

A Systematic Lie, Part 3

by

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Well, as you can see, this is the third portion of my never-ending article ‘A Systematic Lie, Part 3’ (better known as Mr. Toad’s wild ride, or at least that is what it has been on this end so far). Before I go further, let me say that this is a very busy time of year for me, and I am sort of disappointed that I have not been able to complete this article before now. Because I am so limited on time, these articles are not being edited as carefully as I might otherwise like. Also, because I need to make a quick trip to Florida, I may have to miss the next issue.

Because of the length of this article, and, because I initially sat down and wrote it in a single sitting (20 pages), you can probably imagine that a little editing has taken place since that first attempt. While the first segment wasn’t too bad, the second segment was pretty much a total rewrite, and then I had some difficulty getting it in line with the first segment. Heading into this third segment, I am now wondering if it will align with the first and second segments. I would be worrying about this a little more if I had any real confidence that any of the segments actually lined up with anything beyond the confines of my own imagination.

Probably, I lost most of my would-be critics (and maybe everyone else) around page three of Part I. This is where long articles and the lack of audience participation really come in handy because if no one tells me that this article lacks continuity, I can and will assume that it is brilliantly written. If this is not the case, then it was at least written with brilliant intent, and that is almost the same thing.

In the last two articles, we discussed testing, evolution, fitting into the scheme, passive and aggressive motivation, natural system, specialization, and widowhood cocks. In this article, I hope to continue to build on these topics, and, at the same time, I also hope to add in an additional topic, widowhood hens. While I would also like to include double widowhood, it is my guess that I won’t get quite that far, and of course being the author there is an excellent chance that I will look very good in this assumption, as I am at least somewhat in control of the outcome.

Widowhood Hens

I don’t really know where widowhood hens started, but here in the United States, it was probably sometime in the early to mid 1960’s. While, up to that time, a small number of fanciers flew some variation to the widowhood hen system (mostly celibate hens), to my limited knowledge, it was Phil Brodhag that first flew a full-blown widowhood hen

system here in the United States. While Phil had amazing results with the system, it was Art Hees that propelled the system to the forefront of the American sport with what I would still consider to be the single most amazing season probably ever flown here in the United States. This season occurred in 1974 old birds, where he won the 300, 400 and 600 mile races while averaging seven pigeons on the front page every week for the entire season, and against 150 lofts and 1500+ pigeons a week.

The widowhood hen system was tailor-made for the hen based families of the time, and, while the system is very competitive at all distances, in the right hands, it can simply dominate the long distance races. However, there are still a couple of problems with the system.

First, let me start off by saying that in my seminars, I generally mention that hens should bring grace to the family and cocks should bring strength to the family, as it is my view that these are the roles of the two sexes. When a fancier races a single sex for multiple generations, the secondary sex can't really have the same dominance in the breeding loft.

Before I give an example of what I am talking about, I need to mention that the shift between grace and strength can swing either way. Hens can become "stronger" and thereby lose the finesse traits, and cocks can become too graceful and thereby lose their power. While knowing that this article is about hens, and, while knowing that the grace – strength transformation can move in either direction, I still really think that initially it is much easier for most fanciers to see what I am trying to say when we use widowhood cocks as my example.

Therefore, let's assume that performance is the key to testing. Obviously, not every line within a family is going to have the same level of success. Clearly, a widowhood cock fancier can judge the success of his cocks through their performance. Those that perform well are what the fancier considers his "hot" breeding lines. While the fancier can judge the cocks on the race sheet, how does he judge the performance of his hens? In truth, most fanciers would select hens from the "hot" lines as well. After all, logically most fanciers wouldn't want to shift away from their success.

The fact is that when the grace – strength balance is at its optimum, both sexes within a family will also fly at their optimum. However, when one sex is left out of the equation we are left to guess about the ability of that sex. Therefore, even though the fancier's "hot" line of pigeons might be perfect for producing performance cocks, it might not be so perfect for producing performance hens. Since the hens are not tested under a pure widowhood cock system, their selection is really based on what the fancier know about the cocks and at the expense of what the fancier doesn't knows about the hens.

