

A Systematic Lie, Part I

by

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It happens to be below 50 degrees here today, and, plain and simple, I don't do any kind of work below 60 degrees unless I am getting paid for it. Since I don't see anyone out there waiving money at me, I thought I would sit in front of my computer and write an article in the warm confines of little house. As my wife is trying to watch television, she will be thrilled at this turn of events. Cindy, how do you spell “the”?

Since I returned from Europe, I have received many many emails, and, amongst them, there have been about ten common topics. Clearly, the most common topic has been about when I might return to Europe for another visit. I am not even going to go into the second topic for fear of starting another avalanche of emails. The third most common topic was probably more of a misunderstanding than anything, and, as I had been planning to write about it eventually, I guess this is the time to do it.

This topic is based on a quote from Carsten Petersen in which he writes, “Book believes that it is not possible to make the right racers when you breed with top racers from both sexes” (you can see this article in its entirety at www.ehofkens.com under Photos from Recent Trip to Europe, October 2005 trip to Europe). Unfortunately, I think something got lost in the translation. What I really was trying to say is that using double widowhood as a mechanism to specialize at both ends of the race course could have a highly negative effect on the evolution of the fancier's breeding loft. This article is in no way focused on Carsten or his methods, as these methods are currently used by thousands around the world. His quote just happened to provide a starting point for this article.

I will try to give what I believe is some rather important background information in a number of areas, and then I will start trying to tie all of the pieces together later on in this article. Please realize that I am about to present a very complicated subject, and it could get out of hand easier than I can probably tie it together.

The double widowhood system is designed to allow the fancier to use both his cocks and his hens in a high number of races, and, thereby, allow him to “fully utilize” his pigeons. Whenever I here the phrase “fully utilize,” I know that trouble is just around the corner. For instance, in this country, our freeway system is fully utilized and we pretty much can't get anywhere. At work, our time is fully utilized with meaningless tasks, so we can't get anything done. Fully utilized is another way to say that someone or something is about to get the short end of the stick!

While there are many fanciers using the double widowhood system, I have never really been in favor of the system. I have always preferred to stick to one system because as the fast food chain, Kentucky Fried Chicken, put it, "We do one thing, and we do it right." Like everyone else, I went through a phase where winning was more important than almost anything, and I used to invent ways to race pigeons more often, but as I have gotten older, I have come to realize that there are far more important things than winning a race, and, in fact, it is very possible to win and lose at the same time.

In basketball, you often hear coaches talking about wanting a player to let the game come to him. What the coach is trying to say is that the player is trying too hard, and, in so doing, he is not fitting into the scheme. Many so called top fanciers don't fit into the scheme and worse yet, they don't let their pigeons fit in either. These fancier are very easy to spot, because the quality their breeders doesn't match their race results. In other words, these fanciers work very hard to turn their "average" pigeons into winners. It is remarkable how often these fanciers live on the short end.

I think it is very important that I work to convey a tone in this article, and that tone revolves around stepping back from the concept of fully utilized and stepping toward letting the pigeons do the work. I once said, "I thought I was clever until I became clever enough to realize that I wasn't." I think there is a lot to learn from that quote, as there are no easy answers in this game. However, over the last 35 years, I have learned that the more we do for our pigeons, the less they do for themselves. I have been repeating this theme a lot lately simply because I am seeing fancier breeding out of so called winners that under ordinary circumstances couldn't fly around the block.

Probably I should stop right here, but, for some time now, I have been studying the affects that racing systems and motivational techniques have on evolution in the breeding loft, and Carsten's quote appears to give me an opportunity to discuss this concept in great detail. The problem with this topic isn't in explaining it; instead, it's in knowing when to stop explaining it!

In my view, the natural, widowhood cocks and widowhood hens systems are all very specific systems; however, racing double widowhood is a way of incorporating more pigeons into two systems at the expense of at least one of those systems. Because it is very difficult to race both systems at the same time, and, as widowhood cocks are always the more temperamental portion of the double widowhood system, cocks tend to suffer under a dual system. Unlike hens, cocks are either totally on form or they are totally off form; there is no in between. When cocks go off form, there is no getting back on form again. When a fancier decides to race both systems, it becomes very hard to give the cocks the kind of attention that they require to perform successfully.

