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Module 4: Racing

The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat

It's all about racing. If our birds weren't for racing, we'd have just show pigeons. The primary mission statement for any racing club should be: "To facilitate racing and all related activities for the fellowship and competition of our members." 100 years ago there were pigeons that barely could fly 50 miles on the day. Now we racing pigeon fanciers around the globe have evolved pigeons that can race up to 600 miles on the day and have long distance races ranging up to 1500 miles. This is an exciting time for racing pigeons, even though at times in some parts of the United States it seems like clubs are shrinking.

This is the sport of kings and peasants. Anyone has a shot at becoming a great fancier. There is real competition in almost all regions. Our national organizations both the AU and the IF have done an excellent job in creating national awards attainable with almost any size club. Some things hold true as far as the rich man who can buy the highest quality birds and the poor man with talent and a great mind who can breed his way to the top.

Our sport is more global than ever before. Our birds are exported, imported and traded between nations. We have futurities at every level from local, regional, national and even international. It's an exciting time to be a fancier. With the Internet we are also making friends not only in other clubs but in other countries. Because we share a common sport and regardless of where you live and compete, it's the same challenge and we can share our challenges and successes. This is the best sport around.

Condition and Form

Form in General

If you have ever studied power lifting training is designed to allow an athlete to peek his performance on the day or just shortly before the day of competition. This is what we try to accomplish with racing pigeons. Our goal is to ship our birds to a race when they are at their best to fly this race. In combination with form and condition we are also trying to send them with motivation within our racing systems to put them in the best psychological condition for the race. This chapter covers "Form", how to identify it, how to create it and how to keep birds in form for the longest period of time.

How to recognize Form

Many fanciers have many definitions of what to look for in determining form. Read as much material as you can and soon you will get an idea of what form in your loft looks like. Here is my list of how to identify form.

Health

First and foremost, your racers need to be healthy. Look for signs of good health to include, bright and clear eyes, snow white wattles and their feet and feathers should be free of any fecal matter. The birds should have plenty of plumes.

Fitness

Hold the birds upside down and clear the feathers from the keel. The skin should be rosy pink, like your lips. If the flesh is blue, the bird was over spent on the last race and is in no shape to fly again so soon. If the flesh is white or near yellow, the bird is most likely fat or nowhere near coming in form. These birds should be exercised and road trained. Do not send them to the race; they will be a waste of your money.

The bird should feel corky in your hand. A heavy bird needs lots of road training and is being fed way too much. It's an easy calculation to know that every bit of extra weight will require energy to propel this pigeon through the air. Do not send fat pigeons. This is a waste of money.

Vitality

The bird should be lively in the loft and when flying. Lively does not mean excited and knocking about. Lively means it should carry itself with vitality. A bird that is listless or looks tired, probably still is tired or is not in shape.

Feather Quality "In the blood"

I do not send a bird when he has primary flights "in the blood". When studying the moult you will notice that when a bird is growing a new flight feather there is a period where the quill grows out and is full of blood. In this stage an injury to the quill could be very bad for the bird. During this time, the health of the bird has a very direct impact on the quality of the new flight. I believe it is not good to ship birds when they are in this stage. There will be another chapter on moulting, but old birds are best raced before the fifth flight has been dropped. There are systems to control the moult.

Psychological State (Motivation -- Confidence)

A bird should have the right psychological state. There are two elements to psychological state. First is the psychological state within the loft, my term for this is motivation. If flying natural, the bird should have a mate. If the mate was lost the week prior and this bird has not re-mated, it is probably a waste of time to ship him/her. A bird should be shipped when he can fly his/her best race. If flying widowhood the routine used prior to shipping must be implemented. Birds need to have motivation to race to their full capabilities.

The second element of psychological state is confidence. A bird coming off a good week that is still in form can go back to the races. A bird who is a day or two late, must be retrained with remedial road training. It's about giving them confidence so they can push on and fly their hardest. If they continually get beat into the ground with tough races and are not given time to recover, they will lose the will to race. A bird that has done well in a few short races can jump to the long races. A bird that

has not done well at the short races should not jump into the long. Just as training is about building confidence, racing is about building confidence as well.

Racing Systems (Old Birds and Young Birds)

Old Birds

Old bird systems are designed around motivation. Cocks and hens are motivated by their love for home (security, food, and shelter), their nest box, their mate, their eggs, etc.

Natural system

This system allows for the birds to mate up, go down on eggs and race to the nest box. Eggs are often switched for dummy eggs but some are raced to youngsters in the nest.

Positives

1. The mate, the nest box, the eggs or youngsters are extremely powerful motivators
2. The possibilities of ways to "set up" individual birds are numerous.
3. Allows you to breed from your race team.
4. If various pairs are kept on different laying cycles various birds will be in form at different times.

Negatives

1. When a mate becomes lost, it then handicaps the remaining mate as it has to be re mated and re motivated
2. Raising a youngster is added stress that may take away from racing form.
3. Brooding sometimes causes a pigeon to eat less rather than get off of the eggs and loft flying may be decreased. To keep from losing either of these, careful attention must be paid to each individual.
4. Birds do not stay in form as long.

Widowhood

This system flies only cocks and uses the nest box and hens as the motivator. The cocks are deprived of the hens except in preparing them for the race and often upon return from the race.

Positives

1. The hens are a very positive motivator
2. Requires less road training
3. Losses during the race system do not handicap the system or the individual birds
4. Bird keeps their form longer than in the natural system.

Negatives

1. Hens are not flown
2. Requires an additional section to house the hens

3. Must have dedicated breeders other than racers to also breed for a young bird season

Double Widowhood

This system is the same as regular widowhood except that hens are also raced. The hens/cocks are motivated the same way by each other just before basketing and upon the return from the race.

Positives

1. The hens/cocks are a very positive motivator
2. Losses during the race system do not handicap the system or the individual birds
3. Both sexes are flown maximizing the amount of birds in the loft racing.
4. Birds keep their form longer than in the natural system.

Negatives

1. Requires an additional section to house the hens
2. Requires more road training
3. Must have dedicated breeders other than racers to also breed for a young bird season

The Celibacy system

This system is where hens and cocks are housed separately. They are flown unmated. Some use of the other sex is used as a motivator.

Positives

1. The hens/cocks are a very positive motivator
2. Losses during the race system do not handicap the system or the individual birds
3. Both sexes are flown maximizing the amount of birds in the loft racing.
4. Birds keep their form longer than in the natural system.

Negatives

1. Requires an additional section to house the hens
2. Requires more road training
3. Must have dedicated breeders other than racers to also breed for a young bird season

Young Birds

Young bird systems are based off of the biological clock and the ability to manipulate that clock.

There is the natural system in which nothing is altered other than young birds are hatched, weaned, matured naturally, trained and raced.

The Lighting System

Uses artificial light to increase the amount of daylight to trick the birds biological clock into making them mature faster. This system usually requires pulling the 9th and 10th flight feathers.

The Darkening System

The darkening system uses the deprivation of light to also trick the birds into maturing differently. The main difference in the darkening system is the birds will lose all body feathers but will keep their flight feathers.

If young birds are matured enough, they can be flown to a widowhood system. The only drawback to this is that most clubs do not separate hens/cocks therefor that could hinder racing a young bird with that type of motivation.

The Natural System

The Natural System is a system that uses both cocks and hens racing from a natural nest position. It requires one section for old birds as hens and cocks do not need to be separated. Breeding is possible on the natural system as each pair will be allowed to raise at least one round of youngsters. By altering the next positions of various pairs, different pairs can come into form at different times and fly from different nest positions. Some lighting techniques can be employed to alter the molt if desired.

Advantages of the Natural System

The advantages of the natural system are that various pigeons can be put into different next conditions. All birds are motivated more strongly to some conditions than others. On the natural system we call these "motivators". Think of a motivator as a specific nest condition. In other systems, such as widowhood, the opposite sex and the desire to mate are used as the motivator. In the natural system it is the nest box, the mate, the eggs, the young and some other motivators that are used.

Breeding Under the Natural System

Breeding is done under the natural system. The cocks and hens are allowed to copulate and to lay and brood eggs. The danger in this is that hens when going into a laying cycle should not be raced and attention needs to be paid to their condition. When it is said that breeding is done under the natural system, this does not necessarily mean that the parentage of the young hatched necessarily is that of the race team. If one does things right, you can have your eggs laid by the breeders and the eggs and young fostered by the natural system race team. This can be a huge advantage towards getting more out of your breeders.

In the natural system the hens and cocks are put together usually around the middle of February. This allows time for them to choose a mate, select and fight for a nest box and to go into a natural breeding cycle. To do this correctly, the hens and cocks should have been separated during the winter or right after old bird season to allow for a good molt. If you plan on using the race team as fosters, then put your breeders together 3-5 days later than the old bird team. Also a good idea for the breeders is to

pre-mate them in October/November so that when you put them together in February they will take quickly.

10-15 days later, we should be down on eggs. This should place our calendar at March 1st. Depending on when your race schedule begins and what type of training you intend on using, take a calendar and plan backwards on the breeding cycle. In our area, racing starts between the middle and end of April. 18 days later the eggs should be hatching, this places us in the middle of March. The round bred out of the race team should then be weaned by the middle of April, which is when racing is to begin.

