

## Thoughts on Health

by

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Lately, I have been getting a number of emails regarding sick youngsters. Well, sick might be a little premature. Actually, at this point, they are unhealthy and headed towards being sick, or at least that is how the fanciers described them. I think it would be safe to say that most fanciers are currently in the process of raising their second round of youngsters (at the time this was written). For good pigeons that are healthy, this is when breeders should be producing their best youngsters. However, just because a pigeon has been placed in the breeding loft, it doesn't necessarily make it a good pigeon, and often times these lesser pigeons tend to fall apart after producing the first round of youngsters.

Well, I can see that I didn't even make it though the first paragraph without switching from sick youngsters to the most likely root cause of the problem, the breeders themselves. Unfortunately, most fanciers seem to spend their time focused on the problem, not the cause of the problem, so they are destined to live the same problem over and over...kind of like in the movie, "Groundhog Day". To me, it would seem reasonable to think that if the sick pigeons that these fanciers are talking about are youngsters, they have not had time to get sick from the conditions in the young bird loft unless, of course, extremely unsanitary conditions or severe ventilation problems exist, and in most cases, that places the cause of the problem squarely back in the breeding loft.

Again, assuming no overcrowding, a decent loft design, and reasonable sanitary conditions, we are only left with the breeders themselves. Since we can hope that the breeders were at least somewhat healthy before the season started, it would appear that they became weakened while breeding the first round. Once weakened, one or several diseases were able to get a foothold and one, several, or all of the breeding pairs were impacted.

Some will say that the fancier didn't medicate his pigeons before the season, and this is the reason why all of the problems have started. However, the plain fact is that good pigeons shouldn't need medication to breed simply because, as my good friend Marty Ladin always says, "Good pigeons don't get sick." However, if

the loft conditions are adequate, in most cases we are not talking about the "good pigeons." Instead, we are generally talking about the questionable pigeons that go down in weight and/or get sick while they are breeding youngsters.

Keeping breeders healthy shouldn't be rocket science, as they are one of the most resilient species on earth. If keeping your breeders healthy has turned into rocket science, then you need to get better pigeons or at least attempt to identify which ones are causing the problem. While this would be a quick solution to these problems, usually these problems cannot be so easily narrowed down to a single source, and this is why most fanciers can never figure out the root cause of their health problems. Instead, between loft, quality, and health issues, it becomes more difficult for the fancier to sort through the problems.

For instance, while poor quality pigeons tend to get sick under the stress of breeding, they clearly come apart much faster when the loft is overcrowded. These days, it is a very rare event to visit a loft that isn't overcrowded. Most fanciers are using the same breeding lofts they built 30 years ago, but with the increased shipping limits, they generally are keeping twice as many pairs. Simply by reducing the number of pairs in the breeding loft, most fanciers could cut their health issues in half.

Aside from sick pigeons, loft design is another area where many fanciers fail. Too many lofts leak, allow rain to blow in through the front of the loft, are under or over ventilated, or are built in such a manner that they don't allow breeders to get enough sun. In about 25% of the lofts that I visit, I can either see internal water damage, or I can smell wet droppings from rain that has leaked into the loft. How hard is it to keep the roof of the loft in good enough shape so that it doesn't leak?

In many areas of the country rainstorms are accompanied by strong winds, and these winds blow the rain in through the front of the loft. As long as this isn't an everyday event, the nests don't get wet, and the fancier cleans the loft out as quickly as possible, this really shouldn't be a problem. Unfortunately, I have seen fanciers trying to maintain a deep litter system under these conditions, and obviously once the deep litter gets wet, it is a breeding ground for disease.

Under and over ventilation of the breeding loft are both significant problems, and while most fanciers worry about these things in their race loft, they never seem too concerned about them in the breeding loft. Generally, it is never a good idea to build a breeding loft for a single environmental condition. For instance, in the northeast, it gets pretty cold in the winter, and hot and humid in the summer. If your loft is too enclosed, the pigeons will suffer in the summer, and if it is too

open, they will suffer in the winter. It is always best to have adjustable ventilation in the breeding loft.

To many fanciers, the breeding loft is nothing more than an afterthought. Over time, I have visited a number of breeding lofts that were dark, dank dungeons. Unfortunately, many of these same lofts also have deep litter, poor ventilation and are often overcrowded. It isn't too hard to believe that these lofts experience sickness, is it?

Pigeons need at least 20 minutes of sun every day. Where I live it gets 110 degrees in the summer, and it is pretty rare not to see at least some pigeons sunning themselves in the flight pens regardless of the temperature. Maybe the pigeons are not very bright or maybe sunlight is really that important to them. Personally, I have about four individual sections that don't get enough sunlight in the early portion of the breeding season, so I don't use them until the sun works itself around to that side of the loft. While it would be nice to have those sections to raise more youngsters, without the sun it is unlikely that they will be as good. While I could use grow lights and whatever else to attempt to rectify the problem, I think that sunlight is very important to the process of raising good youngsters, so instead, I will wait for the sun.

