

Line Breeding Continues

By

Bill "The Book" Richardson

(My articles are not for republication without my written consent.)

I just got back from a visit to the breeding loft. I really don't like this time of year because the pairs are down on their first set of babies, and I can only look at the hens since I can only get out there about mid-day. At this point, there are no babies that are old enough to look at, so this is a very tough time of year for me.

Every Saturday or Sunday, I give all of my pigeons a bath. It is sort of a pain because with 18 individual sections, my sons and I form a bucket brigade. One fills the buckets; one carries them across the yard; and I pour them into the individual bath pans. As my pigeons like to have their bath promptly at about 10:30 a.m., this means I have to get my teenage son up early to help. After the bath is finished, I like to go in and handle the ones I can. However, this is a far cry from the rest of the year when, on the weekend, I can handle each of them four or five times a day.

On this particular afternoon, I went to the loft looking for ideas on how to continue with the line breeding articles. In a way, it was sort of inspirational writing it, or at least I didn't want to quit the sport when I got done (for me that is inspirational). Almost every one of my 18 individual sections has a story related to it. I would tell you each individual story, but after the last article, I caught my editor dousing herself with gasoline and looking for a book of matches, so today I will stick to one story.

I thought I would start out by writing about the Super Merckx cock. It is sort of a funny story really, because I have always liked him the best of all the cocks. He is more powerful than the cock from the Super Pair, and he has an awful lot going for him. The truth is that while his sisters have bred like crazy, he has done exactly nothing in two years of breeding.

In my lofts, very few if any ever make it two years without breeding something. However, in his defense, he is a little different pigeon than most of my cocks. He is unique because he is a throwback. By this I mean that he is not genetically consistent with my current pigeons. I have seen pictures of the older Hofkens, and the one he reminds me of is the Old Pol. Next to the Super Cock, his father is my next best breeder. His grandfather is the Yellow Eyed Merckx that I discussed in the last article. He is really not much like either of them, but I did select him right out of the nest as the best pigeon that year -- yet still nothing. However, today, looking at his six-day-old babies, I would say that his luck is about to change. It takes extreme confidence, extreme stupidity, or possibly both to brag about a three-year-old pigeon that has bred nothing. However, it takes nothing to brag about a pigeon that has already been successful.

I have never had to give up on a pigeon that I liked this well, but I have never had a pigeon that I have liked this well that didn't breed, either. For me, two seasons is a really long time. Since he is a throwback, he is extremely important to the family because such pigeons are rare. Several articles ago, I mentioned a pigeon that I selected some years back from a very good fancier. Since he was quitting, I could have picked any pigeon in the loft, and many had great breeding and flying records. I chose a young hen that had never flown or bred a thing. I chose her because I knew she was a throwback. She ended up breeding way out of turn. If you know what you are looking for, throwbacks are easy to identify within your own family, but because they are relative to the population, they are more difficult to identify within someone else's loft.

I have been thinking about Nature for a number of years now. In itself it is an amazing large-scale line breeding program. Nature is filled with checks and balances that are designed to very gradually promote success. Nature doesn't go wrong; fanciers do. Most of the time fanciers fail because they believe they are better than Nature, and in the short term, they may be. Being better than Nature is tantamount to being better than average. However, in the long term, staying better than Nature is impossible.

If you can promote Nature's strengths; line breeding is a very natural system. I mentioned above that Nature is really a giant line breeding program. I am serious. Line breeding is about the population within. We do it at the loft level; Nature does it on a global level. Nature is the database that keeps track of our every move.

The other day, I received an email from Mauricio Jemal. This email was enjoyable because I have had significant success with his pigeons, and, in fact, the LV cock that I mentioned in my last article is down from his family. I bought this cock because he was so similar to the ones I had success with already. In my emailed answer, the conversation got around to a friend of his named Marty Merrit. Marty had built a family around a pigeon called the Sweet 16, which was a Jemal. I understand he was quite proud of this family! Unfortunately, Marty passed away awhile back, and I have been told that much of this family was just given away to whoever would take them. What was, is no more.

If we could put breeding results onto a positive/negative scale much like a thermometer, Nature is zero or the statistical average of the entire population. A great fancier will move up on the scale and a poor fancier will move down, but in the end they will always regain the statistical average. In the example of Marty's family of pigeons, once the family broke up, all his forward progress fell back to zero on the thermometer. Although we like to think differently, the actual statistical average of the population has moved very little if at all in the last 100 years. In our lifetime, pigeons will not get much better or worse. It takes long-term evolution (maybe thousands of years) to shift the statistical average.

