

Considerations of Complications

by

Bill "The Book" Richardson

www.ehoremans.com

Edited by K. Ramage

kr_catalina@earthlink.net

January 11, 2009

Here it is not even Christmas and yesterday I just spent the entire day mating my breeders. "Why?" you ask. Well, that is certainly a legitimate question. Nobody in their right mind would be mating pigeons at this time of year (or at least they wouldn't do it unless they had to), so my best defense is to write this foolishness off as excitement over the coming breeding season. As you probably already know, with the help of Ed Lorenz, over the last three years, I have been piecing the very best of the Horemans together, and during 2008 there were many signs that things were starting to come together in the way I had envisioned. Not that I ever really doubted that they would come together, but as with any new group of pigeons, the question is always, "How long will it take for that to happen?"

Although I don't like pairing my breeders this early in the year, I had some very good success at this time last year, so I thought, "Why not try it again?" This and my excitement over the potential of the coming year's breeding pretty much cinched the deal. Insane, I know, but then I had that covered by becoming a pigeon flyer in the first place.

It might be hard for some to understand, but I have always enjoyed watching the development of my youngsters, so the faster I can get to it each year, the more enjoyment I get out of the sport. Although there is often a great deal of change throughout their development, I have learned to average out my observations, and this often helps give me an early indication as to where the program will be heading. Ultimately, this helps me plan for the future by allowing me to schedule my breeding pairs two and even three years into the future.

Sometimes the development of these youngsters is pretty clear-cut. For instance, I am doing a lot of inbreeding, and not all inbreeding is as successful as we would like it to be. However, inbreeding failures are pretty easy to identify, and these failures tend to slam the door shut in that direction. For instance, the Verbart hen has been a very successful breeder for me, and obviously I would love to have more of her bloodlines. Consequently, I mated her back to her top son. By backcrossing to the Verbart side, I was diluting the amount of Horemans in the offspring. For whatever reason, this proved to be a disaster that resulted in over half of the youngsters dying in the nest, and the rest

being of less than desirable quality. This was a complete door slamming experience that cost me a year with the Verbart hen. However, considering how much inbreeding I have done, I have actually been pretty lucky because this is only the second time something like this has happened. Given that both she and her son are excellent pigeons, and given how successful she has been otherwise, either they have a low tolerance to inbreeding or the inbreeding led to some unusual flaw. When I out-crossed the Verbart hen, she was mated to a double inbred son of the Super Pair. Two sons from this mating were then backcrossed (I usually do not backcross this direction but I only had two cocks) to two double inbred Horemans hens from the Super Pair. Three of the four children from this mating produced a number of very successful pigeons in Southern California and Guadalajara, Mexico.

Some youngsters take more time to develop and sometimes it can be a while before I can accurately judge their true strength and quality. Generally, the strength of a pigeon can be judged about the time it has molted in the third flight and the back starts to thicken. I have found that pigeons that are not strong by that point never will be. Quality is a little more complicated, and unless I really do not like something, I never totally judge quality until after the pigeons have finished their first molt. This is in part because many youngsters go through growing spurts that tend to leave various parts out of balance with other parts of the body. Eventually all of the parts catch up with each other, and I find that is the time to make decisions about quality.

Hybrids are also always a wait and see proposition. Hybrids should look like hybrids. This means that they should be a little bigger and a lot stronger than their inbred parents. They should have vitality levels that are through the roof. They often feel bigger and puffier in the body. For whatever reason, cocks tend to benefit from being hybrid more than hens. My thinking on this is that hybridization tends to improve strength, and cocks are about strength where hens are more about finesse. Hybridization in itself isn't a guarantee of success. However, as the compatibility between gene sets increases, so does the success of the hybridization. The trouble is that regardless of how great a hybrid may appear, the only sure way to know their value is to fly them. I firmly believe that hybridization works against far more pigeons than it helps, but when a fancier finds the right bloodline combinations, the results can be spectacular.

The theory about hybrids has always been that they fly extremely well and sometimes they backcross pretty well, but they never outcross a second time very well. In computer programming, the programmer often takes several passes or "cuts" at a data set. In terms of breeding, let me use the term "cut" to mean the diluting of concentrated gene sets through the process of crossing or out-crossing. For future reference in this article, I am referring to crossing as the crossing between two inbred lines (inbred family A to inbred family B) and out-crossing as the mating of an inbred family to something unrelated to either family A or B.

In out-crossing, the first "cut" produces a hybrid that most people would race and then attempt to backcross. However, some time back, I began to realize that often times these same pigeons could be "cut" a second time; however, there is a trick to how this second

cut is performed. As defined above, a cross is the merging of inbred family A to inbred family B. This is also sometimes referred to as a hybrid cross.

