

## A Man with Little Else to Do

by

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Let's start off today's sermon by mentioning that, as I am sure you are aware, a number of my articles describe various pigeons within my stock loft. Therefore, when I put my web site together, I went to a lot of work to create a pedigree, pictures of the pigeon, and pictures of their eyes. (You need to scroll down the pedigree page to see all three.) I put these together for two reasons. First, I needed this information available for those that wish to purchase my pigeons, and, although selling pigeons is really not very high on my list of priorities, it does help to pay for the site and the care of my pigeons. Having this information readily available for prospective customers has actually saved me a lot of time. Second, I wanted to have a place where I could display my articles, pictures, and information for my reader.

Most of us relate much better to pictures than we do to lengthy descriptions. In fact one time my wife and I were having heated discussion about which direction the toilet paper should dispense from the spindle. She was insistent that it should dispense from the bottom. I would suppose that you think I wanted it to dispense from the top? Right? Don't be ridiculous. My argument was that any old way was just fine with me. After all, if I agreed with her, then I would have to remember her way. If I chose the opposite way to hers, then I would have to remember that way. Hell, I am just as pleased as punch if there is any toilet paper on the spindle when the need arises. Why get all bogged down in directional dispensation?

She started off explaining the virtues of her system. I responded by pointing out while there was validity to her way of thinking, I would be the one most likely to replace the roll, and, therefore, she would probably only get her wish through random chance. She attempted several other approaches, but I remained in denial over the entire subject. Finally, exasperated, she said, “Am I going to have to draw it out for you?”

When men say stupid stuff like this, they don't actually mean that they are going to do it, but I guess women are different that way. I have seen the instructions that she has drawn up for people to get to our house, and as many of them end up in other cities or states, I felt confident in my response: “Only if you think it is going to make your explanation shorter.”

Now I don't know what you know about women or lawyers or women that are lawyers, but they can be amazingly long winded when they are hacking away at your extremities, but when they have reached the end of the small talk, they can be amazingly succinct in the kill. She marched right into the bedroom, traced her hand out on a piece of paper

with one finger sticking up and handed it to me. There I stood, gutted like a fish, and she hadn't said a word. Oh, wait a minute! You think I lost? No, this was swift and decisive. Losing is when they play with you like a cat plays with a sick mouse.

Now I could have half won if I had just let her stock triumphantly down the hall, but that little shred of pride that I still possess always seems to come forward at exactly the wrong moment. Maybe that is why I only have a little shred of pride left. Anyway, I blurted out, "OK, but can you draw that in color?" This time I didn't get her drawing; instead, I got the real thing as she continued on down the hall. However, there was still no commitment on the direction of the toilet paper, so I was home free!

The next morning, as usual, I got up and took care of the birds. I don't know exactly why, but taking care of pigeons and visiting Home Depot tends to spark the old morning constitutional. I haven't figured out why, but some things are best unexplored. As I was running late on this particular morning, I told my wife that I was in a hurry and needed to use the restroom. As she was getting ready for work as well, she told me to hang on a minute. While it seemed to take her a little longer than usual to vacate the restroom, she finally did, and, by this time, I was in no mood to argue about how long it had taken her, so I ran right in and sat down. Upon finishing, I reached for the toilet paper, and there sitting on top of the now empty spindle was another one of my wife's little drawings with a little note at the bottom that said, "If you need paper, use this. Since it doesn't matter what direction the toilet paper dispenses, it also shouldn't matter what type of paper you're going to use either." It was about this time that she yelled out from the front door, "I am late for work. Have a great day." The door shut with a bang and the house was plunged into silence and there I sat stranded! I am now sure that a picture is worth a thousand words, because I said every one of them!

In developing my site, we were forced into using a PDF format, so it is difficult to place the links into the existing articles and be sure all viewers can use them. To counter this problem, if you go to: <http://www.ehofkens.com/index.html>, at the top of the gray box on the right hand side of the page, you will see "New Articles Added" and a date. Right below that you will see: "[Master List](#) for reference." If you click on this, you will see a list of band numbers. Simply click on the band number that is referenced in my article and you will get a pedigree, a picture of the pigeon, and a picture of its eye.

In my last article, I spent a great deal of time first trying to describe what led up to the changes that I am in the process of making, and second explaining the logic behind the steps that I am currently taking. While we were editing my last article, I asked my editor if she could follow what I was trying to say. She responded by saying, "As well as I wanted to." Everyone is a comedian these days! She eventually softened and said, "Yes, but the information was rather specific to 'your' pigeons."

