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Module 4: Training

TRAINING 101 "Preparing for War"

When you research how to train pigeons, you will find 101 methods. There is no ONE perfect way to train your birds. Explore as many materials as you can and find a system that works for you. The one right way will surely be whatever the winning method is for you, your schedule, the type of family of birds you are flying and what type of distances you are specializing.

The method outlined here is what I call the CONFIDENCE METHOD. It's all about developing birds with confidence and working them out at the distance until they are ready to start the races. I traditionally am not a huge young bird racer. I fly a few races but prefer to continue to train young birds as my main goal is long distance races in the old bird season. You will find training broken down into chapters outlining various aspects.

After the last few years however, I have begun to change my perspective on the subject of young bird racing. Here in the Midwest we have had several tough young bird seasons in a row. It's tough to see a large team wiped out to a small flock in just the first few weeks of the season. Here, we never know what kind of race we are going to have. A headwind on a very hot day but with high winds can very quickly weed out all but the strongest birds. If it's a super strong tail wind, birds that break in time do well, and those that don't, most likely will find themselves in South or North Dakota. So, why would I change my mind about young bird racing, after seeing my fellow club members fly tough season after tough season. That answer is VERY simple. ECONOMICS!!!!

From the day a breeding pair is put together, the youngsters is hatched, banded, reared, weaned, trained and eventually raced we are investing quite a bit of money in them. When they are not flown in young bird season, there are many that would have not fared well in young birds, but are allowed to remain until yearling season. During that year, they are fed, given a top notch health regimen and eventually sent between 100-300 miles only to discover they do not have what it takes to place in the top point winning positions or they simply are lost. Yes, I still believe very good birds are lost in young bird season, but with gasoline, medication, feed and every other expense sky rocketing with our current economy, which one makes more sense? A matter of economics determines that a tough young bird season, will allow you to spend valuable resources maintaining eventual yearlings that deserve to have the funds spent on them.

From the Beginning

You Have to Crawl Before You Can Walk

Your young birds are at 21-30 days and out of the nest. They should be in their own compartment where they are beginning to learn social behavior with their fellow flock mates. Very shortly their training will begin. When we discuss training we are including training to the trap or entrance to the loft, training to come to your "call", loft flying, learning where to perch and not perch (like your neighbor's house) and finally road training.

When you feed your birds you should whistle or call to them. Whatever method you choose it should be something that another member of your family can do as well. The birds will associate this whistle with being fed. Do this every time, every day, all year with all your birds. This will pay big rewards on race day. It will also allow you to get that "spooked" pigeon down

Out of the Loft

It's a Whole New World to Explore

Once your young birds are able to move well within the loft, and are taking the higher perches it is time to get them out of the loft. Do not put them out on a full stomach. Do not let them out unattended as hawks may capitalize on this and you will suffer a major setback. If you are late getting your birds out of the first time, they will be "too strong on the wing" and may get up and fly before they know how to control themselves. This is a major cause of "fly aways".

The best way to introduce them to the outside world is to create a sputnik cage on top of the landing board. This allows you to put them out on the landing board where they will have to maneuver through your trapping system. This also allows you to get them out a litter earlier. They are also protected from the predators that are just waiting for them (like hawks). After a few days when they have learned the trapping system you can let them out on their own.

Roof Training

"Be Home Before the Street Lights Come On"

You can let them go outside on their own without the sputnik cage. The birds will stay on the roof as long as they are not getting too strong on the wing. They will peck at everything as though it's fascinating. Like toddlers this whole new world is new for them, as stated do not let them out on a full stomach. After the designated time "call" them in for dinner. Do not put the full amount of feed in the feeder as some of the birds may not come in and the first ones to the feeder may eat too much. The important thing is to get them trained to come in when called. There are two purposes for this, one is to get them in quickly upon arrival from a race and the other is to get them disciplined to come in when you need them, such as when you want to train the in the morning and then have an evening training toss.

