

Practical Line Breeding

Part I

By

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I don't know what this introduction has to do with anything, but it involves two true occurrences that I think are funny and as I am the one typing..... If you simply can't stand my introductions, sense of humor, or both, you can skip below to the "Line Breeding" section.

One time years ago, I was on the verge of switching clubs. However, since the change hadn't yet occurred, I decided to go to the first meeting of the year in the old club. I was making suggestions, but because I knew I might be leaving, I wasn't voting. After a while, the discussion got heated and one of the fanciers asked, "How come you are not voting?" I explained the situation and of course now things got even more heated. Finally, I said, "Look, let's be reasonable. I am just making suggestions; you are the ones voting on them." At this point, one of the guys jumps up and says, "First you want us to do this and then you want us to do that and now you want us to be reasonable!???" It got real quiet in the club, and everyone just stared at him. I was actually sort of impressed that he was able to find a line that even they were unwilling to cross. I was also impressed that we had found yet another level that we could all sink to.

I came home and told my wife about what had happened (mistake). Looking at me in a bland sort of way as though I might just be bothering her with another trivial pigeon story, she said in something of a condescending voice, "Dear, you thought that was a rhetorical question. Knowing several of your little pigeon friends, my guess is that he was really asking you if you thought any of them were actually smart enough to be reasonable. (I was still back trying to remember what rhetorical meant.) Later, while standing out in the pigeon loft, I started wondering if she was including me in that group. I marched right back in the house and just asked her right out if she was including me. Same look, same tone, she answered, "No dear, I already knew about you."

This is of course one reason why I own a pigeon loft in the first place. I need someplace to go just to sort out all my wife's comments, and I like to have equivalent company (the pigeons) while I am doing it. I stare at the birds and they stare at me and all is well in the world.

Have I mentioned that my wife doesn't think too much of pigeon fanciers in general? Maybe I have already, but here is another example. A fancier came over this weekend to have me photograph his pigeons' eyes. However, by the time he got to my house, it was raining so we decided to go to my loft and look at some birds. My house has a narrow driveway that broadens out at the top. When he parked, he did so right at the bottleneck.

My wife had scheduled one of the dogs (the stupid one) to go to the vet (something that puts her in a particularly foul mood many days in advance), and I was supposed to help her get the dog in the truck. I would take the dog myself, but the last time I took one of the dogs to the vet, he sawed off part of the dog, and I had to lay awake for many nights in case my wife decided to retaliate. Anyway, I heard the door open and saw the dog go in the house, so I knew that a tough situation was developing.

Here I was standing in the backyard with a sub-life form (pigeon fancier), and she had something for me to do. I decided that I would see if she wanted the job done so much that she would risk talking to a pigeon fancier. That was when I heard the breaking of wood and the scratching of metal coming from the front yard. I didn't say anything to the guy. Why worry him when all of his breeders are sitting in the back of the truck, and my wife has just loaded a wet, stupid, 60-pound dog into the back of a 4x4 truck.

Have I ever mentioned that I have gotten lazier as I have gotten older? Well, anyway, I have. There is this dead tree that is right at the bottleneck of the driveway. I have been looking for the right day to take it down; however, one should never approach work of this nature without a great deal of consideration. Now granted, this tree is only about five inches around at the base and about 14 feet high, but if it fell on you just right it could possibly do some damage. True -- you would have to stick your leg out and have it hit you right in the knee cap or something of that nature, but it is always perfectly possible to get hurt on the right day under the right circumstances.

Anyway, I didn't hear any more, so we just kept looking at pigeons. When we were finished, we walked around front. When we turned the corner, you should have seen the look on his face. There were big smear marks in the dirt where she had cranked my tires. The dead tree now only has branches on one side, and the rest were either hanging or they were all over the ground. I swear she got a six-foot-wide truck through a four-foot space. The fancier was so shocked that he walked all the way around the truck twice before he would get in. He seemed a little shook up and just drove off without saying much.

