

Conversations about the pigeon fancy

WEIGHT AND THE WING

Novice: I had the great pleasure of seeing some great long distance champions in Jos Mees' loft at Kapellen. Your friend Andre Fevrier says that you must beware of weight in a pigeon. And yet Jos Mees' champions which I saw are of well above average size and weight. So now I don't understand. What should I believe about all this?

Victor: It's not easy to answer this question, but I shall try to shed as much light as I can on what Andre Fevrier's words mean. Once again we must talk of 'weight, the source of energy' and of dead weight, the source of fatigue.

We shall also talk of the wing, but also of the 'motor' and its fuel. That will be another day.

Novice: It sounds as though you are talking of cars, or rather aeroplanes.

And in this context I remember what Enzo Ferrari, the racing car manufacturer, asked his engineers: "Give me less weight, or more power for my cars".

Victor: These last words bring us to the heart of the problem. I know Jos Mees' pigeons fairly well. They are above average types. And yet they have extraordinary endurance. Why?

First of all we must distinguish between weight and weight. There is nothing more relative. It's evident that a small pigeon will weigh less than a big one. However, what counts is *relative* weight. That is, relative to the pigeon's volume and its wing. But other factors come in to play. You have to realise that a big pigeon may be light, and a small pigeon may be heavy — 'relatively'. When Andre Fevrier says you must beware of weight in the pigeon, it's obvious that Andre is thinking especially of the difference between 'dead' weight and 'living' weight. Andre can 'sense', when he is holding a pigeon, if it has vitality, if it's 'alive' in his hands, if it has keenness!

In addition to this you should also consider thickness of the wing, the supple resistance of the upper wing and the propulsive power of the primary feathers

By Dr. Noel de Scheemacher
Courtesy of the Natural Winning Ways Natural Cy. Belgium

and in particular the four last primaries. In my experience the biggest handicap for the wing is for the middle of the wing — i.e. the 4th, 5th and 6th primaries — to be too long. They act as a brake on flight and tire the pigeon. These feathers are often over-developed in a heavy pigeon because they serve to 'carry' its weight. These are poor pigeons.

Novice: But what does the harmful weight, the dead weight, in fact consist of?

Victor: There is, as I've already told you, fat which infiltrates the whole organism. You know that a good pigeon doesn't easily put fat on because it has an economically functioning organism. It has no need to form fat, which is in fact only reserve fuel, which a good pigeon doesn't need. If you let your pigeons fast for a few days — a practice not used often enough by fanciers — you will see that a fat pigeon melts away faster than a good pigeon which had less fat than the former one at the commencement of the fast. This is because it has greater vitality than the first pigeon and thus a richer organism enabling it to use energy without great effort.

Novice: I have to confess that I did not allow for the weight-volume relationship when I mentioned Jos Mees' pigeons. In that case his pigeons are not 'heavy' for their 'size'. Also, they have a very long breastbone and their weight is therefore spread along the whole length of the bone. I must however agree that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to judge a pigeon's body correctly. Let us not forget that the body is covered in feathers — and that fat, which gives it its weight, is not so easily distinguished from the musculature as in a naked athlete.

Victor: You are quite right, but by assessing a pigeon impartially — without letting yourself be influenced by the famous pedigree — you can manage not to be too far mistaken about its physical qualities.

What is much more difficult is to judge the pigeon's keenness.

After scrutinizing a pigeon's eye, or rather its expression, for quite some time, Jef van Riel used sometimes to say, though without any degree of confidence, "This one *could* well be a good pigeon". Jef worked with diamonds and was therefore used to analysing the brilliance and the 'life' in a diamond and his opinion was often correct.

During the racing season we will come face to face with the supreme judge, the race basket. But this judge can also be wrong. This will be our fault, for if the pigeons we enter are not in perfect condition, the judgment of the race basket may deceive us.

Novice: I know that a pigeon in good form has soft, shining plumage, a plump, light body and a dry, bright eye. All that is fine — but what do you do if they are not like that?