It doesn't really matter if you train the hens and cocks separately. One consideration is if they are on youngsters during training. If so, then training them separately might be a good idea. Here in the Midwest, we often have very cold weather or changing weather into April and even May. A youngster without a parent when it's cold is a very bad idea.

Now is when nesting decision are made. If you do not want to hatch any more youngsters, then you will be flying on nesting conditions that only involve driving or brooding. If you want youngsters, you have some alternatives. If you are still raising out of the breeder loft, you can substitute a youngster when the eggs of a racing pair are about to hatch. You have to keep track of when eggs are laid and when they are due. If you want a bird on a certain nest condition for a certain race, you have to plan backwards and pull their eggs prematurely so that they will go into their laying cycle on your schedule. As stated before, accurate record keeping is essential to successfully fly the natural system. Also, you need to have your pairs in different breeding conditions from each other. If you do not, you could find yourself with a very short list for the race sheet on a given week.

Motivators

Here are the different nesting conditions that should be recorded.

- Cock driving hen
- Hen being driven by cock (pay attention, if the cock is driving really hard, do not ship the hen. It also means the hen is going to lay her eggs within 5-10 days, so this should be carefully observed as you do not want to ship a hen that is going to lay with 5 days or has laid in the last three days. Some fanciers will not ship a hen until after she has laid and is brooding.
- Sitting on eggs 1-6 days old
- Sitting on eggs 7-12 days old
- Sitting on eggs 13-18 days old
- Eggs pipping on day of shipping
- Youngsters 1-7 days old
- Youngsters 8-14 days old
- Youngsters 15-21 days old
- Youngsters 22+ days old

These are not the only motivators available to you. There are also motivators that can be "created" in the loft. Here are some examples.

- Take one parent away for 1-3 days. Place them back in the loft for 1 hour the day of shipping. Then ship the parent.
- Take one parent away 1-3 days before shipping. On shipping night, ship the bird that was left in the nest condition and place the removed parent back on the nest. The bird shipped will think it is a single parent and will be motivated to get back.
- Jealousy: In darkness, place another bird between your pair. In the morning the cock or hen will discover the intruder and throw them out. Do this for a few days. On the day of shipping, do the same thing, but in the early morning, remove the bird for the race. It will fly home motivated to get back to defend its mate and nest box.

There are other “motivators” if you are creative. The one advantage you have on this system over the others is that you can create various motivators. Accurate record keeping can determine what motivators are extremely valuable for specific birds at specific distances. If you are a very creative person, you can manipulate this system quite well.

Disadvantages of the Natural System

Depending upon the nest condition, at times you can only ship either the cock or the hen. You must plan your nesting conditions around your race schedule. If you lose a mate, you lose the nesting condition and you lose your motivators. If you have a miss-match of hens to cocks, the system is not equally effective. If a pair is on youngsters and one parent is lost, you are handicapped to ship the sole parent until the youngsters are weaned or they are fostered out. Remember!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Parenting is physically exhausting and taxes a pigeon. If you expect that same parent to race, but it is doing the work of two parents, you are not going to be able to ship that bird and expect a 100% performance.

Conclusion

This system to be used effectively against your competition requires a lot of observation, record keeping and planning to create the desired nesting conditions. It is flexible for your needs, but not unless you are paying attention and planning as you progress through your season.

The Celibacy System

It's hard to find information on a true celibacy system. When one thinks of widowhood, dual widowhood and the natural system, you will realize that all are utilizing the urge to mate and rear young or suppressing that urge. The celibacy system is the most extreme in denying the sexual urges of either sex. This then is the motivator in the celibacy system.

Overview

The hens and cocks are flown separately, trained separately and raced separately. Unlike widowhood or dual widowhood, no specific mate is used to motivate any specific bird. The birds are not allowed to raise a round of youngsters. This is one difference between widowhood and dual widowhood. If one wishes to raise one round before separating cocks and hens, it is acceptable, but does not fit the truest definition of the celibate system. You have to amend and use the system that best fits your needs. In

this system, the birds are allowed to go down on eggs, but after 10 days of brooding over the eggs, they are removed, and the cocks and hens are placed in separate sections for the remainder of the race season.

4-6 weeks before the race season, the hens and cocks are to be placed in separate sections in which they cannot see each other. From this point onward cocks and hens are loft flown and trained separately. When cocks are being loft flown, the hens need to be inside their compartment and not allowed out into fly pens. If so, the cocks tend to try to get into the fly pens and do not loft fly as desired. The same goes for when the hens are loft flying. For maximum training, it's best to take one sex on a training toss and after the birds have returned, call them in and let the other sex loft fly.

When shipping races, cocks and hens must not be sent to the same race. If your club has distance and short races together, it's best to send one sex to the short races and the other to the long distance races. If you have only one race, it's best to ship only one sex. It's your choice on whether to race just cocks or hens or both. I believe it's best to maximize the birds you have and fly both sexes.

Motivation

Now is the time for motivation. Unlike widowhood where cocks and hens are allowed to have physical contact to get them excited and in the right frame of mind the celibate birds are not allowed physical contact. They have been separated and they have not been allowed to rear youngsters, so they are about as far away from being mated as possible other than the partner they brooded on eggs with for the 10 days.

The cocks can be placed in a section with or without nest boxes. In extreme celibacy, the cocks are also denied nest boxes and are in a section with perches. The nest boxes can be used also as a motivator by being denied nest boxes as well as mates. The hens should be placed in a section without nest boxes as well. If you are lacking space, they can remain with nest boxes but without cocks.

The wall between the hens and the cocks should be solid. There's hardly anything that can be done to stop the cocks and hens from hearing each other unless one puts them in separate buildings. This is not practical for most people.

A third section is used on the other wall from the section with the nest boxes. This section can have an open view between the two sections, such as lathes or lattice work. On the day of shipping, move the hens to the other section and place the cocks in the section with the nest boxes. The two should now be able to see each other. The cocks will go to their nest boxes and will be calling for hens. The hens will be strutting back and forth in front of the divider between the two sections. No copulation can occur because the birds can not physically get together. After approximately 30 minutes, coop up the birds that are to be shipped and then place the remaining birds back in their original sections.

Returning From a Race

On the return from the race have the cocks in their regular section and the hens in the young bird section. When the cocks come home, they will fly to their nest box and they will see the hens. Let

them have a few minutes of victory before placing them back into their section. When the hens come home place them in their section. There is a problem if you have to work or be absent when the birds arrive from the race. If this is the case, unfortunately the birds will be together for some time, unless you only flew one sex. If you cannot be home when the birds return from the race, I suggest only shipping one sex. If the birds are allowed to be together upon the return and to copulate, you are not flying a strict celibate system. But, if you do allow for it, and separate them as soon as is possible for you and yet you are still having great results, then go with it.

Preparing Before the Race

"The race starts days before clock in"

What does "preparing before the race" mean?

Preparing before the race means preparing your birds for the type of race they will compete. This chapter does not cover "setting up" or different psychological tricks you can play to motivate birds. This chapter covers how to physically prepare your birds for the race they are going to compete. It covers how much you should train your birds, how much you should rest your birds and how much you should feed your birds.

Preparing for Sprints

Sprints are generally races between 50-150 miles. A sprint race in good weather with good wind will not stress out a racing pigeon that is in good physical condition. They will be able to compete in the race, make good time and be ready to compete the next week. If you are making short tosses during mid-week, continue to do so even if you plan on shipping to a sprint race on that weekend. Feed the birds as you normally do. If you feed in the evening, you may want to change to a morning feeding on the day of shipping. The birds will be ready. A sprint race is often just another training toss compared to the long difficult races yet to come in the season.

Preparing for Middle Distance

Middle Distance is generally any race between 200-400 miles. A good weather and wind middle distance race can be flown with the birds bouncing back and racing another middle distance race the following weekend. Sometimes, in very difficult weather or conditions, a middle distance race can be just as tough or long as a 500 mile race. This is probably the most difficult distance to prepare. There is a fine edge on the nutrition necessary versus, lack of loading that may be required. On a good weather, good wind race, you can feed the birds as you normally do the day of shipping. If you feed in the evening continue to do so. If time allows you may want to move feeding up a couple of hours. If that is not possible it won't be a detriment. You should ensure the birds get a good drink before shipping. I am not a fan of force watering birds, as I feel there is a danger whenever you attempt for force water via a syringe or other method. The best method is to remove the water pans an hour after feeding the night before shipping night. Feed again in the morning and put the water pans back for a half hour. Remove the pans again. When given their meal the day of shipping, put the pans back after feeding. The birds should take good long drinks prior to shipping. Most racing trucks trailers do have

water systems for the birds, but there is no guarantee that your birds will on the right side of the shipping crate or will take it upon themselves to drink. If it looks as though it is going to be a hard race with rough weather, prepare the birds as though it was going to be a long distance race. NOTE for hot weather -- If you are in a hot weather climate, do not remove the water pans at all. Ensure water is in front of the birds all day as they will need to hydrate throughout the day in the loft.

