

Input from Denmark

By

Rene Hansen

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To be sure, Bill “The Book” Richardson’s October 2005 and 2007 seminars and grading visit changed the course of several lives here in Denmark. For me it began with a chance meeting with the Book at the Ringsted clubhouse in 2005. As I had heard a great deal about Book in the months leading up to his visit, I was very much looking forward to meeting him.

While meeting Book might sound easy, wherever he goes, there always seems to be a crowd of fanciers waiting to meet and talk with him. In fact, although I waited around after his Ringsted seminar with the hope of such a meeting, it seemed hopeless, so I decided to leave. However, unbeknownst to me, he was traveling early the next morning, so while I was talking to another fancier in the hallway, both he and his entourage appeared from the conference room. Taking the opportunity, I stepped forward and introduced myself. Being late in the evening, his entourage wanted to keep going before another crowd started to form, but Book stopped and talked like we were old friends. After a short conversation, he said that he needed to be going, but he invited me to email him.

I have had people make these offers before, and I never heard from them again, so I was not sure if I was getting the brush off or if he was serious. Consequently, I didn’t email him for several weeks after he had returned home. When I finally decided to email Book, he actually responded quite quickly. From that point on, we have remained in very close contact. Away from pigeons, Book is a friendly, funny person, but around pigeons he is generally quiet and thoughtful. Because he is getting paid to do so, Book attempts to help fanciers, but if they start giving excuses or contradicting him, he simply shuts down. I think back on my first attempts to entice him into a conversation about various grains and feeding. Instead of asking Book what he thought, I started off by telling him what I thought. This resulted in him responding politely but there was not attempt on his part to interact further. Later, when I understood Book better, I discovered that in his view, if I already knew the answer, then there was no point in him adding to it. Because of the time he devotes to his students, there isn’t time for excuses or contradictions. Students need to be willing to listen and follow directions.

During the first season under his tutelage, I was expected to follow his directions verbatim. By doing this, he was able to determine exactly portions of his base methods would work on this course, and what changes we would need to make in the future. At the same time, it provided me with the opportunity to better understand his methods. I

am currently sharing time with Kevin Tapply who lives in the Denver Colorado area. Therefore, in this second season to make time for Kevin, Book has given me considerably more free reign to operate the system. However, at the end of each week we still discussed everything that I had done both right or wrong throughout the week. This way, I was doing it, and he helped me make corrections to what I had done after the fact. Next year Book has already told me that since Kevin Tapply is now farther along, he plans to let Kevin work more on his own, and that he will again work more closely with me, especially at the beginning of the season.

Part of what prompted me to write this article was that I recently read Kevin's account of working with Book. In that article, Kevin conveyed the impression that Book is very into scheduling everything. I can tell you that after several seasons of using Book's methods, I now schedule everything weeks in advance. It took me a while to get used to scheduling all of the planned events for each day, but Book insists that if you don't go out to the loft with a schedule, pigeon racing is complicated enough that you will forget to do something. Book likes to say that the race sheet will help the fancier remember everything he has forgotten to do right throughout the week. As Book puts it, during the season pigeon fanciers are nothing but a bunch of zombies wandering around in the backyard without a clue. They are stressed and tired from attempting to keep up with the needs of their pigeons, jobs, and families and they simply do not realize how many things they forget to do.

Prior to Book entering the picture, I tried to keep a mental schedule of what I did from day to day throughout the week. However, because the weather can change so quickly here, that schedule would often change several times during a single week. When things change that quickly, and you are standing in the backyard half-asleep on a cold morning, it can get hard to remember what you are doing at the moment, let alone several days or even a week earlier. Once I started scheduling everything, I found it to be much easier to adjust the schedule when weather conditions forced a change. I also found that while I could somewhat keep track of what was happening from day to day, I had very little recollection of what was happening from week to week. While I didn't see this as important at first, I soon realized how important it was to be able to look back over the events of the season. If a method had been working and then suddenly stopped working, I could easily see when I had started it, and how long it had worked. I have also found that by scheduling everything, I have a very complete system to carry into the next year.

Book is also a fanatic about loft flying, and it has taken me a while to catch onto his techniques. When I first started working with Book, he placed me in contact with another one of his students, the excellent Australian fancier, Steve Zammit. Steve told me right off that it would take time to get used to Book's loft flying techniques, but that it was a very important part of the system. Steve told me that it took several years for him to totally understand the loft flying system and after some of my experiences during this last old bird season, I can see why. If you have not had the opportunity to do so, I would recommend that you read Book's article on loft flying. In this article he gives many tips on loft flying and it is certainly a good start in the right direction.