Victor: I'm here to answer you and I'll do my best another time. But I hope you are

beginning to get a rough idea of how to judge a pigeon's weight.

Noel de Scheemaecker.

THE POWER OF OBSERVATION

Novice: What you told me about your friend Jef van Riel — "The best fancier is the one who can detect defects soonest" — made me think.

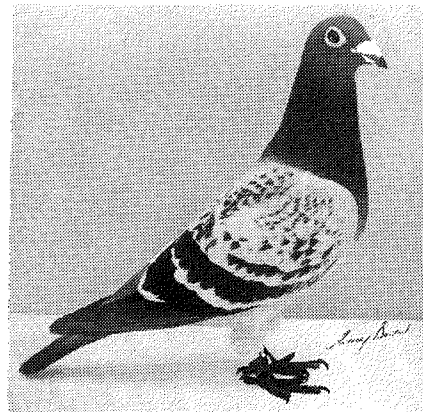
In my view, after due consideration, I think all the difficulty lies in the fact that it is not enough to observe one's pigeons, one must know what one must look for. I wish you would tell me what that is.

Victor: If you though you needed to look out for one single item, you could make a grave mistake. No, my friend, the pigeon is a complete whole. Don't forget that each defect reduces the length of its racing career.

Novice: If I have understood you correctly, you should therefore value highly those pigeons which have a long career, which do not become old before their time.

Victor: What you have just said should

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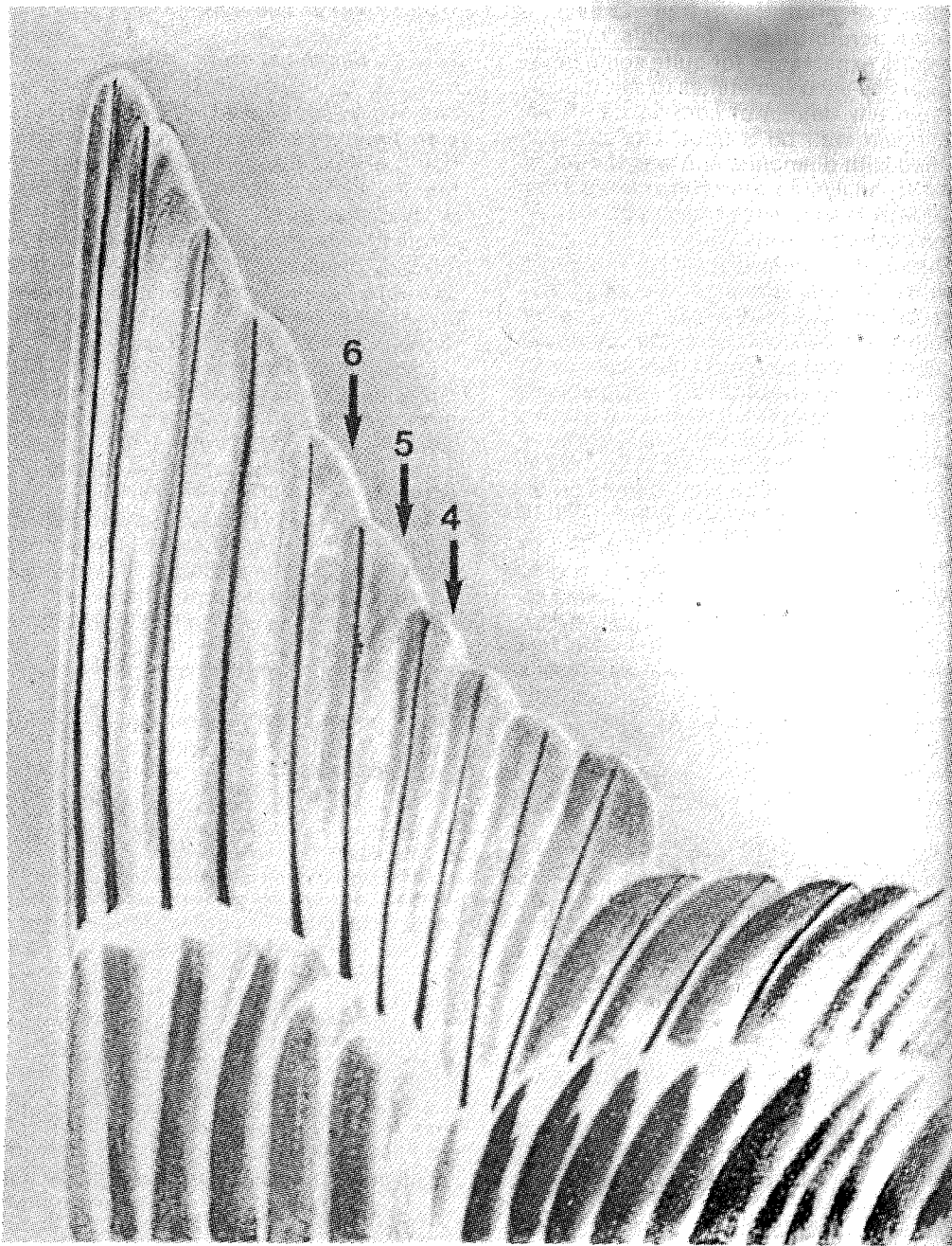
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In my experience the greatest handicap the wing is for the middle, i.e. the 4th, 5th and 6th primaries, to be too long.