Preparing for Long Distance

Long Distance races are considered between 400-600+ miles. Most clubs consider them 2 day races. Race winners will generally on a good race clock by the end of the first day. Long distance races are different because the birds need to be nutritionally prepared much differently. There are two philosophies regarding preparing for long distance races. One is to carbohydrate load the pigeons. The other is to include fats and oil rich foods as well. A good rule is to consider the race by the distance. The longer the distance the earlier in the week you need to start preparing the birds. You also need to not feed your middle distance and sprint birds the same as you will prepare your long distance birds. This will require selecting your pigeons in advance and separating them when you feed. You still need to feed the birds enough to nutritionally sustain them, but so much that you are over feeding them. This is probably one of the most difficult things for a fancier to master. What you are changing is the types of feed you are supplying our pigeons.

For a 400 mile race start mixing corn (maize) into their diet on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday if you are shipping on a Thursday night. I would give safflower on Wednesday and Thursday as well.

For a 500 mile race, start adding corn on Monday and start adding Safflower on Tuesday. On Wednesday night I might even add peanuts

For a 600 miles race, start adding corn on Monday, Safflower on Tuesday and Peanuts on Wednesday.

Some fanciers like to mix their feed with wheat germ oil or other fatty oils to increase the fat or carbohydrate amount of the feed. I have never done this, but it seems like something to consider.

Training for Long Distance

These races take a lot out of our birds. There are some birds that may be able to go to long distance races week after week, but are those birds also giving 100%. I think a well-rested pigeon is required for a long distance race. Short training tosses are fine, but for a Thursday shipping of a Saturday race, I would not train any later than Tuesday and I would keep training tosses shorter than 25 miles. I do not race my long distance birds the week before an upcoming long distance race. Every time that I have had a pigeon do well, on a middle distance race the week previous and due to a tough season bit on the temptation to send them to a long distance race the following weekend, they have not done well or been lost. There are always a few exceptions. As a general rule, I believe they will give their best if they are well rested before a long distance race.

Considerations

I stated that weather can have a huge impact on a race. A tough weather race with a very strong head wind can make a 100 mile race as difficult as a 500 mile race. We as fanciers are depending on weather forecasts. It seems lately that no one can accurately predict weather until the night before or morning of the desired forecast. For the long distance races usually clubs are shipping Thursday for a Saturday release. Make a plan and stick to it. Don't get caught up trying to depend on the weather forecast for a race. You may over prepare or under prepare when your planned strategy would have been adequate. Even if it is a hard race, by loading the pigeons you are putting them more at an advantage than the fancier who does not. Whatever you plan, do it consistently through the season. When you make changes for the next year, don't make them dramatic. Eventually you will figure out what works for your family of birds, your work schedule, race schedule and the weather you usually have.

Other products

The market is full of products to help you prepare for long distance. I am not an authority and will not even attempt to cover some of those other products. If you choose to use any, do it for an entire season, not just one race. That way you can make a season to season comparison. You may find something that works. You may find that something had no affect what so ever. Regardless of what a product promises to do, it cannot out perform well trained and conditioned birds that are prepared for the distance.

Conclusion

Preparing for a race is an art, just like breeding. It takes time to master. Regardless of the most thought out plan, conditions not within your control can contradict your efforts. Have a plan, be consistent and you will make head way. There will always be tough races. I do not know any racing pigeon fancier that has not had a bad race despite all their efforts. Remember that another part of preparing your birds is so when they do have that really tough race, they will have in them what it takes to come home. Sometimes, a very tough race will wipe out under prepared birds and you may never see them again. Have a plan and execute it.

Trapping/Clocking

"The race isn't over until the bird is clocked."

What is trapping and clocking?

"Trapping" is a term that I think stemmed out of the used of the word stall trap. When a bird came home from a race it would enter the loft through a stall or hole. Once inside the hole, the bird was trapped until the fancier could catch the pigeon and remove a countermark which was used to clock a bird. When the countermark was put inside a capsule a lever of the clock was pushed and a cylinder inside the clock would turn and seal the countermark inside the clock. At the same time, the clock would stamp on a roll of paper the day, hour, minute and second. This was then used as the official

time the bird finished the race. Trapping is still the term used by most fanciers to designate or describe when a bird entered the loft. If a bird comes home, but perches on the roof of the loft and does not enter, he has not trapped. With the addition of electronic computer clocks, scanners and microchip bands birds do not need to be caught or trapped in order to be clocked. They do however, if one follows official race rules have to enter the loft or trap to be clocked.

Trapping; The good, the bad and The Down Right Ugly!

When a bird returns home, he must enter the loft. Every fancier has experienced a time when a bird comes home, in what appears to be good race time and it either sits on the roof with no interest of trapping or goes back into the air and does victory laps. The fancier is on pins and needles or ready to pull his hair out if he thinks the bird has made good time. It's the most frustrating time to be a fancier, other than when everyone has made good time and you have not seen a bird. Good trapping relies a lot on good training. When you feed your birds and use a sound device to "call" them in, you are training them to trap on race day. When a bird lands on the roof and hesitates to enter, giving the "call" usually jogs his memory and gets the bird to trap quickly. Sometimes a bird comes home and it appears they are "spooky" or nervous and flighty. You "call" to them repeatedly and they don't respond, or they go back into the air. When that happens, it's best to back away from the loft and watch at a distance until the bird calms down and enters the loft. On a hard race though, from my experience, the birds often trap without a problem. Also, when give the "call" it appears to me the birds pick up their pace and hurry into the loft. In pigeon racing, seconds matter greatly. In some races, seconds can be the difference between 1st and 50th place.

Trap Shyness

This mostly applies to birds that are manually clocked. When a bird learns from experience that when he enters the loft he is going to be caught immediately, it can cause trap shyness. The bird hesitates to enter the loft. All the "calling" in the world will cause additional hesitation as "the call" indicates to the bird that this surely will happen upon his entrance to the loft. I do not know any way to cure trap shyness once a bird develops it. For electronic clock users, who instead of catching their pigeon but instead just look at the clock display the birds do not seem to get trap shyness. It's fantastic as you are looking at the display and your poor bird which just flew 100's of miles is getting a fresh cold drink, maybe eating some feed left for him, or excitingly going to his nest box and greeting his mate whom he flew home to. An electronic clock is an advantage regarding trap shyness.

Electronic Computer Clock versus Manual Clock

Other than trap shyness, what is the difference between a manual clock and an electronic computer clock? When does it really matter? For a manual clock, you must catch your bird and remove the countermark for the bird to officially be clocked. You will lose seconds between when the bird enters the loft and when he is clocked. If you are not present or aware your bird has entered the loft, you may not be aware to clock him and you will lose major time. With the electronic computer clock you do not even need to be home to clock your birds. For some who work shift work and odd days off, this development was a god send. The disadvantage of not being home is that if your birds hesitate on the loft, you are not present to give "the call" to hurry them inside. Now assuming two fanciers, one with a

manual clock and one with an electronic computer clock are both home, who has the advantage? If a small group arrives the manual clock owner has to catch each individual pigeon and clock them, there will most likely be seconds between each bird's times. The owner of the electronic computer clock will watch the small group enter the loft and know that they will all be clocked together within a matter of seconds. The electronic computer clock owner has the advantage. For a long race, both owners most likely have no difference. The birds will not arrive as a small group and a few seconds will not have a huge difference on the results as on longer races, the difference between the winners and 2nd place are often minutes instead of seconds.

After the Return

"The first thing I'm going to do when I get home is..."

You prepare for the next race while this week's race is in progress.

Hey, wait a minute!!! Shouldn't we take things one race and one week at a time? Yes and no. We do take the races one at a time or in my combine two at a time because we sometimes race a medium and long distance race on the same weekend. On the day of the return you actually have two different tasks. One is to recuperate the birds that are coming home and the other is to prepare the birds for the next race. Here are things to consider while preparing for the return.

Water

This is the most important thing your birds need when they return from a race. A bird can fly off almost 1/2 its body weight on a race. They exhaust their energy reserves while racing and a good portion of the weight they are losing is water. If you change water pans normally in the evening, ensure you put fresh water in the loft the morning of the race. You may want to add electrolytes or some something else to the water on the day of return. While in the race truck, your birds probably drank from a community water tray. They were exposed to other birds and any ailments those birds might have had. So on the 2nd day after the return you will surely want to add a 3 in 1 or 5 in 1 medication as a preventive. On race day, I add 1/2 tsp. on Clorox to a gallon of water for their drinking water.

Feed

There are many schools of thought on this. If you shipped a long distance race on Thursday and now it's Saturday or Sunday, a returning bird is going to be famished. The danger is that they will gorge themselves on feed. Here's where preparing for next week's race can interfere with recuperating from this week's race. If I am not going to be home for the return, I put barley in the feeder. The birds in the loft will not eat too much barley as they don't care for it much. A bird returning will eat as much as he needs but won't gorge. Feeding barely to returning birds along with the birds that remained home will not interfere with loading the birds for next week.

You can think of it as feeding light to heavy. If you have a separate section for birds returning to enter you can place a small feeder with pellets. Pellets are nutritionally good, easy to digest but will cause a bird to need to drink lots of water. A returning bird will need to consume a lot of water anyway, so it's a good way to feed them. I do not like to feed pellets to the birds that remained home and will be racing next week.

