The bird singing its song the most times during one hour wins the contest . Champion finches regularly sing hundreds of calls in contests .

= = History and practices = =

The earliest known records of vinkeniers are from 1596 (with some sources advocating a slightly earlier 1593 origin) with Flemish merchants competing . By the late nineteenth century , vinken-zetting 's popularity had diminished significantly , but it saw a resurgence after the First World War . As of 2007 , it was estimated that there are over 13 @,@ 000 vinkeniers breeding 10 @,@ 000 birds every year . However , the popularity of this folk sport is waning in the 21st century . There is also a museum of the sport (Nationaal Volkssportmuseum Vinkensport) in the village of Hulste in the Harelbeke municipality of Belgium .

Vinkeniers use a variety of methods to increase the number of calls in their birds . Techniques to develop singing aptitude include selective breeding programs , high @-@ protein diets , and stimulating them with music and recordings of bird song . As wild finches generally begin singing during the spring mating season , keepers may also use artificial lights placed in aviaries to encourage increased song .

Some vinkeniers claim that finches from the different regions of Belgium sing in different dialects ; with birds from the Dutch @-@ speaking Flanders singing " in Dutch " and those from the French @-@ speaking Wallonia singing undesirably " in French " . The use of " Dutch " and " Walloon " to describe these two supposed types of finches has been suggested to refer to a simple difference in calling not literally linked to either the Flemish or Walloon communities of Belgium , and some linguists even suggest that " Walloon " simply means " foreign " . While minute regional differences (a.k.a. dialects) in song have been observed in the chaffinch (also within Belgium) , the differences have only been reliably distinguishable by the use of sonograms . Taxonomically , there are no officially @-@ recognized subspecies of chaffinch within Belgium .

= = = Cheating incidents = = =

As with other sports , vinkensport has had its cheating scandals , as well as accusations of artificial enhancement . One finch sang a record 1 @,@ 278 susk @-@ e @-@ weits in one hour , and the owner was later accused of doping the bird with testosterone . After one contestant sang exactly the same number of calls in two rounds , the box was opened and a mini CD player was discovered within .

= = = Opposition to the sport = = =

Throughout much of its history , certain attributes of the sport have garnered criticism . Early proponents of the sport would blind birds with hot needles in order to reduce visual distractions . Thomas Hardy ? the celebrated English author and poet who was also an antivivisectionist and member of the RSPCA ? is said to have written his poem " The Blinded Bird " as a protest against the practice . In 1920 , a campaign by blind World War I veterans banned the practice , and today the birds are kept in small wooden boxes that let air in but keep distractions out .

Modern animal rights activists , such as those from the Flemish Bird Protection Society , accuse trainers of " brainwashing " birds into singing more than is natural or healthy by playing looped recordings of finch calls , and that caging birds in the intentionally small and dark contest boxes is cruel . The finch is a popular aviary bird in many countries and it is forbidden in the European Union to catch birds in the wild , despite vinkeniers purporting that wild birds sing better than captive ones . Though chaffinch populations are currently not considered to be threatened , a 2002 court case at the Belgian Constitutional Court upheld a 1979 EU law banning the capture of wild finches .