The problem here is that while the fancier is working toward the strength of the cocks (based on performance), he is also working away from the strength of the hens (grace) based on a lack of performance. Under a pure widowhood cock system, and over the first couple of generations, working towards the strength of the cocks may appear to be a good

thing, as it will likely result in a significant short-term improvement in the performance of the cocks.

However, as the fancier continues to select his hens based on the performance of the cocks, and, since the hens are not raced, the fancier starts to discover that the hens start to take on many of the attributes of the cocks from his “hot” lines. In this process, their heads will grow larger and thicker, they will often become wider at the shoulder, their bodies will be shorter in overall length, their bodies will get somewhat deeper, and their bone structure tends to get thicker. Clearly, these are all cock traits.

Obviously, this can work in the opposite direction as well. As we have already stated, the hen should provide grace to the mating and cocks should provide strength. When only hens are flown, grace will begin to outweigh strength. Under either scenario, the fancier can generally see signs of a directional shift within three to four generations.

This is probably a good place to mention that every day I walk through a park on the way to buy my lunch. I have really grown to enjoy this walk because on the way, there are many wild pigeons. When I have time, I like to sit and watch these pigeons as there is a great deal to learn from them. Nature has an interesting way of breaking things down into very basic elements. For instance 95% of all wild pigeons are black checks with yellow eyes. I find it fascinating that in the wild, dominant means dominant so all you see is dominant colors.

In a way, I think that these wild pigeons illustrate my point about cock based and hen based families. If you observe these wild pigeons from a while, you will notice being in the wild is much more like racing on the natural system and that the cocks look a great deal more like hens than they do in our modern day homing pigeons. Here again, when both sexes are being tested equally and the test is survival, hens tend to dominate the grace-strength balance so grace starts to outweigh strength. This leads to smaller more graceful cocks.

Back in the early days of the sport, most, if not all, fanciers were flying natural. However, when fanciers first started racing widowhood cocks, it was quickly realized that a small number of cocks could produce terrific performances over the course of a six to eight week period. For many years, fanciers were consumed with improving the widowhood system, and, at least initially, they were probably far less worried about their success at the distance than they were at gaining a handle on the system. While natural and widowhood cocks both take about the same amount of time, most fanciers considered widowhood the easier and more efficient of the two systems, and, because other fanciers couldn't take the chance of being left behind, the system grew very quickly!

So why did widowhood cocks dominate over widowhood hens when the transition from natural to these other systems first began? Again, I have not been able to establish with certainty that widowhood came about before or after specialization; however, if widowhood cocks came before specialization, then we need to remember that this was a time when “men were men,” and no self respecting fancier was going to walk a crate of

hens down to the club. I still hear many fanciers talking about the prowess of the male in this or any other species (after all they are males themselves). If widowhood cocks came after specialization, then we can assume that it was specialization itself that forced the change.

Given that the natural system is a hen based system, and that widowhood hens are even more of a hen based system, had widowhood hens been the first to be embraced, it is very likely that specialization (assuming that it came first) and possibly widowhood cocks would never have achieved the same notoriety.

However, whatever the reason, the cock system will probably always be a very big part of the European sport. In fact, I have recently been hearing rumors that in Belgium, they are considering limiting exactly how often hens can be raced. If this is true, you can better understand the engrained resistance to the hens system and its outright threat to mid-distance specialization. Imagine the resistance there would have been 60 years ago!

The fact is that, overall, cocks are just not as efficient as hens in races over six hours in length, and this has a lot to do with feeding, energy storage, metabolism and general endurance. At the same time, however, some have adapted their racing techniques and their cocks to the distance (especially the middle and even the middle long distance races).

