

# My Way – Part Two

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## So what now?

The breeders have been selected and mated.  
The eggs have hatched and the babies reared.  
The youngsters have just been weaned.

## Culling

Just how do we know what youngsters to keep and what to cull?

As far as I am concerned, only one or two percent of the youngsters can be identified as being below standard re physical attributes such as their constitution, wing, muscles etc. If, in the first place, one's selection of stock birds was sound, you should not be able to remove more. Any other youngsters that may be culled from time to time after weaning, are removed because of ill health, deforming accidents, lagging in development and so on. NOT because they do not conform absolutely to one's ideal picture of a good racer. Years ago there was a strong drive, particularly amongst the older fanciers, to cull all but the ideally-constructed youngsters but I do not adhere to this method. There are two reasons for this.

1. Firstly I do not always trust my own judgement concerning what the young bird will grow into. Nature may have other ideas and I have seen some strange-looking babies turn into very effective racing pigeons. For example; An obvious characteristic is size. It appears to me that in certain families the youngsters grow rapidly until weaning age, actually looking too big and clumsy when weaned but post weaning they cease growing and eventually become normal-sized racers. In other families the babies may be small at weaning but post-weaning keep on growing, till eventually, as adults, they also are normal-sized. Nearly always will 'like beget like' and even though the weanlings might be small or scrawny at the time, they will tend to resemble the predecessors as adults. The 'secret' lies in the one important principle; It all reverts back to the earlier selection of **quality of the breeding stock**. The better that was, the better will be the offspring!

2. It strikes me that any pigeons homing acuity, the will to home and the determination to get there, can only be found out during actual races i.e. "let the basket tell"! Racers that do not appear to be physically well endowed may yet become very efficient racers through their strong mental abilities. These birds are often the very ones that carry pool money and when any race suits their particular build, they may become big winners. What this paragraph actually says, is that one must not too adamant re your own judgement and the racing abilities of pigeons. A little caution and reserve is often not out of place. The mental attributes of racing pigeons are invisible but they are extremely important – particularly when looking at short distance birds. As a rule the physical attributes of constitution, muscle, wing-shape etc. play a more important role as the distance increases although perseverance and the strength of do feature more prominently with increasing hours on the wing.

## How strictly must one adhere to the model?

Although each of us has a mental picture of his ideal pigeon, we should have a variety of birds in our lofts. Ideally one would like the perfect pigeon to be capable of winning from all distances and in all weathers. Reality tells it differently and certain types of weather definitely favour certain types of bird

– both in temperament and in physique. So do specific distances. As we cannot order the weather to suit us we must adapt our team to the local climate. Having different types in both physical and mental attributes, will help to meet this demand. The make-up of our team then? Aim for the ideal and the ideal types should make up the majority, but do not discard the pigeons that vary slightly. You may need them on that special day! And of course there is usually enough variation within any population to meet most circumstances. All we need is a small basic breeding team that are not all from one family.

In my own breeding loft are birds that descended from the pigeon families of Stassart, Janssen (Arendonk), Cattrysse and Putterie. With these pigeons (I fly only crosses) I can and do win from 150 to 1100 kilometres.

**Now:**

The breeding season is over.

All young birds have been vaccinated twice against paramyxovirus.

All young birds have been inoculated against pox.

What other routine treatment must these babies now have in preparation for the coming racing season?

**Worms.** Deworm for roundworms, hairworms and tapeworms and if necessary, for the stomach worms. Details are to be found in 'Born to Win'. Remember that deworming is only necessary if you have any idea that worms are present. My own flock was worm free for years but neglecting to deworm a new introduction has caused worms to be present in my loft once more. At present I routinely use Mediworm from Medpet which clears all worms except the stomach worms.

**Lice and mites.** Many formulations are available. Dipping with a Permethrin-containing substance is still a very good method of external parasite control. As far as is known, the common lice and mites do not play a role in disease transmission and do not harm the birds. Neither do they appear to be the cause of the feet- stamping and feather-pecking antics we see occasionally. The biggest reason why we do not like seeing parasites on our birds is because it creates a neglected look – and besides a natural abhorrence to bugs on our pigeons, no-one wishes to be known as a fancier who neglects his charges.

