

A Systematic Lie, Part II
by

Bill "The Book" Richardson
www.ehofkens.com

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If you have not read my first article, *A Systematic Lie, Part I*, I would suggest that you do so before reading farther; otherwise, this part of the article will probably make very little sense to you. Possibly, it will make very little sense anyway, but give it a shot just the same.

In the last article, we discussed testing, evolution, fitting into the scheme, passive and aggressive motivation, and the natural system. Throughout this three part article, I hope to continue to build on these topics, and, at the same time, I also hope to add in two additional topics, specialization and widowhood cocks.

I really think that the combination of European specialization and the widowhood cocks system have had an enormous global impact on the sport, but whether this is good or bad remains to be seen. While I will attempt to make a case that, in the short term, this combination has had a negative impacted on American old bird racing, I should also say that it is very possible that old bird racing in this country was about to go into a decline on its own.

Somewhere in here, I remember stating that, "Young birds equates to a season of commitment, and old birds a lifetime of commitment." Regardless of what specialization and widowhood cocks have done to the American sport, over the last 15 to 20 years, the American life style has changed to such a degree that time is now our most valued asset, and I think that most of us are looking for ways to reduce the workload associated with pigeon racing. Coupled with the fact that everyone tends to feel more competitive in young birds, the American sport has seen many fanciers shifting their efforts to young bird racing.

Truthfully, I am not a historian of the strains, people, dates, times or locations as these topics hold little interest for me. Therefore, I have very little idea of when either Widowhood or specialization got started, although I know that it has been around for some time. While it would be my guess that specialization was a byproduct of widowhood, I can't say this with certainty. What I can say is that both have been around long enough to have a significant impact on the sport.

Widowhood Cocks and Specialization

In Europe, racing widowhood cocks became popular for a variety of reasons. While we have all seen the palatial European lofts in our American magazines, most European yards and lofts are actually quite small. Because of the space limitations, most fanciers

simply can't have a loft that houses enough pigeons to let them compete across the entire race schedule (100 to 600 miles). Although Europeans may be short on room, when compared with the rest of the world, they are not short on fanciers, so they have developed the concept of specialization. This means that many fanciers only concentrate on a specific distance or limited set of distances. For instance, I was astonished to learn how many European fanciers only race from 60 miles!

Obviously, because the United States is so much bigger than the European countries, we are far more spread out, so the number of fanciers in any one area is considerably smaller. If we were to specialize in the same manner as is done in Europe, there would be too few fanciers in any one category to even conduct a race.

As stated above, I am really not totally sure which came first the chicken or the egg, or, in this case, widowhood cocks or specialization, but specialization has certainly created a positive environment for widowhood cocks to flourish. The fact is that specialization and widowhood cocks have become extremely entwined over the years, and it is very possible that one wouldn't survive without the other. In fact, here in the United States, the widowhood cock system, as a pure system, has all but died out, and one notable reason for this is the lack of a similar specialized system. Other reasons certainly include the length of time that it takes to learn the widowhood cock system, and American's desire to train.

Over the years, specialization has worked very well in Europe, as it provides an opportunity for the smaller fanciers to better compete with their larger competitors. In general, specialization is broken down into the short, middle, and long distance races. My primary focus in this article is on the specialized races of 300 miles or less, where cocks have tended to dominate. This is in part because physically, many cocks are better set up of the shorter races, and, in part, because at these distances, most cocks can go many weeks in a row, which allows the fancier be competitive with very few pigeons.

The fact is that the majority of pigeons being imported into America are raced in Europe at distances of 300 miles or less. For the American breeding farms to be successful, they need to sell pigeons that are capable of an immediate impact. Longer distance pigeons generally don't perform well as young birds, and they often take two and three years to make an impact. By then, many of these pigeons have been lost through poor handling (such as sending the pigeons too far too early in their careers), as most Americans simply are not willing to allow the pigeon to mature properly before they push them into the longer distances.

