

1 LOFT DESIGN

A well thought out loft is integral to racing success. It follows, as a side issue and beyond the nostalgia, the more simpler times of the orange box tacked onto the side fence, that it is no longer acceptable for fanciers to hastily, carelessly, put together the inevitable wire and tin loft of the past and expect to avoid winning a prize for the worst looking eyesore in the district. Far too many members of the public have a mental picture of this dreadful excuse for a proper pigeon house and it detracts substantially from the image most fanciers want and deserve. Of equal importance, as a general rule of thumb, the whole thing will also be a hopeless waste of time and effort when it comes to consistent good efforts from our pigeons.



Photo 2 – by D. Brennan – Westrail

The reality is that if the loft is an eyesore, then it is very likely the occupants are not worth very much as well. That is a generalised perception only, but holds true in most situations. Good pigeons normally do not thrive in poor surroundings, no matter how many stories there are to the contrary.

2 FEEDING – TESTING – LEARNING

Clean wholesome food is so important and often not given the attention it deserves. Depending on where one obtains the feed will dictate how much attention we need to pay to it. Ask around for where the majority of racing pigeon fanciers buy their feed and follow their lead and they are generally right. Feed obtained from a reputable supplier generally should be of good quality. Nevertheless, one needs to be aware that feed can be contaminated, mostly without the knowledge of the supplier or the pigeon fancier. Historically, the bird market has on various occasions been targeted with grain initially rejected by official grain receipt points, often for high moisture content, which increases its propensity for attack by moulds (p.74,75). Kept back on the farm it eventually becomes old season, mouldy and bin-burnt, with secondary infestations of weevil and later even mixed with pickled grain and eventually rodent-soiled. (See illustrations at p.732) Some merchants will take this grain off the farm at substantially reduced costs, particularly with the approach of new season crops and will find its way to the bird market. It is a matter of continually being vigilant. Grains and legumes can also insidiously be coated in phostoxin powder (aluminium phosphide) a licensed product used for the universal fumigation of grains for weevils. It is against the law to insert phostoxin pellets into unprotected grain, but it is still done in some areas and especially in dealing with field peas. When challenged, some merchants will say it is inert and harmless. On the contrary, it will make our birds ill, rarely kill them, but retard any youngsters fed on phostoxin tainted grains and legumes. Apart from detecting the presence of a white powder coating on the feed, always make it a habit to smell a sample by taking a double cupped handful held close to the nose and if phostoxin is present it will give off a hint of carbide, for those that recognise the similarity, or more commonly a faint smell of garlic. Good fresh grains and legumes are virtually odourless and should be stored meticulously in dry conditions away from potential moisture ingress including humidity and at a temperature below fifteen degrees Celsius (15°C) and this will inhibit weevil egg laying and development. Try not to stockpile during the summer months. Potentially, we have the best grains in the world – we just have to stay alert and learn to recognise good and bad grains and legumes. It is always good practice when using peas and beans to give them a light rub, just prior to use, with a cloth bag – a flour bag, lightly dampened with oil such as linseed/flaxseed oil, olive oil and so on. This will remove any potential for phostoxin and most other dust accumulations from grain, too, but remember to wash the bag regularly. It is worth thinking about too, that if storing grain for any length of time a spreading of Bay Leaf across the top helps keep insects away. It is not a foolproof method, but keeps them in check.

Other cereal grains can be fungal infected (additional growth beyond latent spores found on all grains) from being in contact with moisture at point of supply, or point of harvest and often this is not readily

PIGEON RACING – A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

detectable, especially if a bad lot has been blended with a good lot to deliberately disguise/dilute its presence – blending of grains is quite common. Not all fungal infections are toxic, there are some fifty named species associated with wheat development, for example, but some, such as the Aspergillus family (a well-known grain storage mould, dark green in colour) can be highly toxic and it is always wise, before making a substantial purchase, to have the grain tested. Where proper testing facilities are not available a simple jar test, while a poor substitute, is better than no testing at all. Obtain a small sterile (full dishwasher cycle) clear glass jar with tight fitting lid. Place approximately one dessert spoonful of grain in the jar and cover the grain with sterile water (not chlorinated scheme water – distilled water boiled for minimum five minutes) and reseal the jar and let sit for twenty-four hours for the grain to soak. At the end of twenty-four hours carefully drain the excess water off and quickly reseal the jar and then sit it on a window sill, but not in direct sunlight - about 27°C is ideal. Most, if not all grains treated in this manner will eventually develop a mould growth, but this should not be expected within forty-eight to seventy-two hours; a period representing the normal time for travel through the bird's system. Mould growth, visible to the naked eye and formed within forty-eight to seventy-two hours, is a reasonable sign that the grain is already tainted, already in its secondary life stage and has had mould growth accompanied by possible toxin deposition in the past, such as mycotoxin and is prematurely reactivated and should be rejected. However, any mould formulation beyond 72 hours is relatively safe. Concurrently, good quality grains and legumes should sprout in the same or near timeframe and shows it is healthy. Grain and legumes which will not sprout are not necessarily inferior, but may well have been heat treated or radiated and should therefore be regarded as suspect and to look further afield. Healthy grain stored in cool very dry conditions should not pose a fungal infection issue at any time. (see also p.80, 81). I am not in favour of metal storage bins for their potential to sweat (condensation) in cold conditions. Low-cost sixty-litre plastic refuse bins, with a good lid seal and found in most hardware stores are ideal. Finally, we need to cultivate our feed merchants to both recognise the level of quality we need and to have them understand the trust we place in them to do the right thing, as without them we are really just groping in the dark.