You accomplish this by keeping an edge to their appetite and feeding them on a regular schedule. They adapt to a routine fairly quickly and if you deviate from this routine, they will very quickly let you know

it. If they are out and you miss the regular feeding, they will come find you. Consistency in a routine is a staple towards good pigeon handling.

If you have been feeding the birds properly, they will immediately try to get into the trap and get inside to eat. Some may be confused and walk to the edge of the roof where the walk in door is located. Like children, they are processing their world in the same way. Be patient. You may even have one or two stay out overnight. After a few days of this, all young birds will know how to get inside the loft and trap. If their being fed properly they will not mess around unless they get "spooked".

Spooking is a term used to explain when a young bird become nervous, anxious or scared. They can get spooked when they see a large bird they are not familiar with such as a hawk, crane, large black bird etc. They can get spooked over a loud noise such as gunfire, an exhaust misfiring, a car door slamming. When they are spooked something minor can cause them to go airborne. Be patient. Any bird with intelligence will settle down and come back to the roof. It may take hours but it will happen.

Sitting out over night

Occasionally you will get young birds that will set out overnight. If you live in the city, this will not be very bad. The next morning let the birds out again and usually the overnight offender who spent the night on the roof or in the tree in the dark, scared and without dinner will come inside with the other birds when dinner the following evening is fed. If you live in the country, like I do, sometimes that one overnight stay out is fatal. We have owls and without all the buildings and other "clutter" the pigeons are very easy pickings for the owls. Owls do not hunt by sight but hunt by hearing. They have extremely fine hearing. One method to thwart an owl is to place a small radio outside the loft and let music play at a modest volume. Do not set the radio out until it is absolutely dark. The bird on the roof will then not fly up and the owl will have a more difficult time hearing your bird and there for preying upon him.

Night Flight

This has never happened to me, but it happened to one of our members recently. It has also happened to my father and other fanciers in my club. A night flight is when the birds get spooked just before dark and all go airborne. The birds will fly around in the dark endlessly. The danger is that they will hit walls, wires, trees and other hazards. This member of our club gives his birds open loft. He calls them in to eat but lets them still have open loft so that they will fly around even after dinner. The birds get more flying time, but on one evening, a hawk hit his loft just before dark sending the entire young bird flock into a night flight. The next morning more than half the birds did not return and some of those that did had career ending injuries. One bird came back with the top portion of its beak missing. I am not a fan of open loft until dark. I hope you never have a night flight, and I hope I never have a night flight. But be forewarned.....do not create habits that allow for the possibility of a night flight. Also, understand that hawks love pigeons. Hawks will catch on to the fact that a ready meal is available. If you have open loft and a hawk catches on, he will stop hunting other prey and make your loft his prime target.

Learning to "Drive"?

"I Promise I Won't Wreck the Car"

In these first days on the roof is the most entertaining time to watch the pigeons. It is also the time to pull out your hair or learn patience. The bird will first flap their wings and sort of hover in short burst. Then they will fly off the roof and make small little circles and land again. After a while they will start to fly for short times. Eventually this will lengthen to longer periods of flight.

This is the most entertaining time to watch your birds. As they start to fly around the loft at first as a group of individuals and later they will start to group up in a flock. At times they will do crazy things. There will be midair collisions as the flock makes turns to attempts to avoid objects. There will be crazy dives when you swear they are going to hit things. Yes, sometimes they WILL hit things. Don't worry...this part is taken care of as they will learn to fly as a flock and get control of that huge natural engine mother nature gave them.

The Training Crate

"Team, Meet Your Home Away From Home"

Your birds are loft flying and routing. Hopefully you are really enjoying them. Now you are also feeling the anxiety as you know it's soon time to start basket training them. There's a young bird race schedule around the corner and you have to be ready for the first race. Most instructions on training skip this part of training. I think to most they really don't think about it but they naturally include the introduction to the training crate as part of their training.