Therefore, what most breeding farms are selling is the concept of instant success. It is hard to blame them, as there are just simply many more of these short-distance big-record pigeons available. Here is some surprising news; Americans are all about time and money! The fact is that these days, here in America, money racing (entry fees and pooling) is now the name of the game, and, because of time constraints, virtually all of that money is in the young bird races. In a way, these races can be fun in that, in this

country, we are so spread out that it is about the only way that a fancier from the west coast can ever compete with a fancier on the east coast.

However, it costs a lot of money to enter these races, so fanciers want to send the very best pigeons possible. If a fancier is going to spend big money for an import, he is also going to want to have a chance to at least recoup his investment in the money races. Paying \$1,000 - \$3,000 for an excellent pigeon is nothing if there is the potential of winning \$50,000 or more in a race. Unfortunately, there are many more losers than winners, so the Europeans are probably able to sell 100 pigeons for every one that pays back on the fancier's investment.

So what about demand? The fact is, there are more Americans that want to win than Americans that really care where they win. If we look at the average young bird schedule, 90% of all the races are 300 miles or less, and, if we look at the average old bird schedule, about 50% are 300 miles or less. On average, this probably means that 14 to 15 races a year are 300 miles or less, and this doesn't include those areas that fly double races, where again, virtually all of those races are 300 miles or less. Once you do the math, it is pretty easy to see why there has been such an influx of shorter distance European pigeons.

Realistically, most of us only have room for so many breeders, so as the number of short distance pigeons continue to increase (cock based pigeons), the number of long distance pigeons continues to decrease (hen based pigeons). As mentioned above, this is further compounded by the fact that a good short distance pigeon tends to compile a good record in one or two years whereas a good long distance pigeons will take three or four years to build that same record. This is compounded still further by attrition, which of course is directly affected by time (two more years of flying) and distance (length of the races). Therefore, it is easy to see why European short distance pigeons continue to gain market share in our lofts.

At the same time, it should also be fairly easy to see why this has had a tremendous affect on our ability and possibly our desire to compete in the longer old bird races. After all, we got into importing the cock based families so that we could better compete in the shorter races; therefore, since the percentage of longer-distance hen-based pigeons in our breeding lofts has been steadily decreasing, it would stand to reason that we would either attempt to buy more, or eliminate distance racing from the schedule.

I want to emphasize this next point! Europe still has many hen based families, but the vast majority of these families are flying the long to extremely long distance races. Clearly, Americans "could" go out and buy more of these European hen-based long-distance pigeons; however, these pigeons are not a threat in young birds, short distance old birds, or even the long races for two or more years. As there is little to no money in old bird racing, there is no potential for any payback on these pigeons. Therefore, the incentive to purchase these pigeons is very low.

The only thing that I can possibly see on the horizon that might reverse this trend is the affect that the young bird systems (darkening and lighting), have had on the sport. Like widowhood cocks, these systems are designed to help the fanciers to get many in shape at the same time and to get more pigeons on the drop. Many fanciers are starting to take exception to these systems, and some concours are moving their starting dates back later in the year to minimize the advantages that these systems tend to provide. However, in many places in the States, the window between how late they can start the races and how late these races can be flown into the winter is very constrictive.

If the systems continue to be seen as a problem, I could see a situation where some areas quit flying young birds in favor of racing a yearling/old bird series like they do in some areas of Australia. This would provide the potential for another very interesting shift in the sport. However, to be honest, I don't see this happening.

In my view, what specialization does not provide is the type of testing necessary to adequately prove our pigeon. So again, let's discuss testing. There are two types of testing, competition and survival. Competition testing is what most fanciers spend their time thinking about. For them, the more pigeons that are in the race, the better the race must be.

However, because of the number of pigeons shipped to the short distance races, the pigeons never really have the opportunity to break up, so "homing ability" becomes a secondary issue and pigeons tend to resort to a process that I call "group think".

There must to be a collective thought process for the pigeons to become and remain synchronized in any group formation. In the wild, synchronization provides protection through numbers, and it is very common for mass formations of birds to quickly and continuously change direction to confuse competitors. However, while pigeons also like to protect themselves through numbers, they don't tend to change directions in the same manner. Instead, pigeons use synchronization for pacing and breaking wind resistance.