Rene Hansen in front of his loft holding his champion pigeon 1188

Denmark is made up of the Jutland peninsula that extends off the northern portion of Germany, the island of Zealand, and the island of Funen. There are two courses, one from the northeast that extends into Sweden and one from the southwest that extends into Germany. I now focus on the more consistent southwestern course and that is what I will be talking about here. Unlike the pigeons flying to Zealand and Funen, the pigeons flying from the southwest to Jutland never have to venture out over the ocean and, in an overall setting, this is a big advantage. Because the major city of Copenhagen is located

on the northeastern shore on the island of Zealand, and because there are many fanciers concentrated in that area, in mass releases there tends to be a great deal of pull in that direction. As a result, racing in Denmark has broken up into several geographical locations called sections. With the exception of the national races, which are limited to the longer races, the sections are not released together. Here in central Zealand where I live, our pigeons fly from the mainland Germany across open ocean that, depending on where the birds choose to cross, is approximately 40 to 60 miles wide. I live on the southwest corner of the island of Zealand, and like Kevin Tapply, I am well off the line of flight as is anyone that lives to the north or east of me. For the most part, the line of flight is about 10 miles to the east of me and the pigeons head toward the much larger and more centrally located Ringsted club. However, there are times when the pigeons leave Germany at an odd angle and head up the western coast of Zealand and almost miss the island all together. These can be very tough races because the pigeons overshoot and end up coming back or crossing the island at a right angle.

Being short and off line to the west are a bad combination unless the pigeons happen to come by themselves and thereby hold a better line of flight, which they rarely do. The fact is that pigeons prefer to cross large bodies of water in groups, and, until they reach land, they are very unwilling to break up to go their own separate ways. Since they reach land approximately 10 miles east of me, the pigeons usually lose mileage flying west along the coastline back to our part of the island. This is further compounded by there being little help from other pigeons heading in my direction. It would be a very rare event that my pigeons would arrive with other pigeons from my area. For that reason, my area of the section has not typically been very competitive.

This is where Book deserves a great deal of credit. He certainly could spend his time working with fanciers that have more experience, more money, better pigeons, and better lines of flight. Yet, these things clearly don't mean anything to him; otherwise he probably wouldn't be helping any of his current students. Book is a good judge of people and he seems to know who he can work with and trust, and above all else trust is a very big issue with Book. In talking with his students, you will quickly learn that they are extremely loyal to him and they are not going to let anyone get in between. During the season there are many communications between him and his students, and this communication can wear on both parties at times. This is especially true for Book as he is working with several students at the same time. Because of the time that they spend together, it is important that Book and his students like and are able to work each other. When he is short with a student that student needs to correct the problem and understand that it is nothing personal.

Considering all of the open farmland around my house, I actually have a rather small yard, which contains a small breeding and racing loft. I keep less than 80 pigeons, and I am lucky to raise 30 young birds each year. Because of the water crossings and weather conditions, most fanciers either tend to enter 10 or fewer pigeons into the races each week. This tends to make our section entries considerably smaller than those in Jutland. While I have always done pretty well at the club level, between limited entries, a bad

airline and inconsistent weather conditions, until recently, it has been difficult for me to clock more than one or two pigeons at the top of the sheet in any given season.

Over here, our old bird season starts several weeks before the young bird season, but the majority of the two seasons occur simultaneously. Fortunately, the young bird season has always been pretty short with only six races (that may change this coming year). Sometimes having two seasons going on at once can make things a little more complicated and because of personal time constraints, I may not be as active in young birds in the future.

When I finally asked for Book's help for the first time, the old birds season was already under way, so we agreed to focus on young birds even though the season was only two weeks away. Unfortunately, in the very first week of a six-week season, the pigeons contracted Adenovirus, but we managed to finish out the final four weeks of the season in pretty good fashion. Two of these races were quite note worthy as we placed 10 pigeons in the top 20 on one race and 10 pigeons in the top 40 on the final race. Many consider the first of these two performances to be one of the greatest performances in the history of the section. The latter performance occurred on a day when there were a lot of losses.

Although at the time I thought I understood the system, I can see now that I was relying on Book more heavily than I might have thought. In fact, he made that pretty clear when he kind of let me have more control of the system going into the last race. Once off autopilot, I was more than a little wobbly bringing the feeding together properly and we were fortunate that it was the last race of the season and that it happened to be a very tough day. While we had a pretty good race, we certainly could have done better. The experience was a good one though, because it allowed me to experience the complexity of going beyond the paint by the numbers approach.

Typically, pigeons, especially young pigeons, do not like water crossings. Older pigeons tend to cross in large groups, but young birds are often reluctant to leave the shore, so they tend to cross in smaller groups, and these smaller groups are less likely to follow the traditional line of flight. When my pigeons are in shape and the groups crossing remain small, my pigeons tend to break better, and this tends to reduce my airline disadvantage. So far, on the good days, someone always seems to sneak a pigeon or two in several yards ahead of me, but at least now I know that I can be more competitive from this location. When a fancier believes that he can consistently compete, it becomes easier for him to focus on the areas in which he needs to improve.