When my wife got home, my eleven-year-old son came flying out of the house saying, "Man, I wouldn't go in there for awhile. I don't know if you have been out front yet, but Mom just slammed through that old dead tree. I tried to put my head out the window to help guide her, but I got slapped in the face by a branch. When we got to the vet, the dog got away and we had to chase him. Then he got scared and peed all over himself. Then she had to lift him back into the truck. Oh, and by the way, you are not high on her list right now unless dumb-ass is a good thing." That is another reason why I own a pigeon loft. By the way, in a couple of weeks, when she takes the second dog to the vet, the whole tree thing might just take care of itself and my patience in that regard will have been rewarded.

Line breeding

It is my opinion that line breeding is by far the best breeding system. Like any system it has its flaws, but properly managed it has enormous potential. The problem with writing

about line breeding is that it is complicated and good examples are hard to come by. As I know my situation, it probably makes sense that I use my program as an example. However, I don't want anyone to believe that I am doing so as an attempt to promote my pigeons. In fact, I go out of the way to keep my articles as instructional as possible (see stories above for proof).

What is line breeding really about? Line breeding is a balancing act that is built around the past, present, future, out-crossing and backcrossing. For line breeding to work correctly, it is extremely important not to get too hung up on any one of these topics. Interesting mistakes seem to correlate with the age of the fancier. Younger fanciers believe that they are creating the future and they tend to forget the past. Older fanciers tend to want to remember the great ones and the good old days and they tend to hang on to too many of the older ones much longer than they should. Younger fanciers tend to cross too much and older fancier not enough. I guess it is just the way we are wired.

One of my favorite words is "balance." It applies to almost everything we do. When I used to do jujitsu, I had great balance or at least I thought I did until the first time I wrestled a two-time NCAA wrestling champion. When related to pigeons, balance applies to many aspects of the sport. When we apply balance to line breeding, we are discussing how much of the past and present should be kept on hand and how often and how many we should be crossing in at any one time.

Besides balance, two other words come to mind when discussing line breeding: options and advantage. To take advantage of something you have to anticipate it in advance. Decisions have to be made too quickly to just rely on reactions. I was watching my son at jujitsu the other night. He is 13 years old, 5'10" and 190 pounds. He wrestles in the adult division. At first he was slow and didn't know how to do the right things. I would try to tell him, but you can guess how that went. I used to stay and watch him, but I finally got the idea, so I started to just drop him off and pick him up. The other day, I just stopped in to watch him for a minute. I was very surprised to see his development. He beat four out of five 20- to 25-year-old adults and tied with the other. They used to go easy on him, but not anymore. He didn't have to stop and think after each move. If he got into trouble, he got himself out of the trouble. When you get to that point there is no such thing as trouble, you start to leave yourself "options" and then take "advantage" of the best ones as they present themselves.

Line breeding is about creating options and then taking advantage of the right ones. "I should have done" means that it is too late. In my 18 breeding pairs, every one of them is there for a reason. Some are promoting the past, some are creating new lines, some are out-crossing, some are backcrossing, some are building to the future, some are paired to win, some are paired to produce breeding hens, some are paired to produce breeding cocks, and so on. The hardest thing for most fanciers to do is to think ahead and create options. I have already explained the planning that goes into pairing my pigeons; maybe over the next several articles it will begin to make sense.

No system is perfect, and line breeding has two potential disadvantages. The first is the potential of genetic depression. Unlike genetic depression caused by inbreeding, this disadvantage is very slow to formulate but is still there nonetheless. Over the years, I have visited many good fanciers with line bred families. Generally these lofts have had more than their share of success and because of this success the fanciers have become committed to their pigeons. One plays on the other and this commitment pays off for both. However, after a period of time, an almost imperceptible change starts to occur. Without their noticing it, their pigeons are placing instead of winning. Other fanciers will tell them that their family is behind the times, but that really is not the answer. They will train harder or medicate more, but this is not the answer either.