ADVICE FROM YESTERYEAR

"If a fancier intends laying himself out for the shorter races it is necessary to give his birds plenty of short tosses, even if it is only a mile or two single up it gives the bird confidence and gets it accustomed to being by itself. In 1907 I had a very good young bird season and it so happened that I was in a position to give my birds plenty of single up work. Whenever I went out I took a basket of birds under the seat of the pony phaeton, and every now and then I let go a bird single up. They were taken every and any direction and learned the country all round home. This evidently stood to them in the races as I was placed in every young bird race."*

Source: Guest writer, nom de plume "Trier," *The Australasian Racing Pigeon publication* – June 2 1919

3 BREEDING

The Author's challenge here surrounds the appropriate placing of key topics within the subject of breeding and a whole range of other questions and simultaneously confining these issues within the framework of Chapter 24 "Questions Answered" wherein the readership of the Australian Racing Pigeon Journal (ARPJ) have specifically asked a broad range of questions across multiple topics and are best kept within that group. On this basis the following, which are specifically to do with breeding, are recommended for reading.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT TO MATE WITH WHAT?

Chapter 24 pages 568 to 578

THE EVILS OF INBREEDING

Chapter 24 pages 579 to 607

ROGER BROWN – Four Factors for selection

Chapter 24 pages 652 - 656

LEO TURLEY ON FOSTERS

It is very common to see the term '*pumpers*' being widely used to describe foster parents raising youngsters that are not their own. While it is obviously a well-entrenched term, it does sound almost derogatory. I am probably right in thinking that the term originated from the fancy side of the sport to describe using racing pigeons as feeders for their more exotic breeds, which some are often less than successful in raising their own young. The same genre also use the word '*foster*' so it is not an entirely unknown term.

My own experience has shown that it is less debilitating on pairs and particularly hens, to let them raise all their own young, even to the point of say eight to ten youngsters in an extended season, rather than take eggs from them for fostering. This is contrary to the reasoning of many fanciers and I would be interested in any hard data studies that may have been done in this area to indicate the opposite, but as already shown at pages 85 to 88 the extreme effort and dedication directed towards incubation and the bodily processes that surround this effort is not something that should be dismissed without serious thought as to what it does to the birds metabolism when suddenly deprived of this role.

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7 FORM AND FEEL

FORM IN RACING PIGEONS

Question: "There are many indicators of form in pigeons, e.g. pink muscle, no scale, warm feet, the cleft in the roof of the mouth being open etc. Which of these are fact and which are fiction and is there any scientific basis to them? Another couple of examples to add to the new topic would be firm droppings and down feathers on the floor".

Please turn to pages 539 to 547

PREPARATION FOR THE RACE

It becomes a precursor to all racing that before starting a season one must treat extensively for coccidiosis, canker, worms, lice and flat-fly and if vaccinations are available, for paramixovirus and salmonella too and well in advance of a season's commencement. Now onto basketing preparation.