**Pigeon Flies.** These seem to occur in fairly hot countries only. In contrast to lice and mites, pigeon flies are an irritating scourge and besides disturbing the necessary rest of pigeons with their painful bites they have been identified as the biological transmitters of pseudo-malaria. Pigeon flies love pigeon nests, breeding under the protected areas very happily and attacking the nestlings from an early age. Insecticidal preparations containing permethrin – be sure to read about and use the correct dilution rate! - is safe and effective. (Please note that the other related formulations such as cypermethrin, flumethrin and deltamethrin, are not the same and cause intense irritation to the pigeons for a few days.) However – the pigeons need not be dipped or sprayed! A solution of the product is made and with a cloth or hand-broom, the clean (very important!) loft surfaces are hand-rubbed with it. Spraying is not effective as the surface tension created by the powder on the walls and ceiling prevents the dip from actually wetting the surfaces. As said, the insecticide need not be applied to the pigeons as a thorough treatment of the walls, ceiling, floor and all surfaces, will keep the loft free of flies for at least 6 months. Loft sweepings and pigeon droppings contain the eggs of the fly. These hatch in about one month but as the hatched flies will return to the loft it is essential that all loft sweepings should be removed as far away from the loft as possible. When wetting the loft, be sure that closed and empty nest boxes are also treated as the flies love to lay their eggs here where

they can lie undisturbed for a month.

In South Africa it is widely believed that young birds that have been reared in the racing loft or that babies that are introduced into a racing team after weaning, besides being a bit of a nuisance, will upset the rhythm and form of the team. Whether this is based on fact is uncertain but I'd rather not risk finding out. It must be admitted though that occasionally my better racers have been on eggs and not having had foster parents ready at the time of hatching and not wishing to dispose of the babies, they have been reared in the racing loft without apparent harm to the form of the team.

### **Preparing for the racing season**

Loft training begins about 6 weeks before the start of the season. At this time a short series of routine treatments are instituted.

**Canker.** (Trichomoniasis) This is arguably the most important disease that pigeons have to deal with. Drugs used are Dimetradizole (Emtryl, Gabbrocol, Dovatric, Trykill), Metronidazole (Flagyl, Meditrich), Carnidazole (Spartrix), Ronidazole (Tricho plus, Sprint-geel, Ridsol) and others. All have been found effective. In the different countries various formulations are available. Examine the label of a certain product and scrutinise it for the active ingredient. It is a wise move to rotate the medication being used and also ensure that the product is given at the recommended dosage and for the correct length of time. Resistance to a drug can build up in all organisms and can happen with all remedies, making life extremely difficult.

I have had serious problems with amino-nitrothiazole found in Enheptin, Aminotrol, Harkanka, Tricoxine, Tricoxibits and others in that it acts selectively and affects only certain strains of the canker germ, allowing the remainder to increase to dangerous levels which then cause disease.

**Coccidiosis.** Coccidiosis is mainly a disease that affects young animals and birds. When we begin to race our pigeons they are already young adults and perhaps too much emphasis has been placed upon coccidiosis by pigeon fanciers. What follows here is applicable to adult racing pigeons. Of late a different approach to coccidiosis in pigeons seems to be in vogue. One school of thought is that the increase or decrease of the number of oocysts seen in the dropping determines whether or not the birds need to be treated. For e.g.; Should there be say a count of 20 000, which decreases to 15 000 and 10 000 in successive days, treatment is hardly necessary. However, should the count be 20 000 and increase to 25 000 or 30 000 on the following day, one certainly has to attend to the condition.

My thought currently is that the presence of multiple coccidia oocysts in adult pigeon droppings is of a secondary nature and that it usually is a response to stress experienced by the pigeon. It therefore make little sense to treat the coccidiosis and do nothing to remove the source of stress. Reducing or removing such stresses is very often enough measure to eliminate the problem and at all times we must meticulously guard against subjecting our pigeons to unnecessary stresses. As I am of the opinion that the less use is made of drugs such as antibiotics and sulpha's the better, this fits very nicely with my principles. I have not treated my pigeons for coccidiosis (neither before nor during the racing season) in recent years and it does not seem to have affected my results.

**Pseudo-malaria.** As this disease is caused by a Haemoproteus germ and as true malaria – caused by a Plasmodium – also occurs in pigeons, I have drawn this distinction and named it pseudo-malaria. It is the disease known by most fanciers and commonly referred to as pigeon malaria - transmitted by the pigeon fly.

