

Size Really Does Count

by

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I want to thank everyone for their kind words on my last article, "A Little Dog Treat." It was fun to write something different for a change, and although it really wasn't about pigeons, it seemed to have caught the attention of many people that I don't often hear from, and that was kind of gratifying on this end.

It has been a while since I have written anything about breeding technique. This is primarily because I have recently been making substantial changes to my breeding program, and because I don't generally openly discuss my transactions while they are under way, I have stayed away from the subject altogether. However, as of a few days ago, I have now pretty much completed these transactions. My goal was to purchase a second line/inbred family that I could cross to the Hofkens to produce hybrids. After some searching, that family turned out to be the Lorenz Horemans.

For those of you that don't know or have not heard of Ed Lorenz (I don't see how that is possible), he has been one of the best racers in America for many years. While I have known Ed since 1988, we have become much closer friends over the last five years, and, over the course of the last year, Ed has allowed me to purchase many of his best pigeons! That process has continued until recently, and with this last trip, I believe that I have the pigeons in place to build a second family. Ed half jokingly tells me that I have no need to build a second family, because what I have really been doing is stealing his entire family!

I know that many of you are saying, "Wait, stop, hold the phone! How did we get from Hofkens to Horemans," and isn't this change over sort of sudden and unexpected? Let me try to explain. In most cases, fanciers that are interested in creating a family would start out with a line breeding program (did that), and as his breeding progressed, he might consider starting an inbreeding program (did that). If you have been paying attention at all (if you haven't been paying attention, I understand), you already know that when I purchased the Hofkens, they were already relatively line bred. However, I increased the level of line breeding until some of them started approaching what might be considered an inbred level. In purist's terms, as the inbreeding coefficient went up, performance was going down. This doesn't mean that the quality wasn't there; it means that they needed to be crossed out.

It was about that time that I had a visit from Mauricio Jemal. During that visit, Mauricio, who happens to like smaller pigeons, also happened to really like De Welches Jr. (who is smaller) and the 540 Topman cock (who is not so small), and he spent a great deal of time convincing me that I should head in that direction. However, because I keep a very

limited number of pigeons in the first place, while his view of directions was probably correct, I knew that cutting my directions down still farther was only going to speed up the inbreeding process. Something was missing!

However, one day about a month after his visit, I asked Mauricio a very simple question, "In your years in the sport, what would you say was the biggest mistake you ever made?" To this he quickly answered, "The mistake wasn't in what I did, it is in what I didn't do. I failed to develop a second unrelated family. Therefore, as the inbreeding coefficient continued to climb within my single family, the performance was bound to decline simply because eventually they would become too inbred." (Sound familiar?)

There is nothing magical about his statement, but when it comes from someone like Mauricio Jemal, it deserves serious consideration! For those of you that are not keeping up, Mauricio is now 30 generations down from his originals, so when he says that eventually you paint yourself into a corner with a single family, I am just smart enough to listen to what he has to say. I am not saying that this is a concern for the average fancier, because most fanciers will not make it past the third generation with the same family of pigeons. However, I took his comment to heart and now here I am with a second family.

Well, that isn't quite all there is to it. While I started the process out looking for a second family, in the end, the Horemans really didn't become the second family. In fact, they leapfrogged the Hofkens to become the primary family. You see, in the process of deciding how to approach a second family, I was forced to ask myself some revealing questions about what my partner and I really wanted to accomplish. The fact is that the Hofkens are primarily a cock based family, and, while they are amazingly beautiful pigeons, they are still cock based. Because so much emphasis has recently been placed on the money races, and because my partner really enjoys getting away from his business to visit these races, it seemed logical to move in this direction. Therefore, when agreed to sell me certain key pigeons, what else could I do?

Also, over time, my view of selling pigeons has changed tremendously. As I have become more widely known through my writings, seminars, and grading sessions, I hear less often from the pedigree chasers (thank you!) and more often from those fanciers that are interested in buying a good pigeon. This change is both flattering and important because it allows me more latitude to do what I do best.

Now, when I find an excellent cross, I no longer live in fear of backcrossing it into the family as I was with the Hofkens. Simply stated, over the last 20 years, Ed has backcrossed the best five or so pigeons from the Snowbird, the Snowbird Classic and the Asian races, into his Horemans, which, considering how much inbreeding he does, is very important to maintaining the vigor of the family. Going forward, I am going to continue this backcrossing practice. The truth is that I was never very happy with the limitation of keeping the Hofkens pure for the pedigree chasers, and now those days are over!