For the second cut, I mate the offspring from this first mating to the family that I didn't use the first time, so if I used family A on the first cut, then I use family B for the second cut. Recently, while grading pigeons in Louisiana, I met a very good fancier by the name of Dave Ratliff. Some fanciers tend to get all excited when they are having their pigeons graded, and with these fanciers I tend to keep the communication to a minimum, but Dave was very laid back. From my end, grading is pretty boring, so it is always nice to run into a good fancier that you can talk with while you are grading. At one point, Dave coincidentally and independently mentioned that he had learned the above technique when he used to breed fighting cocks. I found this to be quite interesting.

By mating my pigeons early, some might think that this was some sort of spur of the moment or impulsive decision. However, pairing tends to be something of a "when" and "how" discussion. In this instance, the "when" has to do with when I mate my pigeons together, and as I have already stated, this year I might have been a bit impulsive in mating them together so early. However, with me, the "how" is never impulsive and that is pretty much what the rest of this article is about.

I often have matings scheduled for as long as two or even three years in advance. I remember that while I was writing my first article for the Digest, I spent a fair amount of time discussing the foundation cocks. This was because, at the time, I was contemplating changing foundation cocks. I was considering several potential candidates for this position, but one stood out over the others. However, before making any proclamations, I wanted to have the chance to mate him to his daughter so that I could see the results. The trouble was that I already had him scheduled out for the next two years, and both of those matings were pretty important. One was to a hen that I had borrowed, and the other was a hen that is getting rather old, so I really couldn't reschedule either of them. In the end, I wound up taking two rounds off each hen in the same year, so that I could mate him to his daughter this year. This is just one example of many as to how and why I might schedule the matings for a pigeon several years in advance.

Even new pigeons take time to fit into the schedule. In my view, all pigeons need time to fully acclimate to a new environment, and while I generally breed them during their first year, I rarely pair them with their intended mate until the second or even the third year. At the same time, I rarely ever mate the same pairs together two years in a row because I have found that the first year is by far the most productive. Because of these beliefs, I generally have only one opportunity to get a new pigeon mated to its prescribed mate, and I do not want to waste that opportunity on a new pigeon that is in the process of acclimating.

My yearlings go through an aggressive selection process where they are first compared against my standard, and then they are placed into one of four categories: inbred, cross, outcross, and backcross. Probably most people know what an inbred and a backcross are, and crosses and out-crosses were defined earlier.

I break up each category by sex, which results in a total of four categories of cocks and four categories of hens. As I have mentioned in the past, I winter fewer than 70 pigeons each year. Realize that even if these 70 pigeons happened to be made up of an equal number of excellent cocks and hens, it still wouldn't translate to 35 pairs of pigeons. Even when a fancier has 35 excellent cocks and 35 excellent hens, he will almost always be hard pressed to make 20 really good pairs. In my case, I generally hope to make between 20 and 25 pairs depending on the year. The fact is that things change from year to year. Sometimes I have the right mating for a particular pigeon and sometimes I do not. Since I prefer to wait for the right mating to come along, this usually means that I end up keeping extra pigeons around for a year or two.

For several years, I have been holding onto a hen out of the Super Pair that bred me a 400-mile winner. Not that I would have re-mated her to her old mate, but I sold him right after that season, so that was no longer an option. Therefore, she sat for the last two years. This year, I have a very nice mate for her, so now she has resumed her breeding career. If nothing else, she is very well rested going into this breeding season. The point is that I do not feel compelled to use every pigeon every year.

With this finite number of pairs (25 maximum), I must not only consider how many good pairs I can put together, but I must also consider the balance between the aforementioned categories. I think everyone can understand the reasoning behind putting good pairs together, but let me explain balance between categories.

As should be evident by now, I do a lot of inbreeding. While inbred pigeons can be further inbred (at least to some degree) or backcrossed, their primary purpose is to produce hybrids through crossing or out-crossing. While I have an overall maximum number of pairs (25), there is no set number of pairs devoted to each category. Instead, the number of pairs in each category fluctuates from year to year. This fluctuation is generally cyclical from inbreeding to cross and out-crossing, then to backcross.

For instance, let's start the cycling process at the inbreeding level with ten pairs of inbreds (six from family A and four from family B), five pairs of hybrids crosses (family A mated to family B), two pairs of outcrosses (family A or B mated to totally unrelated pigeons) and three pairs of backcrosses (family A or B mated to an offspring when Family A or B was mated to an outcross. This equals to 20 pairs of pigeons, which is a pretty typical balance for me during a peak inbreeding year (such as last year). Because there is less variation amongst the inbreds, they tend to produce a pretty high percentage of good inbreds, and I would expect to produce at least 20 breeding quality offspring from the inbred category. However, the following year, I would either need to replace the inbreds from the previous year, sell some combination of the new and old inbreds, or move the inbreds to another category. Typically, after a big inbreeding year, the cross and out-cross categories tend to grow (as they will this year) and since there is a finite number of pairs, as one category grows the other must shrink. Again, this is fine because inbreeding is not as much about enabling more inbreeding as it is about producing hybrids. Therefore, I really only need to have big inbreeding years about once every

three or four years with the off years being more heavily devoted to crossing and out-crossing.