In any given loft, it is almost impossible to move above zero on Nature's scale for any period of time. A single loft can certainly make this happen for the lifetime of a single fancier. It is certainly possible that one great fancier can pass on his family to another

great fancier, but the laws of averages suggests that such a chain will soon be broken and the family will return to zero. For every one fancier that is high on the scale there is an equal opposite.

There are many more factors that affect the population as well. Every time we artificially help a pigeon win (by medications, darkening systems, widowhood, etc.), it has a negative ripple effect on the population. At the same time, for every winner that shouldn't have won, there is a pigeon in the race that should have won. If racing translates to the breeding loft, then the false winner may be a disappointment, and if the true winner should get into the breeding loft, then he may be a surprise.

Right now medications are having an unnatural effect on the sport, but one day when medications fail to work any longer, there will be an unprecedented outbreak of disease, and those that meet Nature's standard will survive and those that don't will not. Through medication, pigeons have survived that shouldn't have. Trust me when I say that Nature is keeping track of every one of those pigeons and their day is coming. This is why it is statistically improbable that the population will move away from zero or that the population will change so much that the statistical average will cause a shift in where zero currently is. It is like playing roulette. A fancier can be lucky for a night or a week, but sooner or later the odds will catch up with him.

Let me give you another example using average speed. In a 100-member combine, being in the top ten of average speed is very good. However, over the course of ten years, how many of these same people will be in the top ten every year? Even in this simple situation, fanciers are always being pulled back to zero because during this period of time, it is very unlikely that even one individual will be there every year. Therefore, success is a revolving door and very, very few can cheat Nature for an entire lifetime.

No disrespect to anyone, but the harder you push against Nature, the faster you will fail. In reality, much of what I have written in the past has been centered on this single concept. I work very hard to stay within Nature's rules and Nature's bounds.

I happen to believe very strongly in four things. First, line breeding is critical to long-term success. Second, the breeding loft comes before the flying loft. Third, the strength of the loft is in the hands of the fancier. (Initially, server selection is everything.) And finally, you can't cheat Nature for long.

In my recent email exchange with Mauricio Jemal, he stressed that he bred 300 youngsters a year looking for 3/100. I know in my first several years, I probably held to those percentages myself. As I have stated before, line breeding is a great system, but it isn't going to be any more successful than any other system if you are working with junk.

Let me make one more point here. As I have said before, line breeding is about the past, present, future, out crossing, backcrossing, and (today's topic) Nature. Last time, we talked a little about how to preserve the past. This time, I want to add to this by

mentioning two unique situations, the throwback and the futuristic pigeon. I am very lucky to have one of each type in my current Hofkens family.

Have you ever seen how the NBA lottery works? Truthfully, I can't remember how many teams are involved, but my son says that the 16 teams with the worst records enter the draft lottery. The sixteenth team gets one ball with the team logo. The fifteenth team gets two balls and the fourteenth gets three balls and so on. They put all of the balls into a container and give it a spin and then draw out a ball to see who is going to get the first draft pick. Obviously, the more balls entered the better the chances of that team winning.

Genetics sort of works the same way. Let's say we have a youngster. Just like the balls in the NBA draft, his parents are the most represented within his genetic pool. His grandparents will be next and so on. In the NBA draft, the sixteenth best team has only one chance, but it is still statistically possible that they will get the first draft pick. In pigeons, while it is unlikely that the pigeon will take after the great-great-great-grandfather, he still has a ball in the lottery, and, although the chances are remote, it is possible that he will reappear genetically, to some or a large degree.

Most fanciers fail to recognize the throwback because, unless they have had the family for a number of generations, it is unlikely that they will recognize it as a throwback. They will not have the knowledge to make that comparison. In the case of the Super Merckx, I knew he was a throwback because of his physical traits, but I didn't know to what. However, a few months later, I saw a picture of the Old Pol, who looked just like the Super Merckx. However, if the Super Merckx is going to be that good, he had better get going.

Throwbacks are a huge opportunity to get back to the past. I think a lot of us like to pride ourselves with our advances forward; however, as I have explained, Nature is monitoring our every move. Earlier in this article, I was explaining Nature's kind of "ashes to ashes and dust to dust" approach. Those that move away from zero will eventually be moved back again. Genetics tends to work this way as well. We can trick Nature through genetics, but not indefinitely.

I have always said that the great ones rarely reproduce themselves. This would be an example of genetics being controlled by Nature. When you consider the superstar, genetics, and Nature together, you may start to better understand the "Diamond Theory" that I laid out in an earlier article.

