

## Some Things to Think About

by

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Ideally, my goal is to write an article every couple of weeks and maybe a coherent article once a month. I am finding that there is a difference in writing for a magazine and writing for myself (it could be the font size). Magazines have deadlines, and sometimes when writing for myself, it is easy to let things slide for just one more day. Truth is, now that I have my own website, I am having trouble finding the time to write as regularly as I used to; however, I think that will change.

Actually, this makes it sound like I haven't been writing at all, but that is not quite the case. I have written close to 30 pages over the last three weeks, but those pages were written on situations that were occurring at the time, and the situation didn't pan out as expected. Where I used to have time to recover from a bad article with a better one in the same week, this just hasn't been the case for a while now. Instead, lately I tend to get mired down in attempting to fix an article that has gone astray simply because I don't always feel that I have time to start another one. However, this approach never works, and sooner or later, I end up rewriting the whole thing.

On top of all this, I have been carefully studying my own situation, and, frankly, this study has been taking a lot of my attention away from other things. Unfortunately, earlier in the year, when I should have been concentrating on my pigeons, I was running around trying to get my new website together. Now that I have pulled my head out of the clouds, I realize that I am at a transitional point within my own loft, and it might be a good thing for me to pay more attention to the pigeons for a while! So this is primarily where my time has gone for the last several weeks.

Pigeon racing is about one's ability to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Last weekend, I spent the entire weekend trying to talk my friend down from the top of a bridge that he was about to jump from. He lives in Southern California, and they had what appeared to be a smash on the very first race in old birds (a chance to adapt!). While it was still a two-day race for several thousand pigeons, it could have been a lot worse! The night after the race, my friend was inconsolable. For three years, he has been trying to learn the widowhood cock system, but each year there is some new obstacle. The first year, he couldn't fly because of the PMV quarantine. The second year, he got pox on the third race, and, now, this year the first race was a smash.

On the second race, his combine was a little gun-shy, and because the weather looked like it was going to be bad, they decided not to ship at all. Well, the next day, my friend

went 25 miles south of the race station and had a perfect toss, so the combine could have easily flown the race. Two bad decisions in a row, but that is pigeon racing.

I used to get upset by these bad decisions, but as I grow older, I realize that it is just part of the game and part of human nature. Obviously, fanciers that prepare for a race want to fly a race, so regardless of the situation, there is generally going to be a race.

In California, serious smashes don't occur frequently, and it is very easy to get complacent about putting all your pigeons into (one basket so to speak) an early race. When judgment day finally comes, most guys get caught flat-footed. A fancier that uses good judgment in the number of pigeons he ships to the races will eventually be rewarded for shipping frugally.

Adding to this situation is the number of fanciers that have far too many pigeons. In fact, they have so many pigeons that if they don't get them into the first several races or trainers, they may not get to use them for the rest of the season. In this particular race over in California, there were guys shipping as many as 125 pigeons (that would be just over four times my biggest old-bird team). This is all well and good, at least until the race goes badly.

While in this case, the second day turned out nicely and the losses were relatively minor, each and every pigeon that was out overnight learned a new trick: "Last time I was tired and worked to get home; this time I didn't make it home on the day, but it turned out OK anyway." The first time this happens, they might not like the experience, and they might try harder. The second time they might weigh the experience against the effort of pushing on, and they might decide that being out overnight is not all that bad. The mental leap from exhausting oneself to win to settling for being an hour late is not that difficult for any animal or human. It is always easiest to take the easiest way out, especially when the rewards appear the same.

Had this kind of smash happened on a more difficult course, the story might have been very different. For instance, where I live, smash means smash. They are not coming home today, tomorrow, or any other day, and that is why they need to associate survival with doing their best! To be successful, pigeons need to be motivated and rewarded for going forward, and they need to fear going backward. If I get home, my owner will... If I fail to make it home an owl will... It is critical that fear of the unknown remain worse than the reality.

