

X Factor Continued, Part 3

by

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As I have been breeding since December of last year, I am pleased to announce that breeding season is finally drawing to a close. As the youngsters leave the nest, I will be splitting my remaining pairs, and my sincere hope is to have everything wrapped up by August 1st. I really want to avoid breeding so early next year, but I really had no choice this year because I needed to produce enough hybrid pigeons for the money races and then have enough time to switch over the inbreeding portion of the program. Fortunately for me, the inbreeding has gone amazingly well, so maybe it was worth the work!

Well, this is going to be a little longer article, so we had better get going where I left off last time. Again, if you have not read the rest of these articles, you might want to find them on Winning, or visit my site at www.ehofkens.com.

Generally, the sport is broken down into short, middle, and long-distance racing. However, in terms of processing ability, it is easier to think of distances when they are broken down into two basic categories, short and long. Let's discuss short distance pigeons first. During the shorter races, things happen very quickly, and there is little room for the pigeon to make a mistake. This is why airlines and environmental conditions can play such a big part in the outcome of the shorter distance race.

The ability to quickly process information is very important to short distance pigeons and this is because there is usually very little separation and exposure occurs during the short races. Since the processor probably isn't going to be able to break away from the front flock, it must use its homing ability to guide the front flock and its physical ability to set the pace for the front flock.

Therefore, it is important that the processor has good leadership skills, so that it can take control of the front flock. While these skills are somewhat innate, they improve through experience. Short distance pigeons have a big advantage in that there are more short distance races in their young bird and yearling years. Also, because these races are short, the pigeons can go to the races more often, and, thereby, gain even more experience. Again, this experience translates to better leadership skills.

During the longer distance races, time is generally measured in minutes instead of seconds, and while it is very important to be able to process information, processing it quickly is of less importance. Longer distance pigeons are at a big disadvantage in learning to lead a flock because they don't generally have the speed to keep up with true sprinters, and, therefore, in the shorter races, they are unlikely to be in the front flock in

the first place. For the most part, longer distance pigeons generally don't get to use their processing and leadership (survival skills) until about mid way through their yearling year when they finally reach the races of 400 miles or further.

Because distance pigeons are generally unable to keep up with the front flock in the shorter races, they spend a lot of time in the early part of their careers flying with the also-rans that are either not in condition or are of poor quality, and they eventually learn that these pigeons can't be trusted. Therefore, distance pigeons learn that survival skills are more important than leadership skills, and eventually this serves them well in the distance races when they start to experience separation from the flock and the exposure of being on their own.

While most short distance processors generally show up very quickly, long distance processors generally take more time to rise to the surface. The fact is they are generally much slower to mature, and they usually don't get the same number of opportunities to prove themselves. Because they are slow to mature, they tend to rely more on their innate abilities in the beginning of their racing careers, and it isn't until later on that they come to realize that they can't rely on the also-rans that they start to develop their survival skills. In all likelihood, more distance pigeons would be lost early on in their racing careers if it wasn't for the fact that they usually have excellent innate homing ability. Often times, they must rely on this innate homing ability so that they can survive enough races to gain the experience necessary to use and improve on their processing skills.

Although there is a great deal of talk about the love of the distance races, in most parts of the world today, this is nothing more than lip service. As recently as the 1970's, the majority of pigeons had excellent innate homing skills and strong processing skills. Today, the skill sets have changed radically to very average homing skills, and very strong leadership and processing skills. As the sport continues to decline, this trend is going to become more and more common throughout the world unless we find a way to combine young bird and old bird racing, as this might breathe new life into old bird racing.

While I will almost always take a pigeon that can process over one that can access, there are still some very good pigeons amongst those that can access; however, it is extremely important to give them enough time to truly identify themselves. Generally, a winner identifies himself by winning. However, there are some pigeons that win for reasons other than their true ability, be it because of airline or environmental conditions. Therefore not all winners are true winners. At the same time, there are some pigeons that never win, but over the course of several years, they prove that they can race near the top most of the time these are almost always the very best of the pigeons that can access.

Usually, when I visit a loft with a well-established old bird team, I find several pigeons with unusual accessing skills. These pigeons are not that difficult to identify because about 90% of them are amongst the three and four year old hens that are the "leftovers" from the race team. They are the pigeons that never win, but at the same time, they are

also the ones that were so consistent that they fancier couldn't afford to take them off the team. The other 10% are cocks, and they are almost always older widowhood cocks (four, five and six years old), and, while they have never won, they are almost always the fancier's favorite pool birds.

