Considering Your A, B, C's

by

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Recently, I wrote an article for the Digest entitled, "Considerations of Complications". I also posted this article on my web site, and I discussed some of the concepts presented in this article while as a guest on www.pigeonradio.com. From these three outlets, I received quite a bit of feedback about that article.

In the article, I discussed the concept of owning an A and B family. Through emails and comments that I received back, it is clear that many fanciers wanted to turn the A and B families into a C family. While it is certainly possible to create a C family from the A and B families, the real intent of the two family system is to produce hybrids that can be raced. Were I to combine the two families, I would lose the potential for hybridization that I was attempting to create in the first place. Truthfully, I think most readers and listeners that commented on a C family probably just didn't understand the point of the A and B families in the first place, and they probably thought that the offspring from these two families would be considered a C family.

For the two family system to work, it is critical that the two families remain genetically distinct from each other. Otherwise, you will get the hybrid pop from the first generation when the cross is still a clean cross (clean means no relation between families) and then after that the water will become muddied so to speak as hybridization will be lost.

Now, allow me contradict myself. Several years back, Dave Shewmaker, who is quite knowledgeable about genetics, made a suggestion to me that I have since incorporated into my thinking. He suggested that if there is some **"DISTANT"** commonality between the two families, so much the better. Notice how I tried to place some emphasis on the word "distant" by capitalizing, bolding, underlining, and placing quotations around the word. In calling this kind of attention to the word "distant," I hope to avoid this becoming the topic of next article. Through his comment, Dave was suggesting that when there is some distant genetic commonality between the two families or a single family and an outcross, there is likely to be a higher level of compatibility between the two families. Essentially, distance commonality between families provides more in the way of compatibility than it takes away from the hybridization process.

Let me give you a simple example of what I am talking about. Ed Lorenz and Dave Hunsicker have been close friends for a very long time. As a result of this friendship, Dave has received a number of Ed's top Horemans over the years. Unlike Ed and me, Dave isn't as attached to the concept of inbreeding, which has turned out to be fortunate for both Ed and myself. You see, Dave is an excellent judge of pigeons and he has many pigeons from a variety of sources. Over time, he has blended the Horemans in with the rest of his pigeons, and as a result, the Horemans have become something of a common low percentage base throughout his pigeons.

This is where I come in. Because Dave's pigeons have a common low percentage of the Horemans blood, and because I trust his instinct for pigeons in general (something I don't say too often), I have successfully used several of Dave's pigeons for out crossing into my families. It could be because Dave had good pigeons (which he does), but given that I have out crossed to a number of other good pigeons during this same period without achieving the same results, I personally believe that it has something to do with the commonality factor as Dave suggested.

With that being said however, there could be times when one might want to consider the development of a C family. In fact, I have been studying this possibility in my own loft for two years now. Essentially, developing a C family breaks down into two possibilities. A fancier can attempt to maintain the existing A and B families along with the addition of C family, but this will result in a large number of breeding pairs, and I do not think most fanciers will be willing to go that route. The second possibility is to combine the A and B families into a single family that might then be called a C family. This second approach could be beneficial when one or both families are becoming too tightly inbred, and there is limited or no availability of other pigeons from these bloodlines.

In my case, there are factors that have at least given me pause for thought about developing a C family from my A and B families. Initially, I concentrated on purchasing pigeons from Ed Lorenz's blue pearl line with the intent of them becoming my B family. At the time, the Hofkens were going to be the A family; however, as I have mentioned in the past, somewhere in there I fell in love with the Horemans, and when there were some compatibility issues between the two families, the blue pearl family became the A family, and I was pretty much forced to move away from the Hofkens and find a new and more compatible B family.

