

Athletes, Non-Athletes, and Conditioning, Part II

By

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During the course of writing today's article, I have come to realize that I will need to include at least one more article in my filibuster on conditioning. It seems that this current article kept growing like a weed until, at 14 pages, I realized that even I couldn't sit down and read my own writing for that length of time.

Noticing that I had been at it longer than usual, my dear and loving wife even suspiciously asked what I was so feverishly writing about. When I said, "Conditioning," she said, "Finally a subject that I know all about. I have been conditioning you for years." To which I responded, "I know, dear, and that is why I am trying to get the word out before it happens to others." I think she may still be staring at me with her frostiest stare after that comment, so I will just keep right on typing like nothing ever happened.

In her view, "conditioning" is a pleasant way of saying "total mind control." To show you exactly how powerful it is, with only her staring at me, I have this sudden urge to go out and clean the oven for her. Fortunately, I am a little stronger-minded than that....Now where did I leave that oven cleaner?

For the good of the team

As I have stated many times before, in the average loft, for every one hundred pigeons raised, there are approximately five athletes, ten motivated non-athletes, and 85 culls. Again in the average loft, of the 85 culls, 50 are easily identifiable.

While my breeding program might be a little ahead of average, for every 100 pigeons bred, 50 are still culls. This means that approximately 50% of what I raise are athletes or motivated non-athletes and 50% don't make the grade. I could just wait for them to thin themselves out (which these days seems to be the popular trend) or I could save the feed and effort and make room for the real athletes. OK great! So what does this have to do with conditioning? Well, actually quite a bit.

I have covered this topic with many fanciers by equating it to UCLA basketball. Of course they have no idea what I am talking about. (Maybe I don't know what I am talking about either, but let's pretend anyway). When John Wooden was coach of the UCLA Bruins, he always said two things: "Given the type of players that we have available to us, our practices are often more competitive than our games," and "You play like your practice."

During the Coach Wooden era, there was no college basketball team in the country that could match the UCLA Bruins. In fact, starting in about 1965 and running through 1974,

his were possibly the most dominant teams in sports history with the exception of maybe the 1960-1969 Boston Celtics.

During this period, UCLA had so much depth that there was very little difference in talent between the first and second team. Their everyday practices were often much more competitive than their games.

I will admit to having trouble deciding which of Coach Wooden's quotes should come first, because it is sort of like answering which comes first: the chicken or the egg? Organized practices are the responsibility of the coach. When a team practices well, it plays well. When they play well in their games, both the players and the coach attract attention for their accomplishments. Part of the payoff for their accomplishments is that other good players want to attend that college and be part of that sports program. Better prospects lead to a higher level of competition on the team. This in turn leads to better levels of practice. I guess it comes down to where you want to pick up the argument as to which quote should come first.

The importance of culling

Now, let's go back and try to apply this to pigeon racing. If I raise 120 youngsters a year and I keep all of them, regardless of the overall quality, then the average workout around the loft will sink to the lowest common denominator (the worst pigeon). Good pigeons don't leave bad pigeons behind when they are flying around the loft, unlike road training. Instead when pigeons of poor quality can't keep up or just don't want to fly, they tend to want to hang around the loft or land.

Pigeons thrive on four very simple motivations: food, sex, fear, and territory. If you ever find yourself wondering what your pigeons are thinking about, first consult a psychiatrist, and then, if you are still allowed to have pigeons, think about these four motivating factors. Loft flying is based around food. The minute that a poor pigeon returns to fly around the loft or land, the rest of the group immediately feels that their food is threatened, and they will return to keep an eye on things.

To get pigeons to fly better around the loft, you have to make them believe that they are not missing out on anything when they leave the loft. Pigeons are meant to fly, and part of flying is the desire to exercise while exploring the surrounding countryside. At least this is the mental image you want them to have.

When members of the group are physically weak or poorly motivated, they force the group to fly slower and pretty soon everyone wants to land because the workout isn't fun. If you don't believe me, take your kids with you the next time you go to workout. Soon they will be bored and asking, "When will it be time to go home?" When they do, it will provide you with an excuse, and before you know it you will want to go home as well. See what happens to your workout when one of your kids says, "Let's go, I am hungry." You will pretend to be upset with them to cover your own guilt for quitting.

