

The “L” Factor

By Bill “The Book” Richardson

3/5/05

Well, it has been a while since I have written anything, so let me knock the rust out of my fingers and possibly my brain and let's see how it goes! Thinking ... Thinking... Thinking... still Thinking..... Lots of Rust.

Here we are at the beginning of another breeding season. I have to confess that for me the off-season went by rather fast. In fact, far too fast! With the advent of my new website and all the work that went into creating it, and with the simultaneous changes that have occurred within the loft, I will admit to being a little worn out.

As I have explained in the past, with the exception of those days when I feel compelled to write about something I find humorous (notice that I said, “I find humorous”), the intent of my articles is to make the fancier think. To help out with this process, I must use familiar examples, and what better example than that of my own loft? OK, it might be a little better to use your loft as the example, but obviously, for me, this poses a logistical problem.

If you are one of those people that enjoy short answers like “Yes” or “No,” you are probably not going to make it to the bottom of the page, since that is just not my style. A few weeks ago when I was over in California, Ed Lorenz and I were driving along discussing seminars when he said, “You know, I am not much of a speaker, but one time the club wanted Art Hees and me to give a presentation. I didn't want to do it, but they kept after me. Finally, I told them that I would do it if I could answer every questions either ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ They agreed, and for about 45 minutes all I said was ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.” As my wife and my editor will tell you, I am incapable of answering in such a concise manner.

You may not know this, but I have a morbid fascination with old people. This is probably because I am becoming one at such a rapid rate that I can't help but use them as an opportunity to skip ahead to see what I am going to be like in 15 years!

The other day, I was sitting in the optometrist's office next to an older couple. The wife had an unmistakable German accent. She was being impatient, and it was clear that the visit to the doctor was cramping her style. The husband was very clearly your average American male. Not wanting to get caught up in her frustration, he was looking around for anyone or anything to amuse himself with for the next half hour. He started to talk to me, but she interrupted saying that she needed to use the bathroom. There were also several other events that occurred about the same time, so we never really got started talking, which was too bad because I think he might have been interesting. For some reason, he reminded me of an older Chic Brooks.

When she returned, in a rather snappy voice, she said, “Did you get your prescription filled?” He said, “Well, I was going to get the cholesterol one filled, but you were in a hurry that day. Then I was....” She interrupted, “Can’t you ever just say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’?” He let out a big sigh, and said, “Why, yes I can..... ‘No’.” Without hesitation, she said, “Why not?” He then said, “Well now, that is going to require the explanation that I was about to give you, when you requested a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer.” There was a rather long silence, and then she said, “Well OK, but keep it short.” He then again replied, “No.” She then said, “You already said that.” He said, “I was keeping it short as you requested. If you want to know what is going on, it is going to require my longer explanation.”

This is why I don’t give “Yes” or “No” answers!!! Without all the information, “yes” or “no” can be very misleading. Besides, we could have handled “yes” or “no” 40 articles back.

Richard Clingan and the Luck Factor – Better known as the “L” Factor

Recently, I was conversing with the author of the *Australian Racing Pigeon Journal*, Richard Clingan. We were discussing a possible topic for a future article. One thing led to another, and Richard became a little frustrated (not with me but at the situation that he was suggesting). He finally blurted out, “There is so much luck involved in this sport!” I responded in agreement. He then said, “Well, if that is the case, then why doesn’t anyone write about that?” I responded, “Well if you were involved in a sport where on any given race the outcome was 80% luck, would you run around bragging about it?” He replied, “Well then, I guess we can all go on living with our heads in the sand.” My wife is always telling me to pull my head out (I am not sure that “sand” is necessarily the context that she had in mind), so I will do it here.

Unfortunately, Richard was pointing out the obvious. This sport is based on a whole lot of luck, especially when we focus on a single event. As the sport continues to decline, there has been a significant increase in one-loft races. Thousands of dollars are being spent on the results of a single race. The winner is being held high as if he has accomplished something. It is nice to win. I like to win. However, whatever happened to the concept of condition? Remember that word? You know that thing that usually happens to good pigeons once or twice a year for a three- or four-week period? You remember, one group comes into condition and then three or four weeks later another group comes into condition. Is that coming back to you now? Those good ones that don’t win are no better or worse than those that do, they just weren’t in condition on that one day. Yet the winner is sold for six or eight thousand dollars. Go figure!

