

When One Family Just Isn't Enough, Part 1

by

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I have heard about writers getting something called "writers block," but not really considering myself a writer, I figured I was immune, so I was very surprised when it actually happened to me. In fact, the problem got so bad that I was actually having trouble writing the standard mumbo-jumbo at work! I really don't know how or why it started, but, whenever I would sit down to write, I couldn't think of anything to say, and, on those rare occasions where I could find something to say, I discovered that I was having trouble completing a paragraph. I would start the same paragraph over and over, but, each time, it sounded as bad as or even worse than the last time (maybe it was that way all along, but I just never noticed before), so I would start over again. Finally, it just wasn't worth the time to continue, so, as you may have noticed, I took a long break. While at work on Monday, for some reason, I suddenly discovered that I was writing at least a little better, so I thought I would try writing an article.

In the past, I could devote more of my personal time to writing, but, lately, things have gotten to the point where I am feeling constantly rushed in many areas of my life, and certainly my writing is one of those areas. The truth is that I have now written as many as seventy articles at the rate of two articles a month, and, lately, I am finding it difficult to maintain that pace. Whether I like it or not, what I am really suffering from is burnout, so I think that I am going to start writing less often. I know, I know, you all don't need to stand up and cheer at the same time!

As I have written many times in the past, when I first purchased the Hofkens in 1998, there was plenty of work to be done; however, through excellent planning, by 2003, things were pretty much under control, and I had plenty of free time on my hands, so when the opportunity came along, I used this extra time to write for Winning. However, by the time that I began purchasing the Horemans, my time was extremely divided between writing articles, selling pigeons, answering emails, and traveling.

When it came to purchasing the Horemans, I really didn't take the situation too seriously because I never really thought that Ed Lorenz would part with enough key Horemans to make them worth pursuing on any large scale. In fact, my initial intent was to purchase a few key Horemans to cross into the Hofkens. However, I have found that the Horemans are more addictive than any pigeon that I have ever owned, and, with the new additions that I have purchased from Ed and with what I have already raised on my own, I came to the realization that I not only had the pigeons that I need to build a secondary family, but I actually had enough key pigeons to build the Horemans into my primary family! As it

did with the Hofkens in the beginning, it is going to take a great deal of time, effort and planning to get them totally together as a family, but I am off to a fantastic start. Still the key word is planning, and I have been devoting all of spare time to this effort!

Subsets and Key Pigeons

As part of this planning process, I tend to use some concepts that are common to me, but maybe not so common to you, so I thought that I would take some time to identify and discuss these concepts.

Let's start off by discussing the concept of "subsets" and how they relate to the "key pigeon" concept that I brought up in my last article. Whenever a group of pigeons changes hands, subsets come into play. If one fancier buys out the loft of another fancier, it is doubtful that he will like every pigeon or line of pigeons within the overall group. Therefore, he will begin to weed out those that don't meet his expectations, and, thereby, be left with a subset of the original group. Whenever the fancier buys some pigeons from another fancier, he is purchasing a subset of that loft.

Most families are made up of multiple lines of pigeons. Within each line of a good family there are likely to be one or several "key pigeons". Generally the term "key pigeon" is associated with the most compatible pigeon within that line. In fact, within their line, key pigeons are the center of their universe, and the rest of the pigeons within that line play a supporting role to the key pigeon.

When a fancier creates a subset by eliminating one or more lines, it generally means that one or more key pigeons are left in limbo. While we can part with the rest of the pigeons within a specific line, it is very difficult to part with a key pigeon, because they have usually been the key to our success.

Because these key pigeons have built reputation, they are generally of some financial value. Therefore, many fanciers elect to sell these pigeons to recoup some of their initial investment. While what I am proposing doesn't work in every case, when I am closing down a line, I will always try to transition the exiled key pigeon to a line that I intend to keep, which in essence transitions them from the key role to a support role. After all, they were good enough to be considered a key pigeons, they are already proven breeders, and they are part of the family, so why not use them?