Let's take a pigeon like the "019." I am not selecting him for any particular reason other than he was a great pigeon. Yet we are still talking about him, not the son or the grandson, yet his success was close to 30 years ago. Sure, some of his offspring have produced well, but if Nature is a zero and he was a two, then are we back to a one with his offspring? I have the Lorenz cock, and he is a great-great-grandson to the "019." He is a great pigeon with a fantastic pedigree and all of the line breeding one could every ask for, but if we were moving forward at the rate we think we should be, then all pigeons from this line would be unstoppable today. The father to the Lorenz cock was a super

winner, but he didn't win any 17 races or whatever it was that the "019" won. I guess I think of it in terms of bicycle racing. You see those riders that break away from the pack, but if the pack wants to reel them in, it will. You can run as fast as you like, but Nature is coming. For every family in "Diamond" mode, there are ten that are in survival mode, which is the equivalent of zero on Nature's scale.

In my personal opinion, to the extent of your skill level, you can move away from zero, and then to the extent of your skill level, you can run parallel to Nature at that level. However, most fanciers will run parallel to Nature for a while, but they will be pulled back to zero at least once in their lifetime, as if Nature has a type of gravity at work. The vast, vast majority of fanciers will never leave zero in the first place.

Generally, a throwback is compared to a special pigeon from the past. "He reminds me of the 019," not "He reminds me of the great grandson of the 019." If the throwback isn't good enough to regain lost prominence within the family, then it only resembles the exceptional ancestor superficially. Looks are not the key, but they may be an indicator. A few white flights in the right places mean nothing. It has to be more than that. In the case of the Super Merckx, it is his bone structure that gives him away. In a family that is becoming constantly more refined, his bone structure is both raw and heavy. This is not the process of today; it is the process of yesterday; by itself, it is enough to suggest 20 years difference. I have learned that when Nature bothers to throwback this far, it is always for a reason. This is the equivalent of being the 16th worst team in the NBA lottery and drawing the first pick.

Let's discuss the futuristic pigeon for a moment. The futuristic pigeon is where the fancier wants his family to go. As I said, I have a futuristic pigeon in the Super Cock. What makes him different is the jump up to a different level within the family's framework, or even the beginning of a significantly different genetic direction. We have to be careful here that we are not dealing with a throwback. Here is the difference. If the family is moving in a direction and there is a sudden jump in a trait or quality that cannot be explained by any known pigeon within the family, but that pigeon is still on the line of forward movement for the general population within the family, then we are dealing with a futuristic pigeon.

However, in a linear family (a family moving in a specific direction) with the traits becoming more refined, if there is a sudden movement toward a raw, more robust pigeon with potentially higher vigor than those around it, this is a throwback. As I have mentioned, the first one was a hen and the second one was a cock. I have identified only four throwback pigeons; however, they are out there, you just have to be familiar enough with the family to identify them.

When I know that I am not dealing with a throwback, but have a futuristic pigeon because of the sudden unexplainable jump or movement, it is very likely that I am also entering a "Diamond."

In an effort to explain the futuristic pigeon in a different way, let's look at the family population from the past. Within these pigeons we can calculate an average, which for this example we will place at 5. We can then do the same with the current pigeons by first giving a value to every pigeon. For this example let's give three current pigeons values of 4, 6 and 11, and an overall average of 7. Since there have been many more pigeons in the past than there are in the present, when we average the past against the present, the past is going to heavily outweigh the present. The overall average between past and present might move to 5.1, yet you still have a pigeon in the present that is an unexplainable 11. This is the futuristic pigeon.

Within a line breeding program, the futuristic pigeon can pose three interesting dilemmas. The pigeon can be too different from the current family; the pigeon can be used to move the family too rapidly away from the family average; or it can be used to bring up the average of the past. For instance, the Super Cock is right at the edge of what I can presently handle. By this, I mean that he is a shift in body type that I can just barely cover. Had he been just a little farther removed from the family, I might not have been able to cover him within the family.

When I first purchased the Hofkens, I had to establish the core and then determine how far I could move away from that core in all directions. I sold off some very good pigeons that could have made up a different core in a different set of pigeons in a different loft, but in my loft they didn't have the base support and the gap between them and the core was just too big. The parameters for the core that I kept were the yellow-eyed Merckx, the Topman hen, De Welches, and the BOP hen. The BOP could go with the Merckx and De Welches could go with Topman. Getting where I wanted to go took blending of body types. These four bloodlines formed something of a box, and I am still currently working within that box. The Super Cock is the only current pigeon at the edge of that box.

Let's look at this Box Concept for a minute. Think of a regular box. When you start your line-bred family, the average for the population should be in the middle of the box. Every pigeon you use should be within range of the center (from our example, if 5 is the center, every pigeon should fall in a range from 4 to 6). If you are happy with what you have, then you should continue to work around the center. If you are not happy, then you should work on moving the average in the direction you want to go. However, as you do so, you will also have to move the box as well, and some pairs will then fall outside of the box and be left behind.

