

## Cyclical Event Testing

by

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Over the last year, I have attempted to write this article on several occasions (five to be specific). Unfortunately, this topic extends off in every direction, and also unfortunately, it has proven to be extremely difficult to condense into a single article. While I find this topic to be extremely interesting, you may not, yet I still believe that from a conceptual standpoint, this topic is important to all aspects of our sport, and the subject may actually touch on our personal lives more than we might like to believe.

A number of years back, I began studying cyclical event testing and how it relates to both Nature and the sport of racing pigeons. Nature is the ultimate creator, tester, and destroyer of everything in its realm, and one way or another all of its creations are tested for their worthiness to belong within that realm. Nature's creations generally fit into two categories, the physical (land and water) and the living (species of both plant and animal life). Nature's testing cycles are pointed at nothing specific yet everything in general, and those species affected by a particular test react as best as possible to that test. Most of the time, their reaction is enough to allow the species or even its individual members to survive, but eventually there will come a test or a series of different tests that greatly affect or possibly destroy each and every species.

As an example, scientists are currently suggesting that through DNA testing, they think there might have been a series of severe drought-caused famines about 70,000 years ago, and during that period, the human population may have decreased to as few as 2,000 individuals. It is very possible that even an additional single event might have been enough to have driven our species into extinction.

Some would say that back then the human population was more regionalized, and therefore, more vulnerable and that today's populations are larger and more globalized, making them less vulnerable. These individuals would reason that global events are far less common, and therefore, far less threatening to the entire population. However, bird flu, global warming, pollution, drinking water, energy, and financial markets are all directly or indirectly part of the natural cyclical testing process.

From a human prospective, in an attempt to survive, we have used technology to conquer many of Nature's smaller tests (i.e., such as damming rivers to prevent flooding and building aqueducts to carry water to where it is needed). The conquering of Nature's

tests through technology generally leads to increased populations, which in many cases would be unsustainable, were the technologies to cease or be overwhelmed. Most technologies are dependent on an energy source such as oil, and were it to become unavailable, it would likely create a significant vulnerability to smaller cyclical events. At the same time, even a localized event, such as a severe drought in the Midwest, could overwhelm our current technologies and, as a result, affect much of the world's food supply.

So far, we have talked about the cyclical testing in rather general terms. So let me define its major components. Simply put, 'cyclical' means 'repetitive'. Usually, when we think of repetitive, we think of something happening over and over again and at very short intervals. However, there can also be very long intervals between events, and in such cases, the event will still maintain a cyclical pattern.

Cyclical testing is made up of the interval between events, the duration of that actual event, and the severity or magnitude of the event. The interval between events is the time between occurrences, such as the number of years between droughts. The duration is the time the event lasts, such as the number of years a drought might last. The severity or magnitude of an event is the general measure against other like events. Some events are measured on a scale and others are measured by their impact on the affected population. Under certain circumstances, the duration of the event can also determine the severity of the event. For instance, a drought is caused by the lack of rain. Past the point of no rain, a drought really can't get any worse simply because you can't get less rain than no rain. Instead, more severe droughts become longer in duration, and as they do, stored water supplies are used up and their severity becomes more significant to the affected populations.

At any given time, there are many localized and some globalized testing events going on around us, from the common cold to massive earthquakes, volcanoes and global warming. It is perfectly possible for several different types of events to overlap in a specific region. For instance, there are usually several droughts occurring simultaneously in various regions of the world. In less technologically advanced regions, it is very likely that famine will accompany droughts. Where populations are weakened through famine, and sanitary conditions are not what they should be, there is also the possibility for disease to run rampant. As you can see, it is very possible for major events to quickly compound.

Pigeon racing fits into Nature's cyclical event testing in a rather unusual way. Nature tests us through cyclical events, and we test our pigeons through cyclical race events; however, while we are testing our pigeons, Nature is testing them through its own set of cyclical events. While we test for the best speeds each week, Nature provides an occasional reality check to remind us that survivability is still a very big part of the formula.

Several major factors play into the survivability of our pigeons: the race conditions, the quality of our pigeons, the condition of our pigeons, the motivation of our pigeons, and

when it becomes important, the homing ability of our pigeons. When conditions become tough and pigeons become separated, there is no substitute for homing ability, and ultimately, survivability pretty much depends on it.

As I have mentioned in other articles, survivability leads us to the concept of the lowest common denominator. In the long term, it is not the fastest pigeon that carries forward; it is the fastest pigeon that survives the tougher common tests while avoiding major uncommon tests and common tests of extreme severity. In explaining this, I always think of the Devriendt family of pigeons. What made them special was the fact that when things got really tough, they would simply shut down and come home when they could. That might be the next day or three weeks later, but eventually they would usually show up, and unlike many of today's pigeons, they didn't hurt themselves in the process. Because they had superior homing ability, they didn't need other pigeons to find their way home. Between the patience to wait out events and their excellent homing ability, they were likely to survive more types of major event testing, and this made them more likely to be available for breeding when the time came.

Clearly, through weather forecasts, shipping fewer pigeons, shipping prepared pigeons, and controlling the releases, we can avoid many events. There are situations where we might know about a major event before it takes place (i.e., hurricane), and there are also times where there might be an ongoing event that it would be practical to avoid (a major fire somewhere on the course).