The disease is classified as an erosion disease because the effects are not readily apparent. No symptoms are seen and the birds appear normal in all respects except that race results are not what

they should be. The causative parasites can be seen on a microscopic examination of the stained blood slides. Treatment has a dramatic effect on performance results.

Should one have had pigeon flies in your lofts at any time in the previous year, treatment with primaquin is advised. It appears though that the drug is not able to kill the parasite and that regular treatments are necessary to keep it under control. This illustrates once again the importance of eliminating pigeon flies from the loft.

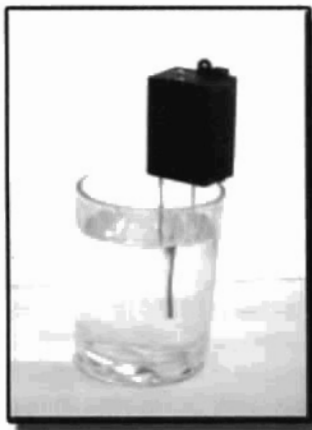
**Respiratory Problems.** Up to this point we have not used antibiotics. We are NOT about to start! Antibiotics are valuable when we need them. At other times they do more harm than good.

Should respiratory problems occur in the loft one's first move must be to check out the ventilation and possible overcrowding. This is particularly true if the problems keep recurring following treatment. Unless we see obvious signs of respiratory disease, no routine treatment is given. Ornithosis and

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Mycoplasmosis will both respond to antibiotic therapy and when necessary formulations containing doxycycline can be used to good effect.

At this time I vaccinate any pigeons that escaped vaccination for paramyxovirus initially. When in doubt as to whether the birds are immune, a third shot is given.

**Moulting.** As said loft training begins at about six weeks prior to the start of the season. My conviction is that this is not really enough time to get the birds really fit. In addition the inclement weather that often occurs at this time of the year in the Southwest Cape can utterly ruin one's proposed training programme. At this time many birds are still not through the moult and consequently loft training must begin with pigeons some of which still have flights ten, nine or even more, to moult. With the pigeon competition in South Africa very much geared to competing in every race and the race programme beginning at a set time every year one is forced to train these unprepared birds. The alternative is to exclude them from the race team until ready but this requires extra lofts or loft divisions and makes the management of the team even more difficult.

As soon as the birds are circling freely for thirty minutes, road training begins. Any pigeons that have not grown their tenth primary flight longer than about 70% of its eventual length, are caught out and kept back. Although there is no hard evidence to suggest that permanent damage is done, it seems that pigeons are more easily lost when the moult is incomplete. In addition, pigeons that are forced to fly with a newly erupted tenth flight are definitely uncomfortable and do not fly freely and at this stage of their lives I do not wish to inflict unnecessary strain on the birds.

**Panting.** At the start of training, particularly on hot days, many pigeons may be seen with beaks open and panting after only a short exercise period. This is usually due to their efforts at cooling down and not a sign of respiratory disease.

**Road training.** In the beginning I will always wait for bright sunny days with no more than 50% cloud cover and do my best to avoid clashes with other training groups. The first toss is a short distance of about 8 to 10 kilometres. If the weather permits and the birds clear the area well and home within a short time, the toss is repeated twice daily from the same spot. Depending on their return times the birds are kept at this spot until they home well from there. They are then moved on to 15 kilometres – which forces them to fly across a neighbouring town. From there they go to 20, 30, 45 and 90 kilometres but proceed to the next training site only after having 'mastered' the previous. If my training has been curtailed at all by the weather they will be on the road twice per day, except for the longer toss. These training flights are all on flat country skirting the mountain ranges.

Once the birds have learned to home consistently well in good weather, I take every opportunity to toss them under cloudy skies. The degree of cloud cover will determine the distance of the first toss under cloud and their ability to home from there determines the degree of bad weather exposure I will give the pigeons. As pigeons have to race in wind and rain I believe that some exposure to these conditions is necessary in their training. Circling around the loft is similarly done in inclement weather, rain being no obstacle to their daily exercise. I make an exception in the case of very strong winds and neither loft train nor road train at this time, as it is felt that the danger of collision with trees and wires under these circumstances outweigh the possible benefits to be gained.

The above is old news to most fanciers and could possibly have been left out but to make sense of the whole it had to be described in fair detail. Consequently more space than envisaged has been used. Next month we will consider the methods used during the racing season and the philosophies behind them.