People are always asking me why my pigeons fly so well around the loft. The answer is very simple. Some pigeons want to fly and some don't. I keep the ones that want to fly because, for whatever reason, they are self-motivated. I don't want to spend my time driving up and down the road making them do something that they are not good enough to do on their own.

Many fanciers train a lot to compensate for their pigeons' lack of athletic ability. Plain and simple, athletes don't require heavy road training, but underachievers do. Therefore, if you have athletes on your team and you are a heavy trainer, you are wasting gas!

True, through heavy training, the fancier will get somewhat better performances from the underachievers, but what is the point in that? Personally, I would rather see these underachievers not win than to win and have them mess up my entire breeding program. Many of you might be thinking, "Well, I know enough to know which ones should go into the breeding loft and which ones shouldn't, so I will take the win." Maybe, but I sure see an awful lot of fanciers buying their stock instead of breeding it.

Range of quality

While athletes may not require road training, they will require loft training. The problem with loft training is that for it to be successful, the team needs to be made up of a much higher level of quality. This brings us to the "range of quality" discussion.

The range of quality is the difference between your best pigeon and your worst pigeon. Again, remember that around the loft your team will practice at the level of its worse component. Since there are many more bad ones than good ones, if we don't cull, the population will be skewed heavily toward the culls.

As we continue to eliminate the culls, we remove the skew and improve the average. As I have mentioned, I raise 120 youngsters and work my way down to 60 to start the season. Therefore, I start the season with the upper half of what I raised. Generally speaking, this gives me a significant advantage over my competitors because I am only working with very-good-to-excellent pigeons. Unlike most lofts, I have what I want, not what is left!

I once visited a master fancier who was known for his ability to select pigeons. During my visit, he was flagging his pigeons around the loft, so I had nothing better to do than watch. He had a flag on the landing board, and, on a beautiful clear cool day, he was bragging to me about how well they were flying. Now, I was sitting there taking this all in, and it's funny, but I didn't get the same impression. They were flying in such a tight circle around the flag that the inside pigeons had to be getting dizzy. In fact, I was getting dizzy just watching them. After watching for five minutes, I could point out every pigeon that was messing up the exercise. "You race the way you practice!" If he had eliminated the disruptive pigeons, he would have gotten much more than 45 minutes and without the flag.

Another time many years ago, I visited a fancier that was among the best that I have ever known. He had his pigeons out flying in the afternoon on a 107 degree day. Now this might have been a little excessive; however, it is because of him that I changed my ways of thinking about loft training. He is no longer with us, but at the time he had a wife that was exactly half his age, and she used to bake chocolate chip cookies for him. In fact, while I was there, she brought out a whole plate of them and proceeded to proudly tell me how much he loved her cookies.

As soon as she went back into the house, I started to reach for a cookie, but he grabbed my arm and said, "Those are not for you; they're for the birds. You see my wife is a great person, but she can't cook." About that time, a pigeon landed on the landing board and -- zing -- my friend threw a cookie at it. It was so afraid of those cookies that it went back to flying. My friend turned to me and said, "See, they are hard as rocks; you can toss them a mile and they go off like a grenade when they hit something." In this case fear was the motivation because no one wants to get hit in the head with a chocolate chip cookie.

Seeing the chocolate chips melting on the landing board, I asked him if he thought it was a little hot to be flying pigeons, to which he responded, "Yep, for some, but then they are not the ones that I am after. [Now this next part might sound a little familiar.] Only five in 100 pigeons are any good, and it won't be any of those that are doing the landing, partly because they won't be here. It is best that I discover their lack of athletic ability now."

Remember my jujitsu experiences; what were the topics? Athletes, heat, and condition. The second fancier was exploiting all of these before the season so that he could reduce the range of quality. The first fancier had too big a range of quality and he was wasting his time. How could he expect the athletes to work to potential amongst all that junk?

There is a job to do, and only so many can do that job. Find out which ones can do the job and remove the rest. By the way, the second fancier's pigeons flew for over an hour in 107 degree heat, and he was the champion in his area right up until the time of his death.

