

A Rare Chance at a Lasting Memory

By Rene Hansen

Let me start out by introducing myself to the American fancy as Rene Hansen, a fancier from Denmark. Recently, I shared a unique experience by traveling on a seminar and grading trip with a fellow Dane, Flemming Christensen and one of the most, if not the most, talented graders in the sport of racing pigeons today, Bill "The Book" Richardson (who I will refer to as Book from here on). Whenever a person makes a claim like this, it opens the door for controversy, but until I personally witness someone else doing the things that I have seen Book do, I will stand by these words. I don't expect to have to retract them anytime soon.

During this visit, Book gave a number of seminars and graded approximately 3,000 pigeons at numerous locations throughout Denmark. The three of us spent over a week on the island of Zealand grading pigeons, and this was followed by a week-long road trip to southern, central, and northwestern Jutland. The schedule was extremely demanding, and it left me as tired as I have ever been in my life. It is my understanding that Book's 2005 visit, which also included Holland and Belgium, was even more exhausting, and, truthfully, I cannot imagine how that could be possible!

The Danish fanciers that listened to Book's seminar and watched or paid to have him grade their pigeons, couldn't have possibly understood the totality of what actually occurred day after day at location after location throughout our country. On a regular basis throughout the visit, Book's calls were absolutely amazing.

Having never been associated with anything like this before, I really didn't know what to expect. However, if you asked me today what one word best described grading, I would immediately say "pressure". At times you could just feel fanciers standing around waiting for him to make a mistake. However, time after time, these fancier were disappointed. To add to the pressure, some fanciers were incredulous that Book could determine so much about their pigeons so quickly. At the beginning of a grading session, they would stand and mumble to each other that calls like these just weren't possible. In most cases, before the end of the grading session, disbelief turned into admiration, but regardless of which emotion the fancier was feeling, everyone hung around to watch.



Packed House! Book grading pigeons for many of the fanciers in attendance for his eyesign show in Vejle, Denmark

While I knew that Book was obviously under a great deal of pressure, he never really showed it other than he was usually pretty tired after grading three, four or five hundred pigeons in a sitting. It was the pressure that the fanciers put themselves under during these grading sessions that surprised me the most. One minute a fancier would be talking normally with me, and the next minute he would be anxiously dancing around while Book graded his pigeons. I doubt these fanciers would have been any more excited had they been flying a race. If Book liked a pigeon, then the fancier would swell with pride, and, if Book didn't like the pigeon, the fancier would often become unconvincingly defensive. On the one hand, they didn't want to look bad to the other fanciers in the room, but, on the other hand, you could generally tell that they often shared some misgivings about the pigeon as well.

It is important to remember that grading is not usually about a single pigeon, but more about the sum of the pigeons within the loft. Book is clearly looking for certain things, and sometimes it takes a few or even a number of pigeons before he finds what he is looking for, but somehow he eventually finds the winning thread within the loft, and once found, he has an amazing ability to follow that thread up and down the generations. Time after time, once the thread was

found, the fanciers would go from being defensive to highly receptive to what Book had to say.



Open-minded? Well maybe. Attentive? Certainly. Mind-bending? Absolutely!

Book said it best when he said, "Grading pigeons is one giant mind-bending exercise. Not all fanciers come to learn or improve their lofts. In fact, many fanciers come to try and trick me, prove me wrong, or talk over the top of me. That is all part of grading. I can only hope that I am as entertaining to them as they are to me. Without these individuals, I might go to sleep in my chair, so these fanciers do serve some purpose."

Without his knowledge, a number of fanciers had him re-grade pigeons that he had graded on the previous 2005 trip. In every instance, these fanciers came back at the end of the session and said that Book had graded the pigeons exactly the same both times. Some fanciers wanted to tell Book about their pigeon's performances before he had even graded them. Book gave us very specific instructions to head this off immediately. He said it was important for him focus on the pigeon, not the fancier's view of the pigeon.