So what is the answer? Inbreeding is about moving rapidly toward and then away from genetic depression. Line breeding is about avoiding genetic depression over the course of time. Depending on the size of the genetic base of the family, avoiding genetic depression isn't as easy as it seems. When inbreeding, it is generally easy to see the signs of genetic depression. In line breeding it is more difficult. Because these families are often older, in many cases it is very difficult to find like or new blood to add to the family. It is also difficult to find pigeons that fit the family. Most would rather stick their heads in the sand than admit defeat. After all, loyalty is what paid off in the first place. This is then a question of balance. Eventually, every family will need new blood. The longer you wait, the bigger the problem will become. I am currently starting the sixth year of my line breeding program. I am now very happy with my position, so last year I introduced an out-crossing program and this year I am introducing a backcrossing program.

My out-crossing program is currently based on the Lorenz cock. His dad was a super winner and grandson to the great 019 line of Janssen's and the mother was from Ed Lorenz's foundation Horman hen. The second this pigeon hit my hand, I thought Hofkens. He was so close in type that he couldn't miss. I mated him to a daughter of the super pair and got an outstanding cock with better distance.

The Lorenz cock is an older pigeon, so this year I mated him with a hen that is almost identical. In one of my older articles, I mention that my #2 cock bred two flawed youngsters, so I broke up the pair and remated him. In the article, I mentioned that the two youngsters from the second mating were going to rank very high in the stock loft. The hen from the pair is now the mate to the Lorenz cock.

Anyway, they are almost identical. So why did I do this? When I bought him, I considered him a two year investment. As his dad was dominant at 200 miles, I would say that the Lorenz cock didn't fall too far from the tree. That is a little short for me, so last year, I took a chance at producing youngsters that could fly something closer to 300 miles. Remember, I took this chance because I knew that the Horman hen had produced many winners from 100 to 600 miles. Even though the Lorenz cock doesn't show distance himself, I knew that it was in his genetic makeup. By mating the Lorenz cock to a 400 mile hen out of the super pair, I knew I had a very good chance to bring out the

distance he had inherited from his mother. Matings that move pigeons up in distance generally are not high percentage matings, so this was something of a risk.

Just to show you that not everything goes as planned, the first round only had one egg hatch. It was a hen (that I should have kept), and I sent her to a money race over in California. The second round turned out to be two cocks. This was something of a disaster because I wanted a hen to backcross into the family. Since I bought the Lorenz mid-breeding season, I was only able to produce these two rounds.

The Lorenz cock is nine years old and this could be his last year, so I wanted to be extremely careful that I selected a hen that would give me the best chance to reproduce the cock but also place me in the position to backcross. By the way, about three months ago, I had a very good fancier tell me that she should be culled. Back then few would have seen what I saw in this pigeon. In fact, at the time, I told this fancier that while I wasn't that excited about her looks either, I had seen many pigeons exactly like this go on to become foundation hens. We will see.

Anyway, the point is that it has become very difficult to find pigeons that I want to mix into my family, and I was very fortunate to find a pigeon that fit in so well. However, I really need him to produce some big time hens for backcrossing.

Let's take a moment to discuss sameness. In line breeding, sameness can mean two different things. The first meaning is nearly identical body types throughout the pigeons. I tend to follow this concept.

The second meaning is consistently different. Some fanciers will tell you that the pigeons have to be all over the map. This is not as uncontrolled as it may sound. Some families are consistent because they are consistently varied. This is another type of sameness. Most of the time, the range in size is in the cocks. In these families, big cocks don't generally produce big hens.

Under my line breeding program, sameness means nearly identical. This is part of the reason that I religiously practice something I call "range breeding." The idea is that I want the pigeons to be similar enough to fit together, but at the same time, I want to insure that they are different enough to handle different conditions and speeds. I can either range breed to a pigeon or to a specific trait. Generally I range breed to a specific trait.

A significant advantage of line breeding is that through sameness, more pairing options become available. Since they are all the same, one pigeon can be mated to any other pigeon. This becomes critical for a lot of reasons. The more viable options you have to work with the better the chance of success within the breeding loft.