While they may not have the same gifts as the processor, pigeons with accessing ability can still be of great value in the breeding loft. However, it is critical that the breeding loft doesn't become overburdened with this type of pigeon. The unfortunate fact is that when you mate two pigeons with accessing ability, it is unlikely that you will produce many pigeons with processing ability, and those that are produced with accessing ability won't have the same level of ability as the parents. Remember that pigeons that identify themselves as having accessing ability are at the top of the accessing class, but everything else within that class is pretty average.

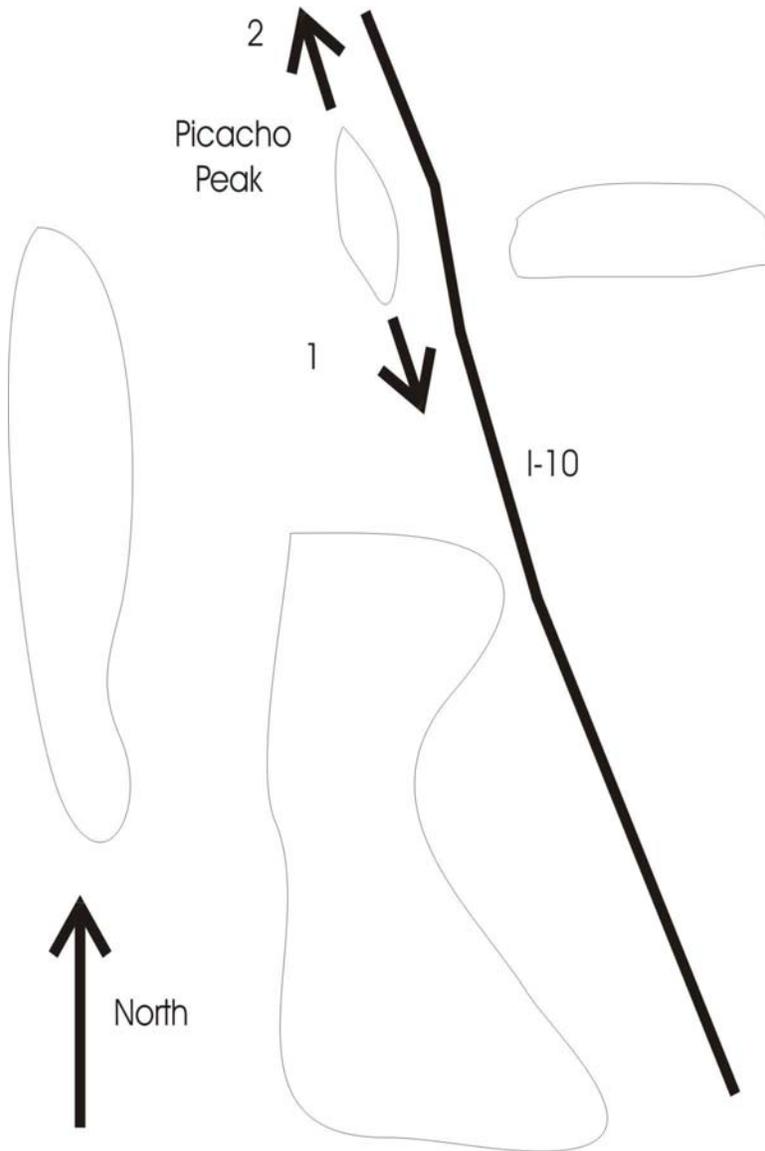
There are times when we really want to use the pigeons that can access. Therefore, whenever one of the pigeons in a pair has accessing ability, the other needs to be a proven processor (winner). While this is not going to turn all of the offspring into processors, it will dramatically increase the odds of producing at least some processors, and maybe some pigeons with excellent accessing ability. While this method generally works pretty well, it doesn't work as well as mating two processors together in the first place, and that is why I say that although you may benefit from using a pigeons with accessing ability, you shouldn't use them for breeding anymore than you need to.