In reality, I don't generally use these transitioned key pigeons for very long. Instead, I try to mate them to the key pigeon within the new line, and then use their youngsters to backcross with the key pigeon. It is important to realize that this is a two year process (an outcross year, and a backcross year), so you might want to consider the time impact this move will have on the key pigeon of the line that you intend to keep. I will talk more about this in a minute.

Foundation Cocks

If you are a basketball fan, you will often hear the coach when being interviewed say, “We need to work the ball into the center so that he gets his touches.” Teams with great centers, try to work the ball into the center every time down the floor, and the more touches he has the better the team plays.

The foundation pigeon should be at the center of the family, and he should get all the touches. He should be mated to the key hens from any line within the family. Notice I said, “He”. I am a big believer that it is the cock, not the hen that is the foundation pigeon. This is not to diminish the hen in any way, as I believe that the ultimate strength of the loft comes from the quality of the hens. However, when you finally find a cock that can play at the foundation level, he is critical to the family.

While I believe in hit pairs, and while they often involve the foundation cock, one needs to be very careful not to get so caught up in the success of the pair that he overlooks the success of the family. In my loft, the Horemans hit pair involves the foundation cock and his sister. However, while I left the pair together last year, I have mated him to two other hens this year. It is the combination of the youngsters from different hens that makes or breaks the loft.

I cannot stress enough how important the foundation cock can be to the overall success of the family, and that is why I rarely sell his youngsters. From experience, I can tell you that this foundation cock is very likely to breed the next foundation cock, and many of your key hens, so every youngster that you sell or give away is likely to be the pigeon that could have made the difference down the road!

Any true foundation cock must possess an extremely high level of genetic compatibility with other pigeons both inside and outside of the family. We will talk more about these traits in a minute. Along with compatibility comes breeding percentage. Producing one good one in six is not the mark of high compatibility or good breeding percentages. For instance, I still have 21 out of the 24 that I have raised from my foundation cock over the last two years.

Genetic Compatibility

Genetic compatibility can mean many things. For instance it is possible for a pigeon to be genetically compatible with its line but not outside its line. These pigeons are often considered support pigeons to the key pigeon. With the help of the key pigeon, the support pigeons are good enough to maintain and possibly improve the line. While the key pigeon generally has the highest compatibility within its line, supporting pigeons are less genetically compatible and that is often the significant difference between the two. When support pigeons are mated together, they may produce a good one here and there, but the percentages are generally lower. However, when the key pigeon is involved in the mating, the breeding percentages tend to climb, and, as in the case of the foundation

cock, it is almost always a youngster off the key pigeon that becomes the next key pigeon. Again this is because the key pigeon is generally more genetically compatible with pigeons inside and outside the line, and family, and it is the compatibility that leads to higher breeding percentages.

It should be mentioned that some lines have more than one key pigeon, but there are rarely ever more than three key pigeons within any line. When you start getting three or four key pigeons in a single line, you are probably at the start of the diamond pattern that I described in my article, "Diamonds Are Not For Ever."

Analyzing the level of compatibility within a line is a critical decision point for most fanciers. Often times, the key pigeon is relatively easy to identify because it is simply a much better animal than the rest of the line. However, on occasion, the gap closes between the key pigeon and the rest of the pigeons within that line, and many fanciers mistakenly believe that the support pigeons are getting better instead of the key pigeon getting worse.

Key pigeons need to be tested for compatibility and breeding percentages within the line, family and outside of the family. Many fanciers get so preoccupied with maintaining the line that they fail to test these pigeons outside of the line. Later when they finally do, they discover that these pigeons lack any compatibility with pigeons outside of the line. Further, many fanciers fail to acknowledge the poor breeding percentage of their key pigeons outside of the line, and this is a sure sign that the compatibility of a line is going in the wrong direction. As a line, the genetics should be somewhat compressed (linebred or inbred), and these pigeons should be prime for producing successful hybrids. However, when this doesn't happen, it suggests low compatibility within the line.