In every year that I have ever flown, I have had a night flight. At first I used to stand out in the backyard and plead with the pigeons to come down, and the more I pleaded, the more they wanted to fly. Regardless of what I did, it always ended up in a night flight. However, at one point, I realized that after a night flight, I never had another one in the same season. Unlike a 600-mile race where they could pick the telephone pole that they planned to land on at dusk, pigeons in a night flight are basically forced to flutter down to the ground in the dark. This is an experience that they don't seem to care to repeat. After realizing this, I would call them a couple of times, and, if they didn't come down, I would

close the traps, go into the house, and let them figure it out. I really think that this experience carried with them right into the long-distance races in old birds, and it tends to give them that little extra incentive to keep going.

Excluding about three areas of the country, most areas simply cannot afford the economics of a disaster caused by a smash, especially when that disaster occurs in young birds. For years, old-bird racing was the more popular of the two series. However, within the last ten years, the sport has made a dramatic shift from old birds to young birds. I think this is because everyone believes that they have a chance to compete more equally in young birds, in part because young birds depend more on good systems than great pigeons, and in part because a fancier can pretty much guarantee that he will have a young bird team where that is not always the case come old birds.

From my point of view, these days most old-bird teams are made up from what is left over from young birds. With the emphasis on young birds and systems, many pigeons enter the old-bird season completely worn out, and, given how close the seasons are together, yearlings often have trouble making it past 300 miles.

These days, clubs are smaller and shipping is more expensive. When a club is making out its schedule, the membership that wants to fly the season usually asked to pay for the whole season up front. After a fancier has dropped out once or twice by the 300-mile race in old birds, he becomes gun-shy about bothering to enter the season with a questionable team, and this is how young-bird racing affects old-bird racing. Even if clubs are not financing their races in this manner, many fanciers still don't have the old-bird team necessary to compete on the long races.

From experience, I would say that where eight out of ten fanciers used to fly old birds, now only approximately five out of ten are willing to enter the old-bird season and because old-bird racing is so much more important to the sport, this is very unfortunate.

### **Problems in the Sport**

We have reached the point in this sport where every bump in the road results in a loss of more membership. In the early 1970s, several unrelated factors came together at one time to really hurt the sport. If you were flying back then, you probably remember the Newcastle outbreak of 1972 (since it was so long ago, I don't really remember if that was a national event or just the state of California), and the gas shortages of 1974.

I will never quite forget the gas shortages and every-other-day gas rationing. I remember one Sunday afternoon, Jim Cleary, Vern Gruber, and I went to an auction at the Compton clubhouse. On the way back, we were about two miles from the clubhouse when Jim realized that he was almost out of gas. Well, if you were around back then, Sunday afternoon was no time for your car to run dry! To compound things, we were in an industrial area, and it was pretty much completely deserted, in part because of the area, and, in part, because no one was out driving since you couldn't get gas on the weekend.

We didn't have cell phones in those days, and it was getting close to dark. Right as the car was starting to sputter, we spotted a gas station and a tanker truck that was delivering gas to the station. The station was closed, but, fortunately, the driver was very nice, and he gave us the gas that was left in the hose after the meter was shut off. (Today, I am sure he would get fired or refuse to help, and we would still be standing there). We actually got several gallons of gas out of the hose, which got us home.

Looking forward, within the very near future, I see three or four potential problems coming along that could have the same effect on the sport.

### **Bird Flu**

Obviously, as we learned several years ago, even though we vaccinate for PMV, we are not exempt from quarantines. This problem could pop up again at any time. The new bird flu that is currently hitting Asia will make it here regardless of what the Asians and anyone else do to try to prevent it. While our pigeons may not be the cause, when people start dying, fingers will be pointed, and those fingers will in part be pointed at us.

### **Zoning and Neighborhoods**

I would also expect zoning to be a big problem in the future, especially if the AU loses its case in Chicago. Even then, it is still going to be a growing problem. There are simply too many fanciers with far too many pigeons that are improperly housed and in close proximity to their neighbors. As a sport, we have never been good at dealing with these kinds of issues. For instance, in every club that I have ever belonged to, there has been a rule that said, "No shipping of sick pigeons." Yet, I have never seen the club refuse a pigeon. I have seen pox the size of golf balls, and, while there might have been some grumbling, the pigeon still went to the race! While we are all shocked by Chicago, I guarantee you that I could visit 20 lofts in the area and at least one would have 200 pigeons free lofting on the neighbor's roof. We are all concerned about our rights, but we need to use some common sense to protect the rights of our neighbors as well!