Obviously, Book's grading techniques are based on past observation, and I think everyone realizes that he is pretty observant. However, until you are around him 24 hours a day, as Flemming and I were, you can't possibly understand exactly how observant. He appears to always be looking down at the pigeon in his hand, yet somehow he is able to monitor everything going on around him.

So far, all I have given you are Flemming's and my personal observations, so let me try to recount some of the more amazing examples from this trip. Book's first feat occurred during the grading session at the Ringsted clubhouse in central Zealand while grading the pigeons of Flemming Chiler Engel (In Denmark, Flemming is a very common name). On handling Flemming's very first pigeon out of the basket, Book almost immediately looked up and said, "This is an excellent pigeon, and, if it has been flown, it has done very well from 400 to 600 miles, and again if it has been flown, I believe that it has won a 600 mile race." Before Flemming could even answer, Book offered him \$1500 U.S for the pigeon. Flemming Chiler Engel and I were both reeling. He was reeling because the call had been exactly correct, and I was reeling because I had actually placed second overall to this pigeon on that 600 mile race that season. Of course Flemming did not sell the pigeon!

Comments by Flemming Chiler Engel:

"I was impressed with Bill The Book. On my part, he was correct in his grading of my pigeons. It all fit perfectly with what I knew the pigeons had done already and, of course, I was thrilled with the high grading of my cock '178' [the 600 mile winner].

In conclusion, this was a very good experience, and I can only say that Bill The Book is incredibly skilled in his field."

Best Regards
Flemming Chiler Engel

A couple of days later, Book gave a seminar to the Copenhagen Eyesign Club, which was formed in his honor after his 2005 trip to Denmark. After presenting his eyesign seminar to the club, Book was asked to grade approximately 15 pigeons as a courtesy to the club. Again on the very first pigeons, Book declared the pigeon a 400 to 600 mile pigeon of the highest order, and turning to Flemming and me, he stated that it was of an even rarer caliber than the pigeon that he had graded in Ringsted. However, it is what he said next that really floored everyone in the room. Someone in the room said, "Then you are saying that it is a winner?" Book replied, "No, what I am saying is that I think it is a national winner at 600 miles because pigeons simply do not come any better than this."

Again, there was silence in the room, and by the reaction, I had to assume that this time the rest of the room already knew about this pigeon. The fancier that had presented the pigeon started out by saying that the pigeon was a stray from Scotland. Obviously, with this statement, I became very concerned that maybe

Book had made a big mistake, but Book didn't even flinch. After letting this sink in for a couple of seconds, the fancier went on to say that it was actually a four time national winner at the distance including a national win at 600 miles, and that its Scottish owner was going to fly to Denmark to bring it home.

Book could have just said that he thought it was a winner and let it go at that; however, sometimes I think Book gets bored just sitting there, so he pushes the envelope for fun, because when I asked Book why he thought it was a national winner, he said, "Well, the pigeon at Ringsted was a 600 mile winner, and this pigeon was exactly the same type of pigeon only better, so what else could it be?" A couple of pigeons later, Book was handed a pigeon that he handed back almost as fast while declaring, "Not my type of pigeon, but it is a 400-mile winner." The fancier quickly affirmed that it was indeed a 400-mile winner. Again, several pigeons later, Book came across another top pigeon, and declared it the fancier's top breeder, and again he was correct!

We spent three days in Esbjerg, Jutland while Book gave his seminar and graded pigeons. During these grading sessions, Book graded a pigeon that he pronounced to be the son of a super champion, and that the super champion was probably its father (not its mother). He went on to give this pigeon the highest marks at the Esbjerg grading. Again, Book's words proved to be prophetic, as this pigeon turned out to be the inbred son of the famous 255 cock that won many races back in 1993, and is still considered the best racing cock to have ever flown in Denmark.



No pressure in Esbjerg, Denmark...unless you happen to be holding a son of the Famous 255 while the fancier (blue coat) and Flemming Christensen are looking on.

