

STRESS AND THE RACING PIGEON

By Dr. Rob Marshall

“Stress” is the cause of all illnesses in racing pigeons.

It is often stated by pigeon veterinarians that “stress” is the underlying cause of disease, but exactly what does this mean to you, the health conscious pigeon fancier.

“Stress” is anything which affects the health and fitness of the thoroughbred pigeon.

There are 4 types of “Stress” that every fancier must understand if they are to effectively control the health and fitness of the thoroughbred flock.

1. Loft Stress
2. Feed Stress
3. Flying or Show Stress
4. Disease Stress

LOFT STRESS

The fancier must understand that the loft is the place where the pigeons rest and has nothing to do with the appearance of the loft other than providing this need.

Loft stress is anything which prevents the thoroughbred pigeon from proper rest.

The cause of loft stresses are: overcrowding, high humidity and insecurity.

1. Overcrowding is the single most important cause of loft stress. Twenty five racing birds and 6 pairs of breeding birds in a loft section with a height, width and depth of 6 feet is the recommended number of birds to maintain health.
2. High humidity (Greater than 65%) during the evening rest period is the next major cause of loft stress. The high humidity rather than low temperature is the cause of loft stress. A rapid change in the temperature is a factor in loft stress but this relates to draught more so than to the low temperature. The conditions of the loft at night must be such to favour restful sleep. Therefore in high humidity areas or during times of high humidity it is necessary to block off the open front of the loft to prevent humidity entering the loft.

A correctly ventilated and insulated loft is necessary to prevent high humidity and maintaining a less variable temperature within the loft.

All roofs must be insulated, especially metal roofs. Condensation beneath the ceiling in the morning must be avoided and is an instant sign of **loft stress**.

The correct level of humidity can be determined by dryness on the surface of a piece of rock salt. The humidity is too high if the surface of the rock salt becomes wet and procedures (eg. line roof, curtain or louvre front closed, sliding roof panels, flap down vents etc) to decrease the humidity within the loft must be introduced in order to lower the level of humidity within the loft. The installation of hygrometer is the the best way to ensure correct humidity levels.

The successful race loft is designed to maintain low levels of humidity which ensures a good night's rest for the pigeon in full training.

3. The security of the loft means there is no cat, snake, goshawk, noise rodent worry to the birds. The loft manager also must be kind and gentle to the pigeons within the loft.

Signs of loft stress are: watery droppings in the morning which turn normal in the afternoon and birds on the ground before sun up.

FEED STRESS

Feed stress relates to poor quality and incorrect quantity of anything fed to the thoroughbred pigeon.

The thoroughbred pigeon requires the best quality feed to be fed in the correct amounts.

Fresh feed means that 80% of the grain sprouts after 48 hours of growth under good sprouting conditions. Every fancier is urged to "SPROUT TEST" the feed before feeding to the race or breeding birds.

Clean feed means the feed is free of harmful bacteria, fungus and insects. Dust on the feed favours bacterial contamination whereas high moisture content of the feed produces fungal contaminants.

Weevils in the feed indicate old or improperly stored grain and must not be fed to healthy birds.

Culture testing of the grain is a must for all serious flyers.

SELF CULTURES can be done by sprouting the seed for 3-4 days then checking for bad odour (= bacterial problem) or mould formation (fungal problem). Quality feed also means the correct balance of protein, starch, fat vitamins and minerals. The Superadditives provide all the necessary vitamins and minerals to the performing birds.

REMEMBER that wet grit is a source of bacterial infection. Food quality means the food is fresh and clean.

The racing pigeon must not be fed too much or fed too little. A bird which is too heavy will fail to perform in the race, show and breeding arenas. A bird which is underfed immediately exposes itself to illness.

Do Not Overfeed Or Underfeed.

An easy way of ensuring that the birds are not overfed is to feed barley at the end of the meal. If the barley is eaten with relish, then the birds require more of the standard mix. If they fail to be interested with the barley then they have had enough. The alternative is hopper feeding which is removed at night so as not to attract rodents.

Underfeeding related to training level is a common cause of illness.

FLYING STRESS

Flying stress refers to the amount of work (training or racing) done by the pigeon in relation to its fitness level and feeding level.

The pigeon which is fed light cannot be expected to loft fly for a long time. A pigeon which is fed heavy must fly to burn off the excess calories. Remember that the pigeon eats to satisfy its energy needs alone.

The feed provides the calories which fuel the muscles. This energy or fuel reserves maybe depleted in a hard race and then the bird will rely upon its muscle mass for fuel. Such a bird must be given time to recuperate from the race or risk "breaking down" with disease.

Unfit birds will damage muscles and therefore must be given time to heal. Hard muscles or muscles which "swell" after a race or fly must be rested. Hot bathes will also help these damaged muscles.

Flying stress causes damaged or tired muscles.

