

New Beginnings.. Doing it "By The Book"

By

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Some of you who have been around for a while may remember me. I flew pigeons with the Denton Racing Pigeon Club of the North Texas Concourse from 1994 to 2001. This is one of the more competitive pigeon racing centers in North America. In the day, I was a better than average fancier generally expected to finish in the top 20 and occasionally win a club race and even a concourse here or there. In 2003, we moved from north Texas to the town of Greeley in northern Colorado, and I gave up pigeon racing for a few years while our family established an alpaca ranch and I settled into a new job.

The itch of pigeon racing was never far off. Every morning I would watch the common bridge pigeons along the irrigation ditch behind my house and the pull grew stronger and stronger to race once again. I had met a local flyer, Rick Brown (Belmar Loft), and I called him to see what the local flying situation was like. Unfortunately, the Greeley club had disbanded the year before, and the four remaining flyers had decided to join the Denver Foothills Invitational Racing Pigeon Club located 50 miles to the south. So, I attended a few meetings, helped the club on shipping nights, and a little later, I applied for membership.

I appealed to my old racing friends in Texas who graciously provided me with an assortment of 70 pigeons, which were soon settled into their new loft. My first and somewhat disappointing season of racing in northern Colorado occurred in 2006 with inexperienced, young birds. It seemed like I did everything wrong and whatever magic I had amassed in Texas did not work here.

For a variety of reasons, the Texas birds did not adapt well to the new racecourse in Colorado. The main problem appeared to be that at 1200 ypm or less the speeds were a lot slower than the pigeons were accustomed to flying.

The courses here run east to west and the birds almost always fly into a crossing headwind, either southwest or northwest. The birds have to climb 2-3 thousand feet in elevation from the plains of Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa to arrive along the front range of Colorado. This part of the world has been in a drought, so the ground is dry and the temperatures are high, which create long, tough races. To top it all off, I live 50 miles north of Denver, which is the center of racing activity. Even though the club alternates racecourses between east and northeast, the drag toward Denver is significant and this makes it nearly impossible to get the birds to break away from the front flock to head north to Greeley.

Generally, for us to have a chance to win, our little group to the north must hope

for extremely favorable environmental conditions, which really don't happen very often. Since that first season in 2006, the conditions have remained extreme, and my losses have been high.

Because these racing results were really not what I was used to achieving, I decided to acquire some breeders from old-line families, including the Gordons, Janssens, Stichelbauts, Tourniers, and Dworeks, and my old family of blacks from Ashford Lofts in England. Obviously, these pigeon families are very different from each other, but I wanted to see which families would work the best under my current racing conditions. While this approach provided some good comparisons, the actual results from the 2007 young birds indicated that there is still a great deal of room for improvement.

I have become convinced that living so far off the line of racing flight means that, to be consistently competitive, I need a complete system tailored for producing quality pigeons with excellent homing instincts and the ability to break out of the front flock much earlier than mine have been able to do thus far. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task or airlines wouldn't be such a contentious subject in this sport. I knew I needed help and began searching for the path to solutions to my particular situation. Some time back I discovered the website of Bill The Book Richardson and his many articles, and I read these with great interest. These articles struck me as being written by someone with a highly analytical mind that looks at problems from all sides. His articles made sense to me, especially since they seemed related to many of the problems I was facing with my pigeons.

I was especially impressed with Book's reputation as a renowned grader and racer outside of the United States where he seems pretty well known, and the fact that he had done all of this without most of us here even knowing his name. After some contemplation, I decided to contact Book to see if it would be possible to set up a meeting with him. Realizing that he probably gets a lot of similar requests, I offered to pay him for his time. Before he would accept my proposal, we exchanged several emails in which he asked me many questions related to my pigeon racing experiences and breeding techniques. Seeming satisfied, he finally agreed to meet me for four hours on a Saturday morning.

