

A GOLDEN ERA IN PIGEON RACING IN ADELAIDE

Moments to Remember

By John Hofman

The year was 1959, Buddy Holly, Richie Vallens & The Big Bopper died in a plane crash. Elvis was singing "Are You Lonesome Tonight", Roy Orbison was on the verge of his first big hit with "Only the Lonely", and the Port Adelaide Football Club won their sixth consecutive premiership.

1959 was also the year that Hofman Bros., of Seaton Park got their first pair of pigeons. My brother Greg brought them home from my now lifelong friend, Denis Place. Denis' older brother Wayne had established a loft of racing pigeons a couple of years earlier but never got around to racing them. They had "gone to seed" by this time and had been "infiltrated" by some commoners. The pair that Greg brought home were blue chequers. They appeared to be a cross of racer and commoner and were unrun. They were named "Bossknocker" & "Mrs Bossknocker", by my father. But that was the spark that started my interest and association with pigeons and the sport. The chook house in the back yard was quickly converted into a pigeon cage. The collection quickly grew. Seaton Park, the suburb in which we lived, simply known nowadays as Seaton, was a rather cosmopolitan suburb. There were a high number of immigrants living there, Italians, Greeks, Russians, Balts, Yugoslavs, Latvians etc and many of them kept pigeons such as Tumblers or Rollers, Tipplers or just plain mongrels for eating. We obtained some Tipplers from one of these neighbours, some Tumblers from another.

We also got some Fantails and Modenas from somewhere plus a few commoners or part racers. We were particularly fond of the Tipplers as they were grizzles with short beaks and high flyers. The kit belonging to the migrant neighbour who lived just around the corner would fly all day at a great altitude in tight circles above their loft. The Tumblers from another neighbour would climb high and fall back towards earth in a series of backward rolls.

All in all we ended up with about 40 birds, all broken in and flying around. Hell, they looked a motley lot. One Sunday we were going to Dad's works picnic on the Tanunda Oval, about 40 miles north east of Adelaide, in the heart of the Barossa Valley. Dad worked at Philips Hendon Works as a tool setter. We decided to hamper all the birds, yes the whole lot as we knew little better, and took them to Tanunda with us for a toss. We let them go shortly after we arrived, probably somewhere around 11:00am. They all headed off after a couple of minutes and we never gave them another thought as we spent the rest of the day enjoying the festivities of the picnic. We got home an hour or so before dark and we rushed to the loft for a count up. Every single bird was home; whether they all came home in a single group or straggled in over the course of the day we will never know but there didn't seem to be any tired ones amongst them. Not bad for a pack of mongrels having their first training toss.

A workmate of Dad's, well known SAHPA and LeFevre Peninsula club member, Harry Dunning, couldn't believe it, but came to the conclusion that if we were going to keep pigeons we might as well keep good ones as they, as he put it, cost no more to feed than mongrels. He gave us several pairs of his good racers of the Harrison Jurion strain. They were quite magnificent and out went all of the mongrels. We sought out Doug Searle of the Riverside club in order to join the Riverside Juniors. By this time the 1960 racing season was fast approaching and as we had no birds bred to race we decided it would have to be 1961 when we would commence racing. Doug also gave us a lovely pair of pigeons, a mealy cock and a blue hen that had broken her wing and could no longer race. We bred some good pigeons from them including a mealy cock we called "Pug" and a mealy frill hen, simply known as the "Mealy Frill Hen". "Pug" won three second prizes, two from Keith & one from Maryborough. One race I remember

was a stinker of an event from Keith where it rained all day and the hills were completely fogged out. "Pug" arrived home after 5 hours & nearly 7 minutes on the wing and took 2nd prize in the race behind the Burton Bros.

We were later given two beautiful young cocks and later still a pair of old stock hens to put them with after seeking out Hurtle Simmonds of Semaphore. The cocks raced very well for two seasons and were later mated to the two old hens and were excellent breeders. We crossed the Dunning birds with the Simmonds birds and they flew very well. I don't know what the Simmonds birds were except for the old gay pied hen he gave us which he described as a "Bastian". As far as I can remember, we pretty well kept the Searle birds to themselves.

The 1950's and 1960's really were the Golden Years of pigeon racing in Adelaide and probably so in the rest of Australia. There was plenty of space, suburban blocks were huge and behind our yard in Seaton was a huge market garden owned by a Mr McMahon.