Flying stress also relates to the correct feathering. An incomplete wing during the moult adds to "flying stress". Birds must work harder to keep up with the flock and are in danger if exposed to hawk attack.

Flying stress relates to an incomplete wing or tail feathers.

Flying stress also relates to the toss and stress of the race, the stress of exposure to disease in the baskets and the stress of the constant threat of predator attack when flying.

Stress relief after racing is a necessary part of maintaining the flocks health.

The correct rest, diet and preventative medicines after the race help relieve "flying stress" to the thoroughbred pigeon.

A crop which does not empty quickly is a good indicator of a bird with "flying stress".

LOFT DESIGN AND DISEASE

During active racing it is imperative that the birds get a "good night's sleep" if they are to remain healthy under the strain and rigor of training and racing. Consider that you spend a night out under the stars when there is a wind or heavy dew and you can understand why some pigeons do not rest fully in certain lofts.

My recommendations during the race season (April to August) when the weather is wet and humid is to lock the loft up at night so that the birds can enjoy a good warm "bed".

The cause of illness in many lofts relates to improper loft design which promotes restlessness and the loss of sleep at night. This makes the birds tired and therefore less keen to train vigorously. If the birds are tossed as well without proper rest then illness will occur. The racing pigeon must rest comfortably at night if they are to remain healthy during active racing.

It is not really the temperature that bothers the pigeon because it has such a good insulation via its feathers, but the high levels of humidity which favours restlessness and subsequent illness. For this reason it is necessary to monitor the humidity in the loft when serious training starts and the best way to do this is to check the wetness on the surface of a block of rock salt in the loft.

When the rock is dry on the surface the humidity is O.K. and when it is wet the loft needs to be closed up to decrease the humidity within it. This involves a flap (or louvres) which covers the front of the loft on evenings which are humid. As well vents at the back of the loft are best fitted with flaps to enable easy closure. In lofts with wire floors and cavities it is necessary to block off all air movement at night when it is humid.

Every effort should be made to minimise the increasing humidity of the night time from entering the loft, in order to guarantee a good night's sleep for the training pigeon.

The best floor in my opinion is wood (form ply, marine ply etc.) which remains warm and dry at even the most humid times. Concrete absorbs moisture from the air and therefore generates humidity as does sand on the floor. For this reason I would recommend a wooden floor during racing. I would even cover a wire floor with wood during the racing season because of the problems with fungus in a wire floor system.

Deep litter floors which are perfectly dry are O.K. but any wetness is a big mistake.

The best loft is one which allows the training bird to sleep at night.

The first signs of a poor loft is a change to wet mushy droppings in the morning whereas in the evenings they firm up. Other indications of restlessness at night due to excessively high levels of humidity or air movement are squashed perch droppings from where the bird has been restless during the night.

Advanced signs of a poor loft are respiratory problems which fail to respond to medication treatment.

Signs of high humidity outside the loft are dew on the lawn or car windscreen. Lofts in areas which experience dew must be insulated by lining the ceilings and walls.

A SPECIAL NOTE ON WIRE FLOORED LOFTS

The wired floor is advantageous in preventing the birds having contact with the droppings, as well as making cleaning less frequent. However, cleaning of the droppings from beneath the wire is still necessary at least twice a week during active racing for the following reasons;

- 1.** Fungal (mould) growth on wet droppings occurs during the wet/humid months of the early race season (i.e the months when dew is on the car windscreen and lawn!). The spores from the mould are inhaled by the birds which then predisposes the flock to air sac disease (i.e poor performance and heavy losses).
- 2.** Lime thrown onto the droppings may irritate the sinus of the pigeon thereby rendering the flock susceptible to "respiratory". Look for sneezing in the flock after applying the lime!

3. A wire floor should not be an excuse for poor cleanliness.
4. The cavity beneath the wire must not have any air movement through it at night. This will predispose the loft to high levels of humidity and therefore restlessness in the race birds at night. This equals "tired" birds which are predisposed to illness and "break" down.

CONCRETE FLOORS

When it is very humid the concrete floor mat become damp because it absorbs the moisture from the air. The use of lime is advisable but must be swept off before the birds are allowed back in. The powdered lime will irritate the nostrils and cause sneezing. As well ingestion of the lime will cause a bowel irritation and watery droppings.

Concrete floors retain the heat in summer and stay cold in winter (at night) and so may predispose to restlessness.

Restlessness equals poor form and eventual "Respiratory".

WOODEN FLOORS

The best floor is a form ply or marine ply floor. It is a non porous floor which insulates heat and cold. The birds enjoy lying on this type of floor and it promotes a restful environment for the flock during the day and night.

Condensation on the ceiling is a sign of excessive levels of humidity. Lining the ceiling is mandatory in areas of high humidity if the race team is to maintain health and form.

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EMAIL ADDRESS IS:

garnham@bigpond.com

Any stories or racing pigeon news.