Bath Water

Not a necessity, but you'd be surprised to find out what things make your loft "home" for your birds. I like to have a fresh pan of bath water in the fly pen for the returning birds. It's the perfect time to provide bath water for the birds that remained home. A returning bird who takes a bath will calm down, perch and preen themselves, assisting in their recovery. We like to think the birds are flying to mates, eggs, nest etc. I had one bird 472 who would come home and run through the trap and the first thing she would do is dive to the fly pen and jump in the bath pan. She acquired the name "Calgon" for that trait. This pigeon also always laid an unusually large egg and small egg EVERY round. The large egg never hatched and it was determined later that the large egg was ALWAYS a twin yoke. A twin yoke egg is incapable of hatching. A twin embryo will develop but twins cannot hatch and eventually they interfere with each other's development. Adding bath water is just another enticement for the birds.

Access to their motivation

Whatever you used to motivate your birds should be available to them upon their return. If you are flying natural, they need to have access to their nest, eggs and mate. If you are flying widowhood or celibacy, the birds should have access to their mate or nest box. Accessing their motivation upon their return strengthens the use of that motivation in later races. Not giving them access to their motivation only causes that motivation to become less successful. Every fancier has strange stories. I heard one fancier who reported that whenever a certain cock returned from a race, it would fly to its nest box and would assault any bird in the box and kill any youngsters (yes his own). That's a huge example of the motivation birds have. I would have eliminated the cock as I will not tolerate birds that will bloody any youngster. Just my personal choice, but I can also respect a bird that has that kind of passion. I selected based on behavior as well as racing ability.

Evaluate the birds condition

If you read the chapter on trap shyness you understand that as much as you want to handle a bird when he returns, you must wait a short while. It's important not to wait too long, as you will want to get an accurate assessment as soon as possible. Handling a bird will tell you a lot. If a bird has mud on his feet, he went down for water enroute. Check to see how much weight a bird has lost and check for fresh injuries. There are many times, even a well scoring pigeon may have struck and object on the way home. If you don't notice it until days after the return,

it may affect your decision to have flown the mate on the natural system. Keep records of their condition. Some birds will come home looking almost as fresh as when you shipped them. If they were early in the clock, that might mean they were in superior physical condition. If a bird is always late in the clock but looking fresh, it didn't work hard. It didn't race....it merely came home. Observations give us information. Recording information gives us data. Possessing data gives us the option of evaluating the data to discover even more important information. You may decide to change the way you prepare for a certain distance, or how you manage your team next year. Or you may discover you have an also ran that should be taken off the team before the season is even over.

Quarantine late birds

Late birds need to be placed in quarantine, See the next section for information.

Quarantine Late Birds

What is a late bird?

A late bid is any bird that has been out for more days that race time. An unfortunate but necessary assumption is that birds that fly long distance will occasionally be out a night on a two day race. If a bird is gone for more than 48 hours on a race, we have to assume it roosted with feral pigeons or in an unknown loft with other birds. It's possible the bird roosted solitary, but it's not worth the risk to make an unsafe assumption if it could have a direct effect on the health of the entire team.

What is Quarantine? Why is it necessary?

Quarantine is to separate the bird from the team or loft immediately. It means to place the bird in separate quarters where it will drink and eat separately from the other birds. We do this because this bird may have been exposed to various diseases while out in the field. After 72 hours, the physical condition of a bird is almost depleted. In this condition their immune system is weaker and it's more probable they could pick up an illness or disease. A lot of diseases do not show signs immediately. Quarantine is necessary for the health of your active team. Bringing an illness into the loft could shut your whole team down or greatly hamper the performance of the entire team. By quarantining late birds you are preserving the health of your active team. It also allows you to attend to your late birds and preserve their health as well. This will allow you to give this bird preventive medication and make observations about their health. If the bird is very run down, this will remove them from other stresses and expedite their recovery. You will be able to feed them properly to bring their health and weight back. It's a hard pill to swallow, as if you are on a natural system, this usually means you are hampering your ability to fly their mate.

When to add them back to the team

If after several days, you do not detect any ill health from the bird's physical condition and droppings and you have given them preventive medication it is probably OK to reintroduce them back to the team. There is always a chance they have been exposed to an illness, but at least after a few days in quarantine, their immune system will be stronger. There is no such thing as total 100% bio-security due to the nature of pigeon racing. But any steps we can take to increase our bio-security, even slightly is very important.

The temptation to race them immediately

Quarantine is one step towards increasing our bio-security. The nature of pigeon racing often creates temptation. We put tremendous amounts of work into preparing for the races all year round. No one wants to loose, we are competitive. A nature of competitiveness is the urge to take risks. When you have had two or three tough weeks in a row and nearly your whole team is run down, you want to send any bird that is in fair shape. Don't take a quarantine bird and ship it out of desperation. Accept that quarantine status is going to be part of your system and part of how you manage a team. A quarantined pigeon who was late the week before will NOT give you 100% we should never ship a pigeon that is not going to give 100%. If you are currently towards the top in average speed, there is always the little voice that says "I need to race and at least clock to stay in average speed." It's not worth it. It's hard to accept this, but it really isn't worth a "chance" to stay in good ranking in average speed versus risking the health of the team or doing a grave injustice to one of your pigeons. Be honorable to yourself and your birds. Do the right thing.

Rebuilding for the Next Race

Overview

How you rebuild for the next race or races depends on many factors. What is the next race? What kind of a week are you coming off of? What is the condition of the birds in the loft? We call it a race team, though it is nothing more than a stable of individual race birds. In reality the only time our birds are really a team, is when we are flying for average speed or national awards that depend on a combination of performances from various pigeons. I suggest you review [Racing Part 6 Managing the Team](#) or Racing [Part 9 Pros's and Con's of Average Speed](#). Otherwise, we are referring to our loft of individual racers. The factors in consideration for each individual bird are as follows:

1. *Condition:*

Are they still recovering from a tough race? Are they still in condition with a good performance from the last race? Did they not compete last week but have been trained?

2. *Training/Rest:*

This could be considered a sub category under condition. Throughout the season you must balance the two for each pigeon.

3. *Health:*

Are they healthy? Never send an unhealthy bird to a race. It will not give you 100%. Only ship birds that are going to give you 100%

4. *Motivation:*

Regardless if you are flying natural, widowhood, dual widowhood or celibacy, you are using some motivations. Do you have those motivations in place?

5. *Nutrition:*

When you are rebuilding for the next race, you will be feeding again from light to heavy, and carb loading for middle distance and long distance races.

Condition

It may only be Saturday or Sunday, but the next race week is quickly upon us. We start preparing for the next race starting now. If a bird just flew a middle or short distance race, it's time to evaluate their condition. If the bird gave a good performance or was not really challenged, less than 6 hours on the wing, it's a candidate for the next week's race. If a bird was out for more than 6 hours on the wing, put it on the reserve list. If you rest it, train it and rebuild it, it will give you 100% the following week. A bird that was on your reserve list last week should have no excuse not to go the next week unless it's a matter of health. You can't control when birds have a bad or super tough race. Everything else is within your control.

Training/Rest

If a bird came off of a long distance race or a super tough race, as stated earlier, put them on your reserve list and plan on holding them from next week's race regardless of how well they bounce back. Give them a week of loft flying and then train them the following week for the week after's race. You will reap huge rewards from the bird if they are of excellent quality. Don't be tempted to fly them into the ground. Subscribe to the philosophy of maximizing their performance from their potential. Pre-race training is encouraged but sometimes not possible due to weather. It's best to give lots of short tosses early in the week. The purpose is to get their "heads in the game". If you are using a form of motivation, this helps reinforce the motivation. It also guarantees you they are exercising and not loft flying. If you want to save fuel and not drive down the road, this is an excellent time or flag flying. A well trained, well rested bird is going to give you 100%.

Health

Health is paramount. Ask any great flyer and they will all tell you their champions performed while in super health. If you have a sick bird, remove it from the racing loft and treat it separately. Keep an

eye on the health of the birds and give them preventive medication during the race season. ALWAYS vaccinate the birds before the race season and afterwards. Keep a clean, dry, well ventilated loft and health should not been an issue. If your birds are healthy, they are more likely to give you 100%.

Motivation

If you are using widowhood, dual widowhood or celibacy, keep on your system and the birds will do fine. If you are flying natural, all sorts of problems can come into play as you manage your team and your losses. Do not send a bird if you have lost their motivation. For example, you shipped a cock driving a hen and he was late and quarantined or lost, do not ship the hen. She has lost her motivation and you will a few days to get her strongly attached to a new mate. If your hen was on youngsters and the cock was lost or vice versa, it may seem tempting to move the youngsters to fosters, but once again you will have to get her reattached to another mate. Yes, the natural system has lots of challenges in regards to managing a team. Keep a record of your birds and the mating/nesting conditions they are in. You may very well find that shipping an excellent pigeon when you have lost their motivation is a waste of your time. It's better to wait the extra week and send them to a race when they are super motivated.

