

My Teacher – Don Falkenborg

By

Bill “The Book” Richardson

I was saddened to hear that my first and most important teacher, Don Falkenborg, passed away on Thursday, September 16, 2004, at 81 years of age. Probably none of you knew Don, but he was extremely important in my development as a fancier and as a person. I am writing this in memory of what he meant to me, and in tribute to all the teachers who have taken the time to pass on their knowledge.

When Don first started teaching me, my philosophy was “If a little is good, then a lot is better.” In reply, Don would always say these words to me: “Middle of the road, always stay in the middle of the road. If you leave the road you will get lost, and you will have to waste time finding the middle of the road again. You only live so long, so always stay in the middle of the road.”

It is this quote that is the basis for everything that I know about pigeons, and it is the meaning of this quote that I have sought to master for all these years. You see, pigeon racing and life in general are about moderation and balance. When it comes to our pigeons, all of us are guilty in some way of a lack of moderation, whether because we keep too many pigeons, over-medicate, over-train, over-feed, and so on.

In professional sports, we have often heard it said that true greatness in an athlete is measured as much off the field as on. Don should stand as a giant reminder that greatness in this sport isn't always measured on the race sheet. There are many great fanciers who never get the recognition they deserve because they live in bad locations or simply don't have the necessary time to devote to the sport. Don was one of the latter.

Don and his wife Marie ran a very successful tire equipment and supply company based in California. It was his dedication to this business that really kept Don from becoming a legend in this sport. When Don flew, he was a very good fancier. However, he didn't get the opportunity to race very often, and, when he did race, he would often have to leave on a sales trip right in the middle of the season. I know that he wanted to compete, and I know he could have been right at the top of the sport, but his business came first.

Don was a very good selector of pigeons, and it didn't seem reasonable to some people that he should have this level of knowledge when he didn't race. As a kid, it was often difficult for me to have a teacher who didn't fly. I would tout him as my teacher, and fanciers would say, “Who is he?” For a kid, this was sometimes tough to take! I really wanted him to be successful, but I guess in the end, if you consider me successful, then as a teacher he must have been successful. That is what Don had time to contribute, so that is what he did contribute.

I will remember Don for a lot of things, but some things stick in my mind. When I was much younger, I remember asking Don, "If you are not going to fly, why even own pigeons?" He replied, "When you are older, you will understand this better, but my days are often very stressful, and when I am handling pigeons, I can forget everything else." As I have often mentioned, I haven't raced in a number of years now, but there isn't a day that goes by that I don't want to rush home and handle my pigeons.

Don was not hurting for money, and he had no attachment to specific pigeons. Because he wasn't concerned about failure, he could focus on a subject even when it might be detrimental to his pigeons. He completely ruined more than one set of pigeons breeding for a single physical aspect, yet if an experiment failed, he would just go buy another set of pigeons. He had a very good understanding of the physical aspects of the racing pigeon and that is what made him a great selector of pigeons. He didn't need to fly to have this.

If you were to ask anyone what they remembered most about Don, they would immediately say his personality. Don was in my view one of the smartest and most personable people that I have ever met in my life. I think what made Don so unusual was his ability to relate with people. When I was young and still living at home, Don used to stop in once in a while and visit with me and my parents, and as my parents didn't socialize much, it was always enjoyable to watch how he put them at ease.

Don grew up in the same neighborhood as Orland and Ralph Wilcox and one of the greatest fanciers in the American Sport, Art Hees. Don always looked up to Art Hees as one of the icons of the sport. One of the greatest compliments that Don ever paid me was when he said, "You and Art Hees are the two most natural pigeon men that I have ever met." When I flew as a junior member in the Mountain Concourse, I had an opportunity to fly against Art; during that brief period, I was the top fancier in young birds, and he was the top fancier in old birds. Like many others, Don could have been jealous of Art's success, but instead he was always quite proud of the fact that he knew Art, and he was proud of Art for his success.

Don had a teacher as well. He was Dan La Pre, the "King of the Valley" at that time. Don often talked about Dan, and many of my current loft handling techniques came down from Dan. I only met Dan at the end of his life, and his only reference to Don was that he was the pain in the butt that came by every Tuesday night for five years. That may not sound too gracious, but if Don was here, he would probably say the same about me, because you see, that is the mark of a great student! Every great student will continue to push even when the well is going dry, and every great teacher will want the student to leave the nest before the student realizes that the well has gone dry. I know that I pushed Don farther than I should have, and I know that he always tried to be patient about it. However, there are limits to everything.

