

TAKING TO THE SKIES

FAMOUS FANCIERS

THE long list of those who have looked after and raced pigeons includes:

- World heavyweight boxing champ Mike Tyson.
- Artist Pablo Picasso, who named his daughter Paloma - Spanish for pigeon.
- Queens Victoria and Elizabeth II.
- Hollywood actor Yul Brynner.
- Australian cricketer Bill Lawry.

THE SPORT

PIGEONS bond for life and can live more than 20 years.

RACING is said to date back 1800 years, with long-distance pigeon racing really taking off in Belgium in the mid-19th century before spreading globally.

THE race weight of a South Australian pigeon is 500g. PIGEON racing has been declining, with fewer younger people taking up the sport amid increased cost of feeds and fuels.

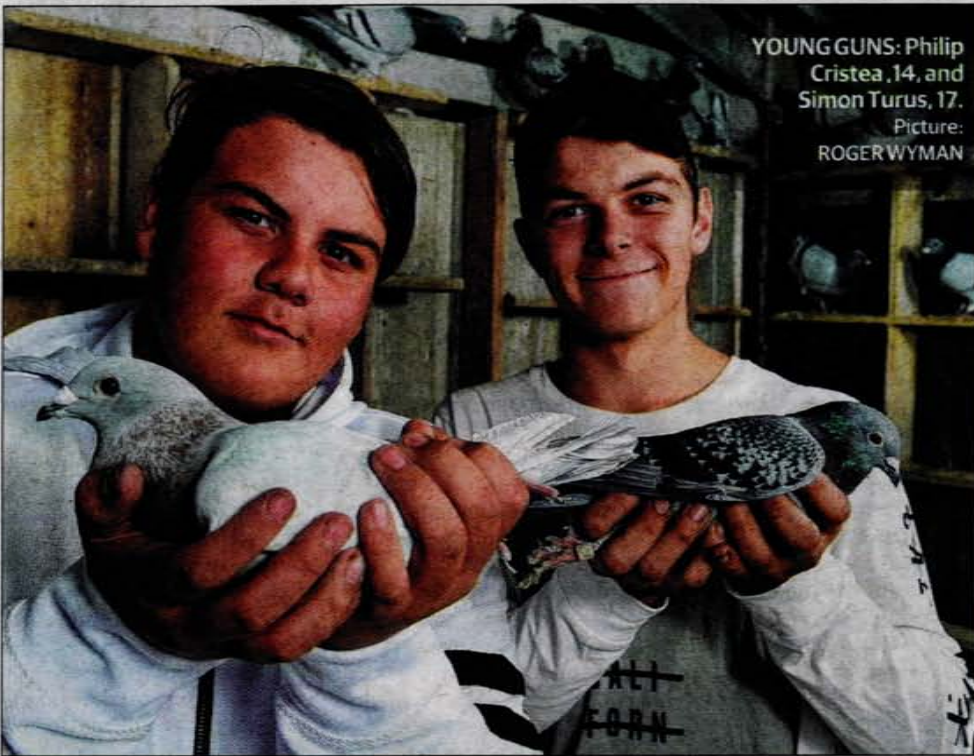
FLYING LOCALLY

ADELAIDE Pigeon Club has a prize pool of \$110,000 over five races each season. First prize is \$10,000 and the top 30 places receive prize money. Entry is \$100 per pigeon.

RACE season is from late May to late September each year.

THE annual Sires Classic race - a 500km race on August 28 in Moulamein this year - offers a cash prize and a new car to the winning breeder.





YOUNG GUNS: Philip Cristea, 14, and Simon Turus, 17.
Picture: ROGER WYMAN

a shotgun to them if they saw them.”
However, gunfire is almost tame compared to the peacetime menaces. Racing can be a hazardous pastime.
“Hawks are bad. The peregrine falcon does all the damage – they come down from on top,” Jack says. “On a level plain a pigeon will outfly them,

but they take pigeons by stealth.
“The falcon doesn’t have a natural predator and is protected now. It’s doing terrible damage to fauna.”
Feral cats can be devastating during longer-distance races such as the Alice Springs marathon, when pigeons might need to rest overnight.

Telephone wires can also take a toll.
The racing pigeon, Jack is adamant, “is the greatest athlete in the world”.
It is not a boast but a statement of intent and affection.
They’re fast, with enormous stamina. The Alice Springs to Adelaide record is a few seconds under 12 hours – the

winner travelling at 127km/h non-stop.
Michael Antoniwi, 92, has similar claims for his long-distance pigeons.
“They are beyond doubt the greatest athlete on earth, with speed, endurance and tenacity to get back to their owners,” he says.
Michael, a Hyde Park club member, won this season’s first club race, a 280km flight from Stirling North, near Port Augusta, to Adelaide, and he intends to keep going with his birds.
“He would drive me mad,” says wife Dot on what would happen if he gave them up.
“It gives him a sense of achievement and a robust circle of friends. This purpose the pigeons have brought into his life from a very young age has contributed to living a happy and constructive life.”
Ukrainian by birth, Michael spent time in Stalin’s forced labour camps in his early years before finding refuge and safety in Australia. The pigeons brought a healing perhaps, most certainly a stabilising factor all his life.
It is a sport for all ages, though. Tameya Barber, 19, of Lonsdale’s Southern Districts Club, is a recent convert and unusual in that pigeons are not a family obsession – she and

her father got into the sport together through helping with a neighbour’s birds.
“Up until last year I was the only person below about 30 at the club,” Tameya says. “The pigeons are just beautiful, remarkable creatures really.
“I get great interest, love and joy from them. It’s very exciting when they come in from a race. If they’re a bit late coming home, you can panic.
“I don’t like to name the birds as I’ll get upset if I get too attached and something happens to them. You might lose one or two in a race but someone usually finds them.”
They don’t all come back. SAHPA is coy – losses are low, it says. But these people care for their birds. It’s why they do it.
Prizemoney is a bonus and one-upmanship worthwhile – but still secondary.
Money still matters, albeit with a different slant. The annual \$220 SAHPA membership always raises a grumble; the prizemoney invariably more likely to pay for feed and fuel bills than exotic holidays.
However, it is all trumped by the joy and camaraderie of the race across all ages.
The long trip by road out for the birds and their hard miles back almost done, getting over the line has long lent a come-

dic touch, with the race winner not first past the post but the first bird to clock off.
“I don’t know how many races I’ve lost because of a clocking problem,” says Jack, a West Torrens/Woodville member. An electronic timer that scans a chip on the pigeon’s leg once it enters the loft now dispels all arguments.
For 17-year-old Simon Turus, of Munno Para Downs, the interest in pigeons happened by accident two years ago.
“Dad’s friend, Bill, has pigeons and we would visit him and always find Bill in the pigeon loft either sorting his pigeons or having a look around,” Simon says.
“I was really interested after a few visits. I didn’t want to tell my dad but I knew that at home, near the highest point of the roof, we had some pigeons so I climbed up and tried to catch them but had no hope.
“Dad caught me and realised I was interested. He took me to Bill’s house and asked if we could have some pigeons and he was more than happy to hand over a few pairs. I was over the moon.
“A few months later I joined Smithfield club and decided to race. My friends think it’s weird that I do it ... I even had a nickname. ‘Pigeon.’”