Our pigeon cage backed up onto the fence of the market garden and us kids often climbed onto the roof of the loft and disappeared over the back into the market garden to play in the long line of old Pepper Corn trees which formed the northern boundary of the market garden. It was not uncommon for us to sample some of the produce being grown there as well. The majority of suburban streets were unsealed, and no foot paths. Everyone knew each other for streets around. During the winter months after school up to 20 kids would be out the front kicking a football, end to end, in the street. During the summer months it would be replaced by tippy-go-run cricket matches. These were the days when there was a Delicatessen on the corner of every second or third street and when the street lights went out at 1.00am. These were also the last days of the "Iceman", soon to be followed by the "Milkman" and the "Baker's horse and cart", into extinction.

Pigeon Racing in the Port and neighbouring suburbs was incredibly strong. The Riverside club was the strongest of all with over 50 members alone. Top flyers in that club at the time were Fin Fraser, Laurie Thamm, Les Jeffries, Alec Weir, Bob Drew, Roy Judd, Joe Burke, Peter Matthews, Corrie Lodge, Brick Aubert, Ron Wiles, Ernie Anderson, "Bunny" Mitchell, Allan Kohler and Don Burgess, just to mention a few. There was also the two storey loft on the Old Port Road at Hendon belonging to the successful partnership of John Cock (Snr) & Sons. This loft and its pigeons could be easily seen from the street and all of us kids used to "drool" at the loft and the pigeons within every time we walked or rode our bikes past it. The main aim for most was just to make the top ten in the club race each week, such was the quality of the competition. The Riverside clubroom was situated on railway property adjacent to the Alberton Railway Station. For the number of members it had in those days it always amazed me how small the clubrooms were. It must have been no more than ten or twelve feet wide and about twenty feet long. On hampering night there was no way all the members and their birds could fit inside at the one time. Members would have to queue up outside with their baskets waiting their turn to be called to the ringing table to have their birds processed and entered. It was still used every year up until the time it was burnt down somewhere around 2002. The Peterhead club was the other club which together with the Riverside club formed the Port Adelaide District Racing Pigeon Association. Their heyday was in the 1950's when they had over 50 members. By 1960 they were on the decline with about 25 – 30 members but some real quality ones among them including

Cec Dunstan, Bob Woodhead, Hurtle Simmonds, Cyril Simmonds, Lloyd & Sawford, Jim Todd and Ron Shiel, among many others. The Osborne club was also quite strong and after competing in the PAA for a while, eventually decided to fly independently. They had a number of good flyers like Roy Aubert, Frank Sparrow, Pat Pridham, Terry Underdown, Tommy Dunstan, George Coldwell, Keith Evans, etc., etc.

The Woodville club was also a very strong club and they flew independently as well. They had the likes of Artie Morris, who later went to Riverside, Bill & Harold Richardson, Charley Henderson, The Dempsey Bros., George

Jeans, Peter Millay, Morry Keyhoe, Alvin Richardson and Alan Harris, and in earlier years, Cliff Kennett. If my memory serves me correctly, the Dempsey Brothers seemed almost unbeatable for quite a lengthy period of time.

All of these clubs flew in the SAHP Combine along with the Glynde and Magill clubs to the east and the Plympton, Glenelg and South West clubs to the south. There were four Combine races each year from Oodnadatta, Benalla, Finke & Junee. The Oodnadatta and Benalla races were quite often 100 pound first prize races. Quite a sum to win in those days. It cost one pound per bird to enter, with I think, and I stand to be corrected here, a five bird maximum entry. A pound a bird was quite a considerable entry fee back then when you consider that the average working mans wage would have been 15 pounds, perhaps 20 pounds per week.

Also in the Port was the LeFevre club which was quite strong and flew with the SAHPA Inc,. They also had many good flyers including Gus Nelsen, Colin Nelsen, Harry Dunning, Bill Ware, Len Clase, Colin "Buzzer" Beasley, Ross Cowley and later on Frank Boron and Alan Brown. They had 15 to 20 members in most seasons. The other strong club bordering the Port Area was the Henley and Grange club which also flew in the SAHPA and were often 20 plus members strong. Some of the top flyers in that club at the time were Colin Bayment, Reg Foureur, Merv Hatch, Stan Ferguson, Verco & Willoughby, Tommy Jackson, Kevin Smoker and Don Hawke.