Two weeks later, Book and I spent nearly three hours discussing pigeons over a late breakfast. During this conversation, he asked many very interesting questions about my situation, my birds, my handling techniques and my lofts. He offered me a great deal of insight into the art and science of pigeon racing that, with more than 10 years of racing experience, I had never really considered before. If I wasn't already convinced by his articles, it became increasingly apparent that Book has a vast knowledge of these amazing creatures and that knowledge seemed to touch all aspects of the sport. As time was going by very quickly, I asked him if we could use the last hour of my visit to handle his family of Horemans.

Basically, all I knew about Book's pigeons was that a very good fancier by the name of Pete Lorenz received approximately 20 eggs from an undisclosed European loft in the 1970's. From those eggs, which were reputed to be from a Horemans family, Pete and his brother, the famous American champion, Ed Lorenz, were able to raise four pigeons, which became the basis for one of the top families in the United States.

By the time we got to handling the pigeons, I thought I was prepared for most anything, but what I saw in Book's birds astounded me. Book's Horemans are small to medium in size, possess truly amazing feather quality, and incredible balance. Their wings were perfectly structured and well ventilated, and the last four flights were nearly the same length. The keel bones were strong and the vents were both strong and tight. While they were well muscled, the pigeons were still extremely buoyant and light in the hand, in spite of the fact that they were breeding youngsters at the time. Without exception, I saw these same attributes on every pigeon I handled including some 40-day-old youngsters that were already carbon copies of their parents. I guess what made it even more amazing was that a portion of these youngsters were his highly inbred "double doubles" as he calls them. They are the product of a double inbred brother mated to its double inbred sister. These birds had amazing strength for their size, and unlike many inbreds they were amazingly vital pigeons!

Most fanciers like to show off their pigeons, but Book seemed more interested in watching me handle his birds. When I made comments, he asked me questions about the comments that I had made, and it became increasingly clear to me that I was not grading his pigeons, he was in the process of grading me. What made this tough was the fact that, with a single exception, he never commented himself; he only asked me questions. He made a single comment as we were walking out the door of the breeding loft, "You seem to have a pretty good hand for pigeons," which gave me some hope, especially since knowing more about selecting is important to me. Although we were running out of time, we closed out the session discussing line breeding, inbreeding, backcrossing, and hybridization methods.

I was disappointed when it came time to leave, as I knew that there was so much more that I could learn from him, but we both had other commitments and had to move on. Throughout the time I spent with Book he never tried to make himself sound important or above me, and he was very good at explaining complicated subjects in a way that I could understand. He was very interested in what I thought, and he left me feeling my opinions were important to him. I learned a great deal in our time together, yet with this being our first visit, I could tell that he was cautious with the information he divulged. It wasn't that he was withholding information; instead, I could tell that he could have taken any of our conversations to a much higher level.

When I arrived back home, I sent Book a note thanking him for his time, and to my surprise, he continued to remain in contact. He asked for photos of my loft, and through pictures, he helped me redesign my loft. With each passing email, I suspected that our conversations were coming to an end. Yet the emails kept coming, and after a while, I began to feel that he was testing my ability to follow instructions. Given the number of people that he must come in contact with, I am sure he needs to be careful how he spends his time and distributes his hard earned information. Therefore, I was quite pleased when he suggested that he would be willing to work with me. Recently, he allowed me to communicate via emails with several of his students in other countries and through their explanations, I am now somewhat more aware of what will be expected of me in the future. If I could fly my pigeons half as well as his students appear to be flying, I will be very pleased. I feel very privileged to be receiving Book's help, and our discussions have already made me realize that I have a lot to learn.

The truth is that I flew much better in Texas than I have since starting over in Colorado. It is such a different environment here, and I now know that I am significantly handicapped by being so far off the primary line of flight. Given what I have gone through, you can imagine how difficult it is to put your trust into someone that has never flown a race from your location, yet I am encouraged that Book's other students are flying in diverse conditions with remarkable results. Their loyalty and faith in Book seem unshakeable and it makes me believe that if I can learn his system, my results will significantly improve over time as well. I will keep you informed about our progress.