

X Factor Continued, Part 1

by

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Prefix

I have been working on this article for approximately the last 6 months. The first portions of this article incorporates portions of my earlier article on ‘The X Factor and Flight Mentality’, so before you read this, it might be good to go back and read that article again, especially since this article doesn’t include some of the same detail about X Factor. At the same time, this portion of the article includes a great deal of detail that goes off in new directions.

In its current unedited form, the entire article is over 60 pages long, and my challenge will be to edit and revise it a section at a time. While I will do the best that I can to edit this in a timely manner, sometimes I need to think about something for a while before I can edit or rewrite it, and sometimes I just get tired of working on one article, especially when things are not going well. Therefore, it is possible that I may write some other articles in the mean time. The portions of this article will all be posted under X Factor Continued, followed by a Part (...), and once they are complete, they will be available on my site at www.ehofkens.com. The challenge in this article may be in breaking it up into sections.

Most of the time when I fall behind, it isn’t because I haven’t written; instead it is because I don’t have time to edit what I have written. Because of this, I have recently been trying to cut my articles to approximately four or five pages in length. I figure that it is better to keep them short and get them published then it is to make have them sitting in storage on my machine. Therefore, on a big article like this, in order to keep the parts short, I may not always be able to break it up where I want to.

X Factor Continued

My good friend Ed Lorenz once told me, “If you want to be a hit with women, don’t ever mention that you race pigeons. If you invite them over to your house, be sure that the shades are drawn so that they can’t see any pigeon lofts in the back yard. If you own a truck they will be suspicious, so think about buying a car; if you own a car, never leave the crates on the back seat or in the trunk, and otherwise, be happy being single.”

Women or otherwise, I have stepped on the “owning pigeon’s landmine” a number of times in my life, and the outcome is rarely pleasant. Whether it is with another pigeon fancier or anyone else, I know that the minute that the word “pigeon” leaves my lips the

conversation is on the way down hill. True it might go down hill a little quicker with women, but any way you look at it, it is on the way down hill.

Every time the subject comes up, I grit my teeth and wait for the inevitable question, "How do pigeons find their way home." Women love to ask this question, although they never seem to have time to wait for the answer. Asking this question is kind of their way of saying, "You poor dumb man, why would you step on a landmine like that. Don't you realize that I am a woman, and women could care less about such trivia?" To prove my point, the last time I was asked this question, I winced and just didn't answer at all. I think my stock actually went up as she appeared to be thinking, "OK you were stupid enough to have pigeons, and you were stupid enough to admit to having pigeons, but at least you were smart enough to realize your mistake, and not make things worse by trying to explain!"

Having had pigeons for 35 years, it is still very difficult to admit that I really don't totally know how pigeons find their way home. However, I take comfort in the fact that no one else seems to either. It is kind of hard to have worked with homing pigeons all of your life and then be forced to admit that very little is known about homing instinct, which is of course is supposed to be the underlying premise of the sport.

When someone asks the dreaded question "How do pigeons find their way home." I have come up with a clever answer, "I really don't know how they find their way home; my job is to make them come home faster." Generally, by this time, they are ready to move on so they say things like, "Well, it looks like my dog is finished dumping on your front lawn, so I had better be getting home now." This wouldn't bother me quite so much if I actually had a front lawn or they even had a dog with them. But it kind of gives you some idea of how popular this sport actually is with the average person.

Still, I must admit that each time I am asked that question, it strengthens my resolve to come up with an answer (not that anyone will listen or even care). Unfortunately, after all of these years, we are still grasping at straws that can be referred to as no more than plausible concepts. In a way, this may be a good thing, because knowing this important bit of information could change or even ruin the sport in a similar manner to what I expect cloning will eventually do. Heck that would be pretty high tech way for the sport to go considering that it is currently dieing from a complete lack of interest.

While my aforementioned comeback is designed to get out of explaining whatever it is that I know about homing instinct, the second half of the comeback is truer than I would like to admit. The sport really is about making the pigeons come home quicker, and as time goes by, it is less and less about homing instinct. This is probably in great part because speed is more readily defined through racing than instinct.

While I don't think that anyone can say with certainty exactly how homing instinct really works, in my mind, I have narrowed it down to three aspects: genetics, innate application and learned application, which equates to having the ability, applying that ability in its God given form, and further refining that God given ability through repeated application.