Back then I used to eagerly await the weekly publication of "The Chronicle" to see the results of not only the Junior's but also the Senior's including the Port Assoc., the Combine and the SAHPA. Besides the names mentioned above, the likes of the Thalbourne Bros., R. Fullgrave and J. Conley, who lived in the southern Suburbs, often did well at Combine level. The names of many successful SAHPA flyers of that era also come flooding back to me. Many of these names would be well known interstate as well. The likes of Keith Wickham and his brother Ross, Doug Green, Bruce Boulderstone, Arnold Smallacombe, Colin Hawke, L.P.E. Smith, Bert Minerds, Colin Copeland, Bert Richmond, Vin Blanden, Trevor Butcher, Trevor Quinn, Jack Quinn & Son, Charlie "Chook" Delaine, Vic Pape, S. Mitton, Lou Downer, "Bing" Moyle, Warren Moyle, Jack Alldritt and Arnold & Brown are just a few that come to mind who regularly finished in the top twenty results. The likes of Harrold Webber and Alan Goodger were about to make their marks.

The Riverside Juniors also had some pretty good members and in our first year in 1961 we were up against some pretty good opposition in Don Brooks, Garry Meers, Matson, Morrison, etc (I can't remember the first names of the last two mentioned). They had been competing in the junior club for several years and were ready to take the next step into senior competition. Eighteen years of age was the cut-off point for the juniors. They were often right up there with the seniors and we were fortunate they had to move on. In fact I think it was Meers who, as a junior, got special permission to enter a bird in the 100 pound Oodnadatta Combine race that year, and won it.

I vividly remember the first race we ever won in the Riverside Juniors. The race was from Parachilna and the bird was bred for us by Ted Couzner of Seaton Park. He lived just east of the train line while we were on the western side of the Woodville to Grange line. It was a swift race. I have the certificate in front of me as I type. BCH PAC 60 2212. She flew the 259 miles & 1705 yards in 4 hours 57 minutes and 55 seconds recording a velocity of 1535 yards per minute (just over 52 mph). In the previous four weeks she had flown a novelty race from Red Hill and three races from Terowie, being close to our first bird to the loft on each occasion and winning second prize in one of the Terowie races. That year the race program scheduled five North line races straight, 3 Terowie's and 2 Parachilna's before going South East and alternating weekly thereafter. We only flew the North Line in our first year as we had suffered significant losses earlier in training due to our ignorance and possibly stupidity and were down to less than 20 birds with which to start the season. We actually started training with about 40 birds because as juniors we were restricted to a maximum entry of 5 birds per race.

Anyway the winner was called "Hassie" after the young girl in the then popular TV series, "The Real McCoys". Not only did "Hassie" win the Riverside Junior race but she beat all the Riverside seniors as well as the Osborne, Peterhead and Woodville seniors.

Ted Couzner was very proud of the success of the bird he had bred us, as after several years of competition in the Riverside club he was still looking for his first win. So strong was the competition in that club members felt very proud if they could just finish in the first ten of the result sheet. It was one of the rare occasions that I was eager to get to school on the following Monday morning. I went to Findon High School and in my class was Trevor Thain who flew in the Woodville Juniors. Trevor had a loft alongside his father's who flew in the Woodville seniors. I couldn't wait to tell him that we'd won and beat all the seniors, and to find out how he went. Well he went just one better. He won the Woodville Juniors and beat the senior club as well. Lo and behold, when we checked the results in "The Chronicle" later that week we found that the velocity of his winning pigeon just "pipped" our "Hassie's". That was slightly deflating but how often would two juniors knock off all the star studded seniors in their respective clubs on the same weekend?