At the end of Part 2 of this article, I discussed a fancier that races widowhood cocks from short to long, but his real specialty was the middle long races. Obviously, he has been able to adapt his cocks to the longer distances with excellent success, and, while he has built an excellent cock based family over the years, I would liken it to bringing a knife to a gun fight. The same would be true of a hen fancier that wanted to specialize at 300 miles and under. As some will object, I think that this probably deserves some explanation.

I am not trying to say that cocks can't win long (he is doing it), or that hens can't win short, because these things happen all the time. What I am saying is that statistically, hens favor the longer distance and cocks favor the shorter distance, so when you are trying to make one gender do the job of the other gender, then you are fighting both nature and probability.

The second problem (if you can still remember that there was a first problem a page or two back) is that, widowhood hens store fat very easily (almost too easily) as they get older. I have discussed fat as a positive energy source in the past, but for this article we are only interested in deep or old fat. Deep fat generally builds up on most hens during the off season when they are allowed to sit. The older the hens get, the faster this deep fat builds up and the slower it is to burn off.

Through a combination of training and raising youngsters, older natural hens can generally burn off deep fat fairly easily. For fear of starting the moult, many fanciers don't let their widowhood hens raise youngsters prior to or during the season. Therefore,

widowhood hens can't burn the deep fat off as easily, and this becomes a serious disadvantage, especially for the older hens. As the percentage of deep fat continues to grow with each off-season, it then takes longer at the start of each new season for the pigeon to burn off the deep fat. There comes a time for many hens where they simply can't burn off the fat in time to become competitive. Obviously, this reduces the length of their racing career.

The third problem is that because widowhood hens are not raising youngsters, they are in a position to go to more races. While in a single season, this may appear to be an advantage, in the long term the miles build up and the hens fall apart structurally. I have read a lot of articles recently where because women gymnasts don't have the same strength in bone and joint structure as their male counterparts, they tend to show signs deterioration much earlier in life. I am not sure that this comparison totally holds up in pigeons because most cocks are not consistently counted on at the distance, and, therefore, they usually don't receive the same pounding anyway.

The fourth problem with widowhood hens is keeping the numbers up on the race team. Let me give you an example. Let's say that the average fancier raises 100 youngsters and 50 are hens. Then let's assume that the fancier needs to cull out 10 hens for various reasons, he loses 5 hens around the loft, and he loses 5 hens during training. This leaves the fancier with 30 hens to start the young bird season.

Since the fancier is racing widowhood hens, let's assume that he is working with a hen based family. Since the cocks will be less dependable in a hen base family, we can assume that the hens will take up the slack for the cocks throughout young birds. This will be especially true at the distance where losses will probably be higher overall. Therefore, let's assume that the fancier finishes the season with approximately 15 hens, and that he moves these to the old bird team to perform as yearlings.

Assuming that the fancier only races these yearlings to the 400 mile race in old birds (they should still be somewhat tired from young birds), the fancier is still likely to lose another 5 pigeons in their yearling year. This would leave 10 two year olds hens for the race team. Assuming that these two year old hens race through 600 mile, and he loses another 5 of them in the process, there should be approximately 5 hens that graduate to become three year olds. As we have discussed, after their three year old year, the widowhood hens are pretty much finished. This means that assuming everything goes right, we can expect for there to be 15 yearlings, 10 two year olds, and 5 three year olds for a total of 30 widowhood hens at the beginning of any season.

As you can see, the numbers only just work on a year to year basis if everything goes exactly right. However, since we are talking about pigeon racing and as Ed Lorenz is so fond of saying, "There are way more lows than highs in pigeon racing," we can probably expect at least some trouble along the way.

Unfortunately, all the math in the above was based on the fancier having a hen based family. However, as we have been mentioning all along, hen based families are very

difficult to come by these days, as they have been for the most part diluted or displaced by the cock based families. The affect here is that fewer pigeons are making to through their young bird in general and fewer hens can now handle the distance races in old birds.