### **Gas and Shipping Costs**

Don't look now, but the cost of gas is rising, and it will continue to do so throughout the summer. In one of my articles that is currently in dry dock, I mentioned that the refineries were already experiencing explosions and fires. These fires happen every year, driving the price up. (I suspect it's on purpose.) I was talking with Ed Lorenz last night about the price of gas, and he said that oil was down yesterday. I said, "Well, when do you think we will see it at the pumps?" Well, (just in the nick of time) today, there was another refinery fire. It is all one big game that will continue until the price of gas is equal to what the rest of the world pays.

Also, in recent weeks the Post Office and the airlines have decided to battle it out, and now shipping pigeons around the country has become very difficult. While I don't think this last problem is going to last, it would have a significant impact on the economics of

the sport if it did. Without the money races, this sport would already have gone under. Ed told me the other night that, of his 20 or so close friends, only one or two still fly; the rest just ship pigeons to the money races around the country. As of today, I still cannot ship a pigeon to Florida.

### **Saving Our Sport**

Clearly, many of these things we can't control, and, in the long term, this is probably a dying sport, which is a shame because it is also a great sport. "Long term" could be 10 years, or it could be 30 years. However, in the end, when gas is four dollars a gallon, and there are just too few fanciers left to absorb the shipping costs, this sport will come to a competitive end.

Is there anything that we can do to help our sport? While I am not sure that we can change the outcome, I do think that we can greatly slow the process down by doing two simple things.

### **Make the Sport Friendly to New Fanciers**

First, we must dramatically reduce the shipping limits! This move will directly reduce the daily operational costs of the average fancier, and thereby make this sport more feasible for everyone, especially those that are new to the sport. There is some bizarre popular belief among the mob flying mentality that new members are so happy to be flying that they don't care if they have a chance to win against overwhelming numbers. The fact is that new fanciers of any age are far more likely to stick to the sport if they experience success during their formative period.

I had complete finished this article when I received this paragraph from a new fancier. I really think it illustrates my point:

*"Last YB was my very best racing year ever. If it hadn't been, I think I would have given up racing and only have kept a few pigeons around just to see them fly. Until last fall, I had only won one race and was always way down the sheet. If it wasn't for the 6 pigeons that two good fanciers gave me, I wouldn't be thinking about training my birds this year and would have gotten rid of most of them."*

Let me assure you that these are not unusual statements! I probably get emails like these two or three times a month, with the single difference being most fanciers can't go on to talk about the six successful pigeons that someone else has given them. In this case, I know that several of those pigeons came from my good-hearted friend Marvin Powell from Nebraska.

As you know, I spent a number of years doing Brazilian jujitsu, and in that sport the gap between the experienced and the inexperienced is so large, very few people can withstand the learning curve. Few new people are willing to take that kind of pounding three times a week and very few last more than 6 months. Most people simply don't like to wrestle

to exhaustion, be beat up physically, and lose night after night. It is a rare person that is willing to take that kind of abuse. In fact, I was just down watching my son a few minutes ago, and I saw the teacher passing a guy's guard and the guy caught a knee to the face which split his lip in three places. That or worse is what you are up against every night.

Since he started wrestling, we have seen almost 75 different people come and go from the school in the white belt division. During that period, many so-called tough guys have come and gone, and most didn't last three weeks. It does something to you mentally when you believe that you are tough, and then you are constantly humiliated by the entire class every night.

Pigeon racing is no different. Many times, new fanciers are working just as hard as the older fanciers; however, they just don't work as smart. If they get drubbed every time out, they eventually quit. I really don't see how hard this can be to understand, but for some it really seems to be!

In any sport, there is a learning period. In jujitsu, I have noticed that young guys take advice much better than older guys, but even then it is only for a little while. Once they reach the end of their formative period in the sport (about a year), they believe that they are too experienced to be asking questions, but at the same time they are not experienced enough to be successful, so generally they stay at the same level until they quit.