Nutrition

I feed light to heavy. It's the simplest way to explain how I feed. The way to feed throughout the week has already been explained under [Racing Part 2 Preparing before the Race](#). We are simply starting the cycle over again. We already have to be thinking of next week's race so we can properly start the cycle

Conclusion

Just as you are clocking from this week's race, you are already beginning next week's race. This isn't a sport for haphazardly team management. We put in place systems so we can manage a team and reach maximum performance from our potential. Starting immediately is the focus on health, training, form and everything else related to racing.

Managing a Race Team

"You are the General Manager....the Buck Stops with You!!!"

Overview

How many times have you seen a flyer hit a tough race and suddenly they are out for the season? It's understandable to a degree to see someone hit three hard weeks in a row and end up with almost no race team left. Racing has become harder as our weather is more severe. Then there are other factors which articles have been written but no scientific data has been provided. Such as cell phone towers are disrupting our pigeons, ultraviolet light changes due to changes in the atmosphere (documented), a weakening of the Earth's magnetic field (documented fact), and sonic booms from aircraft engines. We could go on and on about why we have tough races but the hard and fast fact is, we have tough races even when we least expect them. Because they will often occur when you don't expect it, you have to

know how to manage a team in order to compete for average speed. Managing a team means always having birds ready for every week. It means not putting your eggs all in one basket.

Factors influencing managing a team

Systems

Systems provided us tool to manage a team. If you are flying widowhood, dual widowhood or celibate, you are reducing some of the nesting factors that can make managing at team at times difficult. If you are flying a natural system, managing the team becomes at times quite the task. Most fliers learn on the natural system. If you can learn to manage your team on the natural system, you will have no problems managing a team on the other systems. Having a system means you have at least dedicated to a plan. If you've dedicated to a plan, you are half way to managing a team.

Injuries

You never know when injuries will occur. They can happen on races, during training flights or just flying around the loft. Where ever there is a utility wire, I'm sure there's a pigeon that has hit it and busted a wing, a keel or a leg. Any bird sent to a race is not guaranteed to come back without an injury. There have been known birds that have walked home after an injury.

Tough Races

A super tough race can put a top pigeon out for weeks. There's a difference between recovered enough to be shipped and recovered enough to race 100%. Don't ship a bird unless it's going to give you 100% of what it has. Not every bird is a winner, but every bird should be given the opportunity to show you what it is made of.

Lost Motivations

If you are flying natural and you lose a mate, you have lost that bird's motivation. Having to set up birds again with different motivations can have an effect on your ability to manage a team.

Quarantine

When birds are late, 48-72 hours or more, they cannot be expected to jump back on the race team. You must put them on reserve at a minimum and most likely should be placed in some sort of quarantine. Count these birds out for at least a week.

Distance Races

When you start flying 400, 500 and 600+ miles, you are getting into the "meat" of racing pigeons. It's almost a sure bet that your race winners are not only fast, but they are not followers. An unfortunate part of long distance racing is that even diploma winners and race winners will have a "bad" race. I've seen 500 mile races turn into 3 days races and even then with very few clocked pigeons. Not only will these birds be late, but some will be so worn down it may take them weeks to recover.

Average Speed

Competing in average speed means having a bird for every race and clocking a bird in race time for every week. (go to [Racing Part 9 Pros's and Con's of Average Speed](#)) It's the most consistent marker of your family. You cannot successfully compete for average speed until you learn to manage a race team. There's a difference between competing and remaining in average speed. There have been recorded seasons in which only one person remained in average speed to attain victory and there are many recorded seasons in which no one finishes average speed.

We know of the pitfalls, here's how to manage the team.

Sub-teams

Breaking your team into sub-teams at the beginning of the season helps you to mentally visualize your season at the beginning from a manager's point of view. If you are competing for average speed, you need to have birds available and in form for every race. If you are flying natural that means having birds on different nest positions at all times. If you are flying another system it's now when in the race season you want your teams to reach maximum form.

Short - Middle Distance Team

In your club and combine, there are only two short races at the beginning of the season and then we are onto middle distance races. For my purposes, there is no distinction between short and middle distance. Often, the long distance birds will fly the first few short races. Once middle distance is reached, long distance racing also begins. Short and middle distance is defined as 75-300 miles. We've already discussed how even middle distance races can turn into super tough races you should further divide this short/middle team into an A team and a B team.

Long Distance Team

Long distance is 400-600+ mile races. In our combine we have a 400, 400, bye, 500, 500, bye, 600, 600. Knowing already that there will be long distance races back to back, it's a good idea to further break down the long distance team into an A team and a B team. Team A will fly 400, bye, bye, 500, bye, bye, 600, bye, end of season. Team B will fly, bye, 400, bye, bye, 500, bye, bye, 600, end of season. Each team will have two bye weeks to rest, retrain and come back at 100%. If your short team falls apart due to unforeseen circumstances, you are still able to pull from one of the long distance teams and place them on the A or B team of the short distance team.

Active vs. Reserve Team or (A team and B team)

Having an Active Team and Reserve Team concept will put you in the frame of mind to hold the reserve team back so that you have fresh pigeons for the next week's race. There are often times when competition tempts a flier into shipping all his best pigeons on one race only to have a smash or near smash race ruin an entire season. By planning ahead you will be ready for that smash which crushes your opponents and you can swoop in with a fresh team and score. Remember there is a difference between fresh and untrained. Birds that are not racing still need to be taken on training tosses or at a minimum flag flown.

For our combine, the A team and the B team on the long distance team will compete the same number of long distance races which is three for a total of fifteen hundred miles, not counting any short races at the beginning. It is most improbable that any pigeon could give 100% and compete in all six long distance races. This also allows for transfers from one team to another. For example, the 1st race of the A team results in a near smash. A bird from that race can be switched over to the B team and receive an extra week of rest, recuperation and training. Any birds from the B team which came home in good form could still be switched to the A team without any detriment.

Short and middle distance is much more difficult as there are much more temptations. When you start out, stick to the A team and B team concept. This will prevent you from shipping all your birds to one race and having a smash. Just like the long distance team, as birds have tough races, they can be switched to the other team and given an extra week to recover, recuperate, retrain and come out giving 100%. One temptation to avoid is taking a bird from a great performance and throwing them into the long distance race the following weekend. Yes, there are birds that can do this with tease. But you can guarantee it's going to be a great and well weathered race. If it turns into a very difficult race, you might have just burned an excellent pigeon. Stick to the plan, if you are going to switch a bird from the short to the long distance team, give him a bye week, just like the long distance team already in place.

In the short, there is one variation to the A team, B team concept. I call it the Active and Reserve Team. A well trained, conditioned racing pigeon can fly week after week up to 300 miles when the races are good. The A team are the birds that are flying well, placing well and are in good form. If a bird goes out of form, put it on the reserve team for next week. If a bird has a bad race and is flown down or on the wing more than 6 hours, put it on the reserve team. You will still train the reserve team and when they switch back to the active team they will give 100%.

Conclusion

Have a system, have a plan, stick to the plan, remember as you are clocking this weeks' race you are already beginning next week's race. Learn to manage your team and average speed hunting will surely be on your plate.

Evaluating Birds

"The crème always rises to the top!"

Overview

We manage to stable or team of race birds. Everyone wants to be a champion. Competition is fierce and believe it or not, after the young bird races are over we are making decisions that will have a definite impact on old birds. When we look at the season in review, we might be pleased, or wish we had done more, or be disgusted and start looking for answers to a bad performance. Regardless of the result of the year's performance, we now have the opportunity to make improvements for next year. It's time to evaluate our race birds, decide who remains on the team, who moves to the stock loft and who we remove from the team. It often isn't easy as if there are many tough races, we are so very

tempted to blame it on the races and not the birds. Now, it's time to have a system in place to ensure we are moving forward. A system should reflect our bird's performance at all levels of competition. The only constant competition is that in your own loft. Your birds are competing against a fairly constant field, under the same conditions. If your skills or system are not letting them score to their potential, then at least they all are penalized equally. You should include loft performance in your evaluation.

Criteria or Standard

You need to put into place a scoring system. Just like there is a scoring system for national and club awards, why not for your loft. You can base your point system on positions, prizes, per even uni-rate or percentages. However you design your system, be consistent. Create a point system that reflects your goals and rewards birds in points for reaching that goal. Also remember that distance birds will compete in fewer races than middle and short distance birds, so the points should be able to reflect their performance as well. I created the following point system for my loft:

Sample Point System

| POSITION | Pts. |
|-----------------------------|------|
| HHC Comb Win | 15 |
| HHC Comb Diploma (top 10) | 7 |
| HHC Comb top 50 | 3 |
| | |
| IA/NE Comb Win | 15 |
| IA/NE Comb Diploma (top 10) | 7 |
| IA/NE Comb Top 25 | 3 |
| | |
| Club Win | 15 |
| Club Diploma | 7 |
| Club Top 10 | 3 |
| Club Top 25 | 1 |
| | |
| 1st Loft | 15 |
| 2nd Loft | 7 |
| 3rd Loft | 3 |
| Clocked | 1 |

Distance Multiple

| Miles | Multiple |
|-------------------|----------|
| (Short) 100-200 | 1.00 |
| (Medium) 201-300+ | 1.50 |
| (Long) 400-600 | 2.00 |

I use Hawkeye Loft Management System from Compuware and it allows me to enter points at the 5 levels of competition, loft, club, combine, federation and union. I use four levels of competition and on any given race a bird is scored points for each level of competition it is eligible. This makes it easier to evaluate the birds at the end of the season and also takes little effort on my part other than entering the correct points into the database when I enter in my race results and printing off a report at the end of the season. I use a distance multiple because the long distance birds will not be competing in as many races as the middle distance bird and this puts them on a level playing field. This system also rewards birds that are consistent over birds that get lucky and score high once. So if a bird was 1st to loft, scored a club win, received a IA/NE combine diploma and finished in the top 50 places within the HHC for a 400 mile race he would receive $((15+15+7+3) \times 2.0 <\text{distance multiple}>)$ or 80 points. If a bird scored 1st loft, club top 10, IA/NE combine top 25 but did not make the HHC top 50 on a 500 it would receive $((15+3+3+0) \times 2.0) = 42$ points. A bird who is consistently one of the first to the loft, and consistently near the top at the club level will easily outscore a bird that gets lucky. Lucky birds never make the same or equal achievement twice.