As an odd twist to this story, Flemming later told me that Book also identified several brothers or half brothers from this same cock during his previous visit in 2005. However, on that occasion, Book said that he could see the champion trying to coming out in both of these pigeons, but that the traits had not come together correctly, and, therefore, he didn't give either of them a very good grade. Flemming recounted that, at the time of the grading in 2005, these two cocks belonged to two different fanciers, and when Book came across the second cock, he immediately said, "Remember about 20 pigeons back, I graded a cock that I said was out of a champion racer, and you (the fancier) identified that champion as the 255? Well this pigeon is the exact same situation." The fanciers stood in amazement because they knew and soon recounted that these pigeons were both full brothers to each other and sons of the famous 255.

After Esbjerg, it was off to Tinglev to visit Dieter Nicolaisen. Although Dieter had been racing for several years prior to Book's 2005 visit, it was just prior to that visit that Dieter had collected many of his current breeders, and it was at the 2005 grading that Book helped him gain some direction within those selections. This grading proved to be very important to Dieter, and he credits the grading

for his rapid rise up the results sheets. When Dieter learned that Book intended to visit Denmark again, he was one of the first to sign up for a loft visit.

I thought about telling several of the stories that occurred during this visit, but because Dieter speaks and writes very good English, I asked him to provide us with his version of Book's visit.

"My name is Dieter Nicolaisen and I live in Tinglev, Denmark. Recently, Rene Hansen requested my input for an article regarding Bill The Book Richardson's latest trip to Denmark, and I have gladly agreed to do so.

Although my son started racing pigeons in 1997, and I started several years later, we didn't form the partnership of Team Nicolaisen until 2004. Like most new fanciers in the sport today, we brought in too many pigeons too quickly, and soon we were somewhat uncertain as to how to proceed. To improve our knowledge, we began studying many concepts including eye sign. Through this study, we eventually discovered Bill Richardson's Hofkens International site. By good fortune Bill had information posted on his site about an upcoming seminar and grading session that was scheduled to take place in Esbjerg, Denmark in October of 2005. As it happened, October was only a couple of months away, and Esbjerg was just up the road from where we lived.

During Bill's visit, we were astonished at the level of sophistication he had attained on the subject of eye sign. He far exceeded everyone's expectation, and his approach was very different than anything any of us had heard before. After the seminar we watched him grade many pigeons for many fanciers. What a spectacle! Crates of pigeons and fanciers everywhere, while Bill sat in the middle of everything totally surrounded by onlookers. The accuracy of his grading was truly unbelievable! Even after several hours of grading, I don't think anyone had left the room.

When our turn came to have our pigeons graded, we were quite pleased when he made a number of positive comments about most of the pigeons that we had brought, especially since his comments matched our experiences with these pigeons! This grading provided a simple blueprint that was easy for us to follow; breed from those that he selected and get rid of the rest! Since then, there has been a noticeable improvement in our results!

In October 2007, Bill again returned to Esbjerg, Denmark for another seminar and grading session. This time, his speech was about breeding technique, and, again, we were very impressed with the level of sophistication in this presentation. Certainly, it gave us a great deal to think about in the future!

However, we learned even more during Bill's visit to our loft. He graded approximately 80 of our pigeons and he made many comments about the loft, the pigeons, and what we needed to do to get better. This time, the blueprint he provided us was more refined. My son and I have adopted the motto, work smarter, not harder, and Bill's insights will certainly help us to do that. My son and I had a wonderful lunch with Bill, Flemming, and Rene, and all too quickly our half day visit was over, and they were on their way to the next stop.

If you have never had Bill grade your pigeons, all I can say is that it is an unnerving experience that leaves you feeling very transparent. Having watched him in a number of settings, I can tell you that he reads people at least as well as he reads pigeons. He has a wonderful way of saying even the most difficult things in such a subtle monotone manner that it goes almost unnoticed by the fanciers standing close around, but to the fancier receiving the grading, his comments go right to the heart.