Also, since motivation plays a very big part in any system, we must consider the two primary types of motivation, passive (self motivated) and aggressive (forced motivation). A passive system is one where the pigeon motivates itself. For instance, when a hen is sitting on 10 day old eggs, it is form of passive motivation, as there is no involvement by the fancier. When the fancier does the motivating, as in widowhood, it is an aggressive

form of motivation. Aggressive motivational systems have become very popular, because they allow even average pigeons to cheat the test and win. You might remember your teachers in school saying, "When you cheat on a test, you are only cheating yourself." While pigeon racing will allow you to cheat yourself, you can't cheat Mother Nature and in the end it is Mother Nature that is still in charge. How so? Where do your winners go when they are done racing? Your breeding loft.

I love to pick on American business if for no other reason than it is a very easy target. Here in America, management is always pumping its workers up with motivational techniques so that they can create the "fully utilized" employee. The sad fact is that if you have been through this experience, you will know that your working career extends over many years, and, regardless of the motivational tool, people just can't stay pumped up for years on end.

In fact, through this practice, companies run the risk of burning out their good employees, while at the same time, gaining little additional effort from their bad employees. I have seen guys stay pumped up for three or four years, and, in the process, they have gotten big bonuses. Eventually though, they can't keep up the pace, and they fall back to earth. However, by that time management has become used to counting on these people, so when they do fall, they are seen as big disappointments. Short-term, aggressive motivation can yield big results, long-term, it will cause a significant drain on the system. This is an example of the affect aggressive motivation can have.

While motivational technique adopted is clearly important, there is another factor that is critical as well. That is the bias of the family, as some families are cock based families and some are hen based families. Probably, I should define the difference between a cock based and hen based family now, as it is going to become very important throughout this article.

The difference between the two types of families is really a pretty simple concept, and its foundation is based on the concept of passive motivation. Since passive motivation is what nature really intended, it provides us with the best test of our pigeons. Overall, under passive motivation, cocks are the weaker performing sex, and they tend to perform their best in the shorter races. Hens, on the other hand, are the more consistent sex, and they tend to dominate the longer races.

Under passive motivational systems such as the natural system, individually, it is often a cock that will turn in the most dominate performance. However, collectively the cocks will tend to be far less dominant than hens. In fact, even in the short races where hens are not really at their best, collectively, they will still probably out perform the cocks.

Through a pure widowhood cock system, and, at distances of under 300 miles, cocks can dominate hens. However, this domination will diminish as the length of the races continues to increase. For instance, at 100 miles, the cocks will probably dominate two to one, but by the 300 it is about even again. From 300 miles on, the hens will tend to dominate regardless of the system.

We also need to consider “overall” racing (100 to 600 mile racing) and “specialization” (a smaller range of racing like maybe 100 to 300 mile racing). Given what we have already stated, we would expect hens to dominate the overall racing and cocks to dominate the specialized races, at least at the lower end of the specialized range.

Although we will discuss evolution in greater detail later, we can assume that our breeding lofts evolve toward our strengths. If we race either extreme long distance or overall races, we can expect that the breeding loft will eventually evolve toward the hens, and, with time, the family will become a hen based family where hens hold a significant prominence over the cocks. If we specialize within a specific range such as 100 to 300 miles, we can expect the breeding loft to evolve toward the cocks, and, again with time, the family will eventually become a cock based family.

While I realize that there are several other racing systems out there, let me stick to the four basic systems, natural, widowhood cocks, widowhood hens, and double widowhood for this discussions. Let’s also realize that this is a huge subject, and with very little trouble, I could write 50 pages on this topic alone; however, I am trying to make this somewhat manageable.

As I am already three pages into part one of this article, I am only going to be able to cover my comments on the natural method this time around.

Natural Method

Let’s start out by generally discussing the natural method of racing. Over the years, I have known about four truly great natural fanciers. All of them had one thing in common; their hens did far better than 50% of the winning. Why? Let’s put this in human terms. Have you ever been lying on the couch and noticed your wife cleaning up after the children? Have you ever thought about helping, or were you just annoyed that she kept getting in the way of the television?

Clearly, cleaning up after the children can’t be that much fun, yet she does it every day. Well, if you could have an out-of-body experience for a minute, you would realize that both the male and the female in this situation are acting out their natural roles. Guys do their manly eight hours, and, if that isn’t enough, “To hell with the world”. Women these days are working the same eight hours, cooking dinner and taking care of the children sometimes long before and after we are in bed (at least I think that is what is happening, but by then I am asleep). Without being told, women realize that the work needs to be done, and, somehow, instinctively they know that men are pretty much useless when it comes to this kind of work. Women are self motivated to take care of the family.