be carved on the loft doors so that it is never forgotten.

Novice: Yes, but such pigeons are rare. You mentioned them to me one day and said that these pigeons were 'indefatigable'.

Victor: If they are in fact becoming more and more rare, then it's our fault. Generally the fancier does not preoccupy himself with the future of his loft. If he notices that the pigeons he is breeding still do well as young birds and as yearlings but start to decline as early as the age of two, the fancier ought to realise that he is heading straight towards a precipice.

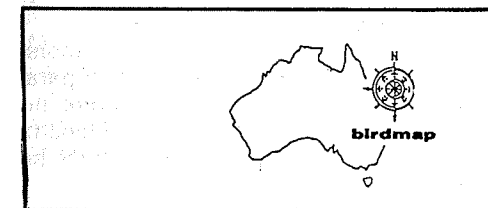
Novice: What could be the causes of this rapid decline? If you can tell me this, I shall be able to become a champion, as Jef van Riel said, and remain one!

Victor: Generally it starts imperceptibly. One quality which conditions all the others, we must never forget, is resistant health. A pigeon which is in excellent health has a good chance of lasting for many years without losing its virility. A good observer will mercilessly eliminate any pigeon which leaves something to be desired un-

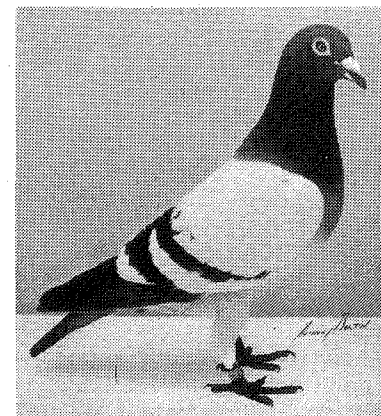
der the heading of health. If it often has an inflamed throat, or sensitive intestine, if it does not moult perfectly, let us beware of it. Let us take no risks, it must be eliminated. One day Jef van Riel, all of whose knowledge was based on his powers of observation, said to me, "I think that the most important part of the pigeon is a good intestine".

"One quality which conditions all the others is resistant health".

Novice: But I think that everything in the pigeon is important if we are looking for the pigeon which will last many years. For haven't you just said that every defect has to



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be paid for, and reduces the duration of the pigeon's achievements?

Victor: Yes, but robust health is an indispensable quality for a pigeon's long sporting life. I told you that defects creep in surreptitiously, little by little, into a loft. For example, the wing loses its suppleness, the upper wing becomes too large and what Van der Schelden called the 'striking power' of the last four primaries decreases. Another dangerous defect: the volume of the pigeons increases and the pigeon 'holds together' less and less well — you can twist it like a bit of rag.

