A Systematic Lie Part IV

by

Bill "The Book" Richardson

www.ehofkens.com

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As I mentioned at the beginning of my last article, I really thought that my trip to Florida was going to impact my ability to complete Part IV of this article, and, to some degree, maybe it has. However, I think that most would agree that this impact is beneficial if for no other reason than it probably makes this one of the shortest articles that I have written!

While I probably could have written more, there was simply no organized way to make this article longer and still break it up into sections. Therefore, like it or not, there is going to be a Part V to this article, and, by that point, I think I will have sufficiently beat this subject to death. As my wife has pointed out on many occasions, she believes that I beat every subject to death. She may not be the only one that thinks this either. Once, while at work, I was giving an ill-fated presentation to several department directors. As it wasn't going especially well, at one point I said, "At the risk of beating a dead horse…" One of the directors said, "Oh you have been done beating that dead horse for a while, now you are just dragging it around the room!" I thought about explaining the virtues of dragging a dead horse around the room, but I thought better of it.

I once told my wife that there was a fine line between just enough information and too much information. Without even blinking she said, "When you are done tromping a subject into the ground, there is so much dust in the air that I doubt that anyone will be able to see any fine lines." So now I don't tell her when I have left her car with no gas in it; after all, apparently it is always best to error on the side of not enough information.

Overview of the General Systems

Early on, virtually everyone in the United States flew the natural system, and I would venture to guess that the majority of fanciers still do today. However, from about 1960 on, widowhood has gained significant popularity in this country, and, today, most top fanciers are using some form of the widowhood system. The fact is that many fanciers have given up on the natural system because it required a large number of pigeons, it is a messy system, it requires a hen based family, and the system makes it far more difficult to dominate the race sheet (if you think that dominating the race sheet is a good thing).

The pure widowhood cock system failed because very few fanciers had the skill to handle the system properly, the system wasn't really designed for multi-distance racing, many fanciers had trouble building up enough good pigeons for the distance, and many fanciers believed that they were at a disadvantage because they couldn't train during the week.

Given the type of racing that we have become accustomed to here in the United States, I think most fanciers are far more comfortable racing their hens, and this probably is related to the fact that Americans do a lot of road training. This fact is that most hens tend to get better (or at least they don't go down hill as quickly) with road training and most cocks tend to fall apart. Americans feel a need to be in control of their destiny and road training gives them the illusion of being in control. However, as we discussed in my last article, the pure widowhood hen system failed because the system often required more hens than fanciers could produce (and yes we are about to cover that again here), and, with the advent of the cock based families, there were even fewer good hens being produced.

Membership and Shipping Limits

Although the number of fanciers racing widowhood has been steadily growing, the sport overall has been declining. Therefore widowhood, as a percentage of the sport, has appeared more dominant than it probably really has been, but, none the less, it has still grown very rapidly. The increasing number of widowhood fanciers (fewer pigeons shipped) and the declining membership has directly impacted the number of race entries.

With the decline in entries, many clubs were forced to raise their shipping prices, which, in turn, led to an even greater decline in membership. While raising prices might not have been the best approach for the sport, the only other option was to buy smaller shipping trailers, and, unfortunately, this is usually very expensive. Therefore, most clubs have resorted to increasing their shipping limits, in part, to help offset cost of shipping (I say in part, because there are now many fanciers that have no idea how to select their race entries, so, instead, they constantly lobby for larger shipping limits so that they don't have to make that decision).

While in the early 1970's shipping limits were commonly 10 to 15 pigeons, today, it is common for shipping limits to be 30 or more pigeons. While many widowhood fanciers were already struggling to compete with their smaller pure widowhood teams (cocks or hens, but not both), these additional shipping limits forced many fanciers to push their widowhood pigeons even harder, and, over a period of time, this extra strain started to take its toll.

Many will say that, "It only takes one to win." This argument might warrant some consideration if these same fanciers were sending and winning with one pigeon every week, but these fanciers always seem to be the ones that ship the limit. While it may only take one to win on a weekly basis, throughout the season, an 8 bird entry is not going to consistently withstand a 30 bird entry, especially on a tougher course. In those rare cases where the few stand up to the many, they don't do so year after year. Frankly, if this isn't the truth, then more fanciers would still be flying pure widowhood because in terms of performance, effort and expense, pure widowhood is still the most efficient system. Therefore, most fanciers are faced with two choices. They can increase the number of breeders that they keep and thereby produce more young birds, or they can race both sexes on what is known as the double widowhood system.

Double Widowhood

Double widowhood (DW) is a system that involves the simultaneous use of both cocks and hens (in this case, "simultaneous" means racing both sexes in the same season). In truth, DW is a trade off system where the fancier tries to benefit more from increasing the size of his team than he loses through the disruption to the system itself. In other words, it is not a better system, but because of the increased team sizes, the system has more versatility.

While pure widowhood is considered a rest system (where the pigeons are allowed to rest during the week), it is very common for the fancier to enter these pigeons on an average of 7 races per year. Widowhood cocks are often flown six to eight weeks straight. DW and the natural system are also considered rest systems, but that rest is more focused from week to week than day to day.

For instance, the fancier can put more pressure on the cocks in the shorter races and allow the hens to rest for the longer races. Many schedules around the United States are set up so that at the end of the season, there are short races intermingled amongst the long races. If the cocks can handle the shorter races, then the hens will get more rest, and, the fact, is that rested pigeons are less likely to get lost, which tends to benefit the fancier on a year to year basis. Even through the DW system doesn't generally favor the cocks and they may not turn in their best performance under this system, they will generally be close enough to keep the fancier in average speed, and, when they happen do well, they will collect points. If the cocks are successful even 1/3 of the time, most DW fanciers believe that the cocks have done their job.