The birds should be put in the training crates and left alone for an hour or more, long enough for them to get used to the cramped quarters. The crate is a different environment as they have no proclaimed territory here. They will fight if they feel another bird is too close to them. After a while they will settle down. Just like the loft, the roof and the neighborhood they are getting to know this environment too. It is best that they get familiar with this crate before the first training toss.

Road Training

"Where the Rubber Meets the Road"

The birds are routing, they've been introduced to the training crates. It's time to start road training. Road training has several purposes. First is to teach the birds their surrounding area. Most programs call for you to start road training in the direction that you will be racing from. The second purpose is to condition them. Like a weight lifter doesn't start bench pressing 300 lbs. but starts at a lightweight and over time builds to a higher weight this is how we are going to training our birds.

First train them approximately 1 mile from the loft. This may be difficult depending on where you live to find a decent release site that is free of wires, trees, buildings, fences etc. You want to find a place that is free of most of these obstacles. Sometimes a large parking lot like a shopping mall early in the morning is a great place if there are not people and cars around.

Give them at least three tosses where they are heading straight home. Also do not release them after they have eaten as food is about the only motivator for getting home at this time. After they have made at least three successful tosses you can move them out to 3 miles, 5 miles, 10 miles, 20 miles, 40 miles, etc. Do not jump to the next distance until they have made three successful tosses at each training location. This is what I call THE CONFIDENCE METHOD. The goal here is to develop confidence in the birds. Also in doing this you are getting them slowly conditioned for each jump in distance. After 40 or 50 miles that they are training well, they are ready for the 100 mile races.

Types of Tosses

"Developing Leaders Instead of Followers"

To this point we've discussed group tossing. This is where you take the whole team and release them at once. When the flock heads for home there is usually one or more leaders, at times the leaders will change but for the most part there is a LOT of followers. Race winners are not followers. They are the first bird home, the cream of the crop they do not follow. They break away and head for home in the lead.

The next question is how do we develop leaders? Through alternative types of tosses other than the flock toss. I suggest doing this at any point after the birds are getting to the 20 mile mark. You can however do this at any time even after the season has started.

Small Group Tossing

Take the birds and start to break them down into smaller groups. Start by breaking your team in half and letting two groups out separately. Just as you can teach birds good habits, you can teach them bad ones as well. Once you start breaking the birds down you have to find a way to ensure each group leaves and heads for home before the next group is released. I have waited as long as 15-30 minutes and out of nowhere a group that disappeared out of sight returns and joins up with the group you have just released. Now, you have spent more time than you normally would for a flock toss and accomplished the same thing you would have if you hadn't let the birds go in a small group.

How do you fight this? You can try releasing each group from a separate location. Let one group go and then drive 5 miles either way of the line of flight and let the next group go. It will allow for the time to go by that you would be waiting to release the next group and hopefully it will help prevent the groups from getting together.

After the birds are doing well in smaller groups try breaking them down into even smaller groups such as 7-9 birds, 3-5 birds. Once you are down in the really small groups you are developing many more

leaders instead of a pack of followers. Don't be surprised if you lose young birds in training, as some just don't have a strong homing instinct and they can just get by following the flock. It's also possible to get 3 followers together who aren't very good and they will get lost. Try to mix the groups up so you are not releasing the same birds in the same group each time.

Small group tossing will pay huge dividends down the road.

Single Tossing

Single tossing is when you are letting one bird go at a time. Unlike small group tossing where you are trying to create and develop leaders, in single tossing you are ensuring that each bird is doing it on their own. You are also developing confidence in your birds. Just like small group tossing, you have to make strides to ensure the birds are not joining up. The best way to do this is to let a bird go, then drive a few miles and let the next one go. You can also choose a good location where you can spend hours doing something else and let a bird go every 30 minutes or so.

Single tossing is a lot of work and some people don't have the time, but it has its benefits.