When I am racing, most of my breeding takes place between January and May. Starting at the first of March and continuing through July, I reduce the flock by ten pigeons every month. With each new round introduced into the young bird loft, some from previous rounds are being eliminated.

In August, after the real heat starts to let up, loft training begins for real. Every year at this time, there are some that look great, but they just don't want to fly. Regardless of their lineage, they are eliminated as well. By the time I am done, I have 60 excellent youngsters to work with. I have settled on this number because I have found that this is the maximum number of pigeons that work together as a team, especially around the loft. Any more than 60 pigeons and the group become awkward, workouts are not crisp, and injuries and losses tend increase.

Guys that keep more than 60 pigeons often have lofts that are overcrowded. What they don't seem to understand is that when pigeons are overcrowded, they tend to reduce themselves until they get down to the number that fits the situation. Unfortunately, for them, these losses are not necessarily quality based.

I was once working with a student who was rather insistent that he needed to keep his 100 pigeons in two 5x8 sections. All of my other students were getting an hour and fifteen minutes around the loft and he was getting 30 to 45 and the training was not crisp. I told him several times that he needed to reduce his numbers, but he just wouldn't do it. When it was time to start road training, they still weren't flying right; I had a good idea what was going to happen, so I kind of drifted away for a few weeks.

When I returned, he had taken several smashes of 10 to 15 pigeons each. Unfortunately, by his own admission, he had lost as many good pigeons as bad ones in the process, but now he was down to the sixty he should have started with. He only lost four more pigeons prior to the first race. He was suddenly amazed how much better they started flying around the loft. His flying times jumped well over an hour and he was able to reduce his road training to once a week. In a very strong club and with a bad air line, he won club average speed and finished third in combine average speed.

My only comment to him was, "Next year, why don't you try keeping the sixty and see what happens."

As I mentioned in my very important article (important to me) on the X factor, young birds rely on the group. If the group isn't working well together, then there are going to be losses, and, in my opinion, quality is not going to be a deciding factor as to who goes and who stays. Pigeons will simply reduce themselves down to the size of their loft. As a species we will one day grow to a number that the planet simply can't support and we will reduce ourselves down to a size the fits the planet.

I have never had a smash from under 100 miles, and I live in an area where smashes are common. I directly attribute this to two things. First, my range of quality is extremely small, and, second, my pigeons have been working together for an hour and a half to two hour twice a day for an entire month. When they leave the crate, they are a tight little ball with one mindset. The reason pigeons get lost or get into smashes early on during road training is that they are not working as a team. Since they are not of a single mindset, various pigeons attempt to lead. Soon everyone is confused, and because of the excessive numbers and the large range of quality, the group mills and splits.

Fancier intervention

Let's discuss the confusing topic of fancier intervention. We all intervene in one way or another. As coaches, it is our job to do so. To intervene is to make decisions and sometimes these decisions are going to be tough to make. Although many fanciers don't

treat it this way, this is a team sport, especially in young birds, and we should make decisions that benefit the team.

The coach is responsible for developing the game plan and making his pigeons work to that game plan. If the game plan is good, and the pigeons are right for the game plan, then they will be able to work to the potential of the game plan. If the game plan is bad, the pigeons are bad, or they are not right for the game plan, then either the coach isn't doing his job and/or the pigeons are not right for the program.

As coaches, we are faced with two choices. We can decide to get involved or we can decide to not get involved. Doing either is still a choice of the fancier, and there are risks either way. For instance, because I work with fewer pigeons and because the quality level is high, I have very few sick pigeons. However, I also shoulder the risk of culling the wrong pigeons to get to this lower number of pigeons. I could be right about numbers and wrong about quality or vice versa. If I make no decision and keep all of what I raise, then I have assumed the risk that they might get sick.

My gamble is simply that in making these decisions, I believe that I am right far more times than I am wrong. Over time, I am betting that through intervention my few selection mistakes will be offset by the betterment of the team overall.