If you have been reading my articles, then you know that the blue pearl family is based around the inbred Super Pair and their double inbred sons and daughters. In very few test attempts, the double inbreds have bred a number of successful hybrids including pigeons that have performed exceedingly well in Southern California and in Guadalajara, Mexico against 20,000-bird competition. Because I was concerned that the blue pearl line would eventually become too inbred, I purchased pigeons form Ed's blue-yellow and silver lines with the idea of blending the three lines together. However, before I could begin that process, I had to produce enough blue pearls from the Super Pair so that they could be crossed against these other two families in numbers. This has now been accomplished. My objective in bringing the lines together is to reduce the overall inbreeding coefficient

of the A family to a more workable level. This does not mean that I am backing away from inbreeding. Instead, it means that I am stepping backward to incorporate a bigger base and once accomplished, I will step forward again, but in a more controlled manner. This has not been without its own challenges, but this might be a story for another time when I know better how the story is going to come out.

Let me pause here for just a moment to explain something. While I know that I have cleared this up in other articles, I am not sure that I have cleared up my definition of inbreeding and line breeding for the readers in the Digest. In the past, several fanciers have taken exception to my use of the terms inbreeding and line breeding. From a purist sense, line breeding and inbreeding actually considered to be one in the same, because under either form of breeding you are increasing the inbreeding coefficient. However, in most cases, line-breeding generally occurs more slowly than inbreeding. I have found that many fanciers become confused by the fact that line breeding is really considered a subset of inbreeding. Therefore, I prefer to describe inbreeding as mother/son, father/daughter, and brother/sister matings, and line breeding as every other type of related mating. Yes, this might oversimplify things, but certainly in today's world a little over simplification is going to hurt anyone.

As we have discussed, even though the blue pearl line was becoming too inbred, I had the tools available to reduce their level of inbreeding (using the blue yellow and silver lines from that same family). The more complicated situation lies in the B family, which is based on a line of Horemans from Ed's late brother Pete. At the time of his passing, Pete's pigeons were dispersed amongst 10 fanciers (Ed was one of these 10 fanciers) in a lottery format. As Pete and Ed were always very close, they exchanged a number of pigeons over the years, so Ed already had several pigeons from Pete even before the lottery came about. Consequently, Ed was able piece together a small but limited line of Pete's pigeons. Here again, they were pretty closely bred.

My selections from this Pete line centered around two pigeons, a slate hen from Pete's famous Hit Pair, and a burnt red cock that was a combination of Pete's Red 700 mile hen and more of the Hit Pair bloodlines. Ed actually received the old Red 700-mile hen in the lottery, and although she was 14 years old at the time, she was still in fantastic shape. At the time, I didn't have any descendents from this hen; she still made quite an impression me. As part of an excellent racing career, she is most noted as one of the seven pigeons that actually clocked on the day from 700 miles (hence her name), and I believe that she finished 4th on that race. Even at 14 years of age, she felt like she was no older than 7 or 8 years old.

I currently have six pigeons from the daughter of the Hit Pair and the burnt red cock, and I have another four half brothers and sisters from this same hen and what was called the '92 cock (he was hatched in '92). As you have probably already figured out, no matter which way I go, these pigeons will become even more inbred should they be mated together, especially since the Hit Pair hen is common to everything.

The next problem is that with Pete's passing, there really isn't another viable source for these pigeons, as anything that I could still possibly get from Ed would be more of the same. This gets us down to several possibilities. I can:

- Let the B family continue to produce hybrids until they have run their course,
- Attempt to inbreed them together for another generation,
- Out cross them to another family, or
- Cross them into the A family to create a single family.

In terms of letting family B run its course, I frankly see too much of this sort of thing. It is a privilege to own a great pigeon, and it is an honor to own a great family of pigeons. To watch them drift year by year off into the sunset would be upsetting to me. If someone was skilled enough to build the family, it seems to me that I am honor bound to maintaining it.

I will certainly test the second option on the B family simply because I would never have thought that I could get away with inbreed the A family so closely, and yet that has worked out amazingly well. However, it would be pretty unlikely to have that kind of success a second time, but you never know. I hope to have the first prototypes before the end of this current breeding season. Unfortunately, this still only postpones the inevitable, because you are not going to be able to inbreed indefinitely, and as specific pigeons within a family become more inbred, I am finding that they don't seem to backcross quiet as well. I will explain this under the next option.