Flag Flying

"Caution the LZ is Hot!"

Flag training is used to keep the birds loft flying beyond loft flying that they are motivated to do. Depending on what system you are racing under birds are sometimes motivated to return to the nest or their mate. This will decrease the amount of time they spend loft flying. The only two ways to increase flying time is to road train them or to use flag training.

Flag training is the use of a flag on a stick. Yes, this is very high tech stuff (joking). I use an 8 ft. green garden stake with a large red piece of cloth attached to the end. When the birds are first introduced to the system each time they want to come down and land, the flag is raised into the air which spooks them into flying again. After a few days of this the flag pole can be posted in front of the landing board the birds will stay in the air until the flag is removed.

A positive way to enforce this is when the flag is removed the birds are immediately called in and fed. They will later know that when the flag is down its dinner time. The call will almost not be necessary as the flag will become a form of "the call".

Negatives of this training technique is that if birds are tired or if they become too wise, they will land on nearby structures or even try to land in a field. If you keep the edge of their hunger too sharp this is especially true.

Positives are that you maximize the amount of actual exercise time for time spent loft flying. Also most hawk attacks occur when birds are out loft flying and are down on the ground where the hawk will ambush them. Flag training can reduce the amount of time they are at risk. Beware however, hawks get wise too and are known to attempt to hit birds in the air if they are desperate enough.

When to Train

"O Dark Thirty.....Let's Roll!"

Morning, Afternoon, Evening

Loft Flying

Loft flying should be done whenever it is convenient for you. This is one of the trainings you can adjust for your work schedule. If you work swing shift or night, the birds can fly in the morning. If you have banker's hours 9-5, then they can fly in the evening. There is no real danger unless you are in the habit of over feeding your birds and they don't come inside when you give "the call". If that is the case and you are loft flying in the evening don't be surprised of one or two or more sit out overnight. At night, they can easily become dinner for predators such as owls, raccoons, possums and cats.

Road Training

Morning Tosses

I am of the opinion that when you road train, the release should be about the same time as the release time for regular races. This is not always the case depending on the hours you work and the schedule you have. In 2002 I was fortunate enough to work 50 miles in the direction we race from and to work day shift. I took the birds with me daily and released them from a 30 mile point. The birds were getting very sharp and didn't even circle when released. I have never had the same schedule since but it was a sweet set up.

The advantages of morning tosses pay off in the summer and when training young birds as you have the opportunity to get them up in the air before the summer heat kicks in. In Nebraska we can have extremely hot weather. If the birds have a bad toss, they have time to get down, rest and make it in before evening. No matter how good your birds are, it is my experience in this area of the country every flyer is going to have a bad toss.

The disadvantage is in old bird training in the very early part of the spring. You have to watch your morning temperatures. If it is below 25-30 degrees Fahrenheit, it's probably too cold for the birds to train. Others may disagree, regardless; there is a threshold in which the temperature will prohibit morning training.

Afternoon Tosses

While you don't have the advantage of releasing when race release would normally occur, you have the advantage of the best temperatures in the spring and fall for training. When it's cold it usually warms up near noon to 2 pm and is ideal for tosses when those restricted to morning or late evening cannot. Also, before daylight savings time allows us to move the clock forward the evening tosses are at even more of a disadvantage.

The only handicap is when summer hits and temperatures get really high, it's almost impossible to train in the middle of the afternoon. I do know some old timers that still trained in the afternoon on the hottest days and one thing you could credit them for is that they developed a very tough family of birds.

Evening Tosses

If you can only toss in the evening, I would not go over 30 miles as if you have a bad toss, then the birds are now restricted by the coming of sunset. Then as discussed earlier, they will have to go down somewhere and can fall victim to predators. If you are going to train greater than 30 miles, you will have to toss on your days off. You should allow the birds a two hour window to get home before sunset.

