

## **Athletes, Non-Athletes and Conditioning, Part III**

By

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I want to thank all of you for your support and recommendations for my upcoming GSR seminar which will be held in Minnesota on October 16, 2004. (See them at <http://gsrracingpigeons.com/> - Click on GSR Auction 2004 and then recommendations.) Many fanciers both experienced and inexperienced including some that I did know and some that I didn't, put forward a lot of effort on my behalf. Thank you!!!

The gsrracingpigeons.com site is a work in progress, and I want to thank Greg Finch for all the hard work he has put into constructing it. As you know, I find humor in odd places. The other day Greg told his brother Everett that if everyone keeps sending in all this stuff about "The Book," they ought to change the site name to "I love 'The Book'."

I could tell that Everett was a little hesitant to tell me this for fear that I might not think it was so funny. Rest easy, Everett, I thought it was a classic. In fact, I told my wife about it, and she mumbled something like, "Then if that is the case, they probably shouldn't bother with a website counter because it probably won't attract too much attention." Anyway, if you get a chance, check it out the new site.

Before I begin this article, I want to mention that some of the following may seem somewhat repetitive. This is because I am introducing a number of topics with subtle differences to the same subject. (This is now my disclaimer for being repetitive.) Take the time to read it carefully because there is some valuable information in this article.

### **Road Training**

In my last article, we left off discussing the benefits of loft flying and its practical application for preconditioning and conditioning maintenance of our pigeons. In this article, I would like to start off by discussing road training.

In my opinion, road training is a necessary evil, especially during the preseason conditioning program. We all road train, so I guess the real key to road training is how much and when it is necessary. Let's face it, other than the initial losses incurred during settling, very few pigeons are lost around the loft to anything other than an accident. While loft flying is beneficial to the pigeon's health, in this sport our primary interest is getting our pigeons to fly from point A to point B. There are always a number of pigeons that talk a great game until they are placed in the basket, and road training will help to sort those out. Used properly, road training can also be an experience and confidence builder. Let me be the first to admit that pigeons (especially young birds) need experience going into the season. I know I road train my young birds around 15 times before the season.

Road training is very different from loft flying because it is extremely stressful to the pigeons. Again, we all have to road train, but we would all be far better off if road training were used as a tool instead of a method. The difference is that road training as a tool helps to build the pigeon up at the right moments, whereas training as a method is a way of life for the pigeon, and it has the tendency to cut the pigeon's career short.

As a great fancier and a good friend of mine once told me of his competitors, "Let them road train, darken, and lighten all they want, and let's see how they are doing by the 300." Based on his race results over the years, I would be hard pressed to argue with him.

Americans are into power methods or systems, and this is unfortunately spreading to Europe as well. We are always trying to force our view of improvement on everything. We are taught early on that success comes from hard work and winning is everything. We live in the now and we tend not to worry about burning our pigeons out until it actually happens, which here in America is something less than three years.

Darkening, lighting, and road training are all great examples of power systems. We can't just let the pigeon win; we have to be able to say that we made the pigeon win! Because I don't want to come across as hypocritical, let me be the very first to point out that this was the exact reason why I did all those pushups and sit-ups in preparation for jujitsu. I could have learned better technique, but, instead, I improved my strength so that I felt like I was in control. I was "making" it happen, and yes, there were some costs associated with my power method. Maybe at 60 I will be at one with the Universe, because I will have the experience and wisdom to finally understand. However, in the meantime, my body understands now!

### **Ramblings of a Mad Man**

I remember that back about three years ago, I met one of my present students at a seminar that I gave at the IF New York Convention in 2001. He was a young guy and full of fire. He didn't know me and he had no idea that I was going to be the guest speaker. I could tell that he was a quick thinker, and, as very few people in the room knew me, I thought I would have some fun. We talked about a lot of things, but the one that sticks in my mind the most is the subject of training.

He started off by asking me about my training methods, and I answered by saying that I wasn't much of a trainer. I usually train once a week. He looked at me like I had three heads, and said, "You would never win anything here by training like that. You have to train at least twice a day if you are going to win." I asked him, "When you figure in the price of gasoline and car maintenance what do you think your trophies are costing you apiece?" That sort of slowed him down a little.