In recent discussions with several top DW fanciers, most admitted that DW didn't enhance the superstars nearly as much as the pure systems, and that if they only had to race one series, they would go to a pure system. However, the problem is that we don't race one series, we race year after year, and while the superstars may lose a little under DW, overall, most fanciers felt that through increased numbers, they were more competitive using the DW system. With more pigeons, they were better able to rest some pigeons each week, and in turn this reduced losses and made pigeons available for the following year.

One fancier alluded to the fact that because he always sent a few cocks and a few hens, his losses were more in balance. Most of these fancier admitted to almost the opposite, and they stated that when there were big losses, the cocks always got hit the hardest (which created a problem the following year), and this was especially true for those fanciers that raced on a headwind course. While several of these fanciers felt that DW was a better overall system, most admitted that they would go back to a pure system if the shipping limits were smaller.

The Math behind Double Widowhood

To understand the advantages of DW, it is important to understand the disadvantages of a pure widowhood system. To illustrate the difference, we are going to need to do some

number crunching, so let's go back and look at the widowhood hen system as an example.

As we have discussed several times over the course of the entire article, under a pure widowhood hen system, it requires approximately 12 pairs of breeders to produce 100 pigeons, and based on previous math, this boils down to approximately 15 yearling, which then boils down to a team size 15 yearlings, 10 two year olds, and 5 three year olds or a total of 30 hens.

Any pure system, it comes down to the fancier's ability to manage numbers and risk. Managing numbers comes down planning out shipping intervals and race distances For instance, in a ten race series, I allow my short distance hens to race 6 races or less. On the longer races, I limit my hens to three short races and two long races. Realizing that I rarely race the yearlings past 400 miles and the three year olds rarely win under 500 miles, much of the numbers management centers around the two year olds because they tend to fly the entire course.

Risk management has to do with the number of pigeons that I am willing to enter into a specific race. This is where the fancier must take into account, the importance of the race, the distance of the race, the strength of his entries, and the environmental conditions expected for the race. On a standard race, my entry for a 15 bird shipping limit is going to be between 7 and 10 pigeons. Most likely, on a shorter race it is going to be closer to 10 entries and on a longer race it is going to be closer to 7 entries. Therefore, 10 pigeons is 1/3 of my team and 7 pigeons is approximately ¼ of my team. Risk management is going to differ from person to person depending on how risk adverse the fancier happens to be. However much of risk management will be based on the skill of the fancier and the complexity of the course.

However, when the shipping limit increases from 15 pigeons to 30 pigeons, week in and week out, shipping seven to ten pigeons isn't going to cut it. This is not because my best pigeons can't compete with their best pigeons; instead, it has more to do with the unusually tough, oddball or smash race where numbers tend to matter. These days, there are many races with extremely spotty returns, and these races often don't have anything to the conditioning or quality of the pigeons. Instead, there seems to be pockets of pigeons and one pocket is just better positioned on that particular day. This is where numbers really come in handy. The more pigeons that fancier has in the race, the more likely he will have at least one pigeon in each of these groups.

In fact, in the case of a smash race, the front runners have usually taken a wrong turn, and been bypassed by those pigeons that are farther back in the pack. At this point, the race is more like a lottery than a race, and, the more pigeons the fancier has in the race (regardless of condition or quality), the better his chances. However, even in doing well under these conditions, the fancier is still going to lose a lot of pigeons and so the question becomes how many he things he can afford to lose.

Obviously if I intend to maintain my entry ratio of 50% of the shipping limit, I am going to have to increase my risk by increase my shipping limit to 15 pigeons or half of my 30

bird team. While I can do this in the short races, it becomes very difficult to do in the longer races. While I expect losses in the longer races, on a tough course, it is difficult to get through all of the shorter ones without at least one bad race. While the fancier might get away with a higher level of risk for a while, eventually it is going to catch up with him.

As mentioned earlier, in many areas the mob flyers love to schedule several short races amongst the longer races at the end of the season. I call these races rhythm busters and that is their purpose. The mob loves these races because they provide an opportunity to ship all the junk to a short race so that they can get them ready to be lost at the 600. I guess in this way, those fanciers ease their conscience for sending them at all. For a small team, rhythm busters are difficult for the fancier to schedule, because he is already dividing his team amongst all the long races, and to go back to the shorter races will require a change in feed with breaks the rhythm. For all of these reasons, the bottom line is that on most courses, a 30 bird race team is just not enough.

When I switched from the natural system to the widowhood system in 1974, it was because I was a junior member, and I couldn't keep enough pigeons to race the natural method effectively. Later, when it was possible for me to keep more pigeons, I still didn't want to race the natural system because I didn't have time for all the work that was involved, so widowhood was still the best answer. However, then the limits jumped and the only real options to a bigger shipping limit was to keep more breeders and raise more youngsters or racing DW.

When the shipping limit was 15 pigeons, I could get by with 12 pairs of breeders. In my mind there are very logical reasons for keeping this many pairs (Please see my article: 'The Relationship between Age and Quality' at www.ehofkens.com). Now to maintain the same entry/shipping ratio with a 30 bird shipping, I would have to keep 24 pairs of breeders, and raise 200 youngsters. This would require a bigger loft, substantially more feed, more medication, and so on. Also, whatever work I avoided doing under the natural system, would be staring me in the face in the breeding loft.

While under the DW system, I am probably not going to get by with 12 pairs of pigeons, I can probably get by with 15 to 18 pairs, and this is what many fanciers are currently doing. Again based on my article 'The Relationship between Age and Quality', 15 to 18 pairs are probably going to ensure that a fancier buys at least three to five pairs every couple of years, but this is what many fanciers are also doing as well.

Until next time!

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