

X Factor Continued, Part 4

by

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Before I begin this article, I would like to take the time to congratulate Steven van Breemen on the 150th addition of the Winning Magazine. One hundred and fifty of anything is a lot, and we should all be pleased that in this case the one hundred and fifty items happened to be for our enjoyment and the betterment of the sport. Please join me in thanking Steven for the hard work that he has put into the magazine over the last seven years. Having read that Steven has been at this for that long, I had to go back and look to see how long I have been publishing articles in his magazine, and it appears that I wrote my first article in late September of 2003. Good luck to Steven going forward!

This portion of my continuing series about X Factor is primarily about three stories (there are actually four, but one is sort of an offshoot story), two of which I have told in the distant past. These three stories have had a profound impact on my thinking about innate and learned homing ability, and they have had a significant impact on my thinking about racing pigeons in general.

During my first several years in the sport, I was very fortunate to obtain two excellent hens. Although both hens produced many good pigeons, one of them produced equally well with several different cocks. As I was in my early teens at the time, my loft was very small and I could only keep six pairs of breeders. Therefore, I was often forced to breed a little later than I otherwise might have. Although my parents let me have pigeons, they certainly weren't wild about them, and, consequently, they weren't very willing to help me with the training tosses. Because of this, I often started training my pigeons several months before the first race just so that I could get enough tosses in.

Breeding late and training early is not always the best combination, and sometimes I had to make some very tough decisions. On this particular year, I was forced to breed my pigeons even later into the season than usual. In fact, when training time came around, I still had two youngsters out of the super hen, mentioned above, in the nest. As these youngsters could fly from the floor to the nest pretty easily, they were probably about 28 days old at the time. Initially, I was going to let them grow up and use them as stock pigeons, but as my young bird race teams were pretty small back then, I really needed these two pigeons on the team. Since I had talked my dad into a three-mile training toss, I felt that if I didn't get these two pigeons into this first toss, the others would quickly be trained out too far for these youngsters to catch up.

It was an agonizing decision, but, in the end, I crated these two youngsters up with the rest and off they went. My thinking was that because the release point was on a very

steep hill that essentially overlooked my house, they would be scared up into the air in all of the activity and follow the rest home. Well, as you can imagine, the rest took off fine and there were my two youngsters standing on the ground looking confused. At first, I thought I would just catch them and put them back in the crate, but they would have none of that. From my vantage point on top of the hill, I could already see that the rest of the flock was about half way home. Panicked, I resorted to scaring these two youngsters up off the ground and into the air, and although that took some effort, they did eventually get up in the air. When I looked around for the others, I could just see them circling the house several miles below.

Although these two youngsters were now in the air, they were far more interested in having fun than worrying about where they were going. My dad wanted to get going, so I closed up the crates and got back into the car quite upset with myself and feeling very stupid about the whole event. When I got home, some of the youngsters were still flying around, so I let them continue with the hope that the other two might see them. After about fifteen minutes, I noticed that the two youngsters had somehow made it home and were amongst those still flying around the loft.

When the group finally came down, one youngster landed on the fence and the other on the ground, and neither had a clue how to get into the loft because they had never been outside. Although it took me about a half hour to get them in, I finally managed. As it was another week before I got the chance to road train again, and as they had already flown on road training toss, they were very quick to fly learn to fly around the loft, but they didn't learned to fly with the group until much later.

The next three or four tosses didn't go any better, and, in fact, on the fourth toss, I lost one of them. The truth is that I was pretty sure that I was going to lose both of them, because even though the one hung around it was always late from the tosses and this continued on into the early races.

It was on about the third week of the race season that this youngster started coming in from training tosses on time. On the fourth week, I noticed that this pigeon was looking very good. So good in fact, that I only sent three pigeons the following week, and I nominated this one as my pool bird. Having walked you though all of this, I guess that I have to report that the pigeon ended up finishing first overall in the combine, but that is far less impressive than what the pigeon went through to get to this point! I really don't think this pigeon would have been able to do any of this if it hadn't been for the fact that it had significant processing abilities, and this allowed it to come home time after time by itself during the early going. Later, this pigeon went on to breed several very good pigeons including a 600-mile winner.

In the second story, life moves on, and I find myself here in Arizona. Depressing but true! In my second year here, I bought a pigeon from a very well known long distance fancier from Illinois by the name Ken Borsch. He was quitting the sport, and he basically gave me the pick of his loft, which usually isn't a good idea. After going though his breeders and what would have been his race team, I picked out a little yearling hen that

had done exactly nothing to that point in its life. When I had made my selection, he wasn't very complimentary in asking me, "With all of the great pigeons in that loft, why would you pick that one?" Before I answered him, we agreed on a price (a pretty small amount as I remember). Then I replied, "In answer to your question, I chose this one because it was the best one." He just shook his head.

The next year, I bred three youngsters out of this hen. Unfortunately, before I could fly any of them we decided to move, so these youngsters were never even settled to my house. They were on their third or fourth flight in the moult, when I decided to give these pigeons and several others to a friend that lived about 30 miles away so that he could attempt to settle them.