At one point in the conversation, he asked me if I was going to the seminar, and I said, "Yeah, if I have time." He said, "I have never heard anything about the speaker, and I can't figure out why they picked him of all people." I said, "Yeah, I know a little bit about him, and, from what I hear, I doubt you will like him much because he's not much

of a trainer either.” He said, “Well then, maybe I won’t go.” I recited my second favorite quote to him: “If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always gotten.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “This guy might say something that you want to hear.”

The next morning, I set my computer up so that my introductory quotes were on the screen. They are as follows:

“If you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always gotten.”

“I thought I was clever until I became clever enough to realize that I wasn’t.” - Book

I took a seat in the front row and waited for everyone to arrive. I was thinking about my speech and the room was about half full, when I heard someone say, “Holy Sh..” from the back of the room. I didn’t even have to turn around to know who it was. We have been friends ever since, and we talk on the phone for at least an hour every Sunday.

### **Back to Road Training**

I know many fanciers are sitting out there saying, “I don’t road train that far, so it can’t be that stressful.” Do you really think the pigeon knows how far away from home you intend to take him? At least once a week, most fanciers probably take their pigeons a lot further than they want or need to go.

To the detriment of our pigeons, we have far more control over their destinies than they do over themselves. When I was training for jujitsu, there were many nights when I just didn’t have it. However, the stress of guilt and worry about missing a workout kept me from missing many workouts. Unfortunately, these feelings would often force me to go when I didn’t feel like it, and that would turn into physical type of stress. As I mentioned in the last article, when you are in the midst of heavy workouts, it is a total drain on your body. It is so easy to say, “I am tired tonight.” If you miss one workout, why not two workouts? The point is that I had these emotions running through my head, and I am supposed to be in control of ME. I use the word “emotions” because when you are exhausted, you have far less control over your emotions and you start to vacillate on every decision. Now coming at this from a pigeon’s perspective, what if I was mentally and physically exhausted from the last race and my owner was demanding this of me?

The minute pigeons are placed in the basket, they become stressed. For the first couple of training tosses, they are frightened, and who can blame them? Early on many will do almost anything to escape -- like jump against the roof of the basket. While they do calm down to some degree, they are never completely calm in the basket. From a stress standpoint, think of what it must be like to have just completed a 200-mile race on Sunday and be thrown into the basket on Tuesday for another sixty-mile toss simply because your owner was going anyway, so he might as well empty the loft. I know I am kind of repeating here, but I want to make the point that most fanciers are training because it makes them feel like they are contributing to the success of the pigeon.

Because they have no idea where they are being taken, the pigeons are always in doubt. Doubt causes stress. Fanciers complain to me about the stress and uncertainty of their jobs all the time, but I have seen very few that showed this type of concern for their pigeons. Unfortunately, when our pigeons are in these stressful conditions and their immune system is often in a compromised state, we are forced to place them in close contact with other pigeons. With heightened stress and close proximity, the risk of incurring sickness is very real!

When our pigeons are finally liberated, they are likely to be anywhere from 30 to 600 miles away from home. As they never rest well in the basket, they are tired at the release, and now they must make life or death decisions.

It is at this point where the game changes, and this change can be devastating for those pigeons that are tired or not in shape. Unlike loft training where the group works to the lowest common denominator (the worst pigeon), on the road, the group works to the pace of the pigeon that is of the best quality and in the best condition. Because they are competitive, good pigeons that are tired will struggle to keep pace even when it is not in their best interest to do so. This is why it is so detrimental to be training a pigeon on Tuesday when it just flew a race on Sunday. If he is forced to keep pace with a fresh pigeon that didn't go to the last race, he is at an extreme disadvantage. Have I beat this into the ground far enough so that you can see my point?

### **Muscle, Oxygen, and Fuel**

Fanciers tend to forget that pigeons have a different type of muscle than we do. Dr. Chalmers wrote a very interesting article on muscle a while back, and I would highly recommend that someone write and ask him to re-post it here at "Winning," as I believe it was the best article that has been written on this subject to date. In it, he discusses slow twitch and fast twitch muscle and the differences between red and white muscle. As I know that I cannot do better, I will leave you in his care on this subject.

For this article, it's enough to know that a pigeon's major flight muscles are made up of red muscle, and, while this type of muscle requires more fuel and oxygen, it doesn't tire as quickly under exertion. Many of the pigeon's minor muscles are made up of white muscle. These muscles are primarily used for steering, landing, and other less repetitive motions, and, while they require far less fuel and oxygen, they tend to tire much more quickly.