Sanitary conditions can be broken down into cleanliness of the loft and the pigeon's hygiene. There is a lot of discussion about whether cleaning nests and floors during the breeding season is a good idea. I am not much of a nest cleaner during the breeding season. However, I live in an extremely dry environment, so the droppings usually dry very quickly. Because my pigeons are naturally very healthy, I don't see any reason to disturb the nest area other than to throw in a little straw and band a couple of youngsters now and then. However, depending on your environmental conditions you might not be so lucky, and if you are going to scrape nests and floors at all, then there is probably good reason to scrape all of the time.

If you use a deep, dry litter system in the breeding loft, it is a good idea to rake the floor and remove the dung piles out from under the perches. In fact, to keep the dust down in the race loft, I used to clean the top of the litter with 1/8 inch wire over the end of the vacuum hose. When pigeons are healthy, they produce good bacteria in their droppings, and this helps to fend off some amount of bad bacteria. However, when health issues get out of control, bad bacteria can quickly overwhelm the good bacteria and deep litter can then start to work against you.

I spray every new pigeon that enters the loft for pigeon flies, mites, and lice before I put them in the loft. These pests can cause health issues of their own, and they tend to cause the pigeons to itch and scratch and this, along with the

pests, can cause significant damage to the plumage and is stressful to the pigeons. A handful of Borax placed in the birdbath water once every month or so is usually enough to remove most of these pests. I wouldn't do this too often because Borax tends to dry the feather out a little.

Bathing is also very important to the pigeon's health for a number of reasons. When pigeons take a bath, they preen their feathers with their beak. This has a calming effect which tends to relieve stress in the pigeon. While preening, they use their beak to squeeze the oil gland that is located at the base of the tail. As they groom themselves, they spread the oil to all of their feathering which keeps the feathers from drying out, and makes them more impervious to water and pests. Pigeons that feel dry in the feather either do not have good feathering in the first place, or they are not producing enough oil. You can usually identify the young birds that do not produce enough oil because they often have soiled tails. If you look closely at a soiled tail, you will notice that the wet droppings have penetrated the surface of the feather because there is no oil on the feather to protect it. Pigeons should get a bath once a week regardless of the weather or loft conditions.

This is a fairly general list of problem spots in the breeding loft, but I will bet that most fanciers are weak in at least one of these areas. When sickness gets started in either the young bird or breeding loft, it takes the fancier time to identify the weak pigeons because the aforementioned factors confuse the issue. If the fancier has these other situations under control, it is generally pretty easy to identify the weaker breeders that are causing the problems.

Although this article is not about selection, let me mention a couple of things that might help you avoid health problems.

The first issue is white/pink and gray under tongues. In my view, gray under tongues are generally a sign of questionable health. While I have handled a few champions with gray under tongues, I have felt that it was either caused by pigmentation of the tongue, or that maybe the champion didn't have a gray under tongue when it was busy becoming a champion. In truth, there are very few families of pigeons that have gray pigmentation in their tongues. Therefore, it is my view that it is probably best to eliminate all gray tongues from the breeding loft and thereby avoid the problem. Once the pigeons with gray tongues have been eliminated, and as long as no other gray tongues are added, this problem generally never resurfaces.

The second topic is beak pulling. In my view, pigeons should want to fight you when you pull their beak, and personally, I won't own a pigeon that isn't willing to pull back. Some will not pull at all, others will give a couple of tugs and give

up, (I call this the dead battery syndrome), and then there are those that will continue to fight until you let go. The more vigorously they fight, the better I like it. Pigeons that are right internally want to fight. Clearly, there are some pigeons that don't fight that seem to do well as racers and breeders, but they are in the vast minority. When I was grading pigeons in Denmark, I came across a lot of pigeons that I correctly selected as race winners, but they didn't pull. However, even as race winners, and I wouldn't brought any of them home. Of the five or so super champions that I also selected out during those gradings, all of them pulled extremely hard. Certainly pulling is not the answer to everything, but it is a very important starting point. Pullers do not come from non-pullers, and non-pullers that come from pullers are pretty much without exception no good. As a trait, once pulling is gone, it is gone.

Since all of my breeders pull, and their children generally pull right out of the nest, I have a pretty good idea that when a youngster doesn't pull, there is going to be a problem. Right then and there, that pigeon is excluded from ever reaching the breeding loft regardless of the race record it compiles. To be honest, this has never been a problem. Long ago, I discovered that when inbreeding didn't come together correctly, the pigeons also didn't pull. I find this to be a very important indicator of inbreeding success in the first generation of inbreeding. This doesn't mean that it is any less important in the later generations of inbreeding, but by then other things could be going wrong.

There is a strong relationship between gray under tongues and pulling. For what it is worth, in my view, if you eliminate pigeons from your program with gray under tongues or birds that don't pull or both, the remaining pigeons will be stronger, breed better, and have less sickness (assuming that poor quality and sickness are your only problems).

Until next time!

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