

Passing the First Test...by “The Book”

By

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You may remember that a few months back I wrote an article titled “New Beginnings... Doing it by the Book” in which I detailed my contact with the well-known fancier and grader, Bill “The Book” Richardson. In that article, I promised to update everyone on our progress as it occurred. Book and I have now completed our first season of old birds together and it has been very interesting to say the least!



When I first met with Book approximately four months ago, I knew of his reputation as a highly skilled selector and breeder of racing pigeons. At that time, I knew little about his racing ability. After our initial meeting, Book placed me in contact with several of his students around the world, and they spoke candidly about the success they experienced working with Book. I will admit that I was a little concerned about taking directions from someone living 1000 miles away who had never been to my loft or seen my pigeons. However, they assured me that it wouldn't be a problem.

As I mentioned in my previous article, after looking at a few pictures, Book recommended changes to the design of my loft. There was some significant time and expense involved in these changes, but the changes themselves made sense even though the season was only a few short weeks away. Book later told me, “I rather expected that you wouldn’t make the changes and if you hadn’t made them, I wouldn’t have continued working with you. By your willingness to commit to these changes, I knew that you wouldn’t be easily daunted by things that I ask you to do in the future.”

Even before the loft was complete, Book assigned me another daunting task: to develop a master schedule that detailed all of my racing activities during the course of a normal season. After struggling to get this done, he introduced me to his version of an elaborate but highly functional schedule, and it was clear he was quite accustomed to working with it. Book’s system is extremely detailed; everything is planned out for weeks in advance and documented on the master schedule. As things change through the course of the season and adjustments need to be made, the schedule is adjusted slightly. Yet, one way or another, Book finds a way to get back on track with the master schedule as quickly as possible. We were forced to make such adjustments on two occasions this year, once when I made a mistake and once when I returned from a preplanned vacation during the middle of the season.

Because I figured that things would change throughout the course of the season, I didn’t take the schedule as seriously as I should have...at first. I quickly learned that as long as I followed the schedule, all was fine. I made a couple of little errors which were quickly corrected without real comment, and it wasn’t until I made my first major blunder that Book said something...well, actually a lot of things. From his comments, I quickly realized that I needed to follow the master schedule verbatim, ask every question that came to mind, and point out every observation, no matter how minor it might seem to me.

As Book pointed out rather succinctly, “I live in Tucson, you live in Denver, and so we are going to need to rely on the phone, your observations, and the master schedule. As long as you follow the schedule, I know exactly what I am doing. If, for some reason, we need to move away from the schedule, I need to know about it, so that I will continue to know exactly what I am doing. Stupid mistakes in executing the schedule are not part of the formula.” Since then, my lovely wife, Janet, has been pinning the schedule to my shirt before I go out to the loft each morning. Janet is not actively involved in the races, but she does lend a hand and wants to see us do well. Book assures me that if he had met Janet first, I would still be looking for a teacher, because as he puts it, Janet has more upside potential in the sport.

I would like to mention that, in working with Book for the last several months, I have reached the conclusion that, when it comes to pigeons, Book is in a whole different world than the rest of us. He always knows exactly what he is doing, but it is his analytical and anticipation skills that set him apart. While it is hard to describe, Book seems to be connected to pigeons on a different level. Somehow, he knows exactly what they are thinking and doing all the time. I cannot tell you how many times he would predict

something one day and I would witness it the next. For instance, one day he told me that he had a bad feeling that the pigeons could start their molt within the next two or three days, and when I went to the loft the next morning, all but one pigeon had dropped its first flight. To make this stranger, this was the first time that he had ever flown this particular system, and remember - he hasn't actually raced himself in 15 years. These epiphanies were not scattered occurrences, they happened virtually every day. I don't know whether it is tremendous anticipation, innate ability, or whether he is clairvoyant, but when it comes to pigeons, he just somehow knows what is about to happen.

