

## **Food for Thought.**

### **Snippets from Conversations with Successful Fliers**

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Over the years, I have had many interesting discussions with fanciers and some of the comments and thoughts of these are fascinating. I thought that some of you might also find these of interest. One thing I find is that good fliers are often very observant and have the ability to think laterally. Pigeon racing can be much more interesting, I feel, if one can be innovative rather than simply following what everybody else does. After all, this is the way methods that are now regarded as commonplace, such as widowhood, were first developed.



Have you ever thought if there is an ideal flock size that birds should train in?

Is it best for an individual bird to work in a team of 10 or 15 or a large mob of 300 - 400? In large mobs, the birds tend to get in each other's way and perhaps cannot fly as freely. It might be like going for a jog with a dog on a lead, with the dog interrupting your stride. A bird having to lift a wing or jostle to the side in a large mob is perhaps not exercising as well as it might. Yet most people notice how very small mobs of less than 10 pigeons are reluctant to work well, perhaps because they don't have the confidence to range. So what is the ideal size? Graeme Davison in Woollongong feels that about 60 is the best. This is a sufficient number for the pigeons to have confidence to fly but they can still fly tightly as one and not get in each other's way with each bird comfortably stroking the air. In mobs of 60, each bird can see the way ahead as it is not simply looking at the pigeon in front of it. Similarly, birds further back in the flock can't coast in the air stream created by the leading birds (in the way migrating geese do). 150 birds is a good size for a working team according to John Prior of Adelaide. He feels that when well, this number of birds can fly in synch. and notices that when a fit team is flying like this and meets a team that is not so well, this co-ordinated flying pattern is lost.

Is time on the wing around the loft just as beneficial as tossing? When birds are flying the roof, they essentially do a variety of circle configurations. It is possible for tired birds to always move to the inside of these circles so that they fly a considerably shorter distance than the other birds. This means that although the entire team has spent the same time on the wing, the birds flying on the inside of the circle have not flown as far and so must have flown more slowly, spending more time coasting and gliding. One of the benefits of straight line tossing is that all birds fly the same distance and this distance can be pre-determined by the owner.

How much training do birds need to fly a long distance race? An interesting opinion comes from John Prior of Adelaide, who states that birds, to fly a long-distance race need to fly twice the distance in training tosses or shorter races prior to that event. If one of these tosses or races though had a tail wind, then its distance should be halved. This would mean that for a bird to fly a 700-mile race, it would need to fly 1400 miles in earlier flights, for example, a 250, 300 and 350 mile races and ten 50-mile tosses, provided none of them were blow homes. To me, this seems a good yardstick to work around. Doug Ince in Melbourne states that it is much better for a pigeon to be slightly 'underdone' than overworked for a long-distance race. It is hard to imagine that a pigeon that has been flattened earlier by overtraining or racing will take on the task of homing well from

a long race. However, a fresh pigeon that is prepared to try can make it home because of its blood and fitness.

Some interesting thoughts on assessing winning pigeons were provided by Graeme Davison. If a small group of winning pigeons comes into an area and break for their lofts, it can end up a bit of a clocking match, but how can one determine the real leader? If the leader was going to the furthest loft, then the velocity of all pigeons will be maintained as he led them over their lofts and they in turn dropped off. If the leader was going to the shortest loft, then suddenly with their leader gone, the others may hesitate and the velocity of the further-flying birds would gradually drop.

In Sydney, George Kypreos has some interesting figures that help us decide whether pigeon racing is becoming more expensive. One can compare the cost of a new Holden car, the prize won by the Melbourne Cup winner, the basic wage and the cost of sending a single pigeon to a race in 1965 and in 1995. The cost of the new Holden has increased ten times. The basic wage has increased 13 times. The winner of the Melbourne Cup now receives a prize 11 times higher. Meanwhile, the cost of sending a pigeon to a race has increased three times. A less quantitative measure but also of value for comparison is that the average cost of goods and services has increased ten times. From this, we can only assume that the cost of actually sending pigeons to a race is now relatively much cheaper than it was 30 years ago for fanciers.

However, for federations, the cost of running these races has increased, in keeping with goods and services.

In Adelaide, John Prior has some interesting views regarding breeding. He states that 80% of winners are bred from birds where both parents are less than 4 years of age, and that the chance of breeding a winner declines as the birds age, particularly if two older birds are paired together. He states that only 5% of winners are bred from an old hen paired to an old cock. For this reason, he tries to keep the average age of his stock cocks at just over 4 years and the average age of his stock hens at just over 3 1/2 years. If the average age starts to get a little bit high, older birds are replaced deliberately with younger ones to keep the average age down and so try and increase the number of winners bred. Obviously there are always going to be exceptions but if one wants to have the odds on his side, it seems best to have the age of at least one parent and preferably both 4 years or less. Just why this should be so is hard to say as a pigeon's genetic make up cannot change with age. However, things such as yolk quality are affected by age. John also states that the first pair of eggs from a young hen is of particular value. Although the chance of breeding good race birds from older birds does seem to decline, age doesn't seem to affect the ability of older birds to produce stock pigeons. Perhaps the answer is to breed off your stock birds until 4 - 5 years of age and then breed from the best (ie the ones that have bred the winners) to produce stock birds and then, in fact, replace them with this new stock.

But how should these birds be mated to produce stock birds? Silvere Toye told me that one of the big advantages that European fanciers had over the British is that the British fanciers still believe in families. What is family anyway but simply a group of related birds. Fanciers hope that other members of the family carry the winning genes of the famous bird within the family but even though they may look and handle the same, they may not. Most winners come from cross-breeds. This is due to a genetic phenomenon called hybrid vigour, which tends to cover up recessive characteristics, which tend to decrease vigour and inhibit performance. Fewer winners are produced if birds from different lines within the same family are mated, and very few race winners are produced

if related birds are paired. It is worth noting, however, that if an in-bred bird produced in this way does race well, then it is very likely to breed birds as good as itself because it has little genetic variation. One should therefore aim to stabilise the required genes through inbreeding to produce stock birds and then cross these to produce the race team.

## **STOP PRESS!!**

An exciting result in this years Statewide 700 mile event from Coongoola, with birds flying the race for only the 2nd time ever on the day. 2 birds were clocked by WPF flyer Ken Fawcett at 8.07pm and 10.56pm in the dark. First bird next day was clocked by Graeme Baker of Geelong at 7.02am flying a distance of 735 miles with a total of 80 birds clocked by noon on the 2nd day. Ken Fawcett has now joined the Elite Club of 700 mile day racers with this fantastic performance from two truly outstanding pigeons. Full results and story of this, one of the fastest 700 mile races in the history of the Australian sport in next months Journal.



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