With the advent of my new site, there are obviously going to be some readers that have not had the opportunity to read all or any of my articles (probably they should stay with the lucky majority). Unlike my wife, since I can't draw you a picture, I really prefer to use examples, as I strongly believe that most people learn better when they can apply the

information to a real situation. Unfortunately, I can not visit with each of you individually, and, therefore, I cannot use your loft as an example and at the end of the day, this is how we get around to using my loft as the example.

For years, I have read various articles from various fanciers that use the “do this” or “do that” approach, or they go on and on about their great race records. I have gone out of my way not to avoid both of these because, in truth, I hate to hear that sort of stuff as much as you probably do. Therefore, my approach is different. It is my opinion that anyone who thinks they can make a blanket statement that is universal to the sport is usually going to be wrong. While there are many fanciers out there that would probably love it if I could turn pigeon racing into a format that was similar to a “paint-by-the-numbers” painting, there are simply very few concepts in this sport which are that universal.

I was talking with a friend of mine this very morning. He is attempting to learn to fly widowhood and so far it has not gone very well at all. He is following the instructions of a very well-known fancier whom I will leave out of this. He says, “You know what gets me? XXXX says watch for this or watch for that, but when you see this or that, he never tells you what you should do.” I said to my friend, “How long have you been flying pigeons again?” Here this unnamed individual put a very nice outline together, and all my friend can do is rip the covers off and lick the glue.

Many fanciers won’t understand that this is not a paint-by-the-numbers sport because most fanciers have either lived in one location or flown in one concourse for their entire flying career. This is why so many so called “Great Fanciers” move to Florida only to become very average.

Many fanciers in this sport have achieved great success simply because they have a great airline. However, in their minds, the real reason they are successful is because they are great fanciers. Yet when they move to a new location, they are never heard from again. Let me make this simpler for you. Pigeon racing is like fishing. The bait that works in one location isn’t necessarily going to work in another location.

I could wrap everything up in little formulas that are specific to where I live, or we could work on understanding the principles of the sport. Specifically, most things don’t transfer from one location to another very well. However, the principles of the sport are pretty much the same everywhere. I think back to what Art Hees said to me during my last trip to Florida: “Down here, the very best are probably as good as when I flew in California, but I wouldn’t say that the depth is as good.” Art has been a top fancier everywhere he has been, because he understands the principles of racing pigeons. When he moves to a new location he need only adjust his systems, not his principles.

There are many fanciers that fly very well on paper, but that have never developed a conceptual understanding of the sport. By this, I mean that they have developed a method for achieving success for a given set of circumstances. However, when they move to a new location, those circumstances change and many new variables are added

to the equation. Often, when a fancier moves, location is not the only change. The new course may require faster pigeons, stronger pigeons, pigeons that orient better and so on. When one variable changes, the fancier can possibly recover, but when several variables change at once, the fancier flounders.

Let me give you a quick example. I have two friends that compete with each other in the same club. We will call them A and B. For years A lived right in the heart of his competition. B, on the other hand, lives about 15 miles off to the left, but he only gets credit for about 12 miles. Fancier A will admit that B has a considerable disadvantage, but as he puts it, "But not 10 minutes worth."

Very few people would even bother to fly from where B lives. Obviously, no good fanciers live near B because there are very few places where you can have a bad airline and still be a great fancier, especially when you live in one of the faster concourses. Without the ability to compare himself to other fanciers, B is never sure how he is really doing. Sometimes, based on clocking time, he is much closer to the top competition but he ends up farther down the sheet. Sometimes he is a half hour late and ends up 20<sup>th</sup> overall. Because of the disparity in his results, he has trouble judging the quality of his pigeons. In truth, because there are no constants in his situation, he has very little to go by, and it has been very difficult for him to improve.

On the other hand, A has been one of the most successful fanciers in the entire area for many years. He has had a good location, and with this single constant, he has built a system that is based on performance. However, within the last several years, a number of competitors in the area have quit the sport, died, or moved to better locations, and now A is sitting on the longer end of the hot competition. Suddenly, A is the one that is 10 minutes late every week. While he used to have great confidence in his pigeons, he now often claims that he doesn't have the horses.

Here he didn't even move, and enough things have changed that he can't get a handle on the variables. Imagine what it would be like to have to deal with a number of ever-changing variables all at one time. In talking with guys in Florida, I would say that many of them haven't even realized that the variables have changed! They don't realize that they have the wrong pigeons for the course. They don't realize that they have bought into a bad location and they don't realize that their pigeons have not and possibly never will acclimate to the area. If they understood the principles of pigeon racing, they would be able to adapt much quicker.