Club Training Truck

If you are fortunate enough to belong to a club that has a training truck, I strongly suggest you use it. With the escalating cost of gasoline, the club collectively can offer its members a much more economical way to train. Your birds will also learn to break from the other lofts in the club in a venue other than actual race time. Most club training trucks release in the morning which will better prepare the birds for race releases.

Mid-Season Training

Tweaking the Cog's in the Wheel

Training mid-season is a huge question and there is no one right answer. It depends a lot on how you manage your team during the races. If they are all beat down from tough races, then you are in rebuilding mode. If you are managing your team well, then you should always have some birds that are fresh, some that are in tweaking mode and some that are in recovery or what I call rebuilding.

Loft Flying

Loft flying should be made available to all birds. This time spent watching your birds loft fly is a very good way for you to evaluate how the birds are feeling. Birds that just go off a very tough race will not feel like flying and you know you are in the rebuilding mode. Birds that came off a fast short race will probably be zipping around like they haven't been gone and they are ready to go back the following week. Birds that are in the tweaking mode are loft flying, have had adequate time to rest and are ready for road training. My suggestion is to offer them as much loft flying as possible, I live in the country so this is not an issue for me. If you live in the city where you have neighbors and you can't let your birds get enough freedom they will start roosting on neighborhood houses.

Road Training "Tweaking"

This your time to get them down the road and get their heads back in the game. For your fresh birds this is just keeping them sharp for the next race and will probably be a few 20-30 mile tosses. For birds in the tweaking mode, it's probably a good time to work on breaking and racing. I suggest small group releases or single tosses. This is the time to train for what's inside their head and to keep them fit. If you notice that the line of flight or the first lofts clocking are trending, you may have to alter your training path to be on the line of flight. Often the line of flight is not the straight line you drew on your map. Take a serious long look at the race results. Don't look just at the winners and diploma birds. Look and see where the first few major groups of birds started clocking. You will then get a good idea of

where the line of flight into your area is located and you can adjust your training. If you are getting your miles in, getting your birds to have successful confident tosses, you are doing well. The only wrong answer is to not worry about tweaking and just loft fly. It's always time to tweak something.

Rebuilding or Recovery

These birds should have loft flying available to them. This is the time for rebuilding them from a tough race. This is mostly done with feeding them the right nutrition. Give them 3-7 days of rest and then put them in the tweaking phase with road training. Give them confident tosses and when their head is back in the game, get them back on the race sheet. There are two types of rebuilding birds. First, birds that came off a tough race, but clocked and did respectable. They are only rebuilding to get their body ready for another race; their frame of mind is intact. Second is the bird that was late or even a few days late. This bird had a huge shock to his system from sitting out a few days, taking the wrong turn, maybe even over flying by 100 miles. Who knows? If they are out for more than a day, their adventures and perils could have taken them anywhere. These are the birds that "Tweaking" is designed. To get their frame of mind and confidence back up to par and to get them into the game. There will be another chapter devoted to Rebuilding and Recovery.

Compass Training

What is Compass Training?

Compass training is based around the theory that race pigeons while en-route home from a race will remain in a large group until it's time to "break" from the group and head to their own individual loft. Depending on weather conditions or wind direction and speed, the group could be any direction from their loft in this group when it's time to break. This theory then also discards the fact that the birds will always break from a direct line of flight to the loft. Most literature will teach that a fancier needs to determine the direct line of flight to their loft along with other lofts and then determine where their birds would need to break. This theory doesn't necessarily contradict the straight line of flight theory, but acknowledges that there is a point at which the birds need to break, but that the breaking point could be almost any direction from the location of the loft depending on race variables. The key word in this philosophy of training is that you are training your birds to BREAK, but not just from one single line of flight.

Race Variables

The variables to consider in a race are as follows:

Weather

In case of rain and adverse weather, experienced pigeons may go down and wait it out while other birds will attempt to fly around such storm systems. Flying around a storm system may actually put them in completely different orientation from the loft instead of along the line of flight.