By the time the pigeons become old birds, they have been pretty well weeded down to those that are willing to cross the open water with little or no reluctance. They still tend to cross in large groups with the majority of the pigeons heading to the central part of the island. As Book prefers old bird racing, in 2008 we switched our focus to old birds. During his 2007 visit, Book evaluated my pigeons, selected a flying method that would fit the pigeons he had selected, and redesigned portions of my race loft. After Book's evaluation I had 16 cocks left to winter.

Throughout the winter, Book constantly reminded me about the importance of keeping the weight off the two and three year olds (these were the oldest pigeons on my team at the time). He instructed me to avoid letting the fat creep into the muscles of these older pigeons during the winter months. While I tried to listen, it gets cold here and thinking that the pigeons needed an extra handful here and there, I became soft hearted. Somehow Book seemed to know that I wasn't getting the message because he kept reminding me that if I wasn't careful, these older pigeons would be my downfall at the beginning of the season instead of the success story at the end of the season. Clearly I underestimated this advice because when training rolled around, the older pigeons didn't want to fly around the loft nearly as well as their younger counterparts. The situation kept compounding because during the early part of road training I twice got caught up in rapidly changing weather patterns, and as a result, I had several pigeons out over night in cold, damp, rainy conditions and, for the most part, they were the older pigeons just as Book had suggested they would be. Unfortunately, upon their return several of these older pigeons came up lame. This coming year I will be more careful about what and how much I feed.

After a rather tough preseason, I was left with 13 cocks going into the first race. The system that we employed this season was very similar to the one that Kevin Tapply described in his recent article that can be viewed on Book's site. There were no hens involved at all, and the cocks flew to the nest. Although they took a couple of weeks to get themselves in sync, they seemed to like working together as a team, and for me, the results were quite satisfying.

Week	Station	Distance Km.	Shipped	Club placed/shipped	Sektion placed/shipped
21	Padborg	147km	8	1-5-6-12-15-29-37/68	111 / 1329
22	Itzehoe	200km	7	1-5-6-8-17-21-22/29	120 / 869
23	Soltau	282km	6	1-3-4-5-7-12/23	34-74-100 / 630
24	Bremen	300km	8	1-2-3-4-6-10-12-14/22	2-3-17-39-107/ 545
25	Münster	450 km	8	1-2-3-4-6-7-13-14/19	14-15-28-59/ 376
25	Løgumkloster	166km	2	9/4/1933	182/ 1037
26	Hannover	344km	8	1-2-4-5-6-12-18/33	93-125/ 755
28	Padborg	147km	19	3-4-5-7-8-9-10-11-13-14-15/54	70-93-102-105-106-109-114/648
28	Osnabrück	407km	8	1-2-3-4-5-6-10-11/ 21	80/442
29	Göttingen	409km	7	1-2-3-6-8-14-15/20	2-4-6/439
31	Magdeburg	347km	9	1-3-5-7-9-11-15-16-18/19	55/397
32	Hannover	344	6	1-2-4-5-6-11/28	3-12-71-117/637

There were a number of very bright spots to the season including finishing with nine of my original 13 pigeons. While several of these pigeons compiled pretty good flying records, it was a two-year-old, 1188 that was the highlight of the team placing 2nd at

Bremen, 2nd at Gottingen, and 3rd at Hannover. A nearby fancier, Michael Nielsen, provided me with a set of 19 eggs, which eventually produced 1188. Michael has since moved and is temporarily out of the sport, but for a number of years he was one of the very best fanciers in the area. I would also like to thank Nico van Noordenne of Holland, as he has provided me with many of my better stock pigeons. I have visited Nico several times, and in providing me pigeons, he has always done well by me.

During his visit, Book selected a previous section winner as the only pigeon that he thought could win outright (which unbeknownst to him had already proven to be true). Unfortunately, this was one of the older cocks that came up lame from a bad preseason toss, and I was forced to pull it for stock. Book rated 1188 as one of the next two best pigeons on the team. During his visit, Book told me that while the next two or three top pigeons on the race team (including 1188) could be consistent, he didn't believe that they had the ability to win, which has so far proven to be true. However, he rated 1188's daughter at the top of the loft saying that, like the section winner, she had the ability to win. While I am hoping that 1188 will have the ability to breed more like her, we will have to wait another year to find out.

During his visit, Book was very quick to point out that I still need to improve the quality of my pigeons on both the race team and in the breeding loft. I am working toward this goal and I hope to have four new pairs to add to the breeding loft before this upcoming breeding season. With any luck, I hope to be able to continue to improve over the next several years. I would like to close by thanking Book for all the help he has given me over the last two years.