Unfortunately, these moves are never simple or easy to make (especially when you are in love with what you already have), and there needed to be some careful consideration given as to which, and how many, Hofkens I would part with. However, before I could do anything, I had to bring in and test the Horemans family's ability to adapt to this environment. While Ed has a number of highly related pigeons, and while I was buying many of his top pigeons, I also needed to be sure that I had enough to actually build this starter group into a family.

In all honesty, while selecting this group of Horemans, I was able to apply many of my recent trials and tribulations that I went through in building the Hofkens family, which after working with them for seven generations, I had some idea of the problems that I was going to encounter down the road with the Horemans. I also had to make a serious mental adjustment in my thought on color! I now have more different color than I have ever owned! I now have homozygous silver, T-check black, T-check red, red slate, blue slate, and silver to work with, and, of course, I also have blue checks and blue bars.

While analyzing the initial Horemans, I came to realize that as a family, they were both unusual and unique. As I became more familiar with the lines, I also got to see that Ed had done a masterful job of selecting, crossing and backcrossing his introductions into the family. In fact, because Ed still owned most of the parents and grandparents, I have on several occasions spent many hours studying the affects that these backcrosses have had on the family.

Whenever a fancier makes a move like this, there are significant risks involved. To increase the Horemans pairs, I had to decrease the Hofkens pair, and, unfortunately, there is always the possibility that the two families will not be a successful cross. Therefore, I was quite anxious to produce my first hybrid prototypes, which I have done this year. So far, I can say that physically this has proven to be an excellent cross. I am now interested what they will do in the races.

As mentioned earlier, essentially, I liquidated over 2/3 of my Hofkens family in order to purchase a substantial stake in the Horemans family. While this was extremely easy to do from a financial standpoint, it was not so easy a personal standpoint, but it was something that I believed needed to be done for the overall benefit of the loft.

Like the Hofkens, the Horemans are extremely consistent in structure, but the Horemans tend to be a little more consistent in size. Over the course of the last year, I significantly increased my inbreeding and out-crossing programs, and, from my point of view, I am extremely pleased with how these families tolerate both processes. Obviously, there are very few pigeons that can produce a quality double inbred, but, here again, I have had tremendous success in this area with both lines. In fact, the double inbred Horemans are more clone-like than any pigeons that I have ever owned.

However, there can be a problem with conceptual clones (I realize that even though they all look alike, they are far from being a clone at only two generations of inbreeding), in that they lack the usual range of variation. Therefore, in terms of hybridization or at least

my view of hybridization, it is important to mate them to other pigeons that fall in or near that same range of size variation, and that is what I am going to spend the rest of this article talking about.

Although it has been pointed out to me that inbreeding can be used to make pigeons larger or smaller, my experience still suggests that the majority of pigeons tend to get smaller with inbreeding. As a grader, I do not discriminate based on the size in pigeons. I have seen winners of every size, and when considering size, it greatly depends on what the fancier is trying to do. This is why I am always asking about the speeds and conditions of the course because success on most courses is often reasonably dependant on size.

Long ago, I developed a mental method of scaling pigeons based on their size. However, this is not as simple as scaling them on a 1 to 10 basis. Under my method, there are at least 10 considerations that go into scaling a pigeon:

1. Against the average size of all pigeon.
2. Against the average size of all pigeons within that sex.
3. Against the average size of the family.
4. Against the average size of that sex within the family.
5. Against the average size of that line within that family.
6. Against the average size of that sex within that line of that family.

For Crossing

7. Against the average size of another family
8. Against the average size of that sex within another family.
9. Against the average size of that line within another family.
10. Against the average size of that sex within that line of another family.

Because we are talking about the Hofkens and the Horemans, when comparing one family against the other, I would rate the Hofkens family as a 7.5 in terms of size, and I would rate the Horemans as a 4.5. Before I started the liquidation process, my Hofkens broke down into the BOP line (8.0), the Merckx line (8.0), the De Welches line (7.0), and the Topman line (6.5), which is what I would consider to be an excellent balance in size, as there is enough difference to provide a range from 6.5 to 8.0. This places the average at 7.25 (+/- .75).