Clearly, the majority of cocks are not much better than men. However, if cocks are so useless, why do we bother with them at all? Well, while hens do most of the winning (especially on passive systems), every once in a while, a cock comes along that is a real superstar. I have personally seen a cock dominate on the natural system for eight weeks

in a row. I really don't think there is anything else like it in the sport. When he is can operate on self motivation, he is unstoppable! Still these are the exceptions.

Because the natural method is a passive system, those cocks that do well, do so for their love of territory, mate, eggs and youngsters. While hens are usually more motivated by these things, some cocks are as well. These are the pigeons that we really want to identify, and the natural system is the best method to do it. As Ed Lorenz says, "If you are trying to build a family, natural is easily the best method for identifying self motivated pigeons."

Pigeons that are allowed to self motivate suffer less stress, fewer losses, and have longer racing careers. Although I believe that widowhood has had something of a negative effect, defending territory, sitting on eggs and raising youngsters should still be instinctive to our pigeon. The better those instincts are, the more self motivating the pigeon will be. Clearly, this favors the hens, but, as we have discussed, it is not limited to the hens.

Years back, it was very common to hear fanciers say, "The strength of the loft is in the hens." When I was young, the top fanciers always told me that a great hen could carry an average cock in the breeding loft. If we are going to improve, I don't think we are going to do it by having our great hens making up for our average cocks; however, great cocks, natural or otherwise, are relatively hard to find, so that often tends to be the case.

For the male, establishing one's self as valuable to the gene pool is based on a number of factors that are intertwined with each other. Throughout nature, being a male is about being "tested" to the physical limits. This is because in most species, the male is only necessary for fertilization, and a few good males can fertilize many females. Since male pigeons help feed their young, the fertilization only approach isn't quite as true in pigeons. Still, the range of variation in the quality of males is at least four times as broad as it is in females, and it is critical that they are tested more harshly, as in most species, they are the weak link in the chain.

Throughout this article, I am going to spend a great deal of time discussing testing, and this is because consistent testing is extremely important to the evolution of the family. Simply put, testing should identify who should "survive" and who should "parish."

Pigeons are tested on a smaller scale by how they defend their territory, eggs, youngsters and mate. On a larger scale they are tested by their ability to survive such situations as decreased food and water supplies, environmental hardships and their ability to successfully overcome long flights. Oddly enough, it is the last of these points, successfully overcome long flights, that is the key to testing because it encompasses each of the other aspects. Cocks that fly long distances, have to be self motivated by their territory, eggs, youngsters and mate, and they will be forced to deal with food and water shortages and environmental hardships along the way.

Males tend to do what is easiest, and, because of their strength, they tend to underestimate the situation at hand, and this makes them vulnerable to failure. However, the best males are tested in life or death situations where decision making, courage, strength and intelligence are critical to survival.

Every species has a task. Homing pigeons are tasked with getting home. Overall, cocks are bigger framed, carry more muscle, and, based on strength to weight ratios, they have less endurance. Their muscle is also not as good at storing energy. Generally, these factors have made the males of the species better at the shorter distances.

For those males that have the strength and ability to fly the distance, it comes down to motivation. Because cocks tend to do the easiest thing, when they are taxed by tougher circumstances, most will give up, but a few will press on to the finish, and even fewer still will distinguish themselves as true champions.

While here in the United States, we tend to fly the “overall” system from 100 to 600 miles, not every cock needs to be tested that far; however, every cock should be tested to the far edge of their range. Most pigeons have a specific distance where they tend to excel. Usually, a pigeon can still win at +/- 50 miles of his best distance. The “range” of the pigeon is a little more complicated. Pigeons that fly short of their range won’t win, but they won’t get lost either. Pigeons that fly on the long end of their range won’t win, but, depending on their will to succeed, they might get lost in the process. This is the test and this is what survival is all about.

I am not advocating that we should constantly work to lose pigeons, because I know from experience that the races will do that for us. However, by the end of their flying career, we will have identified some pigeons that we are interested in breeding. It is my view that they should be pushed to their maximum range at least one time before they are retired.

While there are many shortcomings to the natural system (number of pigeons, room, cleaning, shipping availability), and, I am the first to realize that the system is not for everyone, it is still the best method for testing self motivation, consistent testing, and building a family.

Next time, we will pick up with the widowhood cocks system.

Until next time!

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