The astute senior members who were involved in the administration of the junior club reckoned we had a champion in the making and that we should now prepare her for the Marree Young Bird Derby in three weeks time. At the time we agreed but as the second event from Parachilna grew closer, and as we had virtually nothing else to enter and were not competing on the South East line, we just couldn't bear to sit it out for the next two weeks in a row. We probably also got a little greedy as well, so on the night of hampering we decided to front up with "Hassie" again, along with our only other available entrant, a young Dark Chequer cock we called "Homer". He had been trained only as far as Mallala and we didn't have much faith in "Homer's" ability to return. Well the second Parachilna turned out to be a real stinker. I think only three birds made it home on the day out of over 1,000 birds sent by the Riverside seniors. Needless to say, nothing home in the juniors. We knew then that we had lost her. With strong headwinds all day and heavy rain, overall returns were pretty poor. "Hassie" was never to be seen again but "Homer" bobbed up on the Monday morning. The Marree Derby turned out to be just as dreadful. Going by memory, it was another bad day and no birds made home on the day into the Port Assoc and Combine, and Sunday's returns were ordinary. So after two weeks we didn't feel quite so bad because we reasoned that if we kept her for the Derby she would probably have gone down in that. That fateful Parachilna event was our last race for 1961 and we looked forward to season 1962 which couldn't come fast enough.

As the older Alberton boys graduated to the senior competition in 1962, the new brigade of juniors from Seaton took their places. Besides the Hofman Bros, there were our fierce rivals, the Burton Bros. Also Denis Place, John Capel (son of Alf who competed in the Riverside seniors), Des Evans, Garth Hurrell and Peter West, son of Jim West who later took up racing with Riverside seniors after Peter moved on. There also was Darrell Cahill who had pigeons from his grand father who once raced. Darrell only flew a few races in one season due to other sporting commitments. Alongside his illustrious brother John, Darrell became a champion footballer for Port Adelaide in the late sixties and seventies.

The junior club remained strong with several other young lads, whose names I cannot remember, who lived in the Alberton area. One of them was the son of Riverside flyer Allan Whaite, for the life of me I can't remember his first name, but his uncle was the well known Woodville flyer, Harrold Whaite.

Most of us juniors had "Mentors" who started them off with birds and advice and took interest in our progress. As mentioned previously, Harry Dunning was ours, the Burton Bros had Joe Burke, and Garth Hurrell had Charlie Henderson of the Woodville club. Garth's father was a friend of Charlie. Trevor Thain of Woodville had his father and

top Woodville junior John Heyhoe had his uncle, Artie Morris. John used to live at Kilkenny, where the Arndale shopping centre is now situated. Another young Woodville junior "wipper snapper" at the time was Charlie Forbes who seemed to be closely associated with a Mr Pickering of Kilkenny who flew in the Woodville club. Charlie hasn't changed much over the years.

The juniors used to fly all races up to and including the middle distance races but in 1963 some of us wanted to have a go at an Oodnadatta and Benalla race. We got together with the Woodville Juniors and flew two interclub races from these points. There was friendly rivalry between the two clubs and there was a lot of speculation as to which club would provide the winners. Well the Burton Bros proved too good for everyone in the Oodnadatta. There were a few birds home on the day, just before dark, in the seniors and the Burton's timed one right up there with them to have the only bird home on the day in the juniors, thereby easily winning the interclub junior race. We timed one very early the next morning to take second place. The Benalla race was very difficult but once again, a handful of senior birds made home just before dark, but nothing in the two junior clubs. We finally got the "Silver Mealy" hen a little after 8.00am the next morning to win the interclub juniors, the Riverside Juniors reigning supreme. We may have been a little lucky to have won that race. Garth Hurrell gave up waiting for the birds that Saturday evening and went out for the night. When we clocked the next morning we went straight around to his place to see how he had fared. He lived just around the corner, about two minutes away. Well Garth must have got home late that night as he was still in bed. We got him up and he went down to his loft to find a bird from the race in there and it looked as if it had been there for hours. In fact one member of his family, who was not the least bit interested in the pigeons, said they thought they saw a bird arrive at the loft just on dark on the Saturday night after Garth had gone out. Consequently, Garth finished second.