Intervention has a lot to do with the skill level of the coach! Obviously, it would not make a lot of sense to intervene if you didn't know a good pigeon from a bad one. However, it would make a lot of sense to learn to recognize the difference. Here is a very simple way of learning how to tell the difference. Go through and write down the numbers of the pigeons that you think will make it and then the numbers of the ones you think won't make it. Compare the lists to what you have left at the end of the season. If you are off, then you are not looking at the right things. Keep doing this until you can get it right about 90% of the time and then just go with it.

The general effects of loft and road conditioning

Years ago when great fanciers took the time to think of such things, the consensus was that road training for 30 minutes was equal to 60 minutes of loft training. This is what I was taught and believed for a long time. However, through observation, I no longer agree with this belief. In fact, I don't think there is any comparison between loft training and road training. To me it would be like saying that running and weight lifting are comparable training methods.

Pigeons rely heavily on oxygen to fill their lungs and air sacs. Loft flying increases oxygen and road training decreases oxygen. Immediately following a race, there is a lot of toxic waste, known as lactic acid, in the body, blood oxygen is fouled, and oxygen levels are low.

After the race, pigeons require at least a day of toxin removal (rest), and, from that point on, they need to loft fly so that they can increase the blood oxygen levels. For pigeons

that have just flown a race, road training is probably the worst thing you can do for them. Instead of increasing blood oxygen, road training further decreases blood oxygen levels at a time when the pigeon is still recovering from reduced levels.

Every species was set up to perform one or more functions naturally. Pigeons were set up to fly freely or field around their home base. We were set up to walk. Both forms of exercise also help to relieve stress. Plain and simple, road training is stressful. The truth is that most competitive exercises are hard on the body. Road training and racing are competitive exercises, and they don't come without a cost to the body. Road training forces the pigeon to push even when it shouldn't. We will discuss this more in the next article.

Lactic acid

Let me take a minute to briefly discuss lactic acid. It is my opinion that lactic acid is the single biggest enemy to racing pigeons. When a pigeon goes on the road, in the first hour, it burns oxygen and fuel. During a flight of this duration, oxygen levels in the blood will drop to lower levels, but this can be recouped relatively quickly, unless the pigeon is already fatigued. In the second hour, oxygen levels drop still lower; now the pigeon is probably going to need a full day of rest to fully recoup.

From the third to the sixth hour, pigeons burn even more oxygen and carbohydrate (muscle glycogen) fuel and now there is considerably more toxic waste in the system. The breast of the pigeon should not turn blue from exertions of under six hours, unless the pigeon is road-trained too hard, sent to too many races, or is sick. In this case, pigeons will definitely require at least a day of rest.

From six hours to ten hours on the wing, pigeons begin using fat as their fuel. Fat requires more water and oxygen to burn than sugars do. Of the fats, liquid fat burns first and is reasonably efficient. Once liquid fat is burned, solid fat is next, but it is far less efficient to burn and leaves a lot of toxins in the blood. Also, at about six hours, catabolism of the muscle starts to occur. During this process, the body starts to produce a form of cortisone which provides energy and masks exertion. At this point, the level of lactic acid starts to rise more quickly and the pigeon will require as much as a full week of rest to recoup.

Past ten hours on the wing, the pigeon is reduced to breaking down proteins and muscle to keep flying. This stage of muscle breakdown is serious and extremely toxic and even career-threatening. If it isn't the pigeon's day, he is probably finished within a very few minutes at this level. Pigeons should never be exposed to this situation more than twice a season with a minimum of three weeks in between each exposure. Many pigeons suffer more damage than we realize during these super long distance events, and we may have to wait until the next season to see the total effects of these ten-plus-hour exertions.

Flagging

I want to point out that I do not advocate flagging pigeons around the loft. I want them to fly naturally and because they want to fly. Flagging is just another source of stress, and, while it is far less likely to actually hurt the pigeon than road training is, it is still stressful. They also tend to react to it in much the same way as when they think their food supply is threatened. They tend to keep checking to see if the flag is down so that they can land, and soon that becomes more important than exercising. However, as mentioned above, a good loft flying program generally won't happen for most fanciers unless they reduce the range of quality.

This is not necessarily the best place to break this article, but it will have to do. Next time we will discuss road training and its effects on the pigeon.

Until next time!

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