All that being said, the red muscles burn fuel, oxygen, and eventually themselves. Knowing how to rebuild this fragile environment is probably the most important aspect of our training program. So much of success depends on the correct use of rest, loft flying, and training. If you can understand when to rest and when to work and what type of work to use, then you will be consistently successful.

### **Oxygen**

During training tosses and shorter races, oxygen in the bloodstream decreases while blood toxins increase. On the way home from a training toss or a race, pigeons burn fuel and oxygen much faster than while they are resting or flying around the loft. If the pigeon went to a race on Sunday, by Tuesday, his blood is still not fully purified and toxin levels are still higher than normal. If the pigeon is given a toss on Tuesday following a Sunday race, oxygen and toxin levels that were starting to return to normal will quickly return to a toxic level. (If you have ever tried to lift weights with the same muscles for two days straight, you know what I am talking about!)

Let me take one more swipe at this concept. (Remember – I'm not being repetitive; these are subtle changes of focus only noticed by the masters.) When blood oxygen level is low, road training will have a much more significant effect on the pigeon. When blood oxygen level is high, road training will cause a slight dip in the oxygen level, but then it recovers quickly. For instance, when blood oxygen level is high, a pigeon can recover from a 60-mile toss in four to twelve hours. When blood oxygen level is low, that same toss could take two days to recover from. The success of the toss is extremely dependent on where the blood level is at when you take the toss.

These numbers are really for example only, but I am using them to demonstrate a point. Every pigeon has some normal level of blood oxygen. Let's call that zero (0). When the pigeon comes home from the race, his blood oxygen level might be something like a negative ten (-10). "Recuperation" is the time that the pigeon takes to get back to zero (0). "Blood building" can only occur after the pigeon is fully recuperated. Most fanciers have no idea how to even get back to zero on the scale. A good fancier with knowledge of conditioning can get to plus five (+5) on the blood-building side of the scale.

People are wondering why Lance Armstrong is winning so easily; well, it is through a variety of blood-building methods. Where a good fancier is working at obtaining a plus five (+5), Lance has figured out how to get to a plus ten (+10). Because he is an athlete who is required to compete on a daily basis, what a plus ten equates to in bicycle racing is a negative three (-3). This sounds bad; however, his competitors are working at a negative seven (-7). The bottom line is that you must recuperate before you can begin to build blood. In the next 10 to 15 years, blood building will be the new frontier.

### **Conditioning Cycles**

Let's take a moment to discuss general conditioning in racing pigeons. For all practical purposes, pigeons achieve two types of condition. The first type revolves around a weekly cycle. This type of conditioning is almost always built around loft flying. The idea is to rest the pigeon at the beginning of the week and thereby give it time to reduce blood toxins and build oxygen levels in the blood stream. Later in the week, loft flying is increased to build blood oxygen. Pigeons that are brought into condition under this method can often stay in shape for six to eight weeks.

The second type of conditioning revolves around peak conditioning. Under this conditioning method, the pigeons are forced into a higher level of condition through road

training. Usually peak condition lasts two to three weeks and then the pigeons go sharply out of condition for a period of about six weeks. As many fanciers train hard going into the first week, it is common for several fanciers to get their lofts into condition for the first several weeks. When condition disappears, pigeons fall sharply on the race sheet and suffer through several dismal weeks. This fall is often accompanied by sickness picked up during shipping. This is in part because the immune system falls apart as condition comes to a halt. Generally, the incubation period for most sicknesses tends to be two to three weeks as well, so when things go bad, they go really bad! After fighting with all of this, the fancier sees the season as a loss and quits putting all the work into road training, and suddenly at about the time they decide to give up, here they come again. I call this deep cycle conditioning. If you push your pigeons to peak condition, you will also suffer through the lows.

### **Lactic Acid**

Let's get down to the bottom of this whole training thing. For all practical purposes training comes down to two words, "Lactic Acid," the byproduct of toxicity from spent fuel, spent oxygen, and, in the later stages, catabolized muscle. Lactic acid is the overall umbrella term for physical exhaustion. Blood oxygen and toxic waste are pieces that fit under this umbrella. Since we have already discussed blood oxygen, this is going to be something of a repeat (remember those subtle differences!), but at a higher level.