After a week, he cut their last three flights off at the base and put them outside to run around. To make a long story short, although none of them came in together, all three of them were back at my house that afternoon. My friend really didn't want to continue with the experiment, until I asked him, "You know, you cut the flights on all six pigeons so that they couldn't fly, and that seemed to discourage the other three, yet these three not only flew, but they flew home to a loft that they had never been settled to. Don't you think that's a little unusual?"

Eventually, he was able to get them settled and on the race team. Of the three, the cock was never out of the top ten, and, in two years of racing, he won the 250 and the 500, he was king bird two seasons in a row, and he went on to bred me 10 winners within a two year period. One of his sisters won the 400, and eventually bred my Hall of Fame hen that won the 400, 500, and 600. The other sister won the 600.

The third story is about another friend of mine. Although he is now up in years, he has accomplished many amazing things with pigeons, or should I say that his pigeons have accomplished many amazing things for him. I draw this distinction because basically he is a feed and water man. I would have to say that his methods would be considered by most to be somewhat unorthodox. For instance, I have seen him take his young birds on the first toss to 15 miles and in 105-degree heat, and lose half of them. If he did it once, I would say it was a mistake, but he does it all the time, so I would have to say that it is unorthodox. Later he would say, "Well I guess these wanted to come home, we'll work with them."

This fancier is a good natural selector of pigeons, and while he is not a heavy trainer, and rarely trains more than 30 miles, he pushes his pigeons to more races than anyone that I have ever met. While his losses are often high, he quickly weeds the team down to the survivors, and those pigeons go to the races week after week. Over the years, he has very loosely flown both the natural and widowhood systems, and he has chalked up some amazing individual performances. Several times, I have seen him rely on a single pigeon for an entire season and on many occasions these pigeons could have won AU Hall of Fame if he had bothered to enter them.

This particular story occurred when I first moved to Arizona. As I was just starting up again, I needed to purchase some breeders. However, at the time, I was just out of college, and money was scarce. Although I didn't know this fancier very well, I knew of his record, so I decided to visit him. At the time of the visit, he was racing something of a widowhood cock system. I didn't know him well enough to inquire about purchasing any of his breeders, and since he was racing he wouldn't sell any of the widowers or even their mates. However, I asked if I could select out a hen from the mates, and pick it up after the season. He agreed to this, and within ten minutes, I had selected my pigeon, and we made a deal that if it was still there after the season, he would sell it to me for \$15.

As this was no ordinary pigeon, I was quite pleased with my day's work. However, several weeks later, the races turned very bad, and many pigeons were lost. Although he won the 500 and was leading average speed, he only had three widowhood cocks left, and they were exhausted from the tough 500. I just happened to stop by the day after the 500, and he told me that he was going to take the mates to the widowers on a 30-mile toss and then send them to the 600-mile race. Other than flying around the loft a couple of times a week, this was all the training they had for the entire season.

While I was quite distressed by this news, there was little I could say about it. I tried to be encouraging, but considering it almost surely meant the end of the hen that I had picked out, I was pretty much dying inside!

Well, that 600-mile race was one of the toughest races ever flown here, and only 8 pigeons ever made it home, and all of those were on the second day. As I had been in touch with another friend about the race, I knew that the race had been a complete disaster. While I knew that this guy had clocked a pigeon and had won average speed, I couldn't bring myself to even give him a call about the pigeon that I had selected early on in the season. I mean how could a pigeon have not flown all season, be trained 30 miles, and be expected to race 600 miles in 108-degree temperatures? Several days later, he called me to ask when I was going to come and get my pigeon. It turned out that while this hen didn't win the race, it placed 4th, and was less than an hour behind the winner!

Although I don't often talk about these things, let me tie the last two stories together a little bit. The hen in this last story went on to become my foundation hen, and four of her first five youngsters were winners. The youngster that didn't win a race (313) also never flew a race because when it was young, it caught its neck on a wire and almost tore its head off. Again, we didn't have a great deal of money at the time, but I took the pigeon to the veterinarian to have its head sowed back on, which cost me \$50. However, this pigeon paid me back many times over because when mated to the daughter of the hen in the second story, they bred my AU Hall of Fame hen, which won the 400, 500, and 600-mile races. Interestingly, the 600-mile race flown by the Hall of Fame hen was almost identical to the one flown by its grandmother and again there were only 8 pigeons ever clocked. On that day, I had the good fortune to finish 1st, 3rd, and 8th. I mention this because the yearling hen that was 8th, could have also won AU Hall of Fame as she placed first at the 300, 400, and 500-mile races. Her father was the son to the hen in the last story, and she eventually won 5 races, and, in limited breeding, she went on to breed a

500-mile winner for another fancier, and that pigeon also turned out to be a big breeder as well.

Given that the previous two stories provide some explanation of some of my top pigeons at the time, I am going to tell another story that I have always wanted to tell. I don't know that it fits here, but to tell it anywhere else, would require that I explain all of the above again, so instead of doing that, I am going to tell it here.

