

Confidence – The Other Side of the Wall

by

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I thought it might be good to write something today, as I will be heading to California soon, and I may not have to time to write again before then.

This article is going to be about confidence. What I would like people to take out of this article is that well founded confidence comes from experience, and experience comes from trial and error and sometimes reasoning. Those that are not afraid to make mistakes and learn quickly from those mistakes will gain experience and in turn confidence. I point to myself in this article because I have probably made more mistakes than anyone; however, this is in part because I have tried more new things than most in this sport.

Confidence comes to all of us from one of three sources: inexperience, stupidity and experience. Confidence that is based on inexperience is often unfounded. Generally we might consider this to be overconfident. Many young people are overconfident because they simply lack the experience to understand what can happen in any given situation. Believing that you fully understand something when you do not can be disastrous on many levels. The combination of teenagers and cars would be a good example. I read something the other day that said a teenager will have an accident his first 500 miles of driving, yet until it goes bad, they are hard-pressed to realize that it can happen to them.

I am picking on young people here, but, in truth, I know many adults that are still overconfident. Confidence is not something to be verbally broadcast. You don't need to tell everyone that you are going to win next week's race. I have seen athletes come out and guarantee a victory in a football game. It would be stupid enough to make such a claim if you were only responsible for yourself in a sport like boxing, but to make such a claim in a team sport is simply ridiculous. While it is good to believe that you are going to win, saying it doesn't make it any more believable.

Life is a humbling experience, and it has a way of rounding the edges on all of us. My wife has me so perfectly round and in balanced with her exact specifications, that if I were a tire, I would have a guarantee of about 300,000 miles!

While most tend to grow out of their youthful confidence, in a way, it is a shame as youthful confidence gives us the ability to try new things over and over until we master them. If you did a survey on this sport, you would find that the vast majority of top fanciers started when they were very young. When a fancier is young, the drive to succeed is very high and expectations are very low. It is human nature to venture forward when the risks are low.

In fact, all of us tried new things when we were young, but as we get older, we have a much greater fear of looking foolish. When we were young, we weren't experienced enough to realize that we were probably going to fail on nine out of ten attempts. While the failures still hurt when we were young, we were able to get a feeling of accomplishment out of that one success so that we didn't give up trying. One success in ten might be acceptable, but after only three successes in thirty, we start to get the idea that maybe life is going to be tougher than we first thought, and, in truth, this directly affects our ability to create.

While it is a very small percentage of the population that has the will to hit that wall again and again, there will always be a few with that determination. Although they don't see it this way, it doesn't make them any better or any smarter. They are just more determined at that one thing. Maybe they are more determined at pigeon racing or maybe they are more determined at their job, but the more focus they place in one area, the less focused they are in other areas (I am sure that the wife of almost any fancier can tell you this!).

While we have all hit walls, most of us don't realize it. One of the biggest walls in this sport is the reliance on road training. Generally, in athletics, training is about conditioning, and conditioning is about longevity. Very few in this sport have the longevity of the pigeons in mind when they are road training. Most fanciers want to win, and they want to win now, so, for them, road training is the best course of action. Unfortunately, it isn't always easy for a fancier to know when he is hitting a wall. This is in great part because when fanciers are racing, they are so caught up in the process that they simply don't have time to step back and think. What gets them thinking is when another fancier starts beating them and they suddenly realize it just isn't possible to train any harder. While this is only one wall, it is a very easy example of for most fanciers to relate to.

I have always said that pigeons will let you do as much for them as you are willing to do. As different pigeons respond to different things, some will respond to road training. However, because road training begets more road training, their children will need even more training. I think it says that in the Bible. If you heat your loft, then soon your pigeons will not have the fortitude to withstand the natural elements. If you are constantly medicating, then your pigeon's immune system will suffer. In the long run, the more you do for your pigeons, the less they will do for you.

While in Europe, I visited an older fancier whose days in the sport are coming to an end. He had very few pigeons, and he flew the longer distances. He didn't do much for his pigeons but race them week after week, year after year. He is not a big name fancier, but in the 3,000 pigeons that I graded, it was one of his pigeons that was probably the best and another one was right up there. Most fanciers today would have passed these pigeons by, but I was very impressed by both of these pigeons! This is out of a loft of maybe 50 pigeons. While this particular pigeon was up in age, it had only recently been retired. While I don't know this fancier, I do know these pigeons when I see them, and I can tell

you that it is because this pigeon got no special care that it had proved itself to be a champion. This pigeon had been through the wars, and it had done it all on its own for the last seven years. The fancier that has a loft full of these is a champion in my book because I know that the pigeon did all the work.