I first met Don in 1971 when I was 12 years old. Don must have been almost exactly the age that I am today. From the start, he had an enormous impact on my life. He not only

took me under his wing and taught me the sport, but he helped me through some difficult times during my teenage years. As a graduate of USC, he always preached the importance of college, and it is because of him that I obtained my degree from the University of Arizona. I came from a family that didn't have any college graduates, and it took his outside influence to break that trend. For that alone, I could never have thanked him enough!

Don taught me much of what he knew, which was considerable. He taught me in the same way that I now teach my students. His way of teaching was designed to make you think. He taught by asking questions and posing riddles. When I had finally worn out my welcome, I still had many of his riddles to work on. I will always remember Don for his riddles because they challenged me to become better.

What he really taught me was how to think. Don could reason out almost anything! When we would go on training tosses together, he would go over every aspect of logical thinking. He was a master of applying inductive and deductive logic. While I was a little wobbly at first in using these methods of reasoning, with practice and age I have learned to put these tools to great use.

During about a five-year span, Don and I came to know each other's strengths and shortcomings quite well. Then, one day, we started to move away from each other. At first, because I was young, I didn't understand what was happening, and it kind of hurt. I often thought of Dan La Pre's comment about how Don was a pain in the butt for five years, and how now I had been a pain in the butt for five years. Maybe, by teaching me, Don had been paying back a debt to Dan. Truthfully, there is only so much two people can say to each other without getting on each other's nerves, especially when one is always taking and the other is always giving.

My last visit with Don was back in 1997, and it was then that I first handled the Hofkens. At that time, Don owned the De Welches and the Bird of Paradise, both of which I fell in love with immediately. When I got back into pigeons, he called and asked if I was interested in buying them because he wanted to move to another family of pigeons. I received 16 pigeons in the deal, and two babies that were 20 days old. One of those babies later turned out to be my foundation hen, and she is the only pigeon that I still have from that group.

I talked to Don on the phone for the last time about six weeks ago. We had a very pleasant chat, and I think we both knew that it was going to be our last conversation. I am thankful that I had the strength to tell him what he had meant to me in my life, and I hope that I didn't sound too sentimental in the process. I know he appreciated hearing it nonetheless.

I really didn't know how his passing was going to affect me. Well, the answer is going to be an odd one, at least to me. It took me a long time to realize that Don and I were never really about friendship. Our relationship was about the love of a sport, and the concepts within that sport. He was the teacher, and I was the student, and it took me a long time to

understand that friendship wasn't really part of the equation. Through the course of life, there are going to be many people that you both admire and respect, but they won't always be your friend in the way that you think of friendship. To some degree, I have already found this out with a couple of my own students, but that doesn't matter. What matters is that "The show must go on," and, as part of the show, we must train our replacements.

The last time we visited in 1997, he was quite insistent that I go through his pigeons, and I knew that he was watching me very intently. When we were finished, he told me, "When you were younger, I used to be amazed how you could pick out the best pigeons with no knowledge of why. Now, you are pointing things out to me that I know are true, but that I have no knowledge as to why. It seems that we have switched positions."

We were both quiet for a few minutes, and, finally, not knowing what else to say, I said, "Do you want me to tell you why?" He smiled and chuckled (I always loved Don's chuckle) in a way that I will never forget, and said, "No, what I want you to do is find a young fancier, and teach him in the way that I taught you. That is what you owe to me." I was very relieved that he chose to go this way, because I really didn't want to tell him why, not because it was some kind of secret, but because down deep, I knew it wasn't correct protocol for a student to become the teacher of his teacher. It takes a lot of generosity to want your student to surpass you, and Don had that kind of spirit.

I want you to know that I have honored his request in full, and I was able to tell him this in our last conversation, which I think made both of us proud. I should also point out that it was the "young fancier" conversation that made me realize that maybe I still had a part to play in this sport. When Steven van Breeman asked if I would be willing to write for *Winning*, it was this conversation that made me accept.

We all think that we will be remembered for what we accomplish on the race sheet, but that is gone almost as fast as we are. What really has the potential power to last the test of time is the knowledge that we hand down to others. Dan La Pre passed away in the early 1990's, and Don has now passed away as well, yet through me and now my students, they live on.

I started this acknowledgement of Don by saying that probably none of you knew Don, but that isn't true, because since much of what I have written was heavily influenced by him, it stands to reason that if you have been reading my articles, then you know Don almost as well as I did.

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