Wind; direction and speed

Winds play a huge factor in races. What one might consider a strong tail wind is not such an advantage once a bird overshoots his loft location or if the bird is coming in perpendicular to the loft location regarding the line of flight. From the breaking point a bird might be breaking through a tough head wind or side wind. Wind direction and speed affects how the group of pigeons returning from a race will be oriented while approaching their final destination. Also important is how birds fly in head winds versus tail winds. In tail winds, birds tend to fly very high and have a greater ability to stay together in one group. If birds are facing a tail wind, they will fly low to the ground, where is the ever present danger of wires, towers, vehicles etc. and the birds will separate more. The birds will separate because they do not like to fly up and down over large masses such as buildings. Birds prefer to fly around large objects and often the birds take separate routes. Also with the increased drag from high winds, more and more distance tends to separate the birds.

Pull

When you have any group of birds going the same general direction there is a certain amount of "pull", depending on where the greatest number of those birds is headed. If you watch your birds fly around the loft or you have a pair of strong binoculars and you watch them leave from a training toss you will notice there is often not one single leader in a group. The birds will fight for the head position. Sometimes, if a "dummy" gets in front of the flock, they will even turn and head the wrong direction. This is what also happens on race day. If a flock is headed north from the race point but to three different cities and three different clubs, probability is that more often birds from the club shipping the larger number of birds will have the "pull". Their birds will be in front pulling the flock more towards their destination. At times, birds from the other clubs may also be in front, but if the numbers are in the other club's favor, so is the probability of pull.

Topography

Our birds like to follow the terrain. They will fly around a mountain rather than fly over it. They will follow valleys and fly around ridges. There had been some articles posted that birds follow roads and landmarks. If you consider that most roads were built according to the natural topography than one could draw the erroneous conclusion that birds follow roads. Look harder and you may see that they are following the natural lay of the land.

Confidence/Leadership

Confident birds that know where they are located and have been trained to lead rather than follow will break out of a group early, determine the best path of travel for themselves and will not be affected quite as much by pull or the instinct to "group" with other birds. This is accomplished by a lot of small group tossing and single tossing. It can also be achieved to a

great extent with Compass Training. Birds that know where they are and have their memory location of where they are, are confident, will know to break and will head straight home.

Practice

Step One:

Train your birds along the line of flight to a desirable distance such as 50-100 miles. Train them out in increments that you are confident with and keep stepping them out in leaps until the desired distance. I prefer to jump my birds once they have made three good returns from a training location.

Step Two:

Having attained the desirable distance along the line of flight, bring the birds back and start training them out 90 degrees from the line of flight in either direction. Start short again, at 1 mile, 5 miles, 10 miles, and 20 miles until you have reached at least 25 miles away from your location. Then bring them back and start training again another 90 degrees rotated the same direction in the same increments. For example if you were training your birds from the line of flight which is South, then start training them East, then North, then West, and then return South. Doing this will keep them orientated regardless from which direction they are approaching on race day, this could give your birds the edge on when to break. Of note, having already trained to the desired distance along the line of flight, your birds should be in great shape, when you shift to train to the other compass points, if it is your day off, the birds should be in shape to make two tosses. This will greatly accelerate your ability to compass train.

Step Three:

Mid-week or for the birds that are not shipped on a weekend, keep rotating the direction they are released from. This will keep the birds fresh and keen in their orientation. Odds are, the birds will be heading the right general direction from the release point on race day. If you are small group tossing or single tossing, this can be incorporated into compass training.

Obstacles

Time:

It takes time to train and in our busy world not everyone has a lot of time. There are no real short cuts to compass training, as the birds will only excel at their natural ability to do so. Push

them too hard on their orientation before they are ready and you can just as easily lose them as taking them way to far if they are not in physical shape for the toss.

