

Homing in on success

By Jacinta Rose

Callington homing pigeon racer Don King is now the proud owner of a new Holden Barina thanks to a premium investment.

On August 30, King's blue checker hen which he purchased for just \$35, won the prestigious SA Homing Pigeon Association's Sires Classic Race from Wilcannia in NSW.

The 10-month-old hen covered the 564km journey in seven hours 47 minutes and 56 seconds, with an average velocity of over 1205 metres per minute.

"She doesn't have a name just yet, but we might have to call her Bill Barina," King said.

"To win such a prestigious race is quite overwhelming.

"I don't think I'll really believe it until the Barina is parked in the driveway."

With the birds all finishing at different locations around the Hills and metropolitan area, the winner is the bird who achieves the greatest velocity over the race.

Each bird's velocities are measured in metres per second, meaning that the bird which flies the fastest, and not necessarily the bird that crosses the line first, is judged the winner.

This system meant a nervous wait for King, while the results were gathered and calculated.

"I went down to the club that night to put my results on the computer, and I knew my bird had done quite well by the speed," King reflected.

"I then just had to wait until everyone else put their results up, which was quite nerve-racking."

King's hen won comfortably, registering a velocity 85mpm higher than the second-placed pigeon.

"I had been impressed with her leading up to the race, and she seemed to be in perfect condition when she was sent up to Wilcannia," noted King.

"A velocity over 1200mpm is excellent, given the birds were battling a shoulder wind which slowed them down all day."

Conditions for the race varied greatly along the route, with rain and north-westerly winds forecast.

"There was a bit of rain and even some hail around, but we had blue sky all day here at Callington.

"Heavy rain and hail can prevent a bird from entering an area, so we were lucky we didn't have that."

The Ballarat flyer who bred the winning hen will take home a \$6000 breeder's prize.

King purchased the hen especially for the Sires race at one of two auctions held earlier in the year.

Only birds bought at these auctions were eligible to compete, with all being in their maiden season of racing.

The winning hen was one of seven bought at the auction by King, who prefers racing hens to cocks.

The proceeds from the auctions comprised the prize money offered for the Sires race.

Strathalbyn flyer Peter Blaser claimed fifth and 11th placings in the race, and picked up over \$1000 in prize money.

"To have both birds finish so high up was excellent," said Blaser.

Of the 429 birds that started the race, only 24 returned home on the Saturday.

"Most only returned Sunday morning, so I was really ecstatic to have both my birds back in the loft on Saturday," Blaser outlined.

"If they don't return you do worry quite a bit, because you were the one who put them out there so it's your responsibility."

The Sires event, widely considered the best young bird race of the season, is growing every year, according to Blaser, who is also the secretary of the Strathalbyn Homing Pigeon Club.

"The race just seems to keep getting bigger and bigger, despite the sport as a whole declining."

As in greyhound and horse racing, pigeons competing in races are drug-tested to ensure no performance-enhancing substances are used.

"It keeps everything very honest, and gives a sense of legitimacy to the sport," said Blaser.

King's hen and Blaser's two successful birds will now take pride of place in their owners' stock lofts, in an effort to create the next generation of champion pigeons.

Owners are currently in the midst of the breeding season, with Blaser expecting his hens to start laying in the coming days.



Don King, of Callington, with his 10-month-old blue checker hen which recently took honors in the prestigious SA Homing Pigeon Association's Sires Classic Race over 564km from Wilcannia in NSW.

He begins training his new birds in late April, with the racing season kicking off in June.

"The birds have to be trained like a marathon runner, and have a similar level of endurance," King said.

Before beginning training in earnest, King ensures his birds are comfortable in their loft.

"A bird isn't going to want to fly all the way home unless they feel safe and happy there."

Next, owners start to develop their birds' homing skill, taking them about five kilometres away from the loft and releasing them.

"When they've found their way back two or three times, you can move out to 20 km, and then eventually out to 100 km," King said.

Once a week, King takes his birds out to Karoonda for a longer training flight.

"I've had some good success with young birds out there," he said.

King first took up the sport to have fun against his brother, Tony.

"I flew as a junior 30 years ago and then gave it up for many years, before getting back in to it in 2001."

Tony no longer trains pigeons, but has left his most prized birds in the care of Don.

In his junior racing days, Blaser was a founding member of the Strathalbyn club.

Hard work rewarded

"It's quite an addiction, and I've loved it since I was a boy," Blaser reflected.

"I think it requires more dedication than any other sport I've ever been involved with."

"There's a lot of hard work needed, but the reward comes when the bird finishes safely."

King agreed that when a pigeon finishes a long journey, all the hard work has paid off.

"The anticipation of waiting for the birds and wondering where they are, is quite exhilarating," King said.

"There's nothing like the thrill when they come and land after eight or nine hours flying."

However, not all birds are cut out to be racing pigeons.

"Some birds are smart and alter their altitude to find the best conditions, while other birds fight headwinds all day and finish much later," Blaser commented.

He is constantly amazed by the courage and stamina shown by homing pigeons.

"They fly at over a thousand metres a minute for over nine hours, and constantly look out for predators."

"There's not many other animals that have to keep going for so long in that kind of environment."

Blaser believes problems with predators, such as the Peregrine falcon, are becoming worse.

"I've lost about 40 birds around the loft this year to the falcons."

Despite a decline in flyer numbers in Australia, pigeon racing remains big business overseas.

Races are held several times a week in countries such as Taiwan and Belgium, with huge prize money on offer.

While he believes pigeon racing will continue well into the future overseas, Blaser has grave fears for the sport locally.

"Numbers are dropping and I think eventually it will die out."

Just how pigeons can find their way home from hundreds of kilometres away is unknown.

Various theories involving the sun, UV levels and the earth's magnetic forces have been developed, but in reality, their stunning ability remains a mystery.