Over the years, I have spent a great deal of time observing the pigeon's reactions to various training and racing regiments, and it is our northwest course that has given me some insight into a lot of the above. Because, other than a single peak that stands in the middle of the desert floor, the course is relatively flat and covered with low desert shrubs for the last 65 miles. Therefore, it is possible to see the pigeons flying for many miles. On certain tosses, the pigeons will follow the freeway or the railroad tracks right next to the freeway. There have been times when they were flying down the middle of the divided freeway that I could have touched the last pigeon in the formation from the window of my truck. In fact, I could even identify which pigeon it was. As they don't generally fly as fast as I can drive, slowing down for them too much can cause problems when the freeway is busy, but there are still times where it is very possible, and those times have really helped me observe a great deal about their behavior during flight.

This course extends 300 miles to the northwest, and then doglegs to the west for another 300 miles. The course is a headwind course until approximately 2:00 p.m. when the wind shifts around to something of a tailwind course. We have always started racing in mid February, and, because of the heat, it is important to finish up around May 1st. It is not uncommon for the longer races to reach 105 degrees Fahrenheit.

This course has several abnormalities, but the first one occurs at about 30 miles, and it tends to result in the loss of many young birds. Below is a sketch of the mountain range that the pigeons fly through on their way home from the races. Notice the mountain labeled Picacho Peak (labeled #1), as this is where I take my first training toss. Now

notice the two arrows moving away from both sides of the peak. When facing toward the mountain from the southeast, it looks almost exactly the same as when facing toward the mountain from the northwest.



The peak is approximately 30 miles from my house, and, therefore, a perfect distance for my first toss. Being the first toss, the pigeons often mill around for five or more minutes before choosing a line of flight, and, in the process, they get a very good view of the south side of the peak, and I am fairly convinced that they commit the peak to memory because if I take them there more than once, after the first toss, they always seem to know exactly where they are.

In the beginning, I used to take them to this same spot four or five times before I took them to the other side of Picacho Peak. However, on their first toss from the north side of the peak, they always take off in the wrong direction flying north away from the peak (and away from home) and because it was still pretty hot at that time of the year, any mistakes of this nature often results in significant losses.

The peak can be seen from at least 30 miles in any direction because it stands by itself and rises sharply to about 2,000 feet from the desert floor. After studying the situation for a while, I came to the conclusion that since pigeons are far more visual early on, they tend to key on their sight far more than their homing instincts. If they use their visual skills to fly away from the southeast side of the peak, then they will use their visual skills to fly away from the northwest side of the peak as well. Again, this is well before they learn to fully use their homing instinct.

Compared to us, pigeons have very sharp eyes, and they can see very clearly for many miles. While growing up and flying around the loft, they learn to rely far more heavily on their vision and the angle of the sun than on their homing ability. This isn't to say that they don't use their homing ability at all, but at that age, it is really more of a nagging directional indicator than a finely honed skill.

Consequentially, during early road training, pigeons tend to use their vision and their memory more readily than their homing ability and processing skills and this is at least somewhat evidenced by the way they tended to fly away from the peak in the example above. Therefore, after some thought, I came to the conclusion that while taking them to the south side of Picacho Peak was almost essential, as it kept them in the same valley as home, taking them directly to the north side of the peak for their next jump in distance might be confusing them more than helping them. Therefore, instead of taking them just to the other side of the peak, I jumped them 20 miles further past the peak (50 miles from my house). Even though this new release point is substantially farther and I do get some circling at the release point, my training losses dropped to nothing.

However, there is a difference between remembering something and remembering it in detail. There is also a difference in being shown something when you don't know it is important and being shown something when you know it is important. Also, the more times you see something, the more detail you will remember. It is my strong belief that the pigeons remembered the peak and they seemed to remember it after a single toss. They also apparently were able to access that memory after a single toss, however, not in enough detail to distinguish one side of the mountain from the other. That kind of detail takes more experience than just a couple of tosses.

Let me point out a couple of other things here as well. There are very few pigeons with excellent processing and accessing skills, so within any group the chances are that they are greatly outnumbered by pigeons with no ability. When a fancier takes his flock out for the first several times, processors have not learned to use their skills, and pigeons that

rely on accessing have, as of yet, nothing committed to memory and therefore nothing to access. Therefore, in the early tosses, the group is often leaderless or worse yet pigeons with no leadership skills will attempt to become leaders. This gets back to the concept of survival skills mentioned above, because as the processors get more experienced, they will quit relying on the other pigeons within the group, and if they start messing up, he will just leave them. Pigeons with excellent accessing ability are at a disadvantage during these early training tosses because they can't lead, and they may not yet understand the importance of following. Therefore, when the processors get away from the group, the group tends to flounder.