Novice: You were talking of robust health. So I assume that the pigeon must demonstrate this robust health especially by its resistance to attacks from outside. But there is no possible means of resistance against parasites.

With intestinal worms, coccidiosis, trichomoniasis, we are dealing with parasites and the organism can acquire no natural immunity. So your theory of health, capable of resisting everything must be false!

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Novice: I concede that you are right, but whatever the scientists say, you note that there are, for example, strains of pigeons which are less subject to attack by trichomoniasis whereas others, as soon as they come into contact with contaminated water or regurgitated seed, experience an ultra-rapid proliferation of the parasite. So you must agree that there are pigeons which have a degree of resistance to this parasite. From my own observations it is precisely those pigeons which stay 'young' for many years which are least susceptible to trichomoniasis. They are also always pigeons with a perfect throat: tongue resting at the bottom of the beak with a fine opening to the lungs and a pinkish colour; pigeons whose breathing is imperceptible — in a word 'indefatigable' pigeons which deserve our full trust.

Novice: I shan't disagree with what you say, but there are, however, fanciers who still claim, with the late Charles van der Schelden, that it is only the wing that counts.

Victor: They look primarily at their pigeons' wings and make their selection solely on the basis of these. They also say in their defence that their great master Charles van der Schelden said that those who did not blindly believe in his theories were 'something elses'. A delicious phrase, but one which was intended to ridicule those who believed in anything other than the wing.

Novice: So you mean that you must observe the whole of the pigeon to see the item or items which have a tendency to be prejudicial to a long racing career in the pigeon.

I assume that that includes, of course, the wing, but specially the throat, the lungs and the heart, the muscles, the bone structure, the richness of the eye and above all the balance.

It doesn't seem so easy to observe all that. I don't believe I'll ever manage it.

Victor: You will manage it, if you keep your eyes open and think about what you see. But, my friend, there are few fanciers who think. That too is something which must be learnt!

Noel De Scheemaeker.

SELECTION, WITHOUT BEING INFLUENCED

Novice: You told me one day that during the major annual selection of pigeons at the Breeding Station you ignored the origin of the pigeons examined. But surely their origin does count — or does it not?

Victor: That's an interesting question. Does a pigeon's origin count? My answer is 'yes' and 'no' — but more often 'no' than 'yes'.

This depends inter alia on the credulity and naivety of pigeon fanciers and their ability to assess a racing pigeon. It all comes down to knowing whether it is right to judge the pigeon on its individual value or on the value due to its surname! I know it's not easy, but it is made even harder when the fancier believes that the origin is paramount in determining the merit of a pigeon. It is, however, really only an ancillary factor. I should explain this much better, because I believe that you are always subject to those influences to which you wish to be subject. It is difficult to eliminate a certain degree of personal in-

itiative from the fancier himself. His self-satisfaction to juggle with a famous name flatters his vanity.

"The person who knows how to pair and guarantee success just doesn't exist. The only thing I believe is that you have a better chance of success if you have good pigeons".

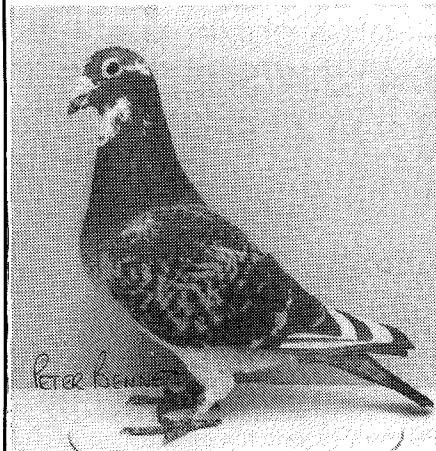
He wants to be able to impress others this way, while forgetting that he is deceiving himself and precipitating the decline of his stock.

For decades the 'Wegge' strain from Lierre has literally been juggled with.

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It is the skill of the fancier which shapes

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a breed. And the value of this breed depends on the fancier's knowledge and the severity with which he judges each pigeon.

Novice: Do you think there are any fanciers who, if they were really strict in their selection, could retain over a hundred pigeons?