The third option would include an outcross/backcross scenario, which would bring new blood into the family and thereby reduce the genetic coefficient. If there is one lesson that I have learned from the blue pearl family, it is that if you are going to use this approach, it is pretty important to do so before the base family becomes too inbred. For instance, I have a number of double inbreds out of the Super Pair. Let's consider them to be two parts Horemans. When I outcross them, I get two parts Horemans, and one part of whatever the outcross happens to be (assuming that it is not inbred itself). When I backcross, I prefer to go back to the original parent from the family side of the backcross. Since I only backcross hens, this means that I take the out crossed daughter and mate her back to her Horemans father. Therefore, I essentially get four parts Horemans and one part of the outcross.

This creates something of a two-part problem. On the one hand, because you are working with a 4/1 Horemans/outcross ratio, you don't always get the benefits of the outcross because it is such a small percentage. On the other hand, such a high percentage of Horemans seems to often overshadow the better qualities of the outcross, and often times all I am left with are the weaker portions of the outcross (a Horemans with outcross problems). Oddly, higher levels of inbreeding seem to work out better with hybridization, and lower levels of inbreeding seem to work out better with backcrossing. This could easily be an idiosyncrasy of my family though.

Last year about this time, I visited Ed and we handled his first round of youngsters. While they were quite young, I really liked a youngster from the aforementioned pair that is responsible for my B family. Later, when I came back to obtain this cock, it turned out that he had another brother that was equally as good. Today, these two cocks are not only my favorites from the B family, but they are two of my top four or five favorite pigeons in the loft. Lately, I have been considering the possibility of mating one of them with the Verbart hen. Both of these cocks match up very nicely with her. Again, with Pete's passing and Ed's limited number of Pete's pigeons, acquiring more of the B family is really not an option. However, through out crossing/backcrossing the B family with the Verbart hen, I could diversify the bloodlines enough to increase the size of the B family.

Consider this: I currently cross the B family with the A family, and I also currently outcross the A family to the Verbart hen. Both are mated to the A family, with the single difference that the B family is a cross and the Verbart hen is an outcross. Both have already worked well with the A family, so some level of compatibility has already been established with either approach. While the crossing and out crossing might work with family A, the combination outcross of the offspring from the B family + Verbart might not work nearly so well with the family A. However, there is a reasonable chance that this approach might work so it is certainly work the risk of trying. The down side is that that it will take two years instead of one year to set up this process.

If you remember back to the article entitled, "Consideration of Complications" you will recall that I mentioned the concept of double cutting an inbred. This is accomplished by mating the B family to the Verbart hen to produce a hybrid, and then taking the hybrid offspring and mating it to the A family. Through this method, I am killing two birds with one stone, so to speak. First, I am able to put the hybrids to work as breeders, and second, once produced, the hybrids can be backcrossed into the B family to broaden that family.

As I have mentioned numerous times in the past, I have been using the Verbart hen against the A family. To use her as an outcross against the B family, I need to make sure that her genetics are either removed from the A family or that her genetics are distant enough in the A family that they will work to enhance compatibility between the A and B families and not detract from hybridization. Because of the fact that the A family/Verbart backcrosses have done so well, this problem has sort of taken care of itself through sales, and I now find myself down to very few pigeons with the Verbart outcross mixed in as an outcross or a backcross.

Even if this weren't the case, it is important to note that there is always some ramping up and down time between these bright ideas. Generally, it takes several years for an outcross to make any real mark on a family. Therefore, there is time to either create distance from the B family by either selling the offspring as I did above, or by breeding farther down the generations so that the Verbart blood becomes a much smaller portion of the A family.

The final option is to collapse family B into family A, which for all practical purposes is creating a C family. In my case, I have really given this a great deal of thought. The significant problem is that I would then either need to come up with a significant number of outcrosses from other sources, or another B family. Given the difficulty that I have had identifying single outcrosses that I like, I can't imagine trying to find a new B family! Based on topics that I have mentioned herein, if I am going to consider such a move, it would be best if I did it before the two families get any more inbred; otherwise there could be a problem with backcrossing.

Ultimately, if I were to go any route, I would probably attempt to inbreed the B family another generation deeper while at the same time testing the family B/Verbart for their out-crossing viability. This would give me two swings at the same piñata.

Until next time!

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