This story involves the former renowned eyesign specialist, Bob Flemming. I say renowned because Bob traveled all over the world grading eyesign during the 1970's and '80's, and in my opinion he did a very good job as evidenced in the following story. In my opinion, Bob unfairly lost a lot of his reputation when he settled down in the San Fernando Valley and pretty much proved that he couldn't race pigeons ...at least there. I say "unfairly lost his reputation" because unlike most people, I really don't see what the ability to select and the ability to race have to do with each other. The fact is that many of the best selectors have not flown all that well or at all simply because they tend to be collectors of good pigeons. Bob tried to bring pigeons in from all over, and on those rare occasions where he was able to purchase local pigeons, they weren't from the top lofts.

So when he brought pigeons with good eyesign from South Africa, Australia, Arizona or wherever else into the San Fernando Valley, they might have been good pigeons, but they were not the type of good pigeon that were needed to win in the Valley. Dispersed back out to their original locations, they probably would have been very successful.

While I wouldn't have listed Bob amongst my friends, based on the following, I gained a great deal of respect for his ability to select pigeons. Anyway this is an interesting story that makes us both look good but from different sides of the fence.

Although I had not heard of Bob at the time of this story, it had been quite well advertised around the state that he was holding a grading session and seminar in Phoenix, Arizona. I don't remember the exact circumstances, but I do remember that for some reason it was going to be awkward for me to bring pigeons to this show, so at first I wasn't going to go. However, when another fancier asked me to go with him, I decided to take three of my older youngsters.

When I arrived, I was kind of surprised how many fanciers attended. There were approximately 400 young birds and maybe 150 old birds at the show, and after several hours, Bob narrowed the young birds down to about ten pigeons that he kept moving back and forth between baskets. Eventually, there were five in each basket and the others were taken away. He again narrowed these down to a single basket of five pigeons.

Now, Bob was a showman if there ever was one, and rather than getting down to business, he knew he had his audience hooked, so he was using it as an opportunity to clown around. Bob was an excellent speaker, and actually very fun to listen to, but on this occasion, I had reason to get on with it. So I finally drug his attention back to the five pigeons in the crate. Not really liking the interruption and being Bob, he said, "Why

would you care, I doubt its going to affect you any.” To this there was a great deal of laughter from his audience, but instead of being embarrassed, I looking down at the crate and responded, “Well maybe.”

With that, he triumphantly reached in and quickly discarded two more pigeons out the crate, which left three remaining. Looking directly at me he pronounced, “These three are the winners.” Smiling, I looked directly back at him and said “then I guess that it is going to affect me at least a little.” Frowning, he said, “Do you own one of these?” I answered, “No.” The muscles in his face relaxed, and once again he was smiling. He pulled one of the pigeons out of the crate, and read off the band number, and asked who owned it, and I told him I did. Again frowning, he said in a not too friendly tone, “You just told me that you didn’t have one in this group!” To which I responded, “I don’t have one, I own all three.” To this day, I still remember how quite it got in the room. I think everyone was calculating the odds in their head!

Out of 400 pigeons, Bob had picked out 313 mentioned above, his brother 314, and a pigeon from another pair. In credit to Bob, he recovered his wits very quickly, and he went on to declare 313 the most likely breeder, and 314 as the most likely flyer, which is exactly the way it worked out later on.

Now, you can look at this several ways. You can look at it that I was lucky, or you can look at it that I already knew much of what he knew, or you can look at it that he was lucky, or you can look at it that he knew enough about selecting to choose those three pigeons out of 400 entries. Although I wasn’t a grader of pigeons at the time, today, I can tell you that he deserves most of the credit. I just brought three pigeons, and he was able to select them out of 400 other pigeons. I put them into the group, and he found them.

While it is possible that there were many other possible winners within the group, Bob chose a pigeon that was a winner, a pigeon that was a multiple winner, and an outstanding breeder that among other things bred a Hall of Fame winner!

Going back to the first three stories, all of them have something to do with unique homing ability, and all three stories are about great pigeons or great pigeons produced by great pigeons. In all three cases, the parents were mega breeders that produced multiple winners and many other top performers. Clearly, these pigeons could process or they wouldn’t have survived the unusual circumstances to which they were exposed.

Not every pigeon has the ability to win, and not ever pigeon that has the ability to win does win, however most of the latter will distinguish themselves in some way, shape, or form, whether it be as the leader of the front flock or, once separated from the flock, as individuals.

We know that we are not talking about pigeons accessing ability, because we are talking about pigeons that have already won. We also know that we are not talking about

accessing ability because we are talking about pigeons that breed astonishingly high percentages of winners.

As we have discussed several times, while a pigeon with accessing ability can win, it is going to be far more infrequent, and often by luck. Usually pigeons with accessing ability attach themselves to pigeons like the above and hope to maintain the pace. However, when things get tough and the front flock gets spread out, it is the processors that win the tough ones. Therefore, it is up to the race to identify the processor, and it is up to the fancier to recognize that the processor has been identified.

Sometimes, a processor will identify itself in a manner that doesn't establish it as a processor. Don't take the chance; make it repeat itself until you are sure. Two general rules of thumb are that "good pigeons don't get sick," and "great processors generally don't get lost."

Until next time!

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