

The Makings of a Champion

By

Bill "The Book" Richardson

This article is in answer to Steven van Breemen's question about keeping pigeons home on hot days. I want to start this off by stating that I think that great opportunities make great champions. In a mass release situation, it is a very rare event for a pigeon to truly distinguish itself as the sole winner. In most cases, airline, geographical, and weather conditions decide who the winner is going to be. These problems are often compounded by the width or depth of the organization. It is very rare that there is complete balance from the short end to the long end. The aforementioned conditions will have some effect on the speed, and, depending on where the effect takes place, they will generally affect one end of the organization or the other.

This does not mean that we should go out and do something stupid that is going to cause a smash right at the release point, like releasing before sunup or in the rain or fog. However, in my mind, heat is a very different circumstance. Where rain can soak the feathering of the leaders and cause them to have to go down to dry out, and fog leaves them blind and tends to confuse the homing ability of the group, heat affects the individual. If the pigeons are up in the early morning before the heat sets in, then they will have time to adjust to the heat of the day.

For those of you that don't follow bicycle racing, there is something in the Tour De France called a time trial. Each rider starts out, one at a time, so that the race is against the elements and the clock. This year, one of the time trials was particularly hot, and it came very close to causing the now five-time winner, Lance Armstrong, to lose the race to Jan Ullrich. (By the way, if Lance keeps racing, he will eventually lose under an extreme circumstance just as the three-time winner, Greg Lemond, lost his will at the peak of a mountain in 1991 and never raced again.)

In my opinion, the toughest man to ever get on a bicycle was Benard Hinault. He was a five-time winner (1978, 1979, 1981, 1982 and 1985). While it is nice to see a winner win five times in a row, you first start to question the competition, and then you begin to wonder whether if he did get knocked down would he get back up? Bernard was a real champion. He would be there every time and put in his best showing when the race was toughest. He is the only rider to win five times and do it over such a long span. I mention this because this is what I look for in a pigeon. I want a battler that will step up to any kind of condition! If we limit the conditions, we take away the chance for something great to happen.

I love the Tour because it is a lot like pigeon racing. The bicyclists ride in a pack and draft off each other, and when the conditions get tough, the weak fall back. They ride for about 20 days and each day has a different set of conditions and circumstances. The top rider must prove himself under all conditions. However, what they all fear is heat,

especially during the mountain stages or on a time trial where they are not allowed to drink extra water. In pigeon racing, heat is like a time trial. Heat is one of the few conditions that can be applied equally to every pigeon in the race. It forces the pigeons to work more against the elements than the competition. It is also the one condition where the pigeons don't tend to stick together.

Many fanciers don't like heat either because they know they are going to experience heavy losses (simply because they feel compelled to send too many pigeons) or because they don't know their pigeons well enough to pick those that have stamina and are strong and in shape. Heat is the one condition where sending more is not better! Those that know their pigeons well enough to know strength, stamina, and conditioning, will not generally have much trouble with the heat!

While there are many pigeons that win the prizes, the majority of them are followers. To find the leaders, you must give them the opportunity to single themselves out through continuous high level performance under less spectacular conditions, out-right wins under any condition, or super performances under extreme conditions (this includes pigeons that are willing to hurt themselves to get home!). This does not mean that I want a pigeon that can only do it under one circumstance. It means that I am taking a pigeon that performs at or near the top all of the time, but is one that I don't have to shy away from when the going gets tough. This might mean, for instance, three top ten finishes and a top ten finish under extraordinary circumstances, or it might mean several wins and a top position under extraordinary circumstances.

Heat provides the fancier the opportunity to learn which pigeons have the fortitude to be given a chance in the breeding loft. Too many pigeons today simply lack fortitude. This is one reason we are having so many losses. I have spent a lot of time studying pigeons that have come home under one of the aforementioned categories. Super performance under extreme conditions, with other top positions under normal circumstances, is one of my highest selection criteria for the breeding loft. If all else is right with the pigeon – and he has a performance under this category – he is going to be a very high selection!

Let me tell you a story that goes back to 1983 old birds. At about mid-season, I visited a very close friend to look for breeding stock. At the time, he flew widowhood cocks and had a smaller team. Since I knew he had some good hens, I wanted to look through the mates to his widowhood cocks. On the third or fourth pigeon, I came across a hen that I thought was a real superstar. I asked to buy the pigeon, but he was in the middle of the races so he wouldn't sell her. He did say that he would sell her to me if she was still there at the end of the season. Since he was racing cocks I thought there wasn't much risk.

As the season went on, it turned out to be a very tough, hot year which included 100 degree temperatures in mid-April. This fancier was having a very good season, but by the 600, his cocks were whipped. Having two weeks to prepare for this last race, he decided to fly the hens. Other than an occasional loft fly, his pigeons had not been trained all season. After giving them a training toss of 40 miles, he sent them to the race.

Was this a death sentence? He told me what he was going to do, and I only asked if I could still buy the hen should she return home.

Well, the race was everything it was expected to be. It was 102 on shipping afternoon, 102 on the travel day, and 105 on race day. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that there were no day birds. The first race bird was clocked on the second day at 9:00 am. It was already 95 degrees. At just about 10:00 my friend got his first pigeon home. It was the fourth overall, and, of course, it was the hen I wanted to buy. Only 8 of 160 pigeons ever made it home!

Keeping his word, he sold me the pigeon, which went on to become the foundation hen for my first family. Three of the first four children that she bred were winners; the one that wasn't hurt its neck on a wire and went into stock. Several years later, he bred my Hall of Fame pigeon that won the 400, 500, and 600 all in the same season! The 400 and 600 were flown in 105+ degree temperatures!

Yes, one could question this fancier for sending these pigeons under such conditions; however, great pigeons are made under extraordinary circumstances. Personally, I wouldn't question his move because he has produced probably 15 cocks that could have won Hall of Fame had he bothered to nominate them.

I might have thought she could fly 600, but I would have never known for sure had this fancier not sent her to the race. In my mind, she became a true champion that day. While she had reason to give up, she pushed on even when it was hurting her to do so. Yes, a lot of other pigeons got lost that day, but it took them getting lost to prove the worth of those eight that didn't. We might not want to have every race be an extraordinary race, but we shouldn't shy away from those that are.

If a pigeon is properly prepared and is strong of will, then races like these provide the opportunity for it to show its worth. Even years later, fanciers still refer to the long hot summer of the Olieman and the "019." What if there had been no long hot summer that year or those races hadn't been flown? Without the opportunity, would these pigeons still have risen to the top? My answer is "No."

Until next time!

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