Some fancier may think that when I am talking about hitting the wall, that I am talking about getting past that wall to go to another level of complexity. This couldn't be farther from the case. I am one that believes we have gone too far in the direction of making things complicated. When I am talking about the wall, I am talking about the realization that there is more to pigeon racing than just a bunch of hard work.

Part of our problem these days is that we pay so much attention to the race sheet that we no longer recognize a good pigeon when we see it. If no one knows what a good pigeon even is anymore, then what is the point of the sport for the small backyard fancier? With 50 to 100 pigeons he is not likely to compete at a national level on a week to week basis. While I was grading this old man's pigeons, I heard the words Piet De Weerd. Steven later told me that I reminded the old man of Piet in the way I handled pigeons. I think he appreciated that I knew a good pigeon when I saw it, and he would be right.

Being a winner is a figment of our imagination. To actually be winners we would have put our entire life up for review, not just one facet of it. I was once visiting a fancier when he pointed to a wall of trophies and pronounced himself king of the world. When he was done, I asked what he thought each of the trophies cost him in terms of time and money. Then I asked him if the guy that was runner up to him spent half as much time and money and had sent far fewer pigeons over the course of the season, would he factor that in to the equation? If it was me, and, this was the case, I would have to give the runner up more credit. You see, if we were to factor every facet of our lives into the equation, we might find out that the person that was actually doing the best overall in life averaged 30 overall on the race sheet. After all I have seen many great fanciers that ignored their wife and their kids so that they could fly on top. If you are a good person and you are doing a good job in life, then you should be confident about that.

For years, this sport didn't have the technology to make the pigeons do the things that they do today. At that time, we didn't know how to medicate and very few road trained. Pigeons probably averaged five years on the race team before they were ever put into the breeding loft, but they could do this because they didn't receive all the road training and medication. With selling pigeons for big money came in the picture, we were bombarded with advertising that told us what to think. Instead of more plausible records over a longer period of time, we suddenly saw giant records in a single season. You can't do these things unless you willing to do the work for the pigeons in one way or another. I guess the money makes it worth it. I consider all of these things walls because they are not designed to make the pigeon better, they are designed to make the fancier look better. Some might say that they are designed to make the fancier win. Win what? A \$200 dollar gas bill every week.

Many people just get tired of hitting the wall, so they lose confidence and just give up. These fanciers may enjoy the sport, but it is not their focus in life, so giving up at the base of the first wall they come to is easy for them. If they could just master the basics of the sport before they die at the base of the wall, then they would be in the same general shape as the old man I mentioned earlier, and they could be letting the pigeons do it. What kills most fanciers at this level and what kills most fanciers period is the number of pigeons that they keep! This is all that separates many of these less successful fanciers from the old man. I was rather fond of that old man.

Instead of giving up at the base of the wall or determinedly running into it over and over, maybe we should take a little time to step back and observe it. This wall is an opportunity to learn something.

One of my students is still on the young side. He just finished a great season which from the third race on he flew with 10 pigeons. He flies in a fairly large combine, and I think he was only out of the top ten on the race sheet twice all season. Yet, all he can talk about is what he can do with more youngsters. He is going to force his way into winning. I have told him a thousand times that eventually he is going to get too old to do all of this work, so it would be good if he started working on it now. I guess I just have to be patient.

I often think that this is one of the biggest differences between men and women. Men tend to take things by force, where women find a clever way around them. My boys will sit in the back seat of the car and beat the hell out of each other, which is fine with me as long as they are entertained. A friend of mine has two daughters, and he talks about how they will get mad at each other and instead of punching each other, one grabs the other's doll and pops its eyes out. While both moves are aggressive, one is direct and one is indirect, yet the point is the same.

For those that have the guile to overcome the wall, there is another kind of confidence, and it comes from experience. Once you have figured out the wall, you generally gain the confidence because you now know how to handle that particular problem.

I think back to a quote by Ulrik Lejre Larsen (One of the best fanciers in Denmark), he says the following:

“Book's greatest strength is that he believes in himself and he is very good to understand where the loft is right now and where it will be in the future.”

In truth, I do believe in myself, and I have always believed in myself. However, after I ran into the wall again and again to the point where I became cross-eyed, I had to step back and examine my approach. One day, I decided that I was working too hard, so I cut all the nonessential work out of the equation. Then I started working on not worrying about the little stuff. My goal became to simplify wherever possible. This move has significantly reduced the number of battles that I was fighting at any one time, and it allowed me to concentrate on the more important things like watching TV.