A couple of other races back in those days always seem to stick in my mind. One was from Maryborough on August 25th 1962. It was another windy day with frequent heavy showers. The birds had the wind on their beaks and it would be the most difficult race we had competed in up to then, but let me digress for a moment. Ray Burton of the Burton Bros was about a year older than me and his brother Jeff was about the same age as my younger brother Greg. Ray was 17, I was 16 and Greg & Jeff were 14. Ray got his drivers licence as soon as he turned 16 and he owned a small green Ford Prefect car. Not one of the earlier "box on wheels" models but a later more modern model. All the juniors used tin clocks which would start running as soon as a bird was timed in. Naturally, only one bird per race could be timed. We had to be down at the club rooms no later than 55 minutes after clocking the first bird so that the clocks could be read against the master timer exactly one hour after clocking. Any later and you would be disqualified. As the club rooms at Alberton were about three miles from our lofts at Seaton, Ray often would drive around and pick us up about half an hour after they had clocked and take us to the club. We mostly clocked within a few minutes of each other so normally there were no problems about running late for fire-off, but if they were running late and time was running out for us to get to the club on time then dad would jump in the car and take us.

We got to know if we had a good one or not by the time the Burton's arrived, or failed to arrive, to take us to the club. Anyway, back to this difficult Maryborough race. The birds were released at 7.30am and it wasn't too long before we realized that we would be lucky to see any of our three entrants on the day, if at all. The afternoon wore on and we probably started to look in earnest for the birds from 4.30pm onwards. I can remember the sky to the south of us was as black as a "dogs guts". The sun began to set and the light began to fade as darkness slowly began to set in. Our youthful eyesight was pretty good and around 5.50pm we spotted this small dot coming out of the gloom in the south with the black clouds as a backdrop, heading straight towards our loft. As it got a little closer we determined that it was definitely a pigeon, and yes it was ours. It was the Blue Bar Cock RJC 61 527 (yes, the juniors even had their own rings) and the certificate shows that we timed him at 5.52.58pm after 10 hours 22 minutes 58 seconds on the

wing. We had no sooner clocked him and moved away from the loft when his full sister BBH RJC 61 62 arrived. Well we thought this was marvelous. However, our elation was short lived as about ten minutes later the little green Ford Prefect of the Burton Bros pulled into our driveway. By God, we thought. They must have clocked well in front to be here at this time. And well in front of us they were. They had clocked nearly half an hour before us and when the results were worked out they would have beaten the whole Port Adelaide Association. What a good bird that was. These were the only three birds in the club on the day and we found consolation in winning second prize and having two of our three birds home when a number of senior flyers failed to time in on the day.

"527" was a very good racer as earlier that year he had won first prize from Keith and exactly one year later in 1963 he won second prize again from Maryborough, this being a much easier event as he flew it in 7 hours and 57 minutes.

The other race that sticks in my mind, mainly due to the humorous incident that happened before the race birds arrived home. It was from Stirling North in 1963. It was another wet day with a strong northerly wind. During the afternoon the rain came down in bucket loads. How far north this rain extended I don't know and we didn't seem to worry about those things back then. We were out in the backyard with our rain coats on, not having a clue about what time the birds might arrive, when we saw a flash of pink and grey hit the small landing board on the loft. The force of the wind seemed to blow this bird onto the glass petitions of the "Yankee" traps and before we could do anything it was through the traps and into the loft. As this was happening we determined that the bird was a Galah, probably somebody's pet that had just escaped. Well we had to rush around looking for a pair of gardening gloves before we could remove it from the loft and resume waiting for the pigeons. Despite the heavy rain they came through well. We clocked MC RJC 61 105 "Stirling Moss" and took second prize again averaging nearly 48 mph.

Training was another highlight during the season. Back then it was all done on the railways, back in the days when most stations had Station Masters. Flyers could send their birds on most weeknights for release the next day from Gawler, Mallala, Long Plains, Bowmans, Snowtown and Redhill on the North Line and Mt. Lofty, Monarto South, Tailm Bend and later in the season from Peake and Lameroo on the South East Line. Tuesday & Wednesday nights seemed to be the most popular and fanciers would come from everywhere in the district bringing their pigeons to the station by car and bike while others pushed their hampers on prams converted to trolleys. The Albert Park station was the closest to us with a Station Master on duty at night and flyers from Grange, Seaton, Albert Park, Hendon, Royal Park, Woodville West and Findon would gather there and once the birds were loaded onto the train, discussion amongst them, with often the Station Master involved as well, would often last for over an hour or more. One can only imagine the same scenario, but larger, occurring regularly at stations such as Alberton, Glanville and Kilkenny where the concentration of pigeon flyers was even greater.

