

Creating Constants and Eliminating Variables

by

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As you can probably guess, I get a lot of emails...thankfully, not as many as I used to get, but I still get far more than my share. Aside from my usual contacts, a good many of these emails are from fanciers looking for information about breeding and other topics, but a number of them are also addressed to the topic of racing. It is sort of interesting how cyclical these topics often are. For instance, I can pretty much count on fanciers contacting me about racing information just prior to the upcoming racing season when there is not enough lead-time to really help them in any way. Over the last two seasons, I will say that this trend has improved a little, and now instead of contacting me on the week of the race, some fanciers are actually contacting me as much as a month before their season is to begin. This still isn't great, but it is certainly an improvement.

Truthfully, even with the proper lead-time, I am not wild about helping fanciers with information about racing. It is not necessarily that I am trying to duck the subject, but unless you take the time to really sit down and understand someone's situation, it is pretty difficult to give any meaningful advice. Although it would certainly be nice to say something like, “Do this and you will be a champion,” given the difference in circumstance, this really isn't possible.

There are a limited number of situations where I do help a fancier and, in those cases, it usually takes about three years before they are totally on their own. As a result of the significant time constraints associated with helping fanciers with their racing, it just isn't practical for me to help more than three at a time and, the truth is that even then, it is an unimaginable amount of work. To help with this workload, I try to stagger these fanciers out over a three year period so that one is starting when another is finishing. I used the word “help” to describe those situations where I do get involved, but “help” is a pretty gentle word for a not so gentle situation.

Because of the extensive time that it takes, these days, I only work with situations that intrigue me, but for whatever reason, these situations are rarely any different than when

fanciers that write me seeking advice...there is never any lead-time going into that first season. Unfortunately for me, this makes things far more difficult that first year, and I am forced to learn a great deal of extremely important information in a very short period of time. I need to know a great deal about fancier, including how much time and money they have to devote to the sport, how quickly they can learn, and how experienced they are. I need to know about the quality of their pigeons and what those pigeons do best. I need to fully understand the loft conditions, environmental conditions, and the terrain of their course. Clearly the list is more detailed than this, but I think you get the idea.

Because I am helping from a distance, it is pretty important that the fancier relay every detail. Unfortunately, these fanciers are not experienced with my way of doing things, but I guess that if they were, they wouldn't have contacted me in the first place. They are my eyes in the situation, and sometimes it takes a while for them to learn how to translate what they see into what I need to know. Eventually, they do get better at this, but when you are racing, "eventually" is a bad word. For them to learn and for me to stay on top of things, there are many emails and phone calls exchanged during that first season. Basically, during that first season, it is generally three to four months of hell for the both of us.

After the first season, fanciers know how to build and follow a schedule. While the schedule is extremely important to them on a day-to-day basis, it is critical for me as well. As I have already said, there are many compounding details to pigeon racing, and as I am working with several fanciers at a time, I use the schedule to help me keep each of their situations straight. After the first year, they generally have a better understanding of how to schedule and how the basics of the system work. At that point, I expect them to become more proactive. They are expected to schedule the entire season out in advance, and instead of me explaining how they should handle the upcoming week, they now explain to me how things went in the previous week. In the third year, I try to work more closely with them again, and I watch for any bad habits they have picked up when they were under less supervision in the previous year. At that point, they have a pretty good understanding of the system that they are using.

As I keep mentioning it, but now you can probably guess that I consider scheduling as pretty important. I have been looking at these same schedules for 20 years, and since each fancier's schedule is formatted to my specifications, I can refresh my memory to the entire season within minutes. Schedules not only act as a plan going forward, but they also provide a history of everything that has happened in the past. The schedule allows me to closely track numerous aspects of the system from day-to-day, week-to-week, and season-to-season. Without this type organization, the fancier would most assuredly mess up and in pretty short order. The truth is that they usually do anyway and, as a result, I tend to get quite animated at those times. After all, we go to the work of developing a schedule so that we can follow it.

I am sure there are some fanciers out there saying, "Well wait a minute. How can they be scheduling an entire season in advance with any accuracy? After all, there is no way he

is going to be able to determine what type of training and feeding will be necessary each week.” We will talk about that in a minute.