Victor: I cannot answer that question because I do not know all the great Belgian or foreign fanciers. But I can assure you that if a renowned breeder were to sell each year even only a few very good pigeons would not keep his position among the leaders for very long.

Novice: So a champion who wishes to maintain his position is obliged to keep the good pigeons, or those he believes to be good, for his own racing loft. He can only allow himself to see the 'second class' birds unless he himself is to become a second grade mini-champion.

Victor: That is self-evident. The clever ones sell their 'name', the renowned, but keep the good pigeons.

Novice: And yet they say that you can

buy very good pigeons from the Janssen brothers at Arendonk.

So they sell their good pigeons.

Victor: I'm glad that you have mentioned the Janssen brothers from Arendonk. They are a special case, since in spite of the fact that their pigeons have the highest commercial value and they are overwhelmed with requests to buy, these fanciers of the old school don't keep pigeons to sell. They are still true fanciers. They only race in speed races and yet real long distance champions have resulted from cross-breeding with their pigeons. The 'Janssen strain' is of no greater value than any other strain if the specific qualities which the brothers always tried to retain in their pigeons are no longer there.

Novice: And what are these special qualities to which the Janssen brothers have always clung?

Victor: It's very simple. Because when they started off almost fifty years ago, they already had a few extraordinary pigeons which outclassed their competitors, *they observed these pigeons closely*. They quite

simply tried, by means of ultra-strict selection, to retain those qualities which they logically thought indispensable in order to keep themselves at the top. They applied a system of quite intensive in-breeding.

"We should always prefer a fine unknown individual of quality to one with an illustrious pedigree and defects!"

Novice: Yes, but if they hadn't had the good fortune to start off with super-perfect specimens, their in-breeding system would never have produced the success it did in the Arendonk lofts.

Victor: That is a very true remark. I've known the Janssen pigeons for decades. They are characterized by the following qualities: a really extraordinary expression in the head and eyes.

Their heads and eyes 'speak to you'. In the cocks, it is an expression of vigour and vitality which accentuates the mobility and the transparency of the eyes. In the hens, it is an expression of gentleness, curiosity and intelligence. As for the wing, it is characterized in the true Janssen pigeon

by the quality of the last primaries, which are fairly narrow at the base and extremely supple. The upper wing is nice and straight, slightly convex and fairly short. The body is heavily muscled in front and makes the pigeon lean forward. That I think is without doubt the primary virtue of these pigeons is a perfect throat. A very fine respiratory orifice behind the tongue, leading to the lungs. This is a very stable quality in the Janssen pigeons.

Novice: Yes, but with such qualities any pigeon would be a champion, whether it was a Janssen or not!

Victor: You're right again . . . but such pigeons are rare. If they have been able to keep them like that by in-breeding and thus to fix these qualities, it is quite normal that there is no risk in cross-breeding with such pigeons. Whereas in cross-breeding with the most illustrious of strains we run the risk of failure if the essential qualities of that strain have been lost. In this case, the origin has no meaning. We should always prefer a fine unknown individual of quality to one with an illustrious pedigree and defects!

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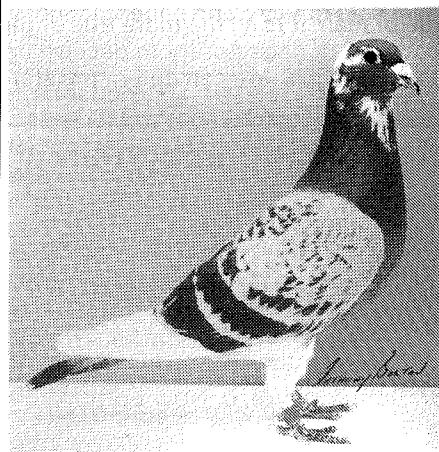
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Novice: And yet these are more highly priced. . .

Victor: That's the fault of journalists and the credulity of their readers!

Let us draw a conclusion from it: the price of a pigeon and its famous pedigree must never influence us when we are selecting our pigeons!