I have seen a few fanciers limply argue about a grading performed in a public setting, but I think that everyone in the room knows that these fanciers are only trying to cover up in front of their competitors. After they have finished arguing, Bill quietly repeats himself, and the disgruntled fanciers fold like a house of cards. Bill is a professional at what he does, and he is in control!"

Best regards
Dieter



Team Nicolaisen (son, Max, second from left and father, Dieter, third from left) holding a true excellent grizzle cock that is likely to be the backbone of their loft.

On a very long, cold, and windy day in Ringkoerbing, Book graded over 500 pigeons. While there are a number of stories to tell from that day, certainly one will remain more popular than the rest. About two-thirds of the way through the session, Book stopped to ask one fancier what system he was racing. The fancier replied that he raced widowhood cocks. Book then told the fancier that his hens were far better than his cocks, and that racing cocks really had to be affecting his racing performance, to which the fancier offered no complaint.

A few pigeons later, Book came across a cock that he gave the highest marks during the Ringkoerbing grading, which put it amongst the five highest on the trip. Book told that fancier that the pigeon was a foundation cock and that he should build his family specifically around this pigeon. The fanciers in the room exchanged glances, but the only thing the fancier said was that the pigeon was a stray from Holland. Book told the fancier that he didn't care about the pigeon's circumstances, and that it had the ability to dramatically improve the fancier's loft. The fancier looked sort of putout by this selection, so Book told me to try and buy the pigeon from the fancier. Putout though he might be, the fancier wouldn't sell the pigeon.

Several pigeons later, Book came across another outstanding pigeon that he rated nearly as high, but this time he referred to it as big winner. Now there

were a lot of murmurs in the room, and then the stunned owner admitted that the previous so called "foundation cock" was the father to this cock, and that this cock had been the champion bird of the section this last season. The fancier admitted that he had almost disposed of the father, but later decided to give it a shot in the breeding loft because he felt sorry for the pigeon.



Owner of the now famous "Stray of Ringkoerbing" (center, green overalls and black jacket with blue patch). Baskets were everywhere, as there were 500+ pigeons graded on that day.

The next day, while taking a lunch break at another fancier's loft in the Ringkoerbing area, I started to tell this last story about the stray from Holland. The fancier waved his hand at me and said, "There is no need to tell that story here, everyone in the section has already heard that story!" Here again, while this was an amazing call to these fanciers, Flemming and I witnessed these same calls all over Denmark.

On the last grading visit of this trip, Flemming recounted a story about how he and Book paid a grading visit to a loft in northern Zealand. This fancier had been at the Ringsted clubhouse when Book graded the first 600-mile winner, so he already had some idea of Book's ability. This fancier told us that he had just returned to the sport this last year, and he was in the rebuilding process. He then asked Book to help him narrow the focus of his loft. Book took this to mean that he should "cut to the chase" and soon 20 average pairs became four

very good pairs. During the process, Book came across a very nice cock that he said was similar, but not quite as good as the "Stray of Ringkoerbing". Book told the fancier that this pigeon should be his foundation cock going forward. Although the fancier had only owned the pigeon for a year, to his credit, he was very receptive to Book's suggestion.

Later, while grading the fancier's young bird team, Book gave two youngsters very high marks. Book said that the first one should have been a very consistent racer, and the second one should have been a winner. He went on to say that while the first one was a nice pigeon, the second one should be moved to the breeding loft. The fancier looked up their race results for the young bird season, and, sure enough, the first one had been the fancier's most consistent young bird racer that season, and the second one had been the fancier's only winner. I guess by now it shouldn't be that surprising that when the fancier looked up the parents of the second pigeon, it again turned out that another pigeon that Book had dubbed a so called "foundation cock" had already bred a winner. A small world!

In closing, let me say that this trip is and will most likely remain the hardest and yet the most enjoyable event of my pigeon racing career, unless of course Book is willing to do it again sometime!

Rene Hansen