At the same time, it might not be such a good idea to consistently avoid events that are more common to a particular racecourse. Such events might include heavier crosswinds or head winds, lesser rainy conditions and heat to name a few. Clearly some judgment is needed in these situations, but ultimately, these are events that once out of the crate, our pigeons are likely to be exposed to regardless of how careful we are with the conditions at release. Pigeons that can't handle the common events associated with their particular course are equally unlikely to produce pigeons that can handle these common events. The problem is that by the next generation, these untested pigeons have multiplied and as a result there are more untested pigeons to be proven. Should members of the second generation go untested, the problem continues to compound.

Many fanciers avoid events in an attempt to build an old bird team only to get large numbers of untested pigeons caught up in a single event at some time during their old bird careers. Under these conditions, a team that looked good on paper suddenly turns into the ruinous remains of a race team. There is really no avoiding these common tests, especially over the course of a three, four, or five-year old bird career.

Let me close out this article, by providing two situations where cyclical testing are currently having a significant impact on two fanciers, in distinctly different ways yet with similar results.

Approximately five years ago, I visited a friend of mine for the first time in several years. Over the years this fancier has been the best flyer in his area and one of the better fanciers

in the American sport, even if he doesn't generally get that kind of recognition. During this and other visits, he had always had strong racing and breeding teams, and on this visit, this was still the case. If I had any complaint at all about his situation, it would be that, generally, I thought that sometimes he let his breeders get too old before he looked into replacing them.

Three years later, he asked me to visit him again. While he has always been a fancier that likes to understate his situation, I could tell that this time he was generally nervous about my visit, and over breakfast, he kind of hinted that it had taken him some time to get up the nerve to ask me to visit.

Because this is a good fancier, he always hands me the best pigeons first, and stops handing them to me before he has reached the bottom of the well. Consequently, after about five pigeons, I already knew that he was in grave trouble. I didn't say much partly because I was trying to think of a way to say it nicely, but on about the fifth pigeon, I finally just asked, "What happened?"

To this, he kind of slumped at the shoulders and looked at his feet, and he began to explain that shortly after I had left the last time, the races had gotten much tougher and that they started experiencing significant headwind every week. (Sounds like an even pattern of longer duration). When the headwinds first started, everyone was completely caught off guard, and because fanciers had been entering so many pigeons there were a lot of losses very early on. Even when fanciers became more guarded, the losses each week were still very high. Unfortunately, this weather just kept on coming week after week for several seasons, and soon, this fancier no longer had the depth on his race team to replace his aging breeders. However, he prefaced this by saying that, "...it really didn't matter because he was no longer clocking these pigeons anyway." Then he pointed to the loft and said, "The pigeons that you just handled are the ones that I have been clocking, and for the most part, there are very few pigeons left from my family in that group."

Obviously, this was a longer duration, higher magnitude event, and because of this, it cleared away a number of families of pigeons in the area, including this family that had been at the top for at least 20 years. This year, the headwinds subsided to some degree, and the few remaining pigeons from his old family once again moved to the top, but in my view, this fancier is going to have his work cut out for him if he is going to bring this family back.

While I am sure that there have been Natural tests of this type and in this area, they have not occurred in many years, and it is even possible that the interval between the last events of this nature might extend back farther in this area than the sport itself. Because of the duration of the event, it wasn't really avoidable, although fanciers could have clearly better guarded against by not sending so many pigeons. In the case of this fancier, he might have been better able to weather this event with younger breeding stock, but even here, that is questionable. Individually, these events were really not of a significant magnitude, but their collective duration turned them into a major event, and in this case

the duration also dictated the magnitude. Because this was an event of a long duration, it affected the entire population, and thereby defined the lowest common denominator, which happened to be the fastest pigeons that could survive these conditions. Since there was a great deal of separation during this event, it also defined the need for homing ability over speed. Ultimately, the totality of this event has redefined pigeon racing in this area. The question is, "What will happen when the weather patterns switch back?"

On the other side of the world there is another very good fancier that is experiencing a similar changing of the guard, but for a very different reason. For years, he and his father flew an excellent family of Janssen's. Because his pigeons are in high demand, he often trades with top fanciers throughout his country. While he has brought these pigeons into his loft, his old family has remained the bread and butter of his loft, or at least until recently.

Several years back, the races started getting considerably faster on his course, and as a result of these faster races, one of his trade acquisitions started showing itself through its breeding performance and soon some of its offspring made it into the breeding loft. As with all of us, this fancier can only keep so many pairs of breeders, so these new pigeons started replacing the older pigeons in his old family. The end result was a greatly weakened old family and the development of something of a new family with far less genetic continuity by comparison.

More recently, I called this fact to the attention of this fancier, and after considering the situation, I think he realized that he might be at a crossroads with the old family. My concern was that his old family had been developed over a long period of time and for the standard conditions on this course. The new pigeons have shown up strong under the faster conditions. For this fancier, the question becomes which road to follow and either one could easily prove to be wrong.

However, crossroads or not, when you are winning significantly more with the new family than the old and you have limited room in the breeding loft, what real choice do you have? Since this fancier started looking more closely at the situation, I have heard that he has won even more with the new pigeons, and of course, this is only reaffirming his resolve in that direction.

Notice that in the first example, Nature is making decisions for the fancier through harsh conditions and significant losses, and in the second example, the fancier is making decisions based on performance. This is typical of the difference between fast and slow racecourses. However, make no mistake about it, when Nature allows the fancier to make decisions, it will be back to test the validity of that decision somewhere down the road!

Until next time!

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