In the past, I used to do some gray logic programming. For the most part, situations that require gray logic programming have not direct solutions. Therefore, it is up to the programmer to create constants, eliminate variables, and prioritize and control those variables that remain. There may not be a direct answer to the problem, but as you continue to identify potential constants and eliminate or control variables, probable solutions do appear. At this point, it is often possible to reverse the logic and work from the potential solutions back to the original question, and sometimes the relationship is more linear in that direction. These same methods can be easily adapted to pigeon racing on a variety of levels.

Wherever possible, creating constants is extremely important to the development of both breeding and racing methods. A constant is a situation that doesn't change or, in some cases, changes as little as possible. For instance, I might train on the same day or days every week. That would be considered a constant. However, the race day might change because of a holiday, and then I might need to change my training slightly. The change might not qualify as a constant, but depending on the situation, it might be constant enough to still be considered a constant, especially when that change applies to everyone else as well.

Generally, there are two different approaches to racing. Most fanciers give the pigeons what they think they need in terms of training (and possibly feeding) on a weekly basis. In other words, they are catering to those that believe they are in shape. Maybe they give two short tosses and a long toss one week and two long tosses the next week, or maybe they switch the days of training. Their changes may even require a change in feeding throughout the week. The more changes they make, the more variables they create. To complicate things still further most fanciers have pigeons from a variety of sources, and each of these tends to respond differently to the fancier's ever-changing methods. Once again, this creates even more variables. In essence, the fancier is “chasing” the success of a few pigeons at the risk of creating many more variables. Think of this approach as similar to the principles behind the game, Battleship, where one opponent guesses where the other opponent's battleships are located. When he guesses right he has a chance, but when he guesses wrong, the pigeons go out of shape.

The opposite approach is to set up a system whereby the fancier does the same thing every week, and thereby turns the situation into a constant. The fancier trains the same and feeds the same, and so on. Instead of the fancier adapting to his pigeon's needs, he lets the pigeons adapt to his system and thereby makes the system a constant. In so doing, the fancier is letting the pigeons decide which ones will adapt to the system.

Those that do not step up are removed from the team, and maybe after a little more testing and with the same results, their parents are removed from the breeding loft as well. Removing the parents from the breeding loft allows the fancier the opportunity to

replace them with pigeons that have responded to his constant system. In turn, these pigeons are far more likely to produce pigeons that adapt well to a constant system. Essentially, under a constant system, the race team helps to improve the breeding program, and the breeding program helps to improve the race team. This is an important relationship if the fancier expects to improve.

Let me make a couple of more points about creating constants. Although I suppose it is possible to make things constant from day to day, I personally think of constant systems in terms of week-to-week. In other words, I train the same way every week, I feed the same way every week and so on. I might not feed the same type of feed or the same amount of feed from day to day within the week, but my feeding on Monday of one week is going to be the same as on Monday of the next week and so on.

This last point about creating constants is pretty important. Sometimes, a situation is so radical that everything is changing from day-to-day, week-to-week and month-to-month. This in itself can be viewed as a constant because we can count on change and, therefore, change becomes a constant. Certain types of ocean racing are built on this kind of logic and I will refer to this again in a minute.

Eliminating variables is also extremely important to developing a system. Through gray logic programming, I would strip a problem down to the constant factors and then I would work to eliminate as many variables as possible. From this simplified form of the problem, I would then add the variables back in one at a time and observe their effect on the problem. Unfortunately, most fanciers tend to add multiple variables to their system every season, and as a result, they have a very hard time determining which variables are working for them and which are working against them. It becomes very difficult to test multiple variables without removing all of them and replacing them one at a time.

Sometimes the order in which variables are stacked can have a significant impact on the outcome. Even though the variables are added one at a time, variable five might have a negative impact on variable three and so on. Therefore, the relationship between variables is as important as the relationship of a single variable to a group of variables.

Prior to 1960, pigeon racing was less complicated than it is today. There was very little road training and medications was pretty much non-existent. Fanciers were more likely to do the same things from day-to-day and week-to-week simply because there was little other choice. It is interesting that many of the great families were developed in that time.

