

Racing Pigeon FITNESS

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No matter how keen the pigeon is to return home, he will not be able to do so in winning time unless, like any other athlete, he has become fit. Racing fitness is the result of the interplay of a number of factors, including exercise, feeding and the overall health of the birds.

The important thing for success with pigeon racing is for fanciers to understand what they are doing. Many fanciers have a good season and then, for years afterwards, mimic exactly the feeding and tossing routine etc. for that successful year, but every year is different. Weather can be colder, the racing can be considerably harder etc. etc.

The skill comes in modifying a basic system so that the birds can, again, be got into winning form.

Unfortunately, there are no strict rules and it comes down to the experience, the skill and the observation of the individual fancier, and to some extent his ability to be able to think like a pigeon. However, these are some basic guide-lines.

1. Feeding

Seeds can basically be divided into carbohydrate and protein based grains. Peas and beans are protein-based grains, while corn, sorghum, wheat and safflower are examples of carbohydrate-based grains. If the morning is cold and raining, or if something has frightened the pigeons and they have spent several hours on the wing, then, when called in, their blood sugar levels will be low. It is important that their blood sugar levels be normalised as quickly as possible, otherwise they will start

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This Journal is extremely fortunate to have had Dr. Colin Walker offer to contribute about eight articles a year on Pigeon Health and his own Methods of Breeding, Rearing, Training and Racing.

mobilising stored energy reserves and loose pectoral muscle bulk, something which may have taken some time to develop. To achieve this, a higher percentage of carbohydrate-based grains in the seed mix are fed and there maybe an advantage in feeding those of smaller diameter such as millet because they have a larger surface area compared to their volume for the digestive enzymes to act.

Conversely, on warm days pigeons often do not want to fly and are not using up energy reserves to keep themselves warm. When called in, their blood sugar levels may be relatively normal. If fed a high carbohydrate mix, under these circumstances, the excess sugars and energy will be stored mostly as fat and the pigeon, over a period of time, will become overweight. One needs to assess each training session and feed accordingly. Several of the birds can be handled every few days to assess their condition and thus monitor their program but things are by no means easy.

2. Tossing

Similarly, the amount of basket training given to the birds must be assessed. In tossing his birds, the fancier should be making a conscious decision that his birds will benefit from this. After all he is deliberately giving the birds work in excess of the amount that they are taking around the loft. If the birds are not racing competitively, it may be that they are underweight and tired. Tossing will only worsen their performance. If however, the

birds are overweight and reluctant to fly, tossing may be the answer. It seems that when everything is coming together well and the birds are in form, e.g. feeding, health, loft environment and exercise, the birds, through their own vigour, will want to fly and winning form will come. Tossing under these circumstances is just not necessary. If you can open the loft door and a pigeon will fly voluntarily around the loft for an hour, why put it to a basket' it is unnecessarily being exposed to injury and predation and is running the risk of becoming basket weary and losing its desire to race.

However, post pubertal hens being raced on the natural system to their eggs may be reluctant to leave them to exercise. Deliberate tossing of such birds has strong advantages. The fancier must therefore decide on what level of tossing to give his birds, this will depend on how many hours they are spending on the wing around the loft and in recent races. Their age, the weather, the method they are being raced under and many other factors that will vary from year to year. The skill of the successful fancier is in deciding through handling and observation of the birds, what level of training is appropriate for that season.

3. How to tell if a bird is fit

Once racing has commenced, the fancier must select which birds will go to that weekend's race. The stage of an individual bird's repro-

ductive cycle and moult will to some extent effect this decision but the main factor would be the bird's level of fitness. Birds tend to steadily come into form and after a race will require a period of recovery.

The fancier must be able to tell which birds are at their peak, that particular week, and are therefore capable of performing at their best. It must be remembered that races are not won by teams of pigeons but by individuals and that all pigeons are different. To be consistently successful the fancier, therefore, needs to know each of his birds as individuals.

When selecting a fit bird, there are no strict rules but there are generalisations. However, factors that generally indicate that a bird is fit are:

3.1 Appearance -

The feathers should be covered in bloom and held close to the body and tight, they should appear shiny and feel silky, the tail should be the width of a single feather. Sometimes the markings and colours will appear just that bit more distinct. The white feathers of a pied may contrast more.

The eye cere and wattle should appear very white and seem to be covered with powder. The bird's eye, itself, should be bright and the blink reflex barely noticeable. Often the pupil will be small.

3.2 Behaviour -

The fit pigeon should appear bright and active and be keen to

exercise. Some birds will fly alone when at liberty, others can exhibit a variety of behavioural changes when feel well, e.g. a cock may parade along the top of a door or take over a second nest-box or a hen may be reluctant to come into a loft when called. The fancier must observe his birds and know them as individuals and correlate such behavioural changes with their corresponding performance.

3.3 Handling -

With the bird in the hand, the fancier can make an assessment of its pectoral muscle bulk and tone. Ideally the muscle should feel rounded and supple without feeling overly soft or hard. Softness usually indicates that the bird has had insufficient work while hardness may indicate myositic (muscle inflammation) due to the muscles exercising beyond their fitness capability.

Myositic muscles are usually a deeper purple colour than normal and the keel will often have a pinkish hue. They are painful and the bird may flinch when handled. The keel should be white and birds that are fit will often have a small pink spot, called a "condition spot" along in length. The muscles should be pink and free of any dry skin flakes; this may indicate a recent increase in size which may indicate developing fitness.

It is not difficult for an experienced fancier to have in his mind's eye an image of what an individual bird usually handles like and using

this as a comparison can therefore tell if the bird has changed in condition.

It is the lot of the fancier to compare the way the bird usually handles, the way it last handled, whether it is thinner, more rounded, or heavier etc. and by correlating this with other signs the bird is showing, in particular behaviour and activity, he can attempt to ascertain whether it is losing or coming into form.

It must be remembered that all birds are different and will not necessarily handle the same way when fit, however, usually when a pigeon is fit we are seeing an increase in both muscle size and tone while at the same time the bird will appear to be the same weight or, in fact, lighter due to loss of body fat. Such birds are described as being "buoyant".

In the fit bird, when the beak is opened the mucus membranes should be a rosy pink colour, the longitudinal slot in the roof of the bird's mouth should be free of mucus and moderately open. The fringes on the end of the bird's soft palate should be intact and the area of tonsillar tissue above this and also at the entrance of the bird's windpipe should not be inflamed. The throat should be free of mucus and "quiet", i.e. not move with the bird's respiration. The tip of the tongue may be either pink or blue although the majority of birds seem to race better with a pink tip. The heart beat is usually difficult to detect and is slow.



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