Money:

Fuel cost keeps skyrocketing. More training means a greater cost for training. If you want to compass train, but want to reduce cost, try compass training only 10 miles in each direction. Though not as great of a distance, it still may pay off on race day.

Quality Birds:

Regardless of what type of training you conduct, there are a certain amount of birds that do not have what it takes and will fall by the roadside. It's no different with Compass Training except we are pushing their orientation ability a little harder than line of flight training. There may be greater initial losses than you previously have recorded, but good birds, with good training and fitness will always excel.

Efficient Training

Overview

Training is one of the aspects of pigeons that most likely will not ever be exactly the same every year. Though we may have a constant philosophy or method of training, there are far too many factors that make it impossible to train exactly the same. Things that affect our training schedule are young bird seasons that start earlier and earlier, bad weather for several weeks or conveniently enough, just on the days we have time to train. Bad tosses, hawk attacks and sometimes family can affect our ability to train. When this happens, and our time is reduced, then it's time to shift to efficient training. What is efficient training? Efficient training is making the most out of the time that you do have to train. It's a matter of economics and it's a matter of convenience. Previous sections have dealt with the Confident Method, which I believe is the best. But, if push comes to shove and too many factors come into play to interfere with training, then we have to shift in efficiency mode. Here are some changes and suggestions to each stage of training.

Roof Training

When getting the youngsters out, try to switch to twice a day feeding if possible. That way on days that you are off from work, you can let them out for 30 minutes to an hour and be able to call them in and then get them out again in the afternoon or early evening. Having a second feeding allows you to be able to call them in twice in a day. It also doubles your trap training. There will always be birds that sit out and the usual difficulties. For the smart birds they will get into the program quickly.

Loft Training

Once your birds are able to fly around, start making effective use of your time by flag flying when they are out loft flying. Keep forcing the amount of time they are in the air by increments until they are

flying the desired amount of time. This is IMPORTANT. As previously mentioned on days you can get them out more than once, the better.

Road Training

Once the team is starting to route for 30 minutes to 1 hour, you can finally start road training. The premise here though is that you do not have the time for the slow methodical approach. The first time out, take the birds 30-40 miles out on the line of flight. Release the birds in three groups at least 20 minutes apart. If the birds have been loft flying well and you have removed birds that refuse to loft fly, they will come home fine. They may take some time, but the first time out, they will be homing. If there are dummies in the group, they will start to disappear rapidly. Follow this up with another 30-40 mile toss two days later and an additional one two more days following. Once they have mastered the 30-40 miles site, you can increase the distance to 50 miles, then 75 miles and finally 100 miles. If you can only get them out once a week, do it. If you can get them out for a short 30-40 mile toss once midweek and then the 50,75 or 100 mile toss on the weekend, even better. The idea here is you are getting them out, on the line of flight, at the necessary distance and getting them fit so that you will be ready when racing starts. Some of the other methods such as breaking them down into really small groups, or single tossing most likely will not be feasible if you are in a rush, If something changes and you can incorporate them all the better.

Conclusion

Remember there is always the ideal way of doing things, the desired way of doing things, the practical way of doing things and finally the available way of doing things. Find what is going to work with the schedule that you have. Training is necessary. Skimp on training, or decide that you aren't trained enough and skip a season and it will have detrimental effects. I have skipped seasons because I was too busy with work, family, etc. and then with the pressure of the race schedule removed, it is hard to stay focused and get those young birds down the road. If they do not race, they still have to train the same, otherwise, a few good ones will remain in the yearling season but most will be lost. Put the economics into play that you fed, medicated and spent money on them for really no reason and it just doesn't make sense. Train, Train, Train!!

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 nasal, 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.

Breaking

What is breaking? Breaking is when a bird separates from a flock and heads out on his own course. If you observe a flock of pigeons you will notice there is usually one leader once they are on a straight course. Occasionally there are a few that switch back and forth. The question is what are the other birds in the flock doing? They are following the leaders. When we talk about breaking then, we are also talking about leading.