As I have said many times before, my teacher used to say, "Always stay in the middle of the road..." However, when you move to a new location, so does the middle of the road. That was there and now they are here. Many fanciers tend to get it stuck in their minds that it worked before, so they are going to make it work here. This is where the failure to adapt really comes into play. I have seen fanciers that wasted ten years of their lives simply because they wouldn't change. Sadly, I have also seen fanciers that live in a single location and change their pigeons every week. As the song goes, "You've got to know when to hold them and know when to fold them..."

This is why I focus on the theory behind the success instead of the success itself. “Give a man a fish and he has a fish. Teach a man to fish, and he can feed himself for the rest of his life.” My goal is to make you think.... or possibly to make you find something else to read.

In my last article, “Tennessee Here We Come,” I began discussing several possible inbreeding, crossing, and hybrid concepts that I was considering embarking upon. In the end, I mentioned that I was going to inbreed many of my current Hofkens, out-cross to produce hybrids, out-cross and backcross, and use a second family.

It has always been my opinion that bigger cocks tend to make better widowhood cocks. As I have stated many times before, although I have been working on changing this, the Hofkens are very much a cock-based family. Because of this, I have always tried to keep the cocks in this family at above average size. However, there are some disadvantages to doing this. First, bigger pigeons tend to mature much more slowly, and, second, as the sport is heading more and more into young-bird racing, pigeons are tending to get smaller not larger. As in most families, there are lines that tend to breed both larger and smaller pigeons. It is these smaller cocks that I am going to start discussing in a minute.

Finally, over the last several years, I have worked extremely hard at changing the type of hen that I am using. Because this was a cock-based family, I started out with a number of brood hens. However, as I have pretty much always been a hen flier, brood hens really don't appeal to me. At the same time, brood hens tend to help in keeping up the overall size of the cocks. Therefore, I realized that a change was coming when the size of the hens started becoming more compatible with racing. I don't want to leave you with the impression that I have these giant hens, because that is not the case. However, I have been working to streamline them for some time. In the last several years, I have had great success in this area.

Before we go any further, let me take a moment to discuss Mauricio's visit last summer. While I was already on the road to some changes mentioned in my last article when he visited, he was the first to bring up the size of the pigeons. Clearly he liked smaller pigeons.

You know, it has been a while since I last flew a race, and it will probably be a while before I race again. The truth is that I have had significant trouble finding many fanciers that still fly a true widowhood system, especially against good competition. This is not a knock on the system itself, it is just that other systems have caught on better here in the States.

Because of heavy training and bigger losses, many fanciers prefer to fly both sexes. Also, unlike Europe, most fanciers in the States don't specialize at a specific distance; instead, we fly from 100 to 600 miles. Very few cocks can do this well, and having a short team and a long team simply requires more cocks than the average loft can raise in a year. Racing cocks also has a serious downside. They tend to go out of shape all at one

time and the fancier can either quit or take much bigger losses. As they tend to go out of shape somewhere during the longer races, the fancier is pretty committed when he discovers that they have indeed lost form.

As I have mentioned several times, the American sport has all but lost interest in old birds. Many places no longer fly the 600 and many have dropped the 500 as well. Instead of the powerful old bird teams of the 1960s, '70s and '80s, old-bird teams are now made up of what is left over from young birds. When I was growing up, the average age of most old-bird teams was probably between 3 and 4 years old. Today, it is probably about 1-½ to 2 years old. If one fancier has an outstanding team, he isn't just the top fancier, he kills everyone else. Since racing widowhood cocks is a learned system, older pigeons tend to fly it better. With the emphasis on young birds where training is heavy and losses are high, and because many better cocks take some time to mature, it is difficult for the right type of cock to make it to old birds.

Again, with the emphasis on young birds, and with the money races that are available in young birds, and with the number of fanciers that are now sitting on the sidelines and breeding pigeons to send out to the money races, the sport is going to continue to head in that direction. I guess the bottom line is that I have been stubbornly holding out in favor of a system that I may never fly, and, at the same time, I have been losing out to some degree on young birds.

In a nutshell, this was essentially Mauricio's point when he commented on the size of the pigeons. I am making it sound like the Hofkens are huge, and that is really not the case, but they could be a lot smaller as well. Although I resisted Mauricio's comments at the time, I think it is only fair to give him credit for those comments because they are now going to become quite important. While I will say that his comments did not cause the change, they were still in the back of my mind when the real reason for the change did come along.