Richard prepared a giant list of variables that, while factual, is simply too long to list again here. Instead, I am going to stay with conditioning and one-loft races (although this applies to normal combine racing as well), because one-loft racing is the easiest to break down.

Along with many others, I have always said that in the average loft, there are five good pigeons in every 100 pigeons bred. By good, I mean that those five have the athletic ability to win when they are in condition. Few of us have a single pigeon that carries us through the entire season simply because one pigeon can't generally stay in condition that long. When a fancier has a great season, it is generally because his five great pigeons come into condition on a staggered schedule. If they come into condition all at once, they go out all at once. Heavy trainers often dominate the first four weeks, and then they get to watch their pigeons all lose form at about the same time.

Statistically, one-loft races operate about the same way. For every 100 pigeons entered, there may be five good ones. Based on the five-in-100 concept, in a big race—let's say 2000 entries—there would be 100 good pigeons. Of these 100 good pigeons, approximately 25% will be in condition at any one time. Therefore, it really stands to reason that a race of 2000 pigeons really boils down to 25 pigeons. Gee, how many combines are flying 2000 pigeons these days?

Going back to Richard's list of variables, we have weather conditions that are favorable to some and unfavorable to others. We also have races that are not long enough or conditions that are not tough enough to separate the good ones from the bad ones. Under any of these circumstances, the 25 that are in condition will be cut in half, so now there are 13 quality pigeons that are going to the race that are in good enough form to win. To add to the confusion, there will also be several lesser-quality pigeons that will be in form, and, if the distance isn't long enough or the conditions are not tough enough, they will hang in there with these 13. When they all arrive together, and the race is decided on the landing board, which one is which? Of the 13 quality pigeons that are in form and are capable of winning, 75% of them will be one-time winners at some point in their lives. The question then becomes whether this will be their day.

In my view, a one-time winner is nothing more than luck until he can post another great performance. Once they have achieved a second performance, then the luck factor can be reduced. Pigeons with wins over multiple seasons are in my mind the best pigeons to base results on because this requires a multi-form event.

Ed Lorenz and I have discussed this topic to death. He is insistent, and I would strongly agree, that unless you have at least two races, you really are not proving much of anything. In Southern California they used to fly two 400-mile money races that were three weeks apart. In my view, this was a pretty good test because the races were far enough apart so that a pigeon that was in form for the first race was unlikely to be in form for the second race and vice versa. As Ed puts it, "Do you know how many pigeons I have had that repeated high in both races? Well, they could be counted on one hand." Yet, those few have gone on to be great racers pretty much through their entire careers.

As discussed above, what this sport is really about is consistency across not only races but seasons. As the clubs grow smaller, old-bird racing has continued to lose its prominence. Young-bird racing has turned into a game of systems, and although there

are winners and losers, the results are for the most part meaningless because they are based on primarily individualistic performances.

The only real credibility left to our pigeons is success across multiple seasons, and without old birds, multi-season testing simply isn't going to happen. I have always said that if you can go through a loft of pigeons that have flown three entire seasons, you are generally looking at a good group of pigeons.

I will also be the first to admit that there are many courses in the US where the losses are simply too high to have very many pigeons at the end of three years. I was talking to Art Hees several months back, and he was mentioning how few pigeons he had that had made it through three years of flying in Florida. It makes it rather difficult when you fly three relatively easy races and one disaster. Nonetheless, I really like to see those pigeons that have flown three seasons because those are the proven ones. The real test for a great pigeon or a great person is the test of time.

As I have pointed out, you can shrink this sport down to one race, or you can build it into three seasons. In one direction lies ruin, and, in another, lies truth. However, for old birds to become prominent again in this country there are going to have to be many, many changes to the sport.