Even when a person knows that they have a specific talent, it doesn't mean that they will go out of their way to apply that talent, or even when they do, they probably won't develop it beyond the innate level. For instance, unlike me, my two sons have some musical ability, and both play the guitar. My oldest likes to tinker with the guitar. He has some natural ability, he is aware of this ability, but, to this point, he has only willing to apply this ability to an innate level.

Let me give you an example related to pigeons. Where I live, one of our courses is from the east and it is a very fast course. However, the last 45 miles of this course is obstructed by a mountain range that runs from north to south. Therefore, the pigeons must fly around either the south or go through a pass toward the north end of the mountains. If they fly to the south, they can follow the freeway (which they like to do), but the flight will take them approximately 30 minutes longer. If they fly to the north, they must hit an elevated pass, or else they will be forced to fly 45 miles farther to the north. Instinctively, they always want to take the southern route because it is easier and safer to follow the freeway. However, if they take the south course, I would be 30 minutes late every week, especially given where I live.

The first year, I tried to show them the pass, but the dirt road up into the pass was very hard on my truck. After a great deal of work, when I took them to the other side of the mountain, they went the wrong way anyway.

I thought about this for a couple of days, before coming to the conclusion that if they were really homing pigeons, then they should be able to find their way home without my trying to show them the way. So, every day for the next five days, I took them to the far side of the mountain, which was a toss of about 70 miles. By the fourth day, they were looking a little tired when I let them go, but suddenly, they cut 30 minutes off their time, and from that time forward, they never went the wrong way again. In subsequent years, I have given them their first toss at the bottom of the pass on my side of the mountain, which is about 15 miles from my house, and then my second toss has been from 70 miles and on the other side of the mountain.

You see, they had no problem being stupid when I was inconvenienced by driving my truck up into the pass, but when I turned the tables and inconvenienced them by forcing them to fly the long way day after day, they suddenly got smart.

Obviously by making it home at all, they clearly had some homing ability. However, when I was inconvenienced, they were only going to give me their innate ability, which was the general their general homing ability. When the inconvenience shifted to them, they were suddenly willing to learn to better apply that ability. If I hadn't forced the issue, they would have been happy to rely on their innate abilities, instead of learning how to better apply those abilities.

It is my opinion that most homing pigeons have some innate homing ability, which translates to some ability to use their natural instinct. However, for many pigeons and

humans there is a brick wall that limits how quickly and accurately these ability are processed, stored, accessed, and applied. Let me explain the difference between processing, storing, accessing, and applying. Processing involves the comprehension of new situations and developing data about those situations. Once the data has been processed, it can be used on the spot (application), and/or it can be stored into memory for use at a later time (application). For a pigeon to be successful, it must be able to apply what it is currently learning or what it has learned from past situations and then placed into storage.

Like humans, some pigeons have average comprehension but excellent storage capability, and, although they are slower to process information, they are much better at committing what they have learned to memory. In a way, assuming they survive the first couple of times that they are exposed to a situation, this sort of gives them a second chance. For instance, in the past, I have mentioned the concept of leaders and followers. In my view, leaders at a minimum comprehend much more quickly than other pigeons while followers tend to rely heavily on the storage and access of data from previous situations. Because followers learn more slowly, they tend to be at risk early on in their racing careers, but as they store data from those experiences, they can learn to compensate for their poor comprehension.

I would like to point out that there is another class in both pigeons and humans that either may or may not comprehend a situation very well but they have excellent memories for a storage perspective. However, for some reason they cannot access what they have committed to storage in a timely manner. In other words, it is in their memory, and given time, they can access it, but they are not able to access it quickly. We have all experienced “searching for a word.” It is in our memory, but we just can’t seem to access it quickly enough.

Finally, as I am always telling my older son, application is everything because it is the action that occurs at the end of the process! A pigeon can comprehend, store and access all he wants, but if it can’t get the job done, then it has no value as a racer. This occurs in humans as well and these people often become teachers and coaches. We have all heard the adage “those that can’t, teach”. This is not to detract from either of these professions, but these people are can often comprehend, store and access data on how it should be done, but for some reason they have some limitation in the area of application. However, they generally have an unusual ability to help other in applying these skills. Unfortunately, there really isn’t much a place in this sport for these pigeons, and these are the pigeons that most befuddle us because they look like they have it, but it just never seems to happen!

Until next time!

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