So that this doesn't get too complicated, let's just use the Topman line for the next example. While in general, this line equates to a (6.5), the cocks actually fall into a range of (6.5 to 7.0), while the hens are probably closer to a consistent average of (5.5). Therefore, as you can see, there is a big difference between the sexes, and this is why the aforementioned list is important.

On the other hand, my current Horemans family is based on three lines, however, in terms of my purchases, two of these lines have been muddied over the last several

generations and now constitute a single line. Therefore, my Horemans are now made up of the blue line and the silver line. In the blue line, the cocks are a consistent (5.0) and the hens are a consistent (4.0), and, in the silver line, the cocks are a consistent (5.5) and the hens are a consistent (5.0).

Therefore, if I were to use all of the Hofkens and Horemans, I would have an overall range in size of (4.0 to 8.0), and, in my mind, that range is just too big! In fact, from experience, I have learned that it is important to keep this range down to around a two point spread. However, this does not mean that the spread necessarily needs to be in the heart of the previously mentioned range or (5.0 to 7.0), because in my case, I am attempting to move the size down to the (4.0 to 6.0) range.

Let me take the time to clarify three related points. First, while I like to keep the range down to an approximate two point spread, this spread is more important within the family than it is to the hybrid program. Still, I would really try to keep the in size of the hybrids down to less than a three point spread.

Second, while overall size is extremely important, body shape is equally important, and, regardless of size, all of my pigeons are selected for a rather specific configuration. Here again there is a range to this configuration, but the tolerance within this range is very small; however, if the configuration is the same within a family, size is of less importance.

Third, hybridization is essentially two purified gene sets coming together to explode the genotype. While we want an explosion of the genotype, we do not want an explosion of the phenotype. This is especially true if we intend to backcross the hybrid back into one side of the family or the other. I can't stress this enough because many hybrids fly great, but are structurally unsound and worthless for backcrossing. Under my methods, I can explode the genotype without exploding the phenotype because my unrelated pigeons still have a common phenotype, and that is still at least half the battle!

Once I made the decision to bring the average size of the Hofkens down to the lower end of their range, it became relatively clear which Hofkens were going to fit into my new program, and, therefore, I began liquidating the rest so that I could purchase more core Horemans. Still, for what I am currently trying to do, the Hofkens cocks are about a full point larger and the hens are about a half point larger than I might like, and while this falls into my three point hybridization standard, I would still like to move the size of the Hofkens down one full point.

Therefore, I am considering several possible moves to correct this situation. Clearly, by selling off the bigger Hofkens, I was quickly able to move the average size of the family downward! Second, more inbreeding, is already underway, because, here again, in my experience, this tends to reduce size. Until I can get the size of cocks in the Topman and De Welches lines from a (7.0) to a (6.0), at least initially, I am going to work primarily with the Horemans cocks and Hofkens hens as this is the most compatible combination from a size stand point. I say "going to work", however, in reality I have been working

with Hofkens cocks to Horemans hens (I don't have enough of the other mating yet), and, as I suspected, I really don't like that cross quite as well.

By selling those pigeons that didn't meet my plan, it allowed me to quickly skew the average size of the remaining pigeons toward my plan. In truth, I was relative fortunate that I had such parity amongst all of my lines, because if that had not been the case, I might have had the bad luck of having lesser quality pigeons in my smaller sized Hofkens lines.

However, the best pigeons in each line were about equal in quality, so, in the end, I essentially traded two lines of Hofkens for two new lines of Horemans. While this first reduction in the size of the Hofkens was pretty simple (I sold them), the remaining Hofkens are still about a point over sized. It is extremely important to note the difference between selling off a point and breeding off a point! Selling off a point only took me a couple of weeks; breeding off a point may take me several generations.

While size is important to compatibility, there are also many other factors that need to be considered. Wing shapes, flight shapes, bone structure, eye structure and muscle type and alignment are all elements than need to match up in order to get the most out of my super hybrid. Even with all the inbreeding over the last year, I still only have one pair of super hybrid (these have been extraordinary) and six strong hybrids for this breeding season. My goal is to reach four pairs of super hybrids by next breeding season.

Until next time!

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