Because of their respiratory system design, pacing is extremely important to the pigeon's ability to sprint and fly long distances. Pigeons do not sprint ahead. Instead, if they are capable of doing so, sprint pigeons set a faster pace than that of their competitors, and, those that can't keep up, tend to fall back fall back.

If the release is very large, and the distance is very short, there will be very little separation. Therefore, under normal conditions, pigeons really don't separate left or right or forward; instead, they tend to separate by breaking their pace and falling behind. Since this is a slow process that occurs over possibly hundreds of miles, and, because the pigeons are still race in a synchronized mass, they are almost forced into the process of "group think". Pigeons do not tend to snap out of "group think" until they reach the front end of the combine, and even then they only do so to get to their individual lofts. Obviously, at this point, airline is all that separates the results.

Many fanciers are wondering exactly why losses are increasing. I rank “group think” right up there with overmedication, overcrowding, poor handling, and poor testing. Some would ask why? If racing is supposed to be about the individual’s homing ability, and homing ability is being tested on a secondary or group level, then our test is not going to be very good! Through specialization in the short races, the pigeon’s strength and the fancier’s airline are clearly the most important factors in the race, and, believe it or not, with the advent of the cock based families, “group think” is what most short distance fanciers have based their breeding around.

The second type of testing is survival testing. Specialization tends to totally overlook survival testing because it doesn’t allow pigeon to be pitted against the elements. If you remember from part I of this article, I discussed the frailty of male motivation at length. As part of that discussion, I mentioned survival testing as a critical part of this weeding process. The point of survival testing is that we want to push the cocks to their maximum distance, and, thereby, force them to prove themselves under tough circumstances. We will discuss this further as we go along.

When in form and not overstressed, cocks can truly dominate. However, because they are cocks, when they are pushed to their limits, they still tend to do the easiest thing, which is to give up. I am sure that all of us have heard it said that widowhood cocks generally win on easy days. While this is not totally true, it is true enough. In those instances where it is not true, a tough race is still usually the defining moment for the rest of the season when a fancier races widowhood cock.

When I was younger, I witnessed a fancier with a team of about 15 widowhood cocks from a family of extremely good distance pigeons, finish 2nd five straight times against 1,500 plus pigeons. He also averaged seven pigeons on the front page, and he won the 600 mile race all in that same season. The next season, he started off very well again, but on the second race, the pigeons were released late and in the rain. While we were all waiting for the race to be released, we all had ample time to discuss this fancier’s chances on that day. I heard more than once that this fancier probably wouldn’t even clock. Considering the situation, he put in an amazing performance in taking eight of the first ten positions in the race. However, after that race, it was pretty much all down hill. Therefore, in this particular situation, it would be incorrect to say that the cocks didn’t handle the test, but after they handled it, they collectively decided that they didn’t like the test much, so they all collectively went off form.

In thinking of a good example of how best to describe cocks, the name that immediately comes to mind, is the famous Dodger baseball player Steve Garvey. While Steve owned many impressive statistics, he earned virtually none of them in pressure situations. If his team was up by 5 runs, he would hit three home runs. If they were down by one run, he would strike out. The bottom line is that he could always be counted on to give you more of what you didn’t need. Unfortunately, that generally describes widowhood cocks as well. Either you are getting 10 very close together or on the drop, or none on the drop.

When cocks are competing within their range of specialization and they are in form, they are very tough to beat! After all, they are specializing on their best distances, and so are a large percentage of their competitors. Therefore, it stands to reason that these pigeons will have a huge advantage against pigeons that are attempting to race a full schedule. Cocks that are specializing in the shorter races should dominate and they do.

However, most pigeons have a range of about +/- 100 miles on each side of their best race. This means that a cock that races his best at 200 miles has a range of 100 to 300 miles, and a cock that has a best distance of 300 miles will have a range from 200 to 400 miles. Short of their range, they won't win and long of their range, they may get lost.