Noel De Scheemaecker.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE EYE

Novice: May I remind of your promise to discuss the language of the eyes in our pigeons? It was after we had had a somewhat humorous discussion on what the droppings could tell us that you mentioned it to me. Do you remember?

Victor: Of course. But before I let our pigeons speak to us with their eyes I want to say something else. This may reassure those people who read our conversations

that what we say isn't more theory but the fruits of experience and of observation, which amounts to the same thing.

Novice: I'm eager to learn what you are talking about.

Victor: I want to tell you this: nothing is more instructive to the fancier than cleaning out the boxes and the floor of the loft, but when you do this you must look carefully . . . and think.

It is preferable to attack a difficult problem while it is still an easy one, since the solutions are then easy whereas later they become harder. And our pigeons' droppings teach us this. That's what I wanted to say, and I'll add that the day I stop scraping out a loft myself I'll also stop writing another word on pigeons. Because I don't want to let myself become drugged by theories!

Novice: That doesn't surprise me at all. I remember you said once that your friend Jef van Riel thought that the best fancier was the one who could spot *soonest* that something was going to go wrong in his loft.

Victor: Right! So we must watch our pigeons carefully, day by day, to see what they have to tell us. And now we have at last come to our pigeons' eyes.

The eye cannot hide from us anything which is happening within the body. If this is true of man, it is all the more true of the pigeon, which does not try to deceive us.

Novice: I know you can detect the state

of the pigeon's form by looking into its eyes. But I'd first like to ask you something which bothers every fancier and especially those who race young pigeons. That is, the question on conjunctivitis.

Victor: I'm glad you've mentioned that, because it needs to be understood.

There are in fact several causes of conjunctivitis, or inflammation of the conjunctiva, which often affects both eyes. If it is an isolated case, there is no need to worry, because it may have been caused by a foreign body in the eye, or a minor injury, and then only one eye is affected.

No cause for alarm!

Another cause, of chemical origin: irritation by smoke or irritant vapours.

There are of course other causes as well, but the one the fancier should be wary of is infectious conjunctivitis. At that stage, why almost all the pigeons are affected, appropriate remedies need to be employed. Neo-Col (Upjohn), is salutary and cures the infection in 3-4 days.

Novice: Since this infectious conjunctivitis is dangerous because it is very contagious, what should be done? By placing one's pigeons in a basket where this infection is present, one runs the risk of seeing one's own pigeons also affected.

Victor: To avoid this real risk, it is wise before basketing one's young pigeons, and even adults, to place a drop of Argyrol in the pigeon's eye. This minimizes the risk of infection.

Novice: I suppose draughts are often at the root of conjunctivitis, as they often are with our colds.

Victor: That's a silly mistake. What is more harmful is the lack of air circulation. Have you ever seen pigeons with coryza (cold) or conjunctivitis in a completely open loft? I haven't!

But let's discuss the language of the eye for a while, in relation to our pigeons' form. Our pigeon's eye can tell us if its respiratory apparatus is fully in order. If the eye is dry we can already be reassured to this.

"The eye cannot hide from us anything which is happening within the body".

In addition, a nice dry beak and dry lids around the eye also prove that the respira-

tory functions are in good condition. As for how the eye can reveal the state of the pigeon's form, that depends on the fancier's powers of observation.

Novice: You use the word 'observation' a lot and no doubt you are right. But when you know what to look for, then you're there! I suppose that's where you come in.

Victor: You have just said something trite but nevertheless essential — as so many commonplace things are! Examining the pigeon's eye, there are two things to look at, as signs of good form.

First of all, the richness of pigmentation, shown by deeper colouring of the iris. The eye becomes lighter and more transparent as a result of the increased contrast. Then there is the mobility of the eye. The pigeon appears to be observing everything. Instead of seeing, it is looking.

Novice: It seems to me that these are nuances which few fanciers are capable of seeing.

Victor: You're wrong there. You are forgetting that there is something which is generally neglected, you have to *learn to observe*. That is the whole secret of pigeon racing. . .

Noel De Scheemaecker.

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