It is just as possible for a pigeon to be equally compatible inside and outside of its line or family. The example that comes immediately to mind is that of the Janssen family. As I have mentioned many times, I have always been a huge fan of the great Janssen lines. If you compared the best Janssen pigeon with the best pigeon from any other great line, I doubt that there would be that much difference in quality or performance. In fact, given the number of strains out there, it is reasonably unlikely that the best pigeon or the best performing pigeon would be the Janssen. However, when it comes to comparing compatibility with other pigeons, the Janssen would likely win hands down, and that is why they are still such a prominent family so many years later. In fact, when I outcross/backcross new blood into the family, I try to use a Janssen wherever possible. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that right now my top cross is a super "Verbart 46" Janssen hen that was bred by Dave Hunsicker.

Not all pigeons are as compatible inside the family as they might be outside of the family. For instance, a pigeon can become so inbred that reintroducing it to the family can have a negative effect on the offspring, as, in turn, they become even more inbred. However, because of its inbreeding, these pigeons can be very useful for producing hybrids outside of the family. In a few paragraphs, I am going to mention a "for instance" that includes

the “Verbart 46” hen and the double inbred Horemans cock that she is mated to, however before I do, I would like to pause for a moment to make a couple of points.

First, a double inbred from a mother/son, brother/sister mating is generally considered as pretty inbred. To give you some idea of exactly how inbred, in all of my years in the sport, and in all the thousands of pigeons that I have graded, only a handful have been double inbreds. Further, of the several hundred single generation inbreds that I have handled, very few of them have been real superstars. Most pigeons just don’t stand up to inbreeding, and that is why there are so few inbreds at any level.

Second, while I use the word double inbred as a simple way to describe the amount of inbreeding, the description can be somewhat misleading, and that is why I am compelled to follow this term with something like “mother/son, brother/sister,” as this helps describe exactly what I mean. The truth is that inbreeding is really best determined by using the inbreeding coefficient formula. For instance, if I mate an inbred brother to an inbred sister, I am going to produce a double inbred. However what if I mate a double inbred brother to a double inbred sister? Is that a triple inbred or a quadruple inbred? It would be the third generation of inbreeding, but because both pigeons in the second generation are double inbreds it could also be considered a quadruple. Also, what I am describing is the two most recent generations, and there could be a great deal of related ancestry that is really not covered by a simple term such as “double inbred”. Still, the coefficient is difficult to apply unless you have the software, so while I am going to stick with the use of the term “double inbred” followed by a definition, I want you to know the difference.

Third, the point of inbreeding is to produce hybrids, not to see how far we can inbreed. While successful inbreeding from generation to generation can be beneficial, it does so with a diminishing rate of return. To put this into perspective, if I pile 100 pennies on a splintery table, and then I carefully grab one handful, I may be able to pick up 60 pennies on the first try without getting any splinters in my fingers, and I might get 20 on the second try, but eventually, I am going to get to the point where I have to work harder and with more risks to my fingers in picking up the remaining pennies. Eventually, the risks are going to outweigh the gains. Successive inbreeding works in this same manner.

Out Crossing and Backcrossing

As I promised, we are now back to the double inbred Horemans cock that is mated to the “Verbart 46” hen. As a double inbred, the Horemans cock is an excellent example of a pigeon that probably should be used outside of the family to produce hybrids. While he could be inbred a third time, the chances are that either the quality of the pigeons or the number of good pigeons produced would suffer to the point where it might not be worth while using him this way; whereas, if he was used to produce hybrids, at least some of those hybrids could be used as a backcross into the family.

While the main point of breeding hybrids is to produce winners, they are also very important to the maintenance of the inbreeding program itself, and this is where backcrossing comes in. When a fancier produces a successful hybrid, he will often want to incorporate it into the family. This is usually accomplished by backcrossing one of the

hybrids to the parent that is in your family. In the case of the “Verbart 46” hen and the Horemans cock, a daughter would be mated back to the father as he is in my Horemans family.