You will notice that I have not mentioned the backcrossing category. In my experience, backcrossing is probably the most important category to the future of the family, but at the same time, it always seems to be my smallest category. Backcrossing is critical to the future of the program because it is how new blood is introduced into the family; however, it is often the most difficult category to set up correctly. It is certainly one category that requires a great deal of advanced planning. This is in part because there are more restrictions to backcrossing. For instance, I only backcross using father/daughter matings where the father is inbred, and the daughter is the hybrid product of an outcross. For this to happen, the inbred cock must have spent time in the outcross category, and his out-crossed offspring must have performed well.

Although a hybrid cock or hen (or both) from this mating may have performed well, I only use hybrid hens for the backcrossing process. While I do on occasion mate inbred hens to outcross cocks in the out-crossing category, I never use their offspring for backcrossing as this would change the cock's line. However, using hens in the category is a very rare occurrence simply because I usually only buy out-cross hens for use in the backcrossing category.

As you are probably figuring out, running an inbreeding program can become a scheduling nightmare, especially when you are running a B family at the same time. Typically the A family makes up 50%, the B family makes up 25%, and the outcrosses make up 25% of the operation. Generally, the B family helps me take up the slack in the crossing category. Yet, the B family must be maintained in the same basic manner as the A family, and this means that it plays a part in each category. There are some differences between the two families. Because the B family is smaller in number, it needs to be both stable and concise. As I tend to use the B family more for crossing, I pay a great deal of attention to their age. This is because I use them less in the other categories. It would be very easy to wake up one day and find that they had all gotten so old that there wasn't time to do any backcrossing or inbreeding. The pigeons in the B family are inbred, but you are never going to hear about double doubles (Double inbreds mated to double inbreds) in the B family.

By crossing the A and B families to produce hybrids, I get pigeons that can win, but because these hybrids cannot be backcrossed into either family, their value to the family pretty much ends there. The crosses take a lot of pressure off the out-crossing category, especially when it becomes difficult to find the right pigeons for out-crossing. While it may sound easy to go out and buy pigeons for the out-crossing category, I have not found this to be the case. There are many considerations that go into these purchases including the fact that they all need to be hens. I am always looking for a very specific type of hen, but truthfully there are not many pigeons that fit my specifications. However, without them, there is no out-cross category and without that there can be no backcrossing and ultimately no family. Therefore, even with all of my planning, the weak link in the whole program is the purchasing of the outcross hens because at that point, I must rely on

someone else to have a quality pigeon, the right type of pigeon, and to be willing to sell that pigeon.

While it may be beneficial to rely on racing performance under a normal breeding program, in an inbreeding program performance can be a highly misleading indicator. Clearly, winning is still the goal of the sport, but one shouldn't get all caught up in reading his own press clippings either. In an inbreeding program, results on one end of the formula may not translate to the other end of the formula. In other words, while it might be nice to backcross a winner back into the family, backcrossing is far more of a genetics compatibility issue than a performance issue. I can name more than one top fancier that destroyed his family by blindly following the success of his out-crossing right back through the backcrossing program and into the inbreeding program only to find out that they had incorporated a gene set that they couldn't control. One specific fancier could narrow the demise of his family down to a single outcross. While the hybrid offspring of this particular pigeon had been extremely successful on the race sheet, once crossed back into the family this hen started replacing the characteristics of the winning family with those of her own. Unfortunately, it took several generations for this fancier to realize what was happening and by then, her genetics had taken over to the point where they couldn't be reversed. By that point the performance of the family had been reduced significantly.

Since it is easy to fail at each categorical level, it is very important to test at each of these levels as well. As seen in the above example, initial success is not something to be chased. Instead, it is something to be pondered and tested. The fact is that there are very few pigeons that can help to improve a top family, but there are many that can help it to ultimately fail. How careful do you need to be? As most of you know, Ed Lorenz is known for his extraordinary success in what once was the biggest money race in the United States. Every year he filled his loft with 100 entries for this race, and over the course of the following three or four years, he would fly each of them into the ground. Very few of those pigeons panned out over time and those that did were tested against his inbred Horemans. Again, very few of those remaining pigeons measured up to the quality needed for backcrossing. After approximately 20 years and 2,000 potential outcrosses (Snowbird entries), Ed wound up using five of those pigeons for backcrossing into the Horemans family. That is how difficult it is to find good outcrosses!

Two of Ed's five outcrosses are very prominent in my base Horemans family, and I am in the process of testing two of my own. Although both have already proven to be successful, it is very likely that my two potential backcrosses will have finished their breeding careers long before I ever make the final decision as to whether to include their blood into the family. While these pigeons are being tested in each of the categories described above, so far, these have been controlled tests, so that should the results be undesirable at any level, their bloodlines can be more easily extracted.

Until next time!

Book

This article is copyrighted by Bill Richardson. Articles cannot be reproduced without the permission of the author.