



FEATHERED FRIEND: Richmond pigeon racer Michael Antoniwi, 92, with one of his flock.
Picture: TAITSCHMAAL

TO many, pigeons are dirty, disease-spreading “rats of the sky”.

But to Jack Hicks they are one of nature’s greatest athletes and his companions.

For most of his 97 years, Jack has been racing and breeding pigeons from the backyard of his Kilkenny home.

A widower, with very few remaining childhood acquaintances, the passion of this hobby – the return of a bird to the loft – brings him to life.

“My father said you should always be busy with something. The pigeons keep you thinking,” he said.

Even deep into his 10th decade, this birdman needs no early-morning alarm. He is up at 6am every day to clean and feed his pigeons, which live in a loft he constructed shortly after he moved into the house he has occupied since 1947.

Physically blighted by age-driven ailments, Jack is mentally razor sharp, a blessing he attributes to the busyness of his vocation – a binding that even a double heart bypass a decade back failed to loosen.

The birds, though, are not always in a rush to co-operate when it comes to exercise. Like teenagers – and most South

Australian racing pigeons are between six months and three years – they can need a little prodding.

Ace, a race-winning five-year-old female and the pride of his current 44-strong flock, gets special attention and is one of the few birds to be named.

My father said you should always be busy with something. The pigeons keep you thinking

97-YEAR-OLD PIGEON FANCIER JACK HICKS

Another favourite, The Godfather, is christened on the spot. But the sheer number of birds in his care and the fact most don’t have a long race life means he doesn’t get too attached.

Jack opens the doors of his pigeon loft and, spasmodically, the birds flee the coop.

Freéd, they dart, silently and arrow-like, over rooftops.

“They’ll be back in an hour,” Jack says. “They need their exercise.”

And they do. Despite de-

clining public interest – South Australian Homing Pigeon Association membership is 230 adults and seven children – pigeon racing can come with some serious prizemoney.

The season’s five premium races carry first-place prizes of \$10,000 each.

Money, though, is a bonus for Jack. Always has been.

A second training run involves Jack’s birds being loaded on to a mobile pigeon truck by a member of the SAHPA, who drives them to Kulpara, 115km northwest of Adelaide, where they are released for a return flight home.

“About 60 minutes back if the wind’s good,” Jack says of the flight time.

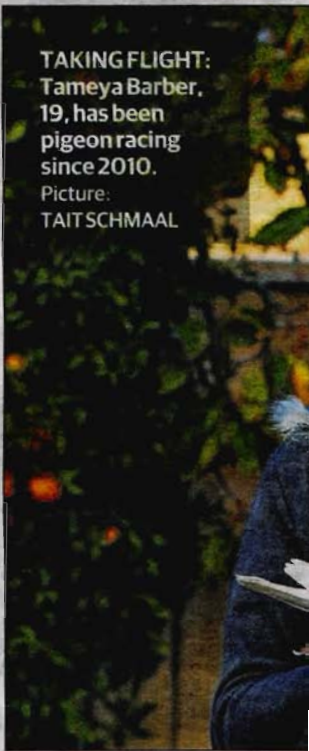
At 11.10am his pigeon carrier announces, on the SAHPA website, that the birds have been released. Half an hour later Jack will check that food and water supplies are plentiful.

“I’ll rattle a tin with peas in it,” he says. “They get to know there’s food in the loft.”

The adrenaline when they return is always the same, he says.

“You see the pigeons and they just fold and dive in,” he says.

More training a couple of days later and the birds will be primed for their weekend race.



TAKING FLIGHT: Tameya Barber, 19, has been pigeon racing since 2010.

Picture: TAITSCHMAAL

When he was aged just 20 Jack signed up to fight for his country, five years in the army’s “Second Fourth Armour” unit, which left him with post-traumatic stress Rest and a career in the family garage business in Woodville, took care of the initial years pigeons were more central stage thereafter.



FRIEND: Richmond pigeon Antoniwi, 92, with one of
Picture: TAITSCHMAAL



TAKING FLIGHT: Tameya Barber, 19, has been pigeon racing since 2010.
Picture: TAITSCHMAAL

When he was aged just 20, Jack signed up to fight for his country, five years in the army's "Second Fourth Armour" unit, which left him with post-traumatic stress. Rest and a career in the family garage business in Woodville took care of the initial years; pigeons were more centre stage thereafter.

"My father bought me a couple of pigeons when I was seven or eight. I really came into it, though, when I built a loft," he says.

However, had it not been for pigeons, he might not have been around.

"On every (World War II) patrol in the Pacific, the wireless operator had to carry three

pigeons in a box. One of the boys went over a trip wire—we let the pigeons go, one got back and a patrol relieved us.

"The army had a pigeon unit. The military would come round to people's houses with pigeons and take them for duty. None ever came back.

"They won medals for bravery. The other side would take