

General Thoughts on Loft Flying

by

Bill "The Book" Richardson

www.ehoremans.com

Edited by K. Ramage

kr_catalina@earthlink.net

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Because of the high prices of gas and feed, many clubs and individual fanciers are starting to rethink their approach to pigeon racing. I have recently heard of at least one club that is considering consolidating their young and old bird schedule into a single old bird schedule. While I am not aware of the particulars on how this club intends to handle this changeover, I do know that parts of Australia have been doing this for some time. Over there, they fly a yearling and an old bird section in the same series. The yearling can compete in the old bird section, but the old birds can't compete in the yearling section.

Obviously, if you have bought a sack of feed lately, you know that the price of feed has increased substantially due primarily to our simple-minded national energy policy that promoted ethanol as an alternative source of fuel. Although ethanol can be made from a number of different organic materials, grain, especially corn, has become the primary material used in the production of ethanol, and as a result, the price of grain has shot up substantially, so substantially in fact, that it is quickly becoming less feasible to use it for making ethanol.

As a side note, large-scale corporate farming has been on the rise in recent years. What has slowed this trend to some degree is the inability to assure price support during bumper crop years. However, in terms of grain, ethanol is something of a guaranteed price support system because excess grain can now be turned into ethanol. This will allow corporate farmers to control the supply of grain available for food production, which could easily lead to increased prices in feed for animals and food for human consumption.

While, in the long term, all of us would obviously like to see declining gas prices, it might actually be better for the sport if we continued to experience high gas prices in the short term simply because rapidly increasing prices shock us into action. The fact of the matter is that it seems to be human nature to adapt to low-level threats and react to high-level threats. If gas goes up 50 cents a year, we are likely to grumble about it but absorb the difference in price. However, when it goes up \$2 in a single year, we begin to talk louder and louder with the expectation that government will listen, and somehow, get us

out of the situation. If this doesn't happen quickly enough, we begin to take counter measures to ease our personal pain. In terms of feeding our pigeons, maybe we reduce the number of pigeons we keep going forward. In terms of training our pigeons, maybe we don't train as often or we rely more heavily on loft flying.

In our sport, we know that pigeons require at least some road training to gain experience, and to some extent, maintain conditioning. Unfortunately, in this country, road training has gone from a source of conditioning to the source of conditioning. Most fanciers see loft flying as something that you do between tosses, and not something you do to identify the better athletes and condition pigeons. However, as gas prices continue to climb, we will continue to look for ways to become more efficient, and thereby, ease our individual financial pain. For some, this will come in the form of loft flying.

As you may know, I started this sport in the very early '70s, and at that time, road training was already far more popular than loft flying. Being a kid at the time, I had to con everyone into taking my pigeons up the road, and when available, I road trained as much as possible. After returning from a stint in the military, and while still in college, I began racing once again. Obviously, money was very tight at the time, and I had to reconsider what I was doing, just so that I could stay in the sport.

Since I couldn't afford to run up and down the road every day, I turned my attention to loft flying. To better understand loft flying, I studied the differences between road training and loft flying. What I determined wasn't that surprising really. Every team of pigeons is made up of bad, average, and good pigeons. Road training is trial by fire and those that come home live to fight another day.. Because it is a forced exercise regiment, it forces those that would otherwise train themselves to exercise at a higher level. It is of significantly less benefit to the good pigeons because, as true athletes, they either do not need as much exercise or they know how much exercise they need. As a result, I believe that road training benefits the average, and when used in excess, it is detrimental to the true athletes.

One lesson that I have learned about this sport over the years is that, as the fancier, you choose the method and work with the pigeons that can adapt to that method, and not the other way around. Loft flying requires a certain type of pigeon, and the faster you identify that type of pigeon, the faster you will become successful with loft flying as a method of training.

Loft flying is about the quality of the athlete. To loft fly well, the pigeons have to want to fly; in fact, they have to love to fly, and at least initially, this will be a pretty small subset of what most fanciers raise. As pigeons fly around the loft, they quickly realize that they have more personal freedom than they do when they are on the road.

Some will enjoy that freedom, and others will abuse it. Those that abuse it must be removed from the team. Early on, these cuts are easy to make, and the pigeons will fly better as each one of these lesser quality pigeons is removed. However, there is a big difference between flying longer and working harder, and that is, of course, where most

fanciers fail. Most fanciers get squeamish about their team numbers long before they ever get down to the true athletes, and this is why they don't succeed with loft flying. While it is easy to identify the poor athletes and slackers, sorting through the average pigeons is a more subtle task. For the most part, these average pigeons don't really want to fly around the loft, but they are clever about covering up that fact.