Things to consider about this scoring system.

Our short races under 200 miles old bird and young bird are only flown on the club level, there for there are only two levels of points possibly to be earned. I don't want to give much weight to these short races as there are not a lot of them and I want middle and long distance pigeons. The HHC level is only available for long distance races 400-600 miles. Once again, the long distance birds compete in less races and their performance in those races carry more weight in how I evaluate my birds. Consistent pigeons will outscore one time wonders. I think too often we hold on to one time wonders only to realize after we've wasted time and effort on them that it was just that, a bird in the right place at the right time, most likely following a really great pigeon.

Selection

Now you have put into place some sort of scoring system to evaluate their performance but you still have to evaluate them based on that system, determine your future needs and finally make selections. It's more economical to keep birds that meet your standards and less than your predetermined quota than to keep birds that do not meet your standards but manage to fill up your loft. The best position to be in is to have more birds meet your standard than can fit into your future quota, but then you are taxed with the decision of who to remove from the team, better for you to be able to make the decisions than for fate to do it for you. Here are things to consider for each class of birds.

Young Birds:

I don't have any real expectations of young birds. I know some may fault me, but each year it seems more and more like its hurry up after old birds to get to the young bird schedule. Many don't like to start young bird season super early, because of the hot weather. Our club has traditionally skipped the first IA/NE combine race which automatically put our club out of average speed. After two club races our birds are right into combine competition. I want

good long distance pigeons and I believe that young birds are still in the learning curve. If at the end of the season there was a surplus then I would base my selections on the number of races they were shipped and the percentage of time they were in the clock.

Yearlings:

Like Chuck, I want yearlings to show me something. I've flown yearlings to the long distance races and they've scored. I admit I did this out of desperation because the team was really thin towards the end of the season or once it was my last old bird season before I moved and I figured "why not?" In my current system, yearlings are my short team. They will compete in races from 100-300 miles. Their job is to cover the short races, learn the system and show that they are racers. At the end of the season, they are evaluated on the point system. The best will stay. In my opinion a great long distance bird may not win a good weather middle distance race, but if it's a tough race, he has a good shot. I think yearlings that score in tough middle distance races are going to be your future stars on the long distance old bird team.

Old Birds:

The two year olds have now flown the long distance races and will be evaluated with the whole veteran team. With the point system in place it's a matter of who's performing and who isn't. When deciding on whom to keep, take into consideration how many yearlings will be moving onward to the old bird team. There is a balance between how many hopefuls from the yearling team will move forward and how many tested old birds will remain. You have to decide what that amount will be.

Breeders:

From the old bird team, you want to continually move your best racers into the stock loft. It's not hard to have a core of breeders and before long; you have a breeder loft of old breeders. Continually try to take the best of your racing birds into the stock loft. Granted, a great racer does not always make a great breeder and the time in the stock loft may have been time they could have won another race or diploma. But then again, you could have raced them one more season and lost them forever. It doesn't take much thought to realize moving them on and upward to the stock loft has a great potential for reaping rewards down the road. Remember the go is to be moving forward.

"Don't look back, look forwards."

When you build a house, you build it twice, once in your mind and a second time in reality. Racing pigeons is the same. You have to envision where you want to go, build a plan or system in your mind and then put it into practice. This sport is ever changing, evolving and improving. The quality of bird in the average loft is probably greater than it was twenty years ago. Not every fancier can afford to spend

thousands of dollars on breeders every year. Before you look outward for the answer to a prayer, start building at home. Always be looking forwards towards that next race!

Pro's and Con's of Average Speed

What is average speed?

Average Speed is a loft award for overall performance. It is sometimes broken down into short average speed and long average speed. The computation for average speed is the speed of the first bird clocked in each race from your loft. The total distance of all races in the computation divided by the total time is figured to compute the average speed. In order to compete for average speed a competitor must have competed in all races. If you are shut out of a race you are eliminated from average speed regardless of your ranking. Average speed is an award usually given at the club or combine level.

The Pros

Average speed is a good indicator of your overall family performance. It's another facet of competition that makes the season more exciting. In a club where most members are competitive in average speed it can be a well-earned award. Your first clocking becomes significant even if it is not in diploma class or point earning position.

The Cons

One shut out will eliminate a team from average speed regardless of their ranking. Not all members of a club compete for average speed as more and more significance has been placed on individual bird performance due to an improved and well organized system by some national organizations to recognize and present national award for individual bird performance. In a club where many members do not compete for average speed and do not ship to every race, it no longer is a good indicator of your overall family performance as it is then not comparative to other teams within the club.

The Future of Average Speed

The future of average speed is surely in question. The current structure of national awards allows for shut out or smash races and do not have a great impact on the computation of an individual bird's performance. In many clubs there have been smash races or races that for unknown reasons have become difficult. Due to these races, average speed has at times has not been awarded to the swift but more of an award to the survivors. It has been known that the sole survivor of a super tough race and sole clock bird earns the average speed award. My opinion is that average speed may someday be placed by the way side by many clubs. There is no national incentive for such an award at this time. In present times yearling average speed awards have nearly disappeared. Old timers can remember a time that this award was one of the most coveted and prized awards and bestowed upon the winner great pride and bragging rights. If average speed does go by the way side, I don't think it will be a loss to the sport. In my opinion I do like average speed and take great pride that when I first started this

sport, I gained some respect by placing second place in average speed in old birds in my own club. I only won a 250 mile race and some diploma and my ranking in average speed was frosting to the season. But still, despite my personal experience, I think the time for average speed has ended.

Pros and Cons of Combines

Overview

This section is intended to define pigeon racing at the combine or federation level. What is a combine and how is it organized? A combine is a coalition of clubs that come together to compete in the same race or races. Each club maintains its own identity but the field of competition is then increased as members can then compete at both the club and combine level. Some combines are broken down further into federations which are a smaller grouping of clubs. Though the birds are all in the same race, the results are broken down by club, federation and combine. Just as a club has officer positions and a race secretary, there are also officer positions at the combine level. Meetings are necessary at both the club and combine level to make yearly decisions. Here in the Midwest, we have our club the CIRPC, which competes in the NE/IA Combine with ORPA and Sioux City. For long distance races 400-600 miles, our combine clubs also compete in the Husker Hawkeye Combine which consists of 9 clubs from Nebraska and Iowa. In respect to long distance racing, the NE/IA Combine is a federation within the HHC.

The Pros

Costs:

The process of shipping races is no different for clubs than shipping is for any business. It cost the same to send a truck down the road weather it is entirely full of freight or if it only has two or three boxes. In this day and age of rising cost and tougher economy, a lot of clubs have had to really struggle with the issue of shipping. When clubs form a combine that also includes mutual shipping, if it makes for more efficient and cheaper per ca-pita cost for shipping, it is a very strong benefit for all involved.

Awards:

It's always great to win or score toward the top in a club race. To score towards the top or win a combine race is even better. Winning against a field of 700 is always more prestigious than winning against a field of say 100-200 birds. For national awards, the best performance at club or combine level is often used for computation. Having this added level of competition and scoring well will reap better rewards in standings for national awards.

Increased Fellowship:

A greater number of fanciers together in an organization increase the number of opportunities to form friendships and fellowship in the sport. When racing pigeon fanciers are in mid-season,

there is little time for anything other than racing. After racing, between seasons when it's time to conduct combine and club business is when we get to spend time with other fanciers. It's networking like anything else and a combine allows for greater personal networking within the sport.

The Cons

Costs:

I previously mentioned this as a Pro, but it is also a Con. As with anything else, it takes money to run a combine. There is the additional cost for awards and maintenance. These costs must come from the individual clubs in the form of combine dues.

Politics:

There are politics at the club level and also at the combine level. Politics are a nature of the beast. We all want to vote in what favors us as a fancier and individual competitor. Sometimes, we need to vote in what benefits the club or combine. Whenever you have a large group of people with differing opinions, desires, needs and visions, there will be politics. Sometimes politics can become so frustrating that some fanciers want to just throw in the towel. Politics will never go away, and at times, there are not a lot of differences and it's not much of a nuisance. When you become part of a larger organization such as a combine, you are adding another level of politics.