At our jujitsu school, I was part of the legendary period when every class was all-out war. We had an NCAA champion wrestler, and two Arizona State cage-fighting champions, and a Pan-American jujitsu champion, and a World Champion Pancration champion wrestler. While we worked on technique in practice, we worked far more on winning during the matches, and how we won didn't matter. There were about 20 of us, and anyone new didn't last long. If we learned anything, it wasn't because anyone else helped us with it. Every night, we come in and bent the rules in some fashion. Unfortunately for the school, we all went our separate ways at about the same time, and it was hard on the school. After we all left, the school started working much harder on technique and keeping the classes more under control (truthfully, my son wouldn't be down there at this age otherwise). This was much easier on the new guys, and more guys are making it farther than ever before.

The students of today know about those times, and they know who I am. If I point things out to them, the younger ones listen for a while, but as they gain experience, you can see in their eyes that they doubt that I could beat them, so they quit listening. I remember once a reporter was asking a professional basketball player something about the great Laker player Magic Johnson. The player said to the reporter, "Man, that is some old history you are talking about there." This was less than five years after he retired. Not that I was any Magic Johnson to the sport of jujitsu, but I sort of know how he feels.

Pigeon fanciers quickly quit listening as well. Generally, to withstand the pain of losing, they find their own little peer groups that are made of fanciers that have similar skills,

and from that point on, they rarely improve. It sort of reminds me of the dating games in the bars around college. Freshmen guys always went out together in little herds. They didn't want to crash and burn in front of their friends while asking a girl to dance, so they would all just sit there. However, since the urge to find a mate is generally pretty strong in most guys, eventually they learned to adapt and by their junior year, they are going it alone. This way, if they fail, it isn't in front of their friends. Somehow failure is easier that way!

Given that pigeon flying is fraught with failure, and it is kind of hard to fail without anyone noticing, most fanciers tend to band together with those that are at their level. What is interesting is that most successful fanciers are loners. This is because they know that success does not come in herds. Their motto is, "If I tell you, then we both will know!" Bad fanciers share everything that they hear like it is their own, and good fanciers share very little because it is their own.

If the shipping limits were 15 pigeons, the average fancier would have a great deal of trouble using a team of more than 45 pigeons to maximum efficiency. Most fanciers would not keep all of the extra pigeons if they knew that they were just going to sit around. In the process, the cost of general care would be reduced, and there would be far fewer health issues since lofts would be less crowded. Fewer pigeons would also translate to fewer neighborhood complaints.

Let me also go out on a limb here to say that a reduction in numbers would improve the quality of the races because fancier would send there very best instead of everything they own. As I have said many times before, when the limits are open, there are still fewer than 100 pigeons in any race that have a chance to win; the rest are fluff.

### **Combined Racing Seasons**

Second improvement that I think we could make is that we could combine the young-bird and old-bird seasons into one big old-bird season like they are currently doing in some parts of Australia. They simply have an overall category that includes old birds and yearlings and a separate category for yearlings only. Under this scenario young birds (yearlings) would help pay for the old-bird races, and young-bird losses would not affect the old-bird races as they do now. Pigeons could mature, and in so doing, they would be far less likely to get lost or have major illnesses.

These days, pigeon racing is being dominated by young-bird racing systems. These systems allow more pigeons to be ready for any race, and it is not uncommon for a fancier to get 10 to 20 on the drop. The fancier runs around with his chest puffed out, but these systems are allowing pigeons to win that shouldn't. Fanciers cannot control themselves, and, because so many of their pigeons are capable of racing each week, they fly them too often. When they finally run into a bad race, there are heavy losses because the birds are tired and the fancier is risking too many pigeons. In turn, these young have a dramatic affect on the old-bird races because fanciers don't have the pigeons left to fly

old birds. Because it is very difficult to prove out a pigeon completely in less than three years, it is very important that we find a way for old-bird racing to regain its prominence.

I really think that these two ideas would make a world of difference in keeping this sport alive.

Until next time!

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