

X Factor, Part 5

by

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In my last portion of the X Factor article, I finished up by saying that good processors usually don't get lost. However, every pigeon has a limit to its capability, and on the wrong day and at the wrong distance, almost any pigeon can get lost.

As I have mentioned in previous portions of this article, homing ability comes in two forms, innate ability, and learned application. While most homing pigeons have a range of innate ability, there are some that have little or no homing ability at all. Pigeons lacking homing ability are usually lost during the young bird season, but some still make it into their yearling year before they are exposed and lost. By their second year, there are generally very few imposters left on the race team.

It is too bad that the losses don't end with the exposure of the imposters. The fact is that on a working course (1100 to 1300 ypm) most fanciers continue to lose approximately 50% of the pigeons from each age group. For instance, as you know, I have pretty much always raced widowhood hens. Therefore, in young birds, I generally start out with 60 pigeons of which 40 are hens. By the end of the young bird season, I usually have about 20 hens to move to the old bird team. These are added to 10 two year olds and 5 three year olds to make up the overall team. As you can see, from season to season, about half of the pigeons are lost or removed from each age group. Therefore, even though the overall quality of the remaining pigeons continues to get better, the loss ratio remains fairly constant.

So why do we lose so many experienced pigeons? Here again, there are many factors, but I am going to stick to the basic five, sickness, distance of the races, physical ability, physical conditioning, and mental conditioning. I think sickness is probably pretty self-explanatory so there is little point in explaining its effect on losses.

While, in the short races, most pigeons can either find their way home or follow someone who can, a lot of these same pigeons don't have the physical ability to handle the longer races. For instance, short distance pigeons really aren't bred to fly the longer distances, so it is up to the fancier to know the capabilities of their pigeons, and, unfortunately, many fanciers do not. Instead they keep racing these pigeons to ever increasing distances until eventually they are lost. Therefore, a lot of the losses suffered through physical inability have a great deal to do with the fancier knowledge of his pigeons.

Not every pigeon that goes to a race is in good physical condition. In fact, while everyone seems to want to brag about the number of pigeons that are actually entered into the race, the fact is that in any give race over 300 miles, about 1/3 of the pigeons will be lost, 1/3 will come perilously close to being lost and one third will make good race time. Of the third that come perilously close to being lost, about half of those will be lost in their next race. I refer to pigeons as “tumbling” because their lives are tumbling out of control, and it is only a matter of time until they are lost.

Under modern racing methods, most pigeons are brought into condition in the last several days before shipping, which is fine as long as it actually works out that way. The problem with this is that the fancier must wait until the end of the week to see how the story is going to turn out. Sometimes things don't go to plan, and then at the end of the week the fancier finds himself waiting for something that isn't going to come, or at least not during that week. Part of the idea of bring pigeons up at the end of the week, is that it helps to ensure that they all come into their best form of the week at the same time. Therefore, when things don't go to plan, it tends to affect the whole team. Now the fancier is faced with the choice of not racing that week or sending a team that isn't in peak form. If he chooses the latter, his returns are likely to be way off.

Finally, the mental aspect is very important as well. When pigeons are in a fragile state of mind, they don't process food in the same manner. Over the years, I have discovered that you really can't tell whether a pigeon is fully prepared for a race until it has been sitting in the crate for about an hour. At that point, the ones that remain tight in the body are ready to go, and the ones that feel hot and wet are nervous and their muscle generally turns to a liquid flab while they are sitting in the crate. You often see the same thing in the lower backs of bodybuilders when they don't peak at the right time. Not only is the muscle too flabby (like it is carrying too much water), but sweat often collects in the area to make it even more noticeable, which for a body builder is a bad thing. Once a pigeon's muscle has turned to flab, its chances of coming home drop in half, especially at races over 300 miles.

In the end, regardless of the pigeon's quality, when a pigeon is not right either physically or mentally, it is far more likely to get lost. I know that this sounds like common sense, but if it is then why do so many fanciers lose pigeons for these reasons?

While a quality pigeon is more likely to fight through a bad day, I am not sure that this is the way that you want to use your quality pigeons. It is disappointing how often a great pigeon is put at risk when it simply isn't ready to go to the races. In fact, I have had many fanciers say to me, “it isn't in great shape today, but if the pigeon is any good, it will make it home anyway.” The pigeon may make it home, however, it is going to find the race rather difficult, and it is going to lose confidence in its own abilities. Instead of thinking about racing, it is going to start thinking about survival. Wouldn't it make more sense to use the skills of a great pigeon on a day when it has a chance to win instead of on a bad day when all you are hoping to accomplish is getting the pigeon home?

Some will say, "Well, if the overall quality is getting better, and there are more proven processors within each remaining age group, then why is the percentage of loss about the same from season to season?" The fact is that in this sport, we all need to push our pigeons harder than we might like. For instance, I generally only race my widowhood hens through their third year. While I try to take it pretty easy on the young birds and yearlings, I work them pretty hard as two and three year olds. While I try to send all of my pigeons to the races in peak form and at distances they can handle, this is still pigeon racing, and things often don't go as planned.

Not every pigeon is in perfect shape every time out and eventually they will hit a long distance race when it isn't their day, and this will generally results in them flying with the also-rans or by themselves. While this might not be such a problem most of the time, when they are having a bad day, it can easily lead to their demise regardless of their processing skills. Ultimately, where exposure is generally a good thing for sorting out the processors, it is never a good thing when a processor is having a bad day, because at that point, it is probably no more capable of surviving the situation than the also-rans.

Even knowing all of the above, sending pigeons to the distance races can be challenging. I think that most of us rely on sending our pigeons to the distance races in two to three week cycles. Depending on the size of the team, it can get very difficult to switch pigeons from one team to another once they have been committed to a specific team. Therefore, team rotation often takes precedence over the actual conditioning of the pigeon because when a cycle comes up, all of the pigeons from that rotation are sent.

Usually, the distance races occur late in the season when many fanciers have sent the pigeons too often, lost too many pigeons on tough days, or a combination of both. When pigeons are lost, the fancier must rely more heavily on those that are left, and this leads to the remaining pigeons being sent to too many races. When pigeons are tired, it is often less clear who will actually step up to the challenge of the distance races. The fact is that although you may have 20 good distance pigeons, in any given season, five are usually doing all of the work. The problem is that those five can't go every week, so they are usually divided into cycles so that they can go every other week. Since it is unclear going into the distance races exactly who will step up, some of the success of the season depends on getting the correct five split equally over two teams.

I remember a very good year where I experienced unusual success. As mentioned above, I had five pigeons that were doing everything and fortunately for me they were split pretty equally over the two rotations. I had one pigeon on each team that ended up winning three races. Just using that example, what would have happened if they had been on the same rotation? Instead of having six wins, I might have ended up with three wins. As you can see, the strength of the overall team, who is willing to step up, how they are split up, and luck play a big part in the fancier's success at the distance. If a good pigeon is in shape going into the first distance race and it can handle the distance, then it should perform well throughout the rest of the season. However, when push comes to shove, the majority of pigeons will spend the majority of the distance races tumbling.

What kills most fanciers is that they have no idea about the condition of their pigeons, so they put all of their best pigeons into the first distance races, and from there they try to mix and match. While pigeons often do well when they are doubled back to back, I like to hear my competitors saying that they are doing this because it lets me know that they are out of balance and weakening!

Until next time!

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