Calling Races:

When the birds have headed down the road or are about to head down the road and the weather is predicted to be rough or it's raining almost everywhere, it sometimes is really just the right thing to cancel or postpone a race. At the club level, this is the decision of the race secretary. If you call it and the weather clears, everyone is mad. If you don't call it and the weather really gets bad, someone is going to be mad. There really is no winning. When you add in a combine level, you also have an increased number of people that won't agree with the decision to call a race. Since more than one club is involved it has happened where a club wants to cancel but either the power is in the hands of another member club or the other member clubs wish to race. In regards to calling a race it is more complicated and there is less control than at the club level.

Obligations:

Whenever you are part of a greater organization, there are going to be obligations. There are officer positions at the combine level that need to be filled and each require hard work. There are commitments for shipping crates and additional deadlines for getting race results to the right people. In the HHC a club every year must host a show for the HHC and another club must

host the all to one loft futurity. When you form a larger organization, you will acquire additional obligations.

Greater fronts:

Here in the Midwest a few cities have more than one club, but for the most parts, our birds are racing to entirely different cities and towns. This increases both the width and depth of the field or front of racing. This can be a negative when birds are not breaking and fly way of course following race birds from another club. In a tough race, it can increase losses. This goes hand in hand with the benefit of having a larger field of birds as a positive. Every rose has a thorn you might say. For us it means having what I would say is almost or might be the widest racing front in the United States.

Summary

Despite having listed more cons than pros, it is my opinion that the more cost efficient we make pigeon racing and the better we make the level of rewards, both greatly outweighs any cons figured in the equation. I think becoming a member of the HHC is one of the best things that has happened to my club. There are a lot of fanciers that were totally unknown to me before we joined this combine. There are also a lot of really good people involved in making this combine work. I think the HHC is a great combine because the clubs involved genuinely are committed to reducing the cost of shipping long distance races so that we can preserve them, have a good field of competition, and not let greed ruin this aspect of our sport.

Partnerships

Partnerships, the good, the bad, the just plain ugly!

Overview

Pigeon racing can be enjoyed by anyone. Competitive pigeon racing takes dedication, skill, the ability to adapt, learn, improve and hopefully strive to achieve success. It takes time, talent and money. It's sport that one can enjoy well into their old age. We are limited by physical ability. It is the thinking man's sport. In this sport we have fellowship, make friend ships and we even have rivalries. Sometimes, fanciers decide that by forming a partnership, they can achieve success. It seems like an excellent thing to do. This section covers partnerships in pigeon racing so that if you are considering forming a partnership, you can make an informed decision.

Different types of partnerships

Breeder-Handler Partnership:

In a breeder/handler partnership, one person is responsible for breeding and the other is responsible for training and racing the birds. Often the breeders are kept at one location and the race birds at another. In this partnership, each person can focus on their task. This partnership can have huge rewards if both are talented at what they do. There are many

fanciers that love pigeons and love the aspect of breeding but do not enjoy the actual racing. There are lots of fanciers that love to race, but are not skilled in the art of breeding. It is a partnership that is destined to happen.

Old Bird-Young Bird Partnership:

In this partnership, one fancier focuses on the old bird racing and the other on young bird racing. This is usually done from one site. There are many enthusiasts that only want to race young birds. If each fancier is talented with their type of racing, huge rewards are possible. That advantage is that for the young birds, they continue on to an old bird career. In the loft of a pure young bird enthusiast, the bird's career is ended after their single young bird season.

One team, two partners:

In this situation, two fanciers work together to manage and race one team, whether it is young birds, old birds or both. Each participate fully in each aspect or share task, but the actual management and racing are shared by both.

Syndicate:

This is starting to become popular in many areas where relocated fanciers are not allowed to have lofts and pigeons in their area. Basically one fancier allows other fanciers to keep their birds in his/her loft. There could be several teams flying out of one loft. This is an excellent option for those forced out of the sport due to economics and relocation.

Family Racing:

Quite simply, a husband, wife and possibly children work together on a race team. This may not really be what you think when talking about partnerships, but in reality it is a working partnership, as many top fanciers will enthusiastically admit that it is with the help of their spouse that allows them to achieve more than they could on their own.

Benefits of Partnerships

Sharing of tasks:

Things are easier when the tasks can be shared. Various partnerships will split the tasks between training, going to the club for clock in and clock out, cleaning the loft, care of the birds, clocking birds, etc.

Sharing of funds:

In many partnerships, the cost is split equally allowing double the purchase power towards better quality stock or in reducing the cost to the individual fancier towards racing in general

Sharing of talent:

Look closely at any group of fanciers and you will discover someone has a natural talent for training young birds, another is great at motivating old birds on a certain system, another has a knack for breeding and pairing breeders, yet another seems to have a special gift for picking birds in just the right form. In a partnership, talents that complement each other when combined can form an amazing team.

Fellowship:

Things are more enjoyable when we share them with others. Even though in a partnership one person cannot claim all the glory, they can share it, and especially if there is more glory to be had. It's great to have someone just as excited or devoted as you to bounce ideas, make plans and enjoy the sport.

Pitfalls of partnerships**Difference of philosophies:**

In a partnership, both parties should be in agreement on the direction of their program, the goals they wish to achieve and how they are going to get there. I've seen partnerships fall apart because at heart, even though they shared a passion for racing, both parties wanted to achieve different goals. I saw one breeder/handler partnership disintegrate because the breeder wanted to breed towards long distance and had acquired birds towards that goal and the handler though they competed in both young and old bird races, really enjoyed and put their heart and soul into young bird racing and not old bird racing. When the breeder wanted to pull out of the arrangement a few years down the road, it was a terrible split. A wonderful friendship fell apart.

Difference in financial capability:

Both partners need to be willing and capable of contributing the same funds towards racing. The competitive spirit may drive one partner who is much more affluent than the other to push more funds into racing. Expecting to be matched the more affluent partner drives the partner of lesser wealth to the poor house. They say the number one reason couples fight is because of money. It's not much different in a partnership.

Equal is not always equal:

One of the greatest pitfalls in a partnership is that eventually, one partner feels he is contributing more work than the other. It's very hard to actually split everything straight down the middle, especially if the loft is located at one fanciers home and not the other. Once again, this happens in relationships and it also happens in partnerships. The feelings of working more than the other lead to frustration, contempt and eventually a partnership is falling apart.

Politics, club rules and voting rights:

A lot of partnerships were started and it was not until the following season when ballots were sent out did a partnership realize they were losing a right to vote. In some clubs, two people competing as one team only have one vote. It's a legitimate rule that was put in place so that John Q. Flier doesn't make his wife a member, then his oldest son and another child, and even though John Q. Flier is only racing one team, his loft has 4 votes towards decisions that impact racing. Many clubs decided, "Put up or shut up!" Clubs started to adopt rules towards members competing in a certain amount of races each season to retain a voting right. Due to this, when two fanciers race one team, they lose the vote of one of the partners. Then people get really upset because they are paying club dues, and they have flown years in a club and they can't believe they are being treated this way. I'm not saying its right or wrong. I'm just saying I understand the logic behind it. If you enter into a partnership, ensure you understand the constitution and by-laws of your club and how this will affect your ability to vote.

Conclusion

When a partnership clicks and two fanciers can combine time, talent and financial capability, towards a unified goal, they are capable of achieving far more than they could on their own. When partnerships don't work for all the reasons discussed, it can be one of the worst things to happen to friend, colleagues and fellow members. If you decide to enter into a partnership, ensure you have thought it through and that both are committed. Ensure that you and your partner honestly do complement each other and have the exact same philosophies and expectations.

The Importance of Record Keeping

Record keeping is extremely important in race pigeons. Normally, when one thinks of record keeping they think of the basic pedigree. Record keeping goes beyond a pedigree. Accurate record keeping allows you to establish a compilation of data. This data can then be analyzed to discover new things. Decisions can then be made based on data and not on theories or guesses. Here are examples of necessary or desired record keeping.

Breeding Records:

Breeding records are one of the most important records you will keep. Breeding records though when supplemented with other good record keeping skills can enhance a pedigree with accuracy. This is the basic information that you should record in regards to breeding records.

1. Sire and Dam
2. round number
3. date eggs are laid
4. date eggs hatch
5. date youngsters are banded
6. band numbers of youngsters
7. date youngsters are weaned

8. Physical observations about each youngster, short down, uncommon naval, slow development, etc.
9. color of youngster

Racing Records:

If you have a program such as Hawkeye Loft Management system by Comproware, then keeping accurate race records is easy and analyzing data is much easier. The following should be recorded in the race record for each bird. Using this data you may discover that a certain bird scored in a certain nest condition. This would allow you to set up the bird into the same nesting condition for the same distance on another race or the following season. You may discover that your birds score in certain weather conditions but not others. The performance is important to also add to the pedigree. If your bird is a prize, diploma or race winner, be sure to update that on the record of the Sire, Dam, Grand Sires and Grand Dams. You can also go one step further and update the records of the Great Grands, but this can lead to a lot of work.