The day of basketing for the race should be relatively normal without being excessively eventful with the candidates already selected earlier in the week, save for minor last minute adjustments. I would be inclined to make the day as restful as possible preferring to minimise major disturbances. For races where the birds are going away in the evening, say you have to be at your club by seven in the evening to commence basketing and the Transporter arrives two or three hours later, then you should plan to start your basketing by six and have it finished by six-thirty allowing time to write up your entry sheet and arrive at the club in reasonable time. If you are able to be home on time you should arrange their last feed by about four and no later. Alternatively, you may need to leave prepared food for some member of the family to put before them at the designated time. This allows sufficient time for digestion to commence and generally the food will not be regurgitated in the basket. Obviously if your entries retain their last meal intact and digestion is able to progress, so much the better, it will hold them in good stead for the race. It is not uncommon for late fed birds to arrive for basketing swollen with food and displaying signs of discomfort and they will not do any good in that condition and quite frankly ought not be accepted for basketing on welfare grounds. Interestingly, the more fit the candidate, the more inclined it will be to regurgitate the food, but in either case it will lose the advantage of the earlier fed bird. If you find there is no one available to feed the birds at the right time on day of basketing, then it is more preferable to leave the feed in front of them all day and even try

15 HELPFUL BACKGROUND FOR RACE COMMITTEES

DISCUSSION ON SMASH¹ RACES IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE

Author comment in an open forum on the topic

In terms of smashes, I would add to Dr. John Brown's² remarks by going so far as to say that racing pigeon fanciers continue to look in the wrong direction. I will stake my reputation on the statement that smashes are predictable and preventable and that magnetic influences/disturbances have no bearing on pigeon navigation. Smashes are related to climatic conditions and race programming and little else. Until pigeon fanciers (forget the outsiders) come to realise that pigeons do not *'innately'* find their way home, without proper education, without the right programs of racing and training and without the right weather conditions, then smashes will continue unabated. What does bother me is that smash races continue to be viewed as having a degree of spontaneity about them; that they will happen without warning, that they are not controllable and thereby it would follow, to an outsider that we should not engage in this sort of unpredictable occupation involving animals. Reality, today, is that smashes are an admission of poor race planning and lack of management and for which there are reasons and no excuses. There is a need to look harder at programming and race practices and start using some common sense and join the program for no smashes. I have to say it, academia has done our sport a major disservice over the past fifty years and turned the simple into the fantastic and left us with it; costing many, many, pigeons and I make no apology for saying that. For the genuine racing pigeon fancier, forget the mumbo jumbo and have a decent look at your race programs. Are the race-stations stepped out in reasonable increments of no more than one-hundred kilometres and kept in a relative straight line, or are the stations all over the place? I would suggest that if the stations are not in a relative straight line, then that is the first indicator for potential smashes. Don't believe academia; if the race stations are all over the place, or there is a decided left or right turn in another direction midway through a program, then it is guaranteed the birds will be tricked, given the right set of conditions which culminate in a "perfect storm". Secondly, which direction do the prevailing/seasonal winds originate from? Prevailing winds that are acute³ to the line-of-flight are dangerous and can cause over-shooting and eventually tired and missing pigeons and the greatest danger presents on very fine days where they can fly a lot further influenced by those winds. (see p.699, 657). Races need to be planned, as best as possible, or at least monitored, to avoid seasonal winds, which often provide a helping, but acute angle to the line-of-flight. In my own region, for example, the thirty-year average wind direction is NW, N and NE for nine weekends of the thirteen between June and August. Is it any wonder that it is extremely unwise to fly an East route during those months?

¹ "Smash" infers very poor results – fewer than ten percent of birds homing from a race.

² Not his real name – changed for privacy purposes

³ In mathematics it describes an angle less than 90°

24 QUESTIONS ANSWERED

HOW TO START

Question: “How about an article for complete beginners starting in pigeon racing. List five things that a fancier must do in setting up and five things/mistakes they must/must not do and a bit of explanation as to why on each”. J.H.

Too easy! In a nutshell, clean, well-ventilated loft, clean wholesome food, clean water and only half the birds you think you need. That makes the five done and dusted. Of course, it is not as easy as that. In fact there is more to this than meets the eye and probably the hardest part is to put oneself in the shoes of a complete beginner and see the world from that perspective. In addressing the topic of a complete beginner one needs to go back a long way and maybe back further than most of us would care to remember. I remember starting a young chap off in pigeons and I wondered what he was looking at. The gleam in his eyes and it took a second to realise he was looking at a pigeon, with its bright eyes and iridescent sheen on the neck; the beauty of the wings, the white wattle, the lacy eye cere and other wonderments. How long is it since any of us have seen a pigeon like that? A long time I suspect. We tend to look through the outer shell looking at conformation, the symmetrical arrangement of parts and the bloodline that made it so, but it doesn't hurt sometimes to take a step back and appreciate that which a beginner finds natural to admire.

By the time a “*complete beginner*” comes to read this, it would have to be assumed he or she already owns pigeons of some description and housed in one form or other, be it an orange box nailed to a fence, a poultry shed or bird aviary and therefore I do not think for a minute that a beginner just walks in off the street having never handled a pigeon before, so we begin beyond that stage. It follows that something must have sparked off the desire to race pigeons, so a number of contacts have already been made, club boundary identified and the members met.