After a couple of not so good seasons here in the Denver area, I had built a team of 17 cocks, many of which had been through some tough events. As a result, it was not terribly surprising when I lost four cocks on my very first toss, and I was having flashbacks to the year before when I took some heavy losses and was out of the season very early on. Having Book aboard was somewhat reassuring, but at the same time, I didn't want to have a repeat performance of the previous year. I knew Book was anxious to test his system against the challenges we have here in Northern Colorado, and I did not want to let him down.

When Book came on board, we had 13 cocks to work with in the race loft. From the start, I told Book that this was a very tough course, and I was not expecting miracles from a team of only 13 pigeons and that we might not get very far into the season. His response was simple, "Well, Kevin, if there is any quality in your loft, we'll try to find it."

I thought that Book might have trouble adapting his system to our head/cross wind course; however, in the early going, it was almost always me that got in the way by not following the schedule closely enough, or not asking for clarification on things that I did not understand. In the interest of time, if you are nodding your head or saying "uh-huh", Book tends to assume that you understand; however, if you really do not understand, you had probably better speak up, because not understanding tends to lead to mistakes. Trust me, Book tends to be more charitable toward a lack of understanding before, rather than after, a mistake is made.

My loft is located approximately fifty miles north of Denver, and we race two easterly courses, one from the northeast and one from the southeast. The prevailing winds are often from the north, and our pigeons are almost always being blown away from our location, making it difficult to compete with Denver birds. Fortunately, there are five fanciers in my general area, and in the early races, they help to provide some perspective as to how I am doing. One of these fanciers, Rick Brown (Belmar Loft), is an excellent long-time fancier that actually lived in Denver proper before moving to his current location. Since I moved to this area, Rick and I have become good friends, and if you can beat Rick, you know you had a good race!

Our first race was from the 200-mile station. Considering everything, we had what I thought was a pretty good race, but because of the prevailing winds, it didn't really show on the race sheet against the guys in Denver proper, as we finished in 102nd place against

784 pigeons from 26 lofts. We did very well against the other flyers on the northern end of the club, clocking three before anyone on our end. Two were late coming home and Book told me to remove them from the team. With only 13 pigeons, I was more than a little concerned about doing this, so without thinking, I asked him what he wanted me to do with them, to which he replied, "Do whatever you want with them, but just don't put them back into the race loft."

The second race was easily our toughest of the season. We finished 119th against 604 birds from 25 lofts. Some of the other lofts on the northern end fared better than we did. Looking back on it, I probably had them a little too heavy coming into the season, and because it was a little hotter that day, this may have caught up with us, as the pigeons came home a little tired. Although I was worried about this, when I mentioned it to Book, his only comment was, "The tough pigeons will get the message that they need to step up, and the rest will get the message that they had better get tougher if they want to hang around."

We ended up losing one and Book ordered two more to be dropped from the team. I shouldn't have been so worried about the races thinning the team down, because in the end, Book ordered more pigeons to be removed from the team than I lost during the entire season! I don't know if we were finding the quality in the loft as Book had suggested early on, but we were certainly getting down in numbers. However, I will tell you that through the following week, they reacted much better around the loft and suddenly there were significant signs of form.

The third race was a 400 and our pigeons responded very well on the north end of the club. Under less than perfect conditions, I had a very good race, moving up considerably on Denver proper to finish 32nd and with quick returns against 373 pigeons and 22 lofts. Again, we were the first loft on the northern end, but Rick Brown finished close behind.

Not knowing earlier in the year that I was going to be working with Book, I had planned a family cruise to Alaska for my 50th birthday, and consequently, we were away for approximately 10 days. As a result, we missed two races and the pigeons went without a major toss for three weeks. When I got back, we had less than a week to prepare for an upcoming 300. On top of this, the pigeons dropped their first flight, which set us back a little more.

By this point in the season, I had become considerably more accustomed to Book's methods and from week to week things were occurring much more smoothly. Book's system is based on rest, which drove a trainer like me crazy! At first, when we did well, I would ask Book if we should train more. The first couple of times, he just flatly said, "No". However, at one point I must have gotten on his nerves because he finally said, "Pigeon racing should be about more than knowing where your car keys are,"...another lesson that I am learning slowly! Old habits are hard to break.