1. race date
2. race distance
3. race conditions, weather, wind, temp etc.
4. release time
5. arrival time
6. speed
7. loft position
8. club position
9. federation position
10. combine position
11. points earned
12. diplomas won
13. race winner
14. winning speed
15. Nesting condition
 1. celibacy
 2. widowhood cock
 3. widowhood hen
 4. natural system
 - a. unmated
 - b. cock driving hen
 - c. driven hen
 - d. sitting on eggs 1-6 days old
 - e. sitting on eggs 7-12 days old
 - f. sitting on eggs 13-18 days old
 - g. eggs pipping

- h. youngsters 1-7 days old
 - i. youngsters 8-14 days
 - j. youngsters 15-21 days
 - k. youngsters 21-28 days old
 - l. on eggs, mate removed
 - m. race bird removed 1-2 days before shipping
 - n. jealousy used
16. return condition
 17. position in the moult
 18. notations of physical condition when shipping (will help you establish what are the signs of form in your loft)

Season Records:

The things you do during the race season also need to be recorded. If you have a successful year, you may want to duplicate your actions, but if you do not record them, it's next to impossible to duplicate them the following year. This is especially true if you are always changing the way you do things. Here are some of the notations that are important.

1. date of medications and vaccines administered
2. type of feeding each day
3. Type of training or exercise given to the birds, weather it is loft flying, flag flying, road training etc.
4. Dates major events happened such as pairing up for natural, splitting cocks and hens for widowhood etc.
5. Preparations for shipping
 1. time birds were fed
 2. what you fed them
 3. if you took grit away
 4. what time you put hens/cocks together for widowhood
 5. when you crated before going to the club
6. Weather conditions

Conclusion

You can have records of whatever is important to you. The fancier who keeps consistent and accurate records is ten steps ahead of the fancier who does not. Record your data, don't throw it away. Put your season records in a binder. You never know when you will want to go back, look at what you have done, or duplicate it. Sometimes we try new things and decide it wasn't a move forward. Record your data. Be diligent and you will have the power of information in your hand.

Electronic Clocking Systems

Overview

Electronic Clocking Systems are systems that have replaced manual clocks in pigeon racing.

This is a recap for those who are too new to flying to remember the "old days". A manual clock was a box, with a clock. All clocks used for a race were synchronized, and then sealed to prevent tampering. The clock contained a wheel with small capsule holes. There was one hole in the frame of the clock. When a bird arrived home, a rubber countermark was removed from the pigeon's leg and placed in the hole in the clock. A lever was then pushed which caused two things to happen at the same time. The clock would stamp on a roll of paper the day, hour, minute and second the bird clocked and the wheel would turn locking the countermark and capsule inside the clock and providing a new empty hole for the new capsule. Upon clocking out for a race the clocks were opened, the counter-marks were removed and the paper tapes were also removed. A race committee would then go through each clock, matching counter-marks to recorded times and then matching the counter-marks to the recorded birds that were assigned each countermark. There was a lot of room for human error in this process and being human, there were occasional errors in every club. This process also could take hours in a large club or in the event of a lot of clocking's.

The new age has arrived.

The electronic clocking system used a computer to clock birds. Each bird has a microchip on its leg which is registered by the computer upon each bird's entry into the loft. The fancier not even be home when the birds arrive as the computer will do the clocking without the fancier. Clocking in and clocking out for races are 100 times faster. For clocking out, it's a matter of a few seconds to download the data from the electronic clock to a computer. The computer then uses a race program to construct the results.

Basic Components:

Most electronic clocking systems have the same basic components as follows:

Clocking Module:

This is a small computer and the "brain" of the system. It has a database inside of RFID chips and what birds match what RFID chips. On race day, the data for the race in progress is also entered into the racing module along with what birds are entered into the race. In some clubs, such as mine, we fly two different races a weekend and both sets of race data are stored in the computer.

Antenna/Scanner:

This is where the "clocking" actually happens. When a bird with a RFID chip walks across or within range of the antenna, the computer registers the RFID chip and records the time. This is that bird's official time. In most system, the antenna looks like a flat pad of which the bird must walk across the pad to be registered by the antenna. Most systems are set up so that multiple

antennas may be attached as in lofts where the birds can enter in more than one location inside the loft

RFID chip:

The RFID chip is usually inside of a thick plastic band that and be placed on a bird and is designed so that it is difficult to remove and cannot easily fall off of a bird. The actual chip itself cannot be seen. This chip is detected and registered by the antenna and the clocking module.

Club Antenna:

The club antenna is very similar to the loft antenna except that it is used to assign bands to individual pigeons and to register or assign birds for a specific race. Often, individual fanciers also have a club antenna so that they can assign their own bands to their birds before the season or during the season.

Desk top computer:

Though not necessary to use the electronic clocking system once it has been programmed and bands have been assigned, it is necessary to assign bands or reassign bands. Also some electronic clocking systems will clock birds from training flights and that data can be downloaded from the clocking module to a desktop computer and loft management program. (When considering a pigeon management system, check to see what electronic clocking systems they are compatible)

Software:

Most electronic clocking systems have software that will allow you to enter data into the module or assign bands with a club antenna.

Software Considerations

As with all software, ensure that your computer system is compatible. As previously mentioned, most loft management software is also compatible with some electronic clocking systems and allow you to download clocking's from training flights directly into the program and each birds training records.

Support

All things not being equal, investigate what support is available for a system that you purchase. Also, most clubs only allow one type of electronic clocking system. Each system requires people to be skilled at the programs used for assigning bands, entering race data and down loading the data from the clocking modules into the club computer. To allow for more than one type of electronic clocking system would create more work and often redundant processes for any race committee.

Maintenance

The old manual clocks required maintenance such as changing the ink pads, rolls of paper, adjusting the speed of the clock and occasionally sending the clock off to have it inspected and tuned. The electronic clocking systems are not different. They are small computers and often the programs on them need to be updated. They contain internal batteries that must be changed and as with all electronic equipment, they do break down. Just like the manual clocks, the occasionally need to be sent in for routine maintenance and updating.

My experience with electronic clocking systems

I have used two systems so far. I have used the Tauris and the Unikon. The ORPA used the Tauris and the CIRPC uses the Unikon. I like the Tauris better as far as how it is constructed and durability of the equipment. The module sits securely in the docking cradle (used to connect the module to the lines leading to the antennas) and when removed the data can still be viewed. The menu is sometimes complicated in regards to buttons that must be pushed to put it into race mode etc. The Unikon is easier to manipulate in regards to assigning bands and the module has always gone straight into race mode when placed in the cradle. The module sits very loosely into the cradle and is designed to sit flat rather than a cradle that can be mounted on the wall. Also all pigeon's lofts contain dust, as it is a by-product of pigeons. The Unikon is more susceptible to the dust by the hardware design than is the Tauris. The scanners themselves are almost identical as well as how both systems are installed. If you are considering either of these, take those points into consideration.

The Decline of Long Distance Racing

Overview

During the last decade it seems there has been a decline in long bird racing. Long ago, there was great pride in winning a 500 mile race and having a 500 mile day bird in your loft. Slowly, most likely through better training techniques, the increase of better quality birds in the average loft and fanciers becoming more educated in their craft, there has been an increase in the number of days birds on a 500 or even 600 mile race. Slowly the number of birds shipped to these long distance races has decreased creating a shorter field of competition. Why has this happened?

Futurities and middle distance racing

One major change to the sport was the introduction of the futurity. The futurity offers fanciers a chance to win sometimes huge amounts of money. For the breeder, it means focusing on breeding birds that excel at middle distance as most futurities are between 200-400 miles. For the handler it means focusing on perfecting training techniques and preparation for the middle distance. For commercial breeders it means winning and scoring at big futurities reaps the rewards of increased sales and higher prices for their birds. For the club it creates a money making opportunity which offers greater flexibility to the club in managing their assets. All these are creating a greater focus on the middle distance races.

National awards

The requirements for many individual bird performance awards have a requirement for some sort of middle or long distance achievement. This is a good step towards keeping fanciers interested in the long distance races. Any system has to have a standard and a point system is in place. In middle distance birds are quite capable of racing week to week back to back, while long distance birds often only fly half as many races as they need to be rested a week or there are bye weeks in the race schedule. The result is the fancier has twice as many chances to earn points with their individual birds by competing and focusing on the middle distance.

Rising Costs

It costs club money to ship birds to any release point. If you factor into this that a driver required to go 500+ miles will require lodging in addition to fuel and the amount of hours spend driving, the cost increases greatly. It cost often three to four times as much to ship a long distance race versus the cost to ship a short or middle distance race. If you factor into this the decrease in the number of birds shipped in a long distance race the cost efficiency greatly decreases. In our area, the Husker Hawkeye Combine is more of a an economic coalition to keep long distance racing by allowing a great number of clubs to band together and focus on maintaining the long distance racing and combining their efforts to reduce the cost to the individual fancier

Summary

I don't know what can be done to help increase the interest in long distance racing. The cost factor in our present economy is a huge force against our long distance racing. The effect of futurities upon our sport has dramatically changed the focus of our sport. Despite efforts to establish long distance awards such as the Ace Marathon award the interest is declining. Maybe the day will come when there really are no races of 300 miles. The only thing that may hold to be true is that where you find a group of fanciers, there will be that urge to race and compete at whatever distance is affordable.