

A Land of Limbo

by

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Sorry that I have not written for a while, but I have been working on a giant project at work, and the thought of more typing just hasn't been quite as appealing lately! Unfortunately, this is going to be a very big project, and, while I thought I might get out of it just being the “concept man,” I can now see that the more I move, the deeper the mud is getting around my ankles. While I don't see it continuing this way, this was a 70-hour work week, and I really have not had a lot of energy for anything else. On top of everything, it has suddenly turned very hot, and it is supposed to reach 112 by the weekend. This doesn't exactly help the old enthusiasm. Let me take a crack at this article, and realize that this article could come to an abrupt end!

There are times in every fancier's life when he is at a crossroads. I have been mentioning for some time now that I am at that point yet again. I guess it isn't a new feeling exactly, and so it doesn't bother me quite as much as it used to. Each time I reach one of these crossroads, I have more confidence that I can work my way the problems that lie ahead.

In the early 1990s, I reached a very different type of crossroads. At that time, the question running around in my mind was whether I wanted to race or even own pigeons anymore. At the point in my life, I had a number of situations that just came together all at once, and I needed a break. Going cold turkey was a little scary because I was afraid that I was going to miss the pigeons, and that thought kept me in the sport for several years longer than I really wanted to be. However, eventually I sold out altogether. It took me five years to admit that I missed my pigeons at least from a breeding standpoint, and, since my return, I have had little desire to race. Maybe someday after I retire the urge to race will return again. However, for now, I am quite happy focusing on the breeding and teaching end of things.

In 2000 and 2001, I came to another crossroads during the time of the Stalin-like purges that drastically narrowed the focus of my breeding loft. This was a nail-biting time for me, and it seemed to drag on forever. The old phrase—“What doesn't kill you will make you stronger”—comes to mind. There was a time when I could have lost my family had I not produced the New Foundation Hen, the Super Cock, and the Super Merckx all in the same year. Purging the loft was a huge risk, and there was more than one day that I was sure that I had screwed up the whole thing. Somehow, I escaped that crossroads, but with a much narrower focus to my breeding program.

This most recent crossroads is again a little different in nature, as it is a changeover from one type of strength to another. In a way, the risks involved in this transition are much

lower. I still have as many good pigeons; therefore, the real difference comes down to who best fits my future plans.

In a way, this is another narrowing process that is similar to my 2000 and 2001 dilemma, with one difference. At that time, I just wasn't happy with a number of pigeons within the group, and back then the decisions had to be black and white. This time around, things are a little different. Since 2001, I have built a very nice group of quality pigeons, and, although there are several directions available to me, with the procurement of the Horemans, the directions have narrowed considerably.

As I mentioned in my last article, since 2000, my primary focus has been to produce pigeons that I thought could win under a widowhood cock system. However, there are very few fanciers still flying this system, and, because it may be years before I fly again, I simply needed to rethink that position.

More recently, in an effort to improve the overall performance in both young bird and old bird, I have now narrowed my selection process down to the smaller and faster end of the family. Considering the enormity of this change, I feel extremely lucky to have a number of pigeons that are tailor-made for such a move.

At the same time, as I have mentioned in recent articles, I am rapidly moving to a hardcore inbreeding program. My fortune continues to hold because the smaller end of the family has already shown an amazing propensity for inbreeding. However, this transition will take approximately two to three breeding seasons to fully accomplish.

In 2000, I was in a self-imposed struggle for survival. The situation was hard on me simply because I made it hard on myself. It would have been a lot easier on me if I had been willing to lower my standard. However, nothing makes me more uneasy than keeping pigeons around that I don't like or need. At that time the decision was about quality.

Back then I was still working with some original imports and some good stock that I had bred. However, there was no theme, so I decided to get rid of the original imports and select only those pigeons that I thought could move the family forward. This was a dangerous move because I didn't have a track record on any of these younger pigeons. I say it was a risk, but, at the same time, breeding more pigeons that I didn't want or need wasn't going to help me either.

Today, I am again focusing on very few pigeons, but pretty much all of them have a year or two of breeding under their belt, and during that period they have already proven that they are capable of producing the type of pigeon that can improve the versatility of the loft.

This is such an important point that it deserves a lot of consideration. Often a pigeon can have one phenotype but produce another. With straight crosses, the phenotype is not set at all; with line breeding, the phenotype is more consistent; with inbreeding, the

phenotype is very consistent with fewer defects. When a fancier has no experience with a pigeon, he has no idea what the pigeon will produce. When the fancier has some knowledge of that the pigeon can produce, he has some confidence. For instance, De Welches Jr. is a 1999. He has never had a bad breeding year, so he has been bred with at least 5 hens. With each successful year, I gain more confidence in him.

When I need to make a change in direction, these are the pigeons that I like to key on because I know that in several years' time, they can produce a whole new stock loft. For instance, right now, I am almost exclusively breeding out of three pairs of Hofkens and three pairs of Horemans. Judging from the results of my first several rounds, I could already be up to six to eight pairs of each by next year, and the year after that I will be up to the full 20 pairs. Again, this is because I am starting out with great pigeons that I have significant confidence in.

Both the 2001 and this most recent transitions have been difficult, but this one may be more difficult from a personal standpoint. In 2001, the problem was the lack of good pigeons, and in 2005 the problem is an abundance of good pigeons that don't necessarily go in the direction in which I am headed. It is heartbreaking to be talking about certain pigeons leaving the program, as it may include pigeons like the Super Cock.