After my return from vacation, Book made some training adjustments to get us back in line with the master schedule, and we were fortunate to win the club at the 300 from Elm

Creek, Nebraska against 330 birds and 21 lofts. This was my first win in several seasons of racing in the Denver area, and with only eight pigeons on my team, I was quite pleased to be flying with this type of consistency against the very tough competition in the Foothills Club.

While I was busy being pleased with our results from the 300, Book had long since shifted his focus to the upcoming mass release from the Midwest National Classic race in Topeka, Kansas. This is traditionally the last race of the season for the Foothills club, and a winner from Topeka is a notable achievement. I explained the format to Book early on in the season, and from that moment on, Book thought this was the greatest idea since sliced bread and doing well in this race was all he talked about.

For those of you who may not be aware of how this race works, birds are shipped from all over the Midwest to the central point of Topeka, Kansas where they are released in mass to loft locations in all directions and between several hundred and a thousand miles away. Because the race covers a number of different states, the environmental conditions tend to determine the outcome of the race. In fact, from various club results that I have seen so far, it appears that in this year's race speeds varied from 900 ypm all the way up to 1600 ypm. Unfortunately, a number of fanciers have dropped out of the race because of this disparity.

However, Book wasn't interested in the disadvantages at the end of the race, but instead focused on the potential advantages at the beginning of the race. As Book put it, "When pigeons are going all different directions at the start of a race, there is going to be confusion, which will ultimately give the true leaders an opportunity to identify themselves as leaders. The rest of the pigeons are followers, and when the going gets tough they will either quit or choose the path of least resistance. Once the chaff is gone, it is easier to identify the wheat!"

Every time Book started talking about the Midwest National, all I could think about was the limited number of pigeons that we had available for this race and Rick Brown's comments about the race. Rick had said that this typically wasn't an easy race for the western sections and that there were usually not many day-birds in the Foothills club. Consequently, I had a pretty good idea that we were in for a tough race. I briefly mentioned this to Book once, and his response was, "And...?"

The preparations for the Topeka race went off without a hitch, and by shipping night I was beginning to think that we had an honest chance to do well as the entire team was sparkling. However, as is often the case at this time of year, the weather report certainly didn't look favorable for the western section with north winds and strong thunderstorms predicted throughout Kansas and eastern Colorado. Clearly this was going to make for a difficult race. When I again told Book that it was going to be tough, he said, "Given enough opportunities, quality will prevail, so the real question is whether you have any quality, and the only way we are ever going to know for sure, is through conditions that are tough enough to separate the pigeons in the front flock. Since you say that the

conditions are going to be tough, and our pigeons are prepared for tough conditions, let's wait and see what happens.”

The birds were released at 5:15 AM (Mountain Time) and with the thunderstorms and north winds, the race proved to be as tough as expected for the Denver area. After slightly longer than 15 hours on the wing, we were fortunate to have the opportunity to win the race, clocking one of the only two day-birds reported in the Denver area. Congratulations to Mike Katzenberger, who clocked the other day-bird directly behind ours. Lou Pendleton finished third, clocking at 6:41AM the next morning. Rick Brown finished fourth and the Sabell family finished out the top five. We were also quite fortunate to put five of our eight entries in the top thirty positions on the race sheet, and to date, six of our eight have returned home.

I am pleased to report that my winning bird was bred from a Janssen hen that I got from my good friend, Kenny Kelly of Denton, Texas, and crossed on a Red Fox Janssen cock. This cock was also my first clock bird at 200 earlier in the year, and it was a consistent flyer all season.

All in all, this has been one of my most enjoyable seasons since I began flying in 1993. I realize that I still have a great deal to learn to sustain this level of success, and I am fortunate to have someone like the Book to help me with the learning process. Keep your eyes out for another update after young birds this fall.

Yours in the sport,

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