Before we start on the five essentials, there are some things that have to be seen rather than found in a book and probably the best piece of advice I could give is to look around, ask around, in your first year for who is doing well in the district, not necessarily from your own club and it may be more advantageous to be outside your club anyway. Make their acquaintance and learn from them. How they train and race, how they house their birds, the loft fittings, the floor style, whether concrete, sand, board, mesh, whether raised above the ground and so on and take plenty of notes and plenty of photographs to form part of your planning. Take time before targeting a certain flyer and then stay with him, as a mentor, bearing in mind you can be promptly choked with too many sources for good

GOOD RETURNS

Question: "In pigeon racing there is plenty to encourage people to win, but nothing to encourage fanciers to achieve good returns, other than it being a nice thing to do. What systems could be implemented to make it in the vested interests of the fancier to get good returns? Personally I think getting the majority of the birds home is just as important as winning and at times is more difficult. I believe in some of the European countries they tie the number of aggregate points to the proportion of birds a flyer has in the top twenty-five percent of the result. I think some type of system like this would see an end to mob flying and the mass production of pigeons, an improvement in returns and a more level playing field generally. All of which can only be good for pigeon racing. Any thoughts? J.H.

You are right! Here we have another excellent subject in which the achievement of good returns becomes more than just *"a nice thing to do"* if such is the case. The very much uncoordinated rank and file membership across Australia look to their leaders for inspiration and direction with this perplexing subject and the onus is on them to do the right thing.

As a left over from the historical one bird timing clock (p.623) all across the country, is the entrenched practice of *'timing'* only one bird in a race, which in effect provides for an artificial result. It has always been a problem that is best left alone as the alternative is even more difficult to contemplate and has very much lain dormant until recent time when electronic timing (ETS) thrust the issue fairly much back into everyone's face. Unsubstantiated tales, sometimes *"tall tales,"* are now condensed down to the electronic timer's stark print-out tape that cites precisely each bird's arrival time to the loft and keeps ETS owners *"honest"*. I have previously written about geographic anomalies, prevailing winds and generous membership boundaries, which invariably place advantages and disadvantages on one location over another and is likely to distort a result as much as the one bird timer is likely to balance the ledger. I think we have something fairly unique here in modern times and quite sincerely I believe it should be left in place to preserve membership, if nothing else. Certainly, we all have memories of dropping six birds together to win the club or even top the fed – we rightly call these birds *"equal winners"*, but as selective memories go, everybody has that experience at one stage or other and again, bringing us all back to the single bird issue, it simply balances the ledger.

There are no simplistic solutions. ETS is the timer of the future and like everything new (and expensive) takes time to be accepted. Heated debates aside, competition will eventually come down to ETS as the sole medium for determining arrival time for our pigeons. Whether it takes ten, twenty or even thirty years, it will be so. The wheels are already in motion and the writing is on the wall.

The most obvious answer to the question is to focus on the printout results arising from the individual's ETS on a weekly basis and create a hierarchy of racing success across the organisation using those results in their entirety. But here again, talking about the differences between the one-bird timing rule

OLD WIVES' TALES AND HOME REMEDIES

HOME REMEDIES

New topic: *“Home remedies – what can be used and what are they supposed to do? (Apple Cider vinegar, Bleach, Raspberry cordial, honey, garlic, yoghurt, Condy’s crystals, Brewers’ yeast etc.). There was one good flyer that even put **rusty nuts and bolts** in his drinkers and others who put a **handful of droppings** in each drinker. Which shouldn’t be used? (Epsom salts) and which are just old wives’ tales?”* Jeff Howell, Editor, Australian Racing Pigeon Journal.

Jeff, this one catches me a little out of my comfort zone and the first reaction here is to say “pass”, but never let it be said that we cannot work this one through to logical conclusions and I am readily reminded of Georges Gits at p.93 and his *“Beware of the old woman tales, which are far too much believed by fanciers.”* As a thirty-year plus Business Analyst, specialising in Business Cases for capital investment in a rail freight and public transport oriented environment and being briefed by an Industrial Chemist, an Engineer (mechanical, civil, electrical) an Architect, a Quantity Surveyor, Accountant, or any other professional, one is often reminded (by them) that a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing – and so it is – and applies to every profession too. Every profession is naturally protective of their expertise. In that perspective and as a necessary jack of all trades and master of none, I have to admit there is far more to this question than meets the eye and even more than I can understand, but as a fraternity, we seem to be obsessed with water additives to a point where some will almost try anything. It needs to be said that the safe dose for many of these fad-style remedies are completely unknown and in certain circumstances could do more harm than good so be aware that a little may be beneficial or harmless, but more is not better and can have a complete opposite reaction, especially if mixing anything with chlorinated town or city scheme water. Take the bottled water obsession of recent decades – it is all in the mind. In essence, we are talking here about fashion additives and these are far removed from prescribed additives (via the water medium) by a properly qualified Avian Veterinarian.