For instance, a pigeon with a best distance of 300 miles that is placed into a 400 mile race is very likely to encounter many new situations. As an example, two-day shipping often starts at the 400 mile station. The pigeon may not understand eating in the basket, or even getting a drink because on a one-day race at the 300 miles, he may not have the same need for water. Also there is going to be a big difference in motivational techniques between one-day and two-day shipping. If the techniques are the same, they will probably not work as well on a two-day shipping, and, if the techniques are different, they will be new to the pigeon. Either way the pigeon is unlikely to react in the same manner. Also, the pigeon will have to learn to pace himself at this new distance, and because he has not flown this distance before, the first time around, he is unlikely to understand this new concept.

It is under these types of circumstances that pigeons tend to switch their thinking from competing against other pigeons to surviving the elements. For instance, using the thirsty pigeon argument from above, a pigeon that is not used to drinking in the basket is probably going to leave that basket thirsty, and it will probably go down for water in the first 200 miles of the race. This stop will cost him precious time, and when he resumes the race, he suddenly finds himself either alone or with the also-rans. He is already on the edge of his capability, at least somewhat tired, and now he either must finish on his own or finish with incompetent partners. This is when we learn how mentally tough (self motivated) our pigeons really are. This is what survival testing is all about.

As I said earlier, we are not trying to lose good pigeons that have done well under competitive circumstances, but, still, we need to differentiate between competition and survival testing. In general, when pigeons are forced to fly all distances, they will tend to select down to a slower type of pigeon with better endurance. In other words, these are the fastest pigeons that survived the toughest test.

Specialization tends to work the almost the opposite way. Pigeons that specialize compete in situations that are best for them, and while this type of racing tends to select for the fastest pigeon, it does not test for endurance or survival skills.

Before I close, I would like to take a moment to make two last points. First, there are still several top fanciers that are flying widowhood cocks here in the United States, so while I don't want to make the system sound completely dead, it has still become very limited as

a system. For the most part these fanciers have been able to adapt this system to the American method by increasing the number of cocks that they maintain, and, over time, these fanciers have been able to make their pigeons adapt to the conditions of the longer races.

My final point is sort of along the same line and it coincides with some of Steen Haagh's remarks from several weeks back. In that article, he clearly pointed out that while many lofts in Denmark had been importing pigeons for many years, if those pigeons were really making a difference in the breeding loft, then why was everyone still importing pigeons?

During my trip to Denmark, I met an excellent fancier that owned a true self-made family of excellent pigeons. He was a widowhood cock fancier, and, although he had owned the same family for many years, they were still clearly a cock based family. However, in spite of this, he races on a very tough course, and he races his best at the 400 and 500 mile stations. His major complaint was that his pigeons no longer had any speed.

While this was all interesting, it was not very surprising (at least to me), and here is why. As I said earlier, this fancier had owned this family for a very long time, and he had clearly adapted these pigeons to the course. Realistically, no matter what he did, this was still a cock based family and he probably was not going to fly two-day 600 races with any great or consistent success. At the same time, this is a very tough course to begin with, and, for cocks to become consistent at the 400 and 500 mile races, it must have taken this fancier many years of survival testing to develop. As mentioned earlier, the longer the distances the pigeons are expected to fly, and the tougher the course, the more the selection process will focus on the slower tougher pigeons. After all, the point of racing is to find those pigeons that are suited for the course.

It is my argument that if his competitors were to quit importing pigeons as Steen suggested in his article, this fancier's pigeons wouldn't become any faster, but we would expect his competitor's pigeons would become steadily slower. I think it is also important to mention here that while this fancier's losses were very low, his competitor's losses were very high. Here again, over time, we would expect the course to select out those pigeons that are best suited for the course.

This leads to two interesting questions. The first question is, "Should this fancier be happy with his success as it stands?" After all, he is still winning the tough ones and that is what the course is really all about, and, at the same time, he does not have to put huge amounts of money into buying imports. The second question is, "Are his competitors buying their success?" After all, if they can continue to bring in enough imports, they will have better speeds, and they will never have to deal with high attrition rates, because they will never need to graduate any of these pigeons to the breeding loft.

One method identifies a great pigeon man who deserves more attention and the other identifies a circumstantial winner who gets more attention. Something to think about!

Next time I will try to tie all of this together, which ought to be interesting!

Until next time!

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