Let me explain two schools of thought here. Racing causes pigeons to produce lactic acid. The longer the race, the more lactic acid the pigeon produces. After the race, most pigeons are given some time off in an attempt to reduce lactic acid. Generally, it takes two to three days to bring lactic acid levels back to normal. If the fancier trains the pigeon before blood levels have returned to normal, lactic acid will increase rapidly. Those fanciers that are hard trainers have pigeons that never really get a chance to fully reduce their levels of lactic acid. Again, this is all a repeat of the blood oxygen argument with one difference. Lactic acid can really only be returned to zero (0), because it is only a "recuperation" process as described under oxygen level.

If increasing lactic acid levels is a problem, then why do many fanciers find success through heavy road training? The answer is really very simple. In the short term, pigeons and humans (the limits of my range of knowledge on the subject) build up some tolerance to lactic acid. Essentially, lactic acid is a poison that in low doses can be tolerated and eventually adapted to by the body. This allows the pigeon to constantly work through a higher level of lactic acid, and it also allows them to handle higher peaks of lactic acid. While these pigeons can be successful, I don't really consider this conditioning, since pigeons in this state show few signs of condition. In my opinion, they fall more into the category of "road hardened." Road hardening is something of a machine-like state where the pigeons become tougher than their environment. However, this is a short-term process and is very costly to the pigeon's health. Young birds that have been road hardened generally make poor old birds because they tend to have trouble ever reaching condition again.

When pigeons are in good condition, they can endure reduced oxygen levels and higher toxin levels within the blood stream; however, if the event forces a prolonged exertion, the pigeon's muscle starts to catabolize (it eats its own muscle in order to survive). Under these circumstances, the pigeon will take weeks instead of hours or days to recuperate. This is part of the reason that heavy road training works much better in the shorter races, since catabolization generally doesn't start to occur until six to eight hours on the wing.

If increased lactic acid levels become something of a constant, the body will adapt to some degree. As I mentioned earlier, having gone through this process myself, I can tell you that it makes you feel very tired. This is part of the reason why pigeons that are road trained heavily don't often fly well around the loft. When given the chance, they would prefer to rest.

Interestingly, even with little training, some of my best race teams have just decided they didn't want to fly around the loft any more at around the 400-mile race. I just let them out to sit on the landing board, and they went right on winning. They were in condition, and they felt they needed rest more than they needed exercise.

When a pigeon builds up a tolerance to lactic acid, there is a range much like the one described in the recuperation side of blood building. The fancier's problem is knowing how to determine when he is exceeding the range. The risk in promoting lactic acid buildup is that you will not know when you have reached a point of diminishing returns on the level of tolerance that you have built. When we choose this course of action for ourselves, we can feel the effects and we have a better idea of when to lay off. When we choose this course of action for our pigeons, it is impossible for us to judge where the point of diminishing returns will occur. If you cross the line, they either quit winning or they become road hardened.

Also, we are dealing with more than one pigeon; the level of diminishing returns is not the same on any pigeon. Some can handle more lactic acid than others, and some can handle slightly smaller amounts for a longer period of time.

We have discussed the effects of lactic acid on young birds. Older pigeons tend to go out of shape when lactic acid levels are exceeded. As they are older and more experienced, they just simply shut down and come home late. However, most old bird systems tend to minimize the effects of lactic acid. Pigeons that are flown under the natural system rarely go to the races every week. If they are trained more, it is offset by the fact that they race less often. Widowhood allows the pigeon to fly a race every week, but in this instance they are rarely trained.

Loft flying, on the other hand, is a very different approach to lactic acid. Obviously, pigeons are still going to be exposed to lactic acid during the race, but their levels of lactic acid are allowed to return to normal during the week through rest and loft flying. Rest and loft flying are self-healing processes. Under this method, fanciers deal with lactic acid by allowing it to spike and then deplete over the course of the week. In the

short races, these spikes are not as high. In the longer races, when oxygen and muscle are depleted, the pigeons are sent in two-week or even three-week cycles. The key is complete rest immediately after the race and loft flying thereafter.

A significant advantage to this system is that, because the pigeons are allowed to rest and fly around the loft, they will never overexert themselves. While this can sometimes hurt their performance against pigeons that are peaking in the short races, it can make them a more viable force for a number of consecutive weeks, and, at the same time, it can greatly increase the lengths of their careers.

Until Next Time!

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