Pigeon racing is all about heartbreak though. For instance, when I was 11 years old, my first pigeon was a pet roller named Stanley. I had him for about two months before I bought my first homers, and I was already quite attached to Stanley. I was trying to talk my dad into letting me have pigeons, and, here out of nowhere, a pigeon flew into our garage. My dad had been a hard sell on the subject, but, going into the garage, I knew that if I could just catch this pigeon, my dad would let me keep it, and I could work on the subject from there. I remember thinking, I may crush this pigeon, but, one way or another, he is not going to leave the garage. I was right on all counts.

Several months later when I was well-entrenched in racing pigeons, I believed that it was important that I maintained my focus on one thing, so I gave Stanley to a friend. It was one of the hardest things that I have ever done. However, it should show you exactly how seriously I take what I am attempting to do. Stanley was a kid thing, but, nonetheless, I did what I had to do because I knew it would ultimately make me better. If I was a kid and I could understand that then many of you fanciers that are older should be able to realize that this sport is about tough decisions, not hanging on to everything in hopes that it might win!

As you probably know, in the past De Welches Jr. has been a key pigeon to the existing family. However, because there were three Merckx cocks, his place in the family had diminished over time. Going forward, though, his place in the future of the loft is assured because so far he has one son (553) and three daughters (516, 554, 370) to carry on his bloodlines after he is gone. In his first year of breeding, 553 has produced several excellent pigeons. Last year his sister 516 produced two excellent hens: 342 and 369. His place in the loft will be assured for another reason as well: he is also the son of the 929 Topman hen.

Right out of the crate, I selected the 929 Topman hen as the best of the Hofkens hens. I just fell in love with her. However, while she bred many great pigeons, she just didn't breed in the direction I wanted to go, at least at the time. Her youngsters were better suited for hens and young birds. Her pedigree indicates that she came down on one side from outside the Verheyen pigeons, and that may have had something to do with it. The bottom line was that she simply wasn't going where I wanted to go, so I moved her out. Looking back, maybe she was trying to tell me something, and maybe I should have listened. I can say that I didn't fault her as a pigeon, because I still think she was one of the best. I know one of her sisters was an excellent breeder that bred many race winners, and the 929 hen was twice the pigeon. Regardless, if we keep every pigeon that we think can do something, we will have 300 pigeons, and, frankly, I just couldn't enjoy that.

Even in losing the 929 hen, I still have a fair amount of that blood left in my current breeding including three excellent hens that I brought back from my partner: 99 HI 0133(daughter), 01HI 0007(granddaughter), and 01HI 0008 (granddaughter).

Also included in the 929 group is the inbred (brother/sister) Topman II cock (540). He has been my favorite since the day I first laid eyes on him. He already produced very well when mated to one of the daughters of the De Welches Jr. (516). This year, he is mated to his daughter from last year's mating (342), and they have produced two amazing youngsters (918 and 919)! In fact, I think both pigeons have surpassed their father, which puts them at the top of the loft. Am I surprised? Only in that they are better than the father; I thought they would be equal.

Essentially, these and the pigeons described above are going to be the basis for the new family. Now the question is: how should I go about constructing this new family? Well, that is not going to be a short answer, and I am sure there is a long and twisting road ahead.

Topics of Interest

When I hear the word inbreeding, I am not always sure exactly how the term is being used. I remember in one of De Weerd's books, he mentioned the importance of inbreeding, but the more I read what he had to say, the more I realized that he was really discussing line breeding more than inbreeding. To make matters even more confusing, there were also some areas where he probably was also talking about inbreeding.

In my opinion, Piet was more interested in getting fanciers to understand the importance of breeding closely than he was in distinguishing the difference between inbreeding and line breeding. If you have read many of my articles, you will know that I am in agreement with this view. However, I also think it is important to carefully distinguish between line breeding and inbreeding.

My definition of line breeding is the mating of related pigeons that are not mother to son, father to daughter, or brother to sister. Generally, my definition of inbreeding is mating

related pigeons that are mother to son, father to daughter, or brother to sister. Until recently, I would not have used the word “generally.” However, because of Dave Shewmaker’s explanation of the breeding behind Topman II (described once again below), I have had to change my definition of inbreeding slightly. Inbreeding is complicated to explain, and, since most people really don’t understand it very well, making it more complicated isn’t going to help.

Most authors don’t make this distinction, so what they write thereafter is somewhat meaningless because if I tell you that I am running an inbreeding program when I really mean line breeding program, and you jump in without understanding the difference, then you are going to create a mess.

Also, before even considering an inbreeding program, I ran a number of inbreeding tests in my own loft. The point of these tests was to determine if this family of pigeons could be inbred. While line breeding tends to work pretty well in most families, inbreeding does not, and most fanciers will find it of no value whatsoever. In the past, I have tried inbreeding, and, frankly, it really didn’t work very well for me either. Some say that it is a slap to a family if it doesn’t inbreed well. I am not so sure, but what is for sure is that some do inbreed and some don’t.

In my past experience, I was never really sure exactly why, but I can say that I had little success. However, for whatever reason, the Hofkens have been a completely different story. Not only have they worked, but, in many instances, they have actually gotten better through inbreeding. Of course, in judging inbreds, there is more to it than meets the eye. Inbreeding is not really a function of trait breeding; it is really more about the genetic makeup of the pigeon and what those genes can handle.

For instance, hemophilia can be traced back to inbreeding. Those people didn’t necessarily look any different on the outside, yet their genetic makeup was different enough to cause a problem that carried on through the generations. It is nice to have trait pigeons that are well bred, but when it comes to extreme genetic consistency, that only comes from line breeding or inbreeding.

It seems that I have run out of time for this edition!

Until next time!

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