

The Relationship between Age and Quality

By

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I am often asked if very young and older pigeons breed as well as others. I am sure that we all have experienced yearlings that have had trouble settling into the nest at one time or another. Personally, I will only breed yearlings if I can use individual sections. Other than that, I have had very good success with yearlings.

When addressing the topic of “older pigeons” we first must define what “old” means. “Old” is relative to the family of pigeons we are discussing. For most pigeons, however, “old” is generally considered 10 years or older. There are exceptions – I once had a friend that visited a fancier with a family of Hermans that were all 17, 18 and 19 years old and still breeding. I would be willing to bet that “old” in that family was more like 14 or 15 years of age.

When it comes to breeding, it is my belief that old cocks fare better than old hens, just the same as in humans. This is because hens, for the most part, are not as heavily built as cocks. Hens also lay many eggs over the course of a breeding career, which robs the calcium from their bones. So gender has something to do with how old a pigeon should get and still be used to breed.

Heat and humidity in combination can be a determining aging factor as well. This correlation isn't quite as easy to present. However, if you have experienced the problem, you know what I am talking about. Pigeons that live in the extreme temperatures of either hot or cold tend to suffer. While hot is the worst of the two, in extremely cold climates the pigeons tend to get a fat buildup on them that is certainly hard on the heart. A combination of high heat and low humidity is very tough on pigeons as well. I live in a climate where it often reaches 110 degrees and stays above 100 for three to four months a year and the humidity is often less than 5%. It is very very rare under these circumstances to see a pigeon that breeds past 10 years of age.

Obviously, there are exceptions, but for one reason or another the average pigeon doesn't make it into the breeding loft until it is four years old. Again, there are exceptions, but I would still say that the average pigeon is pretty much done breeding by 10 years of age. Assuming a breeding range of between 4 and 10 years of age, this means that the average pigeon is in the breeding loft for 6 years with its best quality production peaking at 7 years of age. It is my observation that pigeons past 7 years of age tend to produce diminishing returns, especially in relation to the value of the offspring as racers. Clearly there are winners that are bred from older pigeons. They are often from the first round, pumped, or from a family where the average lifespan is significantly greater. These are exceptions, not the rule.

While the physical limitations of age can be a factor in how long the fancier should breed from a pigeon, I am not sure it is the most important factor. To this point, we have discussed the obvious. Let's combine "age" with the not-so-obvious "quality." There are three simple goals to any breeding program: improved quality of stock, improved performance, and maintaining the longevity of the program. Throughout all of my writing, my assumptions will be based on a breeding loft size of between 12 and 20 pairs of pigeons. I am selecting this range simply because 90% of all lofts in the sport fall within this range.

Going back to the average breeding lifespan of six years which I established above, if you believe what I have to say, you can see that pigeons have three breeding years on the up side and three more on the down side. There are always going to be pairs that you will want to protect longer because they are key pairs to the family, or they have been big producing pairs. Most pairs simply don't or shouldn't qualify at this level.

For most fanciers, the breeding loft comes down to three situations: decreasing quality, maintained quality, and improving quality. The vast majority of lofts experience the first situation. A much smaller number of lofts will experience the last situation in the beginning; however, those that experience such initial improvement will eventually top out at some level of maintained quality. When a fancier reaches a level where he is only maintaining quality, it is for one of several reasons. First and foremost, the fancier reaches the extent of his knowledge on how to improve. Second, sometimes the gene pool doesn't possess the quality to move forward. Third, the fancier has limited time and is forced to share it between the breeding loft and flying loft. Fourth is all of the above.

If the fancier is going to start out in the category of improving quality, he must understand that in order to have improving quality, he must continue to build toward improving quality. Using the average age of the breeding loft as an indicator is a very good method to see if a breeding loft is moving toward quality improvement. If all of the fancier's pigeons are 10 years old, then I would question his ability in one of two ways. First, if he is putting nothing back into the breeding loft and he is not planning to die soon, then he is a fool. Second, if he wants to put something back into the breeding loft and he is unable to find the quality to match his aging pigeons, then he is not a breeder of pigeons in the first place.

If you understand the concepts of breeding, you should be able to improve the quality of your breeders and thereby improve the quality of your race team, which in turn should improve your performance, which will provide more and better pigeons to choose from for the breeding loft. This is a circle that should begin in the breeding loft.

If we know that the average breeding range for most pigeons is six years, and that the fancier keeps 40 breeders, then it is fairly simple to deduce that the fancier should be replacing between 6 and 7 breeders per year just to maintain the breeding loft. To actually improve the breeding loft, the fancier needs to replace between 10 and 12 pigeons per year because not all of the previous year's replacements will pan out. The more breeders the fancier owns, the tougher this becomes, especially when we consider

that on average, we produce 6 youngsters per year from each pair and, again on average, the number of breeding quality pigeons is less than one per year per pair. This means that in the average loft, for every 20 pairs, 10 potential breeders are produced each year. Obviously, these ten will be somewhat thinned out during settling, training, and racing.

I have never been to a loft where the breeders were of equal quality from top to bottom. Therefore, we can assume that while the best pairs of pigeons are producing slightly more than one great breeder per year, it is highly unlikely that this percentage is maintained through the first 10 pairs and by the 20th pair this number is well below 1 per year. We can safely assume that every pair thereafter will drop off further. Assuming an average of 10 potential breeders per year from 20 pairs, we would need 15 potential breeders from 30 pairs to maintain the percentage, yet because of the diminishing percentage in these last 10 pairs, we are very likely to only get total 11 of 12 potential breeders from 30 pairs. The more pairs the fancier maintains, the bigger the deficit.

Again assuming a six-year breeding range and 20 pairs of breeders, a strong loft will have between 30/40 and 36/40 pigeons within a range of 4 to 7 years of age. There are only four possible arguments to counter this, so if you think you are the exception, you had better be in one of these categories. First, you own pigeons with a much longer life span; second, you are willing to purchase pigeons from the outside to cover the deficit; third, your family has a breeding percentage such that you can let them get a little older and not worry about it; and fourth, your race team is of such a high quality that you get equal quality youngsters from them. I will suggest that the first exception will likely produce less vital pigeons, and the race results will suffer. The second exception will never see long-term improvement. The third exception is so small that unless you are held at the same level of esteem as the Janssen brothers, you probably don't qualify. While the fourth might occur, it is unlikely to do so without the breeding loft being in place in the first place. I will concede that a loft with a quality breeding program and an excellent race team can take some pressure off the stock by breeding some youngsters off the quality pairs on the race team.

Until next time.

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