Let's say that I had a hen that was a 10 and a cock that was an 11 in a family with a statistical average of 5. The fancier likes these pigeons because they represent the direction he would eventually like to go. However, these two pigeons are very different from the rest of the family, so he decides to mate them together. In turn, they produce 13s. Where the 11s were at the edge of the box, the 13s are clearly outside of the box. Unfortunately, the 13s turn out to be winners, and for the next three years, the fancier wins out of turn with pigeons from this pair. As these pigeons have out-raced the average population for the family, the fancier wants to work them into the family, but the family is still back at 5. The jump from a 5 to 13 is too great, and as only the original pair stands

between his 13s and his 5s, he has no real breeding support for his pigeons. I hope you can see the problem.

Think of it like the stock market. (My editor is going to love this since she hates the stock market). When the price of a stock goes up, investors continue to buy in at each price level. If the price goes up more slowly, more investors buy in at each level. If the price goes up too quickly, fewer investors get the chance to buy in at each level. If a stock that rose too quickly takes a sudden turn and starts heading down, there is no strong support level, and it is likely to free fall. When you build out into the 13s with a family of 5s and you have nothing in between, there is no support for the 13s -- this is working outside of the box.

Where many fanciers make a big mistake is that they move too quickly (stock market example) and leave bloodlines behind instead of pigeons. For instance, in the last article I was talking about the Topman cock that wouldn't breed. As he was the only cock from the Topman line, what if in that time I had been moving more toward the Merckx and away from him? I would never have had the chance to work with him. The box would have shifted and while he was messing around, he could have been left behind. However, if he had been left behind, I would have lost that bloodline. Again, we want to place a point in the middle of the box. If we need to shift within that box, we work toward shifting the average, not the individual pigeon, and then we shift the box and get rid of what is outside of the box.

Remember when I was mentioning the children off the Super Pair? As I have explained, within my family, the Super Cock is a futuristic pigeon. Because he is such an outstanding breeder, he will probably eventually shift the average and then the box. Using these meaningless numbers to illustrate the point, let's say he is an 11; I have a hen that is a 9. They belong together, but I know they will produce outside of the box. The hen is getting older, and I know that as well. However, the Super Cock also happens to work well with a pigeon that is within my family and is a 6. This is the hen that forms the Super Pair. If you remember, this pair has produced so well that I could easily have 13 offspring in the breeding loft today. However, while I may want to move in the direction of the Super Cock, I want to be sure of two things. First, I want to be sure that when I am moving toward him, I don't leave other bloodlines behind, and second, I don't want to swamp the breeding loft with too many of his offspring. This is another example that shows that while I am not afraid to move forward, I want to bring along the past. If I can't move the average of the population fast enough, and I am concerned about the older hen, I will take a couple of rounds from them and hold them while I am realigning the family. Once I am there, she will still be represented through the children. (This is sort of what I am currently doing with the Lorenz cock as we discussed in the last article.)

Since last year, I have been thinking about the Super Merckx and the Super Cock. In placing the Hofkens on a time line, I can look at the Super Merckx and see where the family has been in the past and then I can look at the Super Cock and see where it will soon go. These Hofkens have been significantly influenced by four fanciers, so they have not always moved in the same pattern of progression. In politics, this is referred to as

“muddling through.” Democrats muddle one way and Republicans muddle another. This is how we stay in the middle. In pigeons this is how we remain close to Nature’s starting point, zero. In comparing these two pigeons there is a parallel plane, which is only separated by time, not quality or direction. The Super Merckx is more robust and a product of his time and the Super Cock is less robust, but where I want to be in the present. If I am right (and I think I am), then I am moving right back to where the family started.

Since it is my opinion that these two pigeons are on parallel planes with the robustness of Super Merckx being the primary difference, I reached an interesting conclusion which I am now attempting to implement. What if I took the mother of the Super Cock and mated her to the Super Merckx? This is what I am currently doing. I see some very interesting half brother/sister matings!!! Think about it: the Super Merckx from the past and the Super Cock of the future, bonded by the same mother, creating half brother/sister matings for the next generation! I’m making options and taking advantage of them.

In wrapping this article up, remember that Nature is all about “ashes to ashes and dust to dust.” What we create will be returned to its beginning state. In the long run nothing will outlast Nature. Follow the rules of Nature and stay within your box. Move the average and wait for the trailing bloodlines to catch up and then move the box. (Maintaining bloodlines is more important than moving the box, but don’t get yourself too strung out in the process.) Don’t deliberately breed pigeons outside of the box and don’t deliberately keep stragglers (except to maintain bloodlines) when the box is moved. Put throwbacks to good use, and turn futuristic pigeons back toward the past. Don’t mate futuristic pigeons together and end up outside of the box. Create options and use them to advantage.

Until next time!

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