Attempting to undo instincts

Pigeons by nature are gregarious. They want to be together for security. Young birds especially have a hard time breaking. It's in their instincts for survival. The predators usually seek out the loner as it might be sick or injured which in nature would be the reason the bird would be solo. Yet our goal is to have winners and leaders. When we train to produce leaders and birds that break we are attempting to train against instincts. This is important to remember.

How do you develop leaders and birds that break?

Breaking and leading are two different things. A leader is in front of the flock following his own course but with the security of the flock. The bird that breaks is on his own, but also following his own course. The common denominator is that both are following their own course. This is what we must train our birds to do. We must train them to follow their own course.

There are two methods in teaching the birds to follow their own course. The first is by single tossing. The bird has no choice but to follow his own instincts and choose the way home. Single tossing is time consuming depending on the size of your flock but is a very valuable training technique. For pigeon fanciers two of the most precious commodities are time and money.

The second method is to toss birds in small groups. I feel that tossing in small groups is better than single tossing. It takes less time and when birds are in small groups, they are still racing each other and battling to be leader. Start out by breaking your flock into 3 groups. For that toss there should have been at least three leaders, often more, as the bird's battle for the lead position. Later, you can break them down into smaller groups of less than ten and eventually down to groups of three. In small group tossing you are developing leaders, which is developing the same instinct that will produce birds that will break and follow their own course.

When tossing small groups or individual pigeons it is important to make sure they do not get together into one large group. Often a flock may appear to go out of site and eventually fly back over the release point 10-15 minutes later. One way to try to prevent this is to let the birds go at not only different time intervals but also at different distances. Choose the distance that you want to train from. Find a very close road that runs perpendicular to the distance. Let one group go. After they are out of sight,

drive 1-5 miles and let another group go. Repeat until all the groups have been released. This may prevent them from grouping up into one larger group.

Some experiences from small group tossing.

Often when we have a training toss we gauge the success or failure of the toss on how the birds arrive home. We are not able to see what the birds do between the release point and the arrival home. The only factor we can see and measure is when they arrive home and in what condition they arrive. When we release the birds as one large group, we have only one measure of how the birds trained.

When I started tossing in smaller groups, I made some interesting observations. I would often toss my birds in 3 groups of approximately 12-20 pigeons each. I would record what time I released each group, how long it took for them to leave out of sight and what heading they were last seen at. When the birds arrived home, they had Tauris bands on and were also clocked by the computer if they arrived home before me.

Sometimes, two groups would come home together yet another group would come home in singles and doubles. Other times the last group released would be the first group home and the first group released would be the last to arrive. One group would make excellent time and another would take twice as long to get home.

How do you end up with such different results when all groups were released from the same point? As stated before, we are only observers of the release and the arrival but not the dynamics of what happen between those points. My conclusions then are only theories as they cannot be proven until one can observe the dynamics of the actual training flight. Here are my ideas on why we have such strange results.

You can often observe at the release point that the birds will start to head out one direction with one leader and then a different bird gets in the front and they take a new heading. Or sometimes, one bird starts to break and the flock turns to "pick them up" staying true to their gregarious nature. There is a battle for the lead position and the direction of travel for the entire group then depends on who is holding that lead position. I think this explains the return of singles and doubles. I believe that if the lead bird takes the flock on the wrong heading, slowly, the other birds realize this, break off and head home on their own. This would explain why there would be such a broken return.

In the case of one group doing poorly and the other groups having a good toss could be explained by the same event. The leader of the poorly performing group took them on longer flight but not enough for the entire group to break or eventually a different bird took lead and brought the team home on the right course.

In any flock there are excellent birds and poor birds. There will always be a battle for the lead position. Until the poor leaders are lost from training, there is always the chance of a poor return. So this is the secondary goal of our training. To train until we have enough confident leaders and any birds that are true followers or dummies are gone from the team.