When you elect to write articles that involve your personal thinking (such as the ones that I tend to write), sometimes you can look kind of stupid. OK, well ... maybe a lot of times. I am sure that many of you are wondering: "Why didn't he do this from the beginning?" Well, things are not always that cut and dried. First, I was keeping the size up to fly cocks. Second, I live on a headwind course, and, should I ever elect to fly again, these are the types of pigeons that have done well for me here. Third, through selection, line breeding and inbreeding can make pigeons either larger or smaller; however, for the most part, it tends to make them smaller. I always knew that eventually the family would start to naturally transition from line breeding to inbreeding simply because of the numbers that I keep. Having the initial size is going to actually help me with my inbreeding. Finally, long before my time, these pigeons were designed to be widowhood cocks. While that may sound like no big thing, when I change them from what makes them widowhood cocks, it is unlikely that could ever go back.

Many fanciers like to start out with pigeons that match their goals; my goal was to preserve the widowhood-cock aspect to my pigeons. However, unlike many fanciers, I

am not afraid to change direction. Because my family is properly based over a range of sizes, the tools are always available to go almost any direction. Clearly, this will take a little time, and it also doesn't mean that I will totally abandon the bigger pigeons, because things may change yet again!

Instead, I have begun the transition to a smaller pigeon by simply focusing my breeding on the smaller end of the family. As I have three or four pairs of key pigeons at the smaller, medium, and larger ends of the family, there is already an excellent foundation for the transition. Again, to Mauricio's credit, he selected what will now be the three base cocks for this new direction. He also selected one of the base hens. It is only fair to mention that he would have probably picked the other two, but one of them hadn't hatched yet (she is a sister to the one he did pick), and the other hen was at my partner's at the time. In reality, there are also several other hens that I will use when I have more cocks.

I am not for any reason going to give up on pigeons such as the Super Cock, the 99Merckx, or the 04Merckx as they have earned their place. The mid-range is going to suffer, because I can easily get back to the mid-range should I need it.

OK, so what did make me change my mind, and why have I waited until now to mention this transition? Well, the answer was quite simple—Ed Lorenz. I was looking for a second family to mate against my Hofkens, and in my mind there is simply no better family for what I am going to do than the Horemans! The key to the whole thing came down simply to what Ed was willing to sell me. Going into the situation, I was unclear as to what that would be. In previous visits, I had made mental notes on several pigeons, but, obviously, my selections are not going to be also-rans, so here again, it was pretty much up to him.

By the same token, Ed is and has been very aware of my love of the Horemans for some time now. Ed is also aware that I hold his skill as a racer and a breeder in extremely high regard, and if you happen to remember the article where I mentioned “ashes to ashes and dust to dust,” you will know that nothing remains above the norm for long. His Horemans are well above the norm! The only way that a group of pigeons is going to remain above the norm when they change hands is if they go to a skilled fancier that shares the love of that particular family of pigeons. I can vouch for my love of this family.

Years ago, my mom used to make an excellent upside-down pineapple cake. However, in order to make it, you needed to have a starter. The starter was a fermented fruit and sugar mix that was hard to get started right, but, once it was started, you could split it and share it with others. Essentially, that is what Ed did for me!

Before I even went over to California, I told Ed that I would like to buy some pigeons. Ed and I are good friends, and if he had said that he would sell me babies off this one or that one, I might have backed off because that is not what I had in mind. I told him that I wanted to get a couple of pairs, and I asked his advice on the bloodlines. He mentioned

his top two flying cocks of all time, and, as it turned out, my previous choices were primarily out of these two cocks.

In the same way that I have great pigeons stacked up by line and by size, Ed has what he considers his base pigeons fortified as well. Although I raided several of his stronghold positions, he still has excellent fallback positions on each of these. For instance, the top cock has two brothers, of which one was equal and one was of a slightly lower caliber. The top hen that I selected has an outstanding sister and an equal brother. Pretty much it went this way through the whole event. He really didn't get hurt too badly, and I now had my starter kit.

OK, so why didn't I mention all of this earlier. First, I wanted to be sure that they could breed equal to what they were. Second, I gave the top cock a tough row to hoe in mating him to his sister. While that wasn't any real big deal, both of them were down from a father/daughter mating to begin with. As I told Ed the other day, I couldn't have gotten better from him; all I could have gotten was more. After breeding the first two youngsters, all that I can say is that I couldn't have gotten better; instead, all that I can do is breed more.

In closing, let me again state that I have purchased potential crosses that fit all the different sizes within my family, and I am very pleased with all of them. However, purchasing pigeons from one of the top lofts—maybe the top loft—in the country to cross against the smaller side of my family was simply a deal maker. Like Ed fortifying his base positions, I have done all the right things in putting myself in the right place to make a move when the potential for the move presented itself. Of course, there is still one more stumbling block in that we will still have to wait and see if the Horemans and Hofkens can be crossed successfully. Only time will tell.

Until next time!

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