While some cock based hens do tend to race well during the old bird season, they are much more limited in their ability to race the distance. Obviously, with this limitation we are once again bring a gun to a knife fight as the hens are not going to be the cocks at their game. Also, because many of the hens behind the cock based families are not consistently tested, the hens out of the cock based families are not nearly as reliable (higher losses) at any distance as the hens from the old hen based families. Finally, many of the cock based families produce an additional 10% cocks, making the young bird split between cocks and hens more like 60%-40% cocks to hens. When you combine these factors, you can see that it is a little more difficult to be a pure widowhood hen fancier these days.

From these examples, I also hope that you are starting to understand exactly how much pigeon racing is like gambling in Las Vegas. It is critical that you understand and play the odds at every turn. The success of most systems is based on a very small margin of error! To be successful, you must have so many yearlings, so many two year olds and so many three year olds. When a fancier experiences a bad young bird season, it will have a ripple effect that will be felt over each of the next three years.

Using the above, and realizing the impact of the cock based pigeons on the widowhood hen system, we should take some time to understand something that I call the “rate of absorption”. Evolution is not always a linear process. Because the concept of pigeon racing is an invention of man, it is anything but a totally natural concept. Therefore, as fanciers, our decisions have a very big impact on the evolution of our pigeons. Evolution is not just based on the “test”; it is even more dependant on the consistency of the test. When the test is inconsistent, evolution cannot be linear.

For instance, here in the United States, we generally race all distances. However, recently there has been an ever increasing emphasis on young birds. In a system that races all distances, our pigeons would logically always evolve toward the longer distances since those pigeons that couldn't race these distances would be lost. However, as the sport continues to evolve toward young birds, the chain of evolution built around all distance racing is broken, and the pigeon population begins to skew toward the shorter faster maturing young birds.

Many areas of the country are constantly changing the “test” simply by constantly changing the direction of the race course. It is impossible to build on your breeding program when these types of changes are being made every other year. As an example, pigeons that were tested on a headwind course will not be quick enough on a tail wind course and vice versa.

Long ago, Europe chose the path of specialization, and, to their credit, they have stuck with it over the years. Because of the consistency of this test (the direction of the course

and specialization) a substantial number of hen based families were able to evolve into what are today cock based families that performed well in the short and the middle distances.

If Europe to discontinue specialization tomorrow, evolution toward the cock based family would be discontinued, and within fifteen to twenty years, the pigeons would swing back to the hen based families. This would be another example of a break in the evolutionary chain.

The concept of “rate of absorption” says that we are the sum of all of our pieces. If all the current pieces happen to be oranges, and we begin to add apples, in effect, we are reducing the percentages of oranges. One apple can be absorbed reasonably quickly, but twenty oranges in a single addition may lengthen the period of absorption. If we add twenty apples to an overall population of 100 oranges could so dilute the population that we would no longer have either oranges or apples, but instead something in between.

Think of it as a range where 20% or fewer apples might be absorbed in to the oranges, from 20% to 50% might create a hybrid that favors oranges. From 50% to 80% may create a hybrid that favors apples, and, above 80%, apples may absorb oranges. Also realize that time plays a big part in the rate of absorption. If a total of 20 apples are add in a single year, it is going to have a much bigger impact than if one apple is added each year for 20 years.

If our pigeons have been part of a long distance family for many years, and we suddenly add a short distance pigeon into that family, there is going to be some confusion in the evolutionary process, but that confusion should be absorbed within a generation or two. This is because that one piece was not enough to disrupt all of the pieces of the family. However, should we continue to add in more of these short distance pieces, there will come a time when the existing family will no longer be able to handle rate of absorption.

Therefore, had we only imported a few cock based pigeons, I think in the long run, the hen families would have been able to absorb a limited number of cock based pigeons. However, since the cock based pigeons were added faster than they could be absorbed, they at best created a hybrid situation that was dominated by the cock based families, and at worst, the hen based pigeons were absorbed into the cock based families as described above.

Clearly, this article has gone on much longer than anticipated, and unfortunately, I still need to cover double widowhood and provide some sort of conclusion. Therefore, I think that I am going to stop here for now.

Until next time!

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