In my mind, the single biggest advantage to line breeding is the predictability of the pairings. It is this predictability that allows you to have the confidence to assign pairs

specific tasks. The better you can predict, the more specific the breeding program can become.

The fastest and best way to improve breeding percentages is through line breeding. I have mentioned that the average loft produces 5/100. It is not uncommon for a line-bred family to produce 20 to 30/100. Think of what you could do with 30 dependable pigeons on a race team. These are the guys that consistently place 7 to 8 pigeons on the front page.

Several articles back, I discussed the return of the yellow-eyed Merckx cock. I refer to him as one of the originals. He is a grandson to the Klienens Merckx and has been very successful. You may also remember that in an earlier article, I explained the difference between parallel and series breeding. Parallel breeding relies on multi-line breeding. Series breeding relies on multi-generation breeding. Parallel breeding is probably a little safer, but it also requires more pairs. As I have also mentioned, I breed in series so that I can keep fewer pigeons.

In general, I have four lines: Topman, Merckx, De Welches, and Bird of Paradise (BOP). I have had very good luck with the Merckx/BOP pigeons. I also have had very good luck with the De Welches/Topman pigeons. Finally, I have had very good luck with the Merckx/BOP mated to the De Welches/Topman.

Currently, I am very pleased with the Hollywood hen. Although I didn't like the mating last year, she still managed to produce two very high finishes in big competition; given the mating, I was extremely impressed. It could have been the cock or the hen or maybe even both; however, it was my opinion that it was the Hollywood hen, so the cock is now gone. Again as I mentioned in an earlier article, I have elevated her considerably in the standings.

Now let's bring the three concepts together. First, since I have had the Merckx cock before, he is well represented clear to the great-great-great-grandson level. He is now present in all four existing lines and is a big part of the series program. As he is getting older, I could use him to reinforce an existing line, or I could mate him to the Hollywood hen and start a completely new line. As I am now sailing off in a very consistent direction, I am adding to the base bloodlines wherever possible. Like the example with the Lorenz cock, this is another move toward preservation. One is directly within the family and the other is the preservation of an out-cross through a possible backcross.

A third preservation move involves the Las Vegas cock and the Colorado hen. They are pigeons that I would very much like to add into the family through an out-cross/backcross situation. However, the LV cock is also getting older (1998), so I want to produce several of these unrelated pigeons. Here, I am primarily looking for hens. The best hen will be mated back to the LV cock for inbreds to use as hybrids against the Hofkens. I want another hen to out-cross/backcross against the Hofkens. Here again, the goal is to

stabilize, preserve, and risk, in that order. I do this by breeding enough from the pair, out-cross/backcross and inbred/hybrid.

The fourth type of preservation move occurs within the family. Several years back, I bred an outstanding Topman cock. He was going to be the cornerstone for the short distance family. He may yet be. However, for some unknown reason, he would walk off his eggs after a day or two. I tried him with two hens over two years, and nothing. Finally at the end of the second year, he bred one youngster that wasn't right. I almost got rid of him, but he was the only cock in the Topman line and to do so would mean losing the entire line.

One of my top three hens is a double half sister to this Topman cock. Here is a case where risk comes before preservation. This was one of the toughest decisions I ever had to make. This pairing could be critical to the future of the loft, but losing the production of a top hen could also be critical to the loft. What made the decision especially tough was that I needed to fold her into the Merckx line. A loss would be a loss all the way around. I had no idea what he would do, so I went with his last performance which was to produce a youngster. It was a very big move. Now I have a son that is right at the top of the loft and a daughter that is in the top ten. This move preserved an original base bird and the line. If the cock quits tomorrow, I have what I need.

Line breeding is an extremely flexible breeding method. The idea is to create options and then take advantage of what you have created. Balance is critical to the line breeding program. Remember past, present, future, and crossing. These are the keys to line breeding. Again, we have discussed parallel (many lines) and series (many generations) breeding. Finally, we finished up with several different methods of preservation. This is a big subject and it may take several articles to fully cover.

Until next time!

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