Average pigeons employ subtle methods of slowing and turning the flock during flight. These pigeons often position themselves to the outside of the flock so that they can lead the flock into a turn when they get tired. Being the pivot point of the turn, they don't have to fly as far or as fast, and it gives them a chance to rest. Early on in a flight, the flock may ignore these pigeons, and when they begin to turn, the group will continue to fly straight. The outside pigeons will then struggle to catch back up, and this tends to put them out of stroke when they do catch up. As a result, there is a lot of wing slapping between pigeons and the group must slow down to get back in rhythm with each other. As the loft flight gets longer and the flock is more tired, these pigeons attempt to turn more often, and generally, the rest of the flock will start to give in. Stopping, starting, and turning are very tiring to the group.

When flocks are working, they tend to line out from left to right. When there are too many pigeons in the flock, one end doesn't know what the other end is doing. When pigeons on opposite sides of the flock start to turn the group at the same time, a ripple effect goes through the pigeons, and the group slows down and starts bumping into each other. For those of you that were in the military, you might remember your experiences marching. When the squad gets out of cadence, everyone starts bumping shoulders and getting out of step. Sometimes it gets so bad that the sergeant will call everyone to a halt so that they can get rearranged. Over time, I have learned that a flock flies at its best when it is made up of less than 60 pigeons. The truth is that very few lofts can field a team of 60 quality athletes.

When pigeons are flying well around the loft, there should be no turning, slapping of wings, or whining coming from their wings. There is just level flight and the rush of wind. The flock should be gone for 30 to 45 minutes before rushing over the loft, and going another 30 to 45 minutes in another direction. Good pigeons know how long they are supposed to fly around the loft, and they would rather spend that time flying than sitting around the outside of the loft waiting to be let in.

While the flying time around the loft should become a habit, many fanciers are responsible for breaking up a good habit. There are a number of ways to do this, such as calling them down early one day. If you don't have the time that day, don't let them out. Often times, fanciers will get their pigeons flying around the loft quite well before the races, and then they can't seem to get them flying around the loft once the races have started. The most common reason for this is fatigue. When pigeons return home from a race, they don't need to be out flying around the very next day. In fact, it could be several days before they are ready to fly again. However, most fanciers either don't want to go through the work of sorting out the tired ones before they are loft flown, or they get antsy and somehow feel they are falling behind in the training department. When they let

these tired pigeons out with their other pigeons, guess what? The tired ones don't want to fly, and the whole exercise routine is brought to its knees. Remember, anything that breaks the rhythm of flying pigeons around the loft is a bad thing.

When building a team for loft flying, there are a number of considerations, and some of those considerations go clear back to the stock loft. Avoid bigger, thicker, or heavier pigeons. Look for smaller, looser, lighter pigeons with excellent strength to weight ratios. Pigeons should have good muscle, but not gobs of soft buttery muscle. Buttery muscled pigeons can take a pounding, but it usually takes a pounding to get them into shape. Smaller, lighter, thinner muscled pigeons tend to come into shape and stay in shape much easier. There comes a point where too much muscle becomes overkill, and as a result, it becomes excess weight for the pigeon to carry around.

Feeding is very important to flying around the loft. High protein foods tend to make the muscle harder, and fats tend to make the muscle fuller, and at the wrong times, this can lead to heavier pigeons and poor loft flights. Proteins and fats are still very important to the diet, but the fancier should be careful how and when they are used. Grassy carbohydrates tend to burn more quickly than proteins, and as a result, they tend to provide the pigeons with a more immediate energy source. When carbohydrates are properly fed, the pigeons will remain light in weight but round in body shape. These are the pigeons that fly the best around the loft. The fancier must work to keep up the regiment during the off-season as well, especially if the pigeons are going to be held in the loft for any length of time. Pigeons with high metabolisms that constantly crave food will never be any good at loft flying.

Health is critical to the success of loft flying. However, for the most part, true athletes have excellent immune systems, and as a result, they usually don't get sick. If there are health issues within your group, you probably haven't removed enough pigeons from the group.

It is critical that a fancier be able to identify his pigeons while they are flying. The fancier should work on this concept from the time that the youngsters are first put out to fly. I handle the pigeons many times when they are in the nest, and as a result, I know their band numbers before they ever leave the breeding loft. Because of this, I know which pigeons are which on the landing board, and it doesn't take much of a leap to recognize them in the air. Instead, it just takes time on the part of the fancier.

Watch for the pigeons that are always on the outsides of the group. Watch for pigeons that fall behind the group and then cut a corner to catch back up. Watch for the pigeons that turn the group. Watch for the pigeons that are always at the bottom of the funnel when they are not flying well around the loft. They are the reason the funnel forms. Watch for pigeons that won't leave with the group. Watch for pigeons that return early while the others are ranging.

These are just a few of the many tips to loft flying. Remember that while loft flying is cheaper, it is something that takes time to master. However, unlike road training that

caters to the average athlete, with loft flying you will find that you are spending more time building the records of the true athletes, and this can only help you when it comes to selecting the right pigeons for your stock loft.

Until next time!

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