Richard is absolutely correct; across the board, this is a sport of very little skill and a whole lot of luck. Richard said that it is 80% luck, and while Ed Lorenz and I were discussing the series of events that led up to Richard's comment, Ed blurted out the exact same figure of 80% luck before I could mention Richard's assessment. This is not to say that there is no skill involved in the sport, but it is to say that the other 20% that is considered skill is really employed by a relative few fanciers in the sport. The success of these fanciers and the success of their pigeons are not measured in individual races, but, instead, are measured over time.

I enjoy one-loft races as something to do and as an opportunity to travel and meet people that I would otherwise never have a chance to meet. However, success or failure in these races must be put into perspective. Frankly, this same logic holds true in a single combine race, and, obviously, this is where airlines come into play.

How important is airline? The other day, Ed Lorenz was telling me that he had just read a recent article by a fancier that had the nerve to stand up and say that the most important thing in the sport is "location." That took a lot of guts to say, and we both respected him for saying it. Airline is just another variable, and, while it may not show up in a one loft race, it does show up consistently in combine races!

I recently read another article that covered last year's Snowbird Race. I will give the author of this article credit for mentioning that four pigeons arrived 45 seconds ahead of the flock, yet these pigeons didn't win. There were a number of witnesses to this event, and all were in agreement that these early arrivals were race birds. The winner came out

of a second flock of 20 pigeons. All that way, and, with a 45-second lead, they still didn't win! No luck involved?

As I have said many times before, even when you identify a multiple winner you still only have its performance, which is worth nothing unless it can be converted to something in the future. After all, winning is what has happened, not what will happen. However, in relation to a family, winning is really only the validation of the family, so to a family, winning is important.

We are in a sport where competition is the chief factor, yet winning in itself means very little, especially if it involves single performances or performances that don't validate the breeding program. Yet, single performances add up to a picture. The more performances, the bigger the picture! Successful breeding creates winners, and winners validate successful breeding.

Every fancier that I have ever talked with seems to understand that not all winners are really winners. However, when I throw one of their winners out of the breeding loft, they can't understand it at all. Conceptually they do, but when it applies to them they don't. This is because they don't understand the concept of the bigger picture. Unfortunately, many fanciers are willing to overlook the big picture to bask in the glow of their individual successes.

The experienced fancier knows that there is a great deal of luck involved in pigeon racing, and he spends a great deal of time sorting out lucky events from the not-so-lucky events. He knows that lying to himself is the quickest way to ruin his loft.

For the inexperienced or less skilled fanciers, winning by luck is often the only way that they are going to win at all, and because for them winning happens so infrequently, they idolize any win. This is why the transition from being an average fancier to an experienced fancier is so difficult.

So far, I have focused on what I call the downhill side of the race, which is the time between the release and clocking. There are many events on the uphill side as well. These are the events before the release that may stretch clear back to the time of the last race. As Richard implied in his list, there are many factors leading up to the race that can have a serious effect on the race itself.

I can remember one time that I had a pigeon that had been flying really well. Because club members were standing around drunk at the time, they entrusted a kid with little experience to ship the pigeons. He in turn let the spring door on the crate close on the wing of my pigeon breaking the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th primaries on the left side. I wouldn't have known about it, but I saw to happen, and I was able to rescue the pigeon and bring it home for the following year. Had I not seen this happen, the pigeon would not have made it home for the 400-mile race that it had been entered in. I would have been left scratching my head.

This pigeon had been in the top ten the previous two weeks, and I firmly believe that it was going to win. Now the pigeon was no longer in the race. I didn't get the validation for my breeding program, and the eventual winner didn't get the same level of competition, which changed the win from validation to luck. Yet the winning fancier had no way to know that his pigeon wasn't really a winner, and, without my pigeon actually proving that it could win, he wouldn't have downgraded his pigeon anyway.

This simple event really ruined the integrity of the race, and yet the race hadn't even been flown. Given the number of fanciers and pigeons involved in every race, most races are probably tainted to some degree before the race even begins.

The aforementioned are just some of the instances involving the "L" Factor. When you stop to think of how many possible things that can change a single race, you start to see how little skill there is involved in a single event. The skill is in multiple events.

Well, Richard, not that it will change anything, but I have now said it.

Until next time!

Book

This article is copyrighted by Bill Richardson. Articles cannot be reproduced without the permission of the author.