From a the standpoint of future breeding, the point of crossing is to expand the gene pool, and the point of backcrossing is to incorporate successful genes back into the family while recompressing that genetic information. In the case of the “Verbart 46” hen and the Horemans cock, mating their daughter back to her double inbred dad will recompress the blood much more quickly because of the dad’s significant inbreeding.

Before we move on, I want to point out that while I am doing a lot of out crossing, very few of these will be used for backcrossing. Further, even when a pigeon is chosen for backcrossing, it will be tested extensively before the blood make it back into the family on a permanent basis. As I have already stated, very few pigeons lend themselves to inbreeding, so it stands to reason that regardless how good they look, feel or produce, when they are put under the pressure of inbreeding, they will stumble and bring down even the best of blood lines. This doesn’t necessarily make them bad pigeons, for inbreeding purposes they are bad pigeons.

Out Crossing and Backcrossing to Both Sides of the Mating

Finally, before I move on, I want to point out another trick that I am currently incorporating. In the above example, I am mating a daughter back to the father. However, there is another interesting possibility that seems to work very well. By mating a son back to the mother, I am doubling up on the “Verbart 46” hen, and then use their offspring to go back again to the Horemans. This has the effect of intensifying both sides of the mating.

Base Pigeons

Obviously, when we start out, we must get our pigeons from somewhere. For good or for bad, these are our base pigeons. Equally obvious is the fact that when most of us are starting out, the quality isn’t there, so we keep changing pigeons. Eventually, some of us figure out that there is pride in ownership, and we either buy into better pigeon, or we work with the pigeons that have brought us our success and we begin to mold them into something. Therefore, it may be at this point where we can declare what we have as our base pigeons. This time around, in purchasing the Horemans, I was in a position where I could select the pigeons that I wanted, and amongst them were a number of key pigeons.

The difference between key pigeons and base pigeons is that when I was purchasing the pigeons I was purchasing the Ed’s key pigeons, and at that point they became my base pigeons. In turn, my base pigeons will eventually produce key pigeons. When a fancier builds his own base, that base is not going to be neatly defined. By this I mean that there will be a set of pigeon on which the fancier relies, but, at the same time, there will be other pigeons involved. However, when the fancier buys his base, he is only able to buy

so many, so the base is generally pretty defined. In my case, the base is made up of six pigeons that I will talk about in the second part of this article.

In talking to Mauricio Jemal, his family was developed from a base of six pigeons. Five of those pigeons were related, and one was from a multiple cross. In Ed Lorenz's case, he started less than five Horemans, and when he had his Stassarts family, he founded it on four pigeons. It really doesn't take many base pigeons to get started. In fact, there is actually less work involved in starting with a very few high quality pigeons. However, as I have already stated, the base pigeons a fancier starts with must lend themselves to inbreeding, they must also be highly compatible, and they must produce high breeding percentages.

The Transition and Backcrossing of Key Pigeons

While there are six key pigeons that make up my base pigeons, I also bought two more key pigeons from a different line within the family called the silver line. These pigeons have won well out of turn, both here and in Mexico. As two greatest pigeons produced by the 611 cock, I felt they were just too good to pass up. Frankly, this wasn't an easy decision for Ed as he pondered the sale of the hen for a very long period of time, and he flat refused to sell the cock for over a year.

I am in the process of transitioning them from their role as key pigeons in their previous line to support pigeons to my base. In essence, they will become an intra-family backcross to my base pigeons. For instance, the silver hen has already been mated to the inbred foundation cock. Because they produced two silver cocks, I can't very well backcross back them to the foundation cock. Therefore, they will be mated to one of his eight double inbred daughters (father/daughter – brother/sister mating).

In the second part of this article, among other things, I am going to give a little history about the Horemans, so I hope that you will look for it.

Until next time!

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