In the main, I always come down strongly against water additives and simultaneously advocate the use of chlorinated town/city scheme water (filtered if necessary) and changed multiple times a day and

OLD WIVES' TALES

QUESTION: "What is your view of some of the old wives' tales (or perhaps not) in pigeon racing? e.g."

1/ Lightning storms cause eggs not to hatch

2/ Shivering means a bird is in form

3/ Blood spot on the keel means I can't remember what

4/ A hens first egg is something special

5/ If a pigeon goes light pull its tail out and it will recover.

6/ Warm feet means good form.

7/ White pigeons are hawk bait

8/ The 3 feathers under the wing must have square ends

9/ Mosaics should be kept for stock.

10/ Pigeons with wide vents are no good.

11/ Dustcoats? Where did they come from and any advantages?

12/ an east wind means a disaster

13/ a pigeon with a loose tail attachment is no good

14/ the fewer birds make it home, the better the winner is.

15/ Red cocks always have black flecks in their wings

16/ Eye sign – Do we dare go near that one?

17/ an imported ring make a pigeon better

18/ plucking a hen will help an old cock's fertility

19/ moulting the last few flights is painful for a bird and they shouldn't be tossed while doing so

20/ after a race birds need a good clean out with some Epsom salts

21/ If a hen won't lay foster some under her and it may help.

22/ Old pigeons mated together are no good

23/ you can sex a youngster by the length of its toes

THE RISE AND FALL OF PIGEON RACING IN AUSTRALIA

“Perhaps you might write something about how the sport has changed over the years you have been involved with it and the direction you see it headed in, or rather the direction it should be headed in if it is to survive. You might mention where it all went wrong and what might have been done differently.”

This is a tall order and I can't say I can see all this in a crystal ball and certainly nothing really went wrong, just some of it is quite elementary, such as in my own case of being unable to do two things at once. I read a sports article in the local West Australian newspaper today headed *“The School of Excellence”* and written by Nathan Buckley (of AFL fame). He quoted an introductory address to the famous Football University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, delivered by Chuck Lennon, a seventy-one year old Alumni of Notre Dame that; *“if you want to be a good student, a good athlete and a good person go to another college! If you want to be great you have come to the right place.”* While on a different level, the same applies to pigeon racing. One just cannot spread oneself over a number of activities and still be great (and read that as successful) in pigeon racing.

Pigeon racing is a three-hundred and sixty-five day a year occupation and there are not too many that can step in and step out, even for short periods and still remain at the highest level – not for very long anyway. Pigeon racing is all about winning and you definitely need another soon, or you are well and truly forgotten. The highest level, today, in my humble opinion, is higher than it was thirty, forty, fifty years ago and the competition is fierce and serious even though depleted by actual number of flyers and over-inflated by too many birds - and young birds to make it worse. Years ago it was good birds owned by a handful of exceptional fanciers surrounded by a sea of half-hearted fanciers flying out of chicken coops and in dreadful conditions not seen anywhere today that even medications (if they had been available) would be hard-pressed to fix. Today, while fewer fanciers and fewer mature birds in liberations, collectively, per flyer, there are now more birds and most of them are good healthy, well-bred specimens, albeit, too many birds per fancier sent to races than could be possibly fit for the event. The *‘raffle factor’* has been turned into an art form and we need to turn that around for the good of the sport and in a nutshell, if we can't pick them, then we shouldn't be flying them.

Not so long ago, I was instrumental in lifting the local government legal holding limit for racing pigeons in Western Australia from seventy-five to one-hundred and fifty. Before that we carried one-hundred and fifty birds, but were always looking over our shoulder. Today, unfortunately, many now carry more than two-hundred birds and we are again looking over the shoulder and in hindsight it was probably not a good move, in fact is counterproductive. As long-time Historian for the Pigeon Racing Federation of Western Australia I still hold old minute and work books from the *‘premier club’* as they used to call themselves, the Amalgamated Club of Subiaco, Wembley, Claremont – now defunct areas for pigeon racing. Some of the best flyers of the nineteen-sixties came from Amalgamated, including that icon of WA racing, the Late Harry Lague of Cambridge Street Wembley. Harry was a bit of a “mob flyer” of his