The course's second abnormality is a very mountainous region between 150 to 250 miles. Now, in terms of height, at only 5,000 to 6,000 feet, these mountains really aren't that ominous. However, in terms of navigation, they are high enough so that the pigeons won't fly generally over them, but complicated enough that flying between them is extremely difficult.

After moving to Arizona, I could never figure out why a pigeon would win one week and get lost the next or why pool birds didn't come through with the expected frequency or why pigeons never repeated from these distances. After racing in Southern California, this was something that I just wasn't used to seeing. However, when I finally had the opportunity to drive that portion of the course, these problems suddenly became very clear. The entire region was a maze of complex box canyons and barren peaks and there was no available water source. While there was a road connecting the race stations, it wound back and forth through the canyons, and it was impractical for the pigeons to follow.

Each race station was aligned with a different set of canyons, and even for a well-conditioned pigeon, it would be pretty unlikely that they would find their way out of these mountains in the front flock two weeks in a row. The fact is that this portion of the course was so confusing that I would bet that quite often we were not even getting the front flock, as they probably often took a wrong turn and wound up someplace in a box canyon. In my mind, this is a perfect example of what I am referring to when I speak of a unique course; however in this instance while there was processing involved, there was clearly a lot of luck involved also. A pigeon could fly over this terrain many times and not fully commit it to memory. Therefore pigeons that relied on accessing were at an extreme disadvantage, especially if they got separated and exposed from the flock.

The final unusual aspect of this course was the dogleg to the west starting at 300 miles. While the dogleg made the course much easier by allowing the pigeons to avoid the maze mountains altogether, for the longer races, the dogleg not only ensured that the course remained a unique course, but because the terrain became somewhat less complicated it also became a perfect example of a processing course.

I found it fascinating that from 400 miles and beyond, repeat pigeons and pool pigeons suddenly became much more common. In my view, this was primarily because as the course moved west, the pigeons were able to avoid the mountains and the processors

suddenly had an advantage. Those that had processing skills and could handle the conditions, rose to the surface to such an extent that it was very common for them to win or be clocked very high in several or all of the long races. For instance, I can name a half dozen pigeons that did well when they were sent to the 400, 500 and 600 mile races in the same season. My Hall of Fame hen won all three races in the same year in temperatures of 105 degrees.

Given that I would define our northern course as a unique course best suited for pigeons that are capable of processing, I probably should also give an example of a repetitive course. Although there are many examples of repetitive courses, since I have raced on the northwest course in Southern California, I will use it for this example.

With the exception of the Grapevine (a steep grade that traverses the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley to an altitude approximately 4,000 ft), and very thick fog at certain times of the year, much of Southern California flies a tailwind course with race stations that are located in a straight line right that follows a freeway. From memory, I would say that the San Joaquin Valley is about 50 miles wide, and for most of the last 300 miles on the southern end, the valley is lined with sizable mountains to the east and rolling hills and mountains to the west. There is a gap in the mountains at the southern end of the eastern mountain range. On this course the majority of young birds losses occur when fog settles at the top of the Grapevine, and, because the pigeons don't like to climb into the fog, they sometimes turn east through the gap in the mountains and end up on the desert. Pigeons that make this mistake rarely return.

For the most part pigeons on this course race over the exact same terrain week after week and with very few complications. The race stations are increased in approximately 50 miles increments, and, because there are so many races in the shorter distances, it is pretty rare that young birds are ever skipped more than 50 miles. When a young bird is exposed to a new distance, they need only fly a maximum of 50 miles to a race station that they are familiar with, and then it is familiarity from then on.

There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to a repetitive course. The advantages are that the speeds on a repetitive course are usually faster, and there are generally fewer losses. The first disadvantage is that pigeons are much less likely to separate, and therefore, it is much more difficult to identify the pigeons that can process. The second disadvantage is that pigeons that rely on accessing often gain more prominence than they should because repetitive courses are memory courses. Because the pigeons never really have any reason to leave the freeway, processing and even accessing aren't as important as keeping pace with the front flock, and this requires conditioning and flat out speed.

Until next time!

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