Today, we are faced with many more choices from road training to a vast array of medications and healthcare products, and unfortunately these only increase the number of variables we must work through. In situations where fanciers are unhappy with the way they are currently racing, my first recommendation would be to reduce the number of variables in their system. This would allow them to see the trees through the forest so to speak. After all, prior to 1960, pigeons were somehow able to find their way home without all of the additives and extra work we put into them today. I am not trying to say that some of these methods and products don't help, but sometimes you need to fully

understand the basics of a system before you move on to the more complicated aspects of that system.

Unfortunately, most fanciers take the opposite approach. When they are not doing well in the races, they try to solve the problem by adding items into their system. There is no rhyme or reason to what they add or how they add it and, as a result, many of the items may not work very well together. Not knowing what to eliminate, they do the opposite and add even more items to their already overloaded system. Often, these additional items are expensive, and eventually they price themselves right out of the sport. Probably, in many cases, they could have done just as well without adding any of these items. The fact is that most fanciers would actually be better off backing down to that level and rebuilding their systems with a little more forethought. This approach is called variable optimization.

Generally it takes three to four years to fully test out the variables of a single system, and by that time, a fancier has a pretty good idea of how the variables will interact with each other. If a problem surfaces, the fancier can remove variables down to the point where the problems goes away and then build the system up again. When I am working with a fancier, I generally start with a more stripped down version of the system. This gives them fewer chances to make a mistake. In a way, I am buying time so that they can become accustom to the base system. As they become more experienced, I begin adding the variables back in.

Recently, I have been working with a Taiwanese-American fancier. He had the unique opportunity to go to Taiwan and race pigeons this last season. Although he has never actually raced before, he has been exporting pigeons to Taiwan for over 20 years. We have been friends for at least 10 years now, and because of this and the fact that I am interested in Taiwanese racing, I agreed to help him. Truthfully, at first, I actually only planned to help him with the basics, but because this situation became more and more intriguing, I basically became hooked.

This fancier is very inexperienced compared to most fanciers I generally work with, and once again, I was faced with very little lead-time going into the season. Because of his inexperience and the short lead-time, I was forced to strip one of my systems down to the absolute essentials. I wish that, going into the season, I would have had a little more time and a little better understanding of their methods of racing. Instead, we floundered around while I worked on understanding the situation. At first, I don't think he realized the urgency or importance of my questions, and this slowed things down still further.

After several weeks, I began to glean enough information about the course and their system of racing that I soon realize that the system I had chosen was too tight-knit to handle their chaotic type of racing. Unlike Denmark where they race from land, over ocean, and then back to land again, the Taiwanese conduct ocean releases under any type of weather conditions. Sometimes there is fog, sometimes it is extremely windy and from any direction, and sometime it is raining. Whatever the conditions at the release, they go

up. Without landmarks and in poor weather conditions, pigeons tend to have a very hard time orientating and, as a result, they are slow to leave the release point.

This realization left me with two pretty simple choices. I could attempt to loosen the constraints of the current system by reducing or changing the associated variables still further or I could switch systems. Since we were pretty much already operating the current system at its basic level, I really didn't believe that there were that many variables to manipulate, so as result, we switched systems. Clearly, this was not the best situation to drag a new fancier through, but I didn't invent the situation, I was simply adapting to it.

Part of what made me come to realize that the initial system wasn't going to work was the fact that pretty much everything in Taiwan racing comes down to the qualification time for each race. In other words, there is a cutoff time, and if the pigeon is not home before then, it is disqualified from not only that race, but all further races that season. Since they do not race old birds in Taiwan, being disqualified means the pigeon's racing career is over. Therefore, survival (meeting qualification time) becomes more important than winning, and to use football terminology, essentially this second system was designed to work as a "prevent defense." We were willing to accept small losses (not winning) in order to avoid a catastrophic loss (not meeting qualification time).

Prior to changing methods, we took some losses, and we took some more losses while converting to the new system. However, after that, things seemed to settle down into a very nice routine that I believe that we can improve upon in the future. In fact, as this fancier is currently back here in the United States, we have been using this opportunity to discuss the implementation of more complex variables back into the system. Currently, he plans to return to Taiwan this next season to give it another go.

While it may not be that important for most fanciers to understand multiple systems for multiple courses, I do think it is pretty important that everyone understand the concepts and components that go into developing a system. Part of that understanding should include creating constants where possible and eliminating and controlling variables.

Until next time!

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