I have been working on the “guy” thing (taking things by force) for some time now, and I have become much better at being lazy wherever possible. Much to my wife’s dismay, my good friend Ed Lorenz is training me in this art, and I am picking it up very quickly. As I am no longer moving very fast, I can see obstacles long before I get to them, and it is becoming easier to avoid them altogether.

It seems that every kid plays video games these days. In most of these games, the object is to move from one level to another. If you watch a kid play, you will see that it takes him a great deal of time to conquer each level. However, as soon as he does, it often only takes him seconds to conquer it a second time. This is experience. If you watch him with a friend that is new to the game, you will hear a new tone in his voice as he explains how to defeat the levels. This tone is the confidence, and it comes from experience.

Babe Ruth had far more strike outs than home runs. You can’t do great things without doing something, and every time you do something for the first time, you are bound to make mistakes. I have made so many mistakes that I can’t count them all, but then I am not afraid to make mistakes because I know that it is a part of learning. In fact, I try to avoid living by this live by this quote, “If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you always have gotten.” If you don’t try new things, you won’t learn new things.

The fact is that I am more confident because of the mistakes that I have made, than I am because of my successes, and this leads to another quote, “I have learned way more from losing than I every have from winning” (I think I made that one up once). Sometimes when the answer comes too quickly, it is because you have not given it enough thought. When something is wrong, you tend not to have confidence in any portion of the problem, so you consider the entire problem more carefully.

When something is new, being wrong or making mistakes is nothing to be concerned about. However, if you continue to make the same mistakes over and over, then there is a great deal to be concerned about. Too many fanciers make the same mistakes year after year. I think this is in good part because they either don’t even recognize the mistake in the first place, or they don’t have the ability to remember their mistakes clear through to the next year. While I make lots of mistakes, I very rarely make the same mistake twice. I said that I don’t mind making mistakes, I didn’t say that I like to make mistakes and there is a very big difference. My mistakes stay with me for a very long time. Anyway, I am more confident because of my mistakes. In fact, I am proud of them because they show that I am constantly trying new things.

In my last article, I mentioned that while in Holland, a fancier brought me three pigeons during one of my grading sessions. I quickly identified his first pigeon as a big winner, and he immediately confirmed this. While I could have put it in the show cages to represent his loft, I instead handed it back to him. Had I chosen that first pigeon, there is no way I could have been wrong as I already new he was a winner. However, instead, I passed it by because I could have liked it better, and, in this case, I thought the race sheet

wasn't telling the total truth. So I took a risk and went on. On the third pigeon, I told him to take it to the show cage before he had a chance to say anything, and, in so doing, I had picked out the best pigeon, a triple winner, in a very large combine. That took some confidence, but then being willing to grade pigeons takes a great deal of confidence.

Although my teacher was good flier when he wanted to be, he rarely had time to race. Instead, he spent his time in the breeding loft studying a single aspect of the pigeon. When I was a kid, he was studying eyesign. Later it was the wing and so on. He would often continue to breed on a specific topic until the pigeon were no good. However, when he was finished, he knew more about that aspect than anyone else.

I took a different approach to that of my teacher. Like Piet De Weerd, I spent my time looking at winners in different lofts and under different conditions. Again like Piet, I also eventually figured out what a winner was. Along the way, I made what I considered to be educated guesses. Sometimes I was right and sometimes I wasn't. When I wasn't I simply adjusted my thinking to fit the situation. With each adjustment I got a little closer. However, when I moved my thinking to a different location, I would often have to start over. For instance pigeon that win on headwind courses are going to be far different from pigeons that win on tailwind courses. This didn't mean that I tossed out everything that I had already learned. Instead, it meant that I had to remember both situations. Soon, I was remembering many situations. No one shoe fits all.

Like the kid explaining the video game to his friend, I have the experience to pretty much predict how the game is going to end. As a grader, I am in the position to share this with fancier, and, hopefully, if he takes evasive action, he can avoid the walls that I see coming. Because I have learned to anticipate the outcome of many scenarios, I am also confident in my ability to avoid most walls.

These days too many fanciers spend most of their time trying to win and too little time trying to learn. As long as they are successful with their current formula, they are not interested in learning any other formula. They are confident in their methods, but unfortunately, their methods are very limited, and, for the most part, they are camped at the base of the last wall that they ran into which happens to be the first wall that gave them any success. These fanciers sound confident, are they?

Until next time!

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