Over the next day or two you would go back to the station to pick up your empty hampers that had been returned. One thing that intrigued me for quite some time was seeing baskets addressed "S. Roy – Return to Grange". Who was this S. Roy of Grange? I had never seen his name in the results ever, yet the pigeons in the basket looked very nice indeed as I often spotted them as the train pulled in to Albert Park from Grange, on its way to the city. Occasionally I would ask another flyer but they had no idea who he was either. Eventually, after God only knows how long, somebody I asked actually knew. I can't remember who it was that told me but he said, "Why, that's Stanley Roy Ferguson".

Stan was one of the top flyers in the Grange club at the time and who was later noted for having the only pigeon to have won two Association races, both difficult races from Morundah and both times clocked in the dark. Anyway, it was explained to me that sometime in the past Stan had suspected some of his birds had been stolen while on their

way to a training toss on the train. If someone was going to steal birds, particularly another fancier, they would be looking to take from the best flyer rather than a fancier with an ordinary racing record. Consequently, he marked his hampers "S. Roy", somebody that nobody knew. To keep his identity intact, he would buy his tickets for the birds during the day and put them on the train at the Grange station in the evening. There was no Station Master at the Grange station at night so unless the paperwork and payment was done during the day, nobody could go there at night to send their birds away.

As I sit here today typing this article I see in the Death Notices of the Adelaide Advertiser, another old Riverside flyer who used to frequent the Albert Park Railway Station for long conversations on pigeons has passed away. Adrian Tuohy, in his 89th year.

To sum up our three years racing in the Juniors, in 1961 we flew 5 races, winning 1 first prize & 1 second prize.

1962 – 16 races for 4 x 1st prizes, 3 x 2nd prizes & 3 x 3rd prizes and lowering our colours to the brilliant first year flyers the Burton Bros, Ray & Jeff, for the Club Aggregate Points.

1963 – 18 races for 6 x 1st prizes, 7 x 2nd prizes & 2 x 3rd prizes, being unplaced in only three short races for the year and claiming to converted Club Aggregate.

Yes, they were really the Golden Days of pigeon racing in Adelaide, and in particular, the Port Adelaide district. I guess things were similar in parts of Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Brisbane back in those days. Where now would you find ten or a dozen more kids, all friends, living within a radius of a mile or so of each other, racing pigeons off their own bat? Our interest in the pigeons kept us off the streets and out of trouble. None of us got into any serious trouble with the law. There were plenty of other kids in the area who weren't interested in pigeons, of whom a number ended up in quite a lot of bother.

Occasionally I take a drive through our old neighbourhood of the 1950's and 60's and it just isn't the same. No vacant blocks and if there is one it is only temporary, as an old house has been demolished to make way for a new one, or more likely two or three. Many of the existing old houses have a new one built behind them in what local councils call a "hammerhead" sub-division. Some of the new houses are huge, almost mansions. The streets, which as kids we thought were long, are now sealed and have footpaths and now seem peculiarly short. There is rarely anyone seen in the streets and certainly not a kid to be seen. Everything is so sterile. This hardly seems the street when over four decades ago there would be a number of Bonfires blazing away on Guy Fawkes night. Friends and relatives would come around and "pool" their fireworks which would be let off continuously over several hours during the night until the whole district looked as if a thick fog had set in with the street lights glowing eerily through the smoke. Sky rockets hurtling into the night sky, penny bombs, thripenny bombs and cannons going off every few seconds, Catherine wheels spinning madly from fence posts, a string of squibbs going off wildly and jumping jacks going in all directions. And the pigeons sitting calmly in their lofts in the backyards, wondering what all the commotion was about. What fun the kids miss out on these days. Never mind the kids, what fun the adults miss out on today.

If I was given the opportunity to go back to an era of my choice it would definitely be the period from the beginning of 1960 to the end of 1974. It was the period when I completed my schooling, started work, eventually met my wife, Beverley, married and had our daughter, Michelle. It was also the period that I scored a plum job as a Tally Clerk with the Port Waratah Stevedoring Company at Berth 29, although I must admit that most of the jobs I have had since then have been pretty good. It was the period of my youth and it was the period that pigeon racing was at its best and most competitive with regard to the number of registered flyers. If it was possible to go through a time

portal and enter the past, this would be the period that I would choose to re-enter and wander back and forth. Yes, these really were the golden years of pigeon racing, when the sport was at its peak. Unfortunately we will never see these times again.