

We All Have to Start Somewhere

By

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“The Book’s” Private War, Part I

When I was about 17 and successful at everything I had ever done (pigeons), I came home one day and got into an argument with my parents. I can remember my dad telling me in not so many words that since I was so close to the edge of the nest, let’s just see if I could fly to the floor.

Well, in my opinion, it was time to be my own man, so without my parents knowing, I went down and took the USAF placement exam, and I joined the military that day. Of course I made that triumphant call home to tell my parents that if they would kindly bring me some clothes to the airport, they wouldn’t have me to kick around anymore.

Well, at about 3:00 p.m. at the airport, my mom was crying and my dad didn’t look so sure that I had made the flight to the floor that he must have had in mind, but too late I was off to be my own man, or so I thought at the time. It turned out later that whoever thought up the military clearly didn’t have me in mind.

The plane took off, and unfortunately I was on it. We arrived with no problems and, in fact, I was having a great time with my newly acquired 17- and 18-year-old halfwit friends. It was the dead of summer (more poor planning on my part), and about midnight when we touched down at Lackland Air Force Base. Now you have to remember that until this point I had lived all my life in California (I was 17), so when I say that at the time I considered myself worldly, I meant it in a secluded sort of way.

When I stepped off the plane, even at midnight it was probably 95 degrees, and as I don’t know that much about humidity, I will say there was a lot of it. This game was wearing a little thin and what was up with this humidity? I kind of felt like I had been sprayed with warm water. In fact, my clothes were starting to stick to me.

We were waiting to have our luggage unloaded from the plane, and I think all of us were suddenly thinking that maybe we had made a mistake. You could sort of feel the enthusiasm slipping away like something wasn’t quite right. It was about this time that someone started screaming at us. “What the hell are you all gawking at!!? If you are waiting for the bellman, you are it! Pick those bags up and get on the bus!” Yep, I was now fairly certain that I had made a mistake and that this guy was going to screw up my plans to be my own man.

We got on one of those blue military buses (I think this is the bus that Jim Morrison is singing about in his song “The End”) with this guy screaming at us the whole way. By now he was the only one having a good time.

We were driving along when a couple of guys started talking to each other again. I didn’t know a bus could stop that quickly and I almost hit my face on the seat in front of me. The guy stands up and points, “You and you get the hell off my bus.” They looked at each other and got off the bus along with this guy close at their heels. The driver shut the door and between this and the noise from the bus, we couldn’t hear what he was saying; however, his mouth was clearly moving, and he had thrown his hat on the ground and was jumping up and down on it, so he must have been making some kind of point.

The two recruits walked back about 20 feet behind the bus, and the guy got back on. “The next idiot that wants to open his mouth can join those two on their march for silence,” he said. About this time I was thinking to myself that I was glad that we all hadn’t stumbled into the Marine recruiting station that morning by mistake. If we had, those poor guys might have had to carry the bus to wherever we were going. As it was, they struggled to follow the bus as we drove off.

After about ½ mile, we came to a stop with our road guards stumbling up from behind. They were soaked from all the humidity. Now even the guy that had been screaming at us got real quiet. The door opened and some guy with a Smokey the Bear hat and a real deep voice started screaming, “You scumbags are keeping me from my beauty sleep, get the hell off this bus and fall in line!” We had just got into line and he starts screaming at us again, “No you morons!!! With your bags!” We were sort of confused at this point so we were a little slow. We had just gotten in line again, when he started screaming at us again, “I tell you that I need my beauty sleep and you disrespect that by wandering over to the bus like a bunch of schoolgirls? Get those bags back on the bus.” Well by now we were getting the idea that this wasn’t the summer camp that the recruiter had depicted earlier in the day.

He made us take those bags on and off the bus about five times. Then he gave us a half-hour lecture and finished up by telling us to pick up our bags. With an explosion like I have never heard, he screamed, “Are you people simple [meaning stupid]? When I say pick ‘em up, it doesn’t mean when you #!?!?! feel like it.” Well, I thought, at least he is consistent. “Put em down. Pick em up. Put em down.” Another half-hour went by with us picking up and dropping our luggage, and I was already learning meaningful new job skills just like they promised at the recruiting station. To be continued with the adventures of “laughing boy.”

We all have to start someplace

Pigeon fanciers might find getting started a lot simpler if they had an army sergeant to shout orders at them. I’ve been pretty tempted lately to try it with my email correspondents. (Some of my students think I’ve already succumbed to the temptation.) I have been receiving a fair number of emails from all over the world, and for me this has

been something of a learning experience. I am always interested in how pigeons are flown elsewhere. The climates, levels of competition, and levels of sophistication are radically different around the world, so there is always something to learn.

I think in reading these emails, I have come to realize that there is a tremendous disparity in the levels of sophistication among fanciers. I guess that shouldn't be so surprising, but in the process, I often wonder how and why these fanciers decide to write to me. Based on their questions, I am clearly writing above their level of sophistication.

I don't mean this to sound pompous, because I don't mean it that way. Have you ever picked up a math book and flipped it open and there are a bunch of formulas with summation signs and god only knows what else scattered all over the page? Well, unless you are a mathematician or an engineer, generally you suffer a quick bout of math anxiety and since you know you are not in that league, you quickly shut the book.

Well, what fascinates me in my situation is that these fanciers must read what I have to say without understanding any of it, and yet they keep on reading. Again, I don't mean this in a bad way. I am discussing line breeding and inbreeding and they are sending me emails about whether red checks or blue checks are better. If I were reading quantum physics, I would be happy to only understand every tenth word, but I'd give up the whole effort pretty quickly. I applaud their efforts because frankly, I know I don't have that kind of patience.

I have been thinking about this for awhile now and several thoughts always come to mind. How could the disparity be so great among fanciers? Could that gap be closed? Do these fanciers really care to close the gap? Well, they must care or they sure wouldn't sit through one of my articles. Heck, I am the one writing these articles, and I often find them a little dry for my own taste.

When I was younger, the sport was so different than it is today. We didn't give our pigeons anything in the way of vitamins, minerals, and medication, because there was nothing to give. Food, water, and grit -- that was about it. At that time, food came in a 100-pound sack and cost \$7.00. I can remember buying feed for a friend one time and the feed had just gone up to \$7.50 a sack. He almost wouldn't take it from me because he wanted to shop around.

Also, back then you couldn't go to your local breeding farm and buy a great pigeon. If you wanted to be successful, you hung around guys that knew the game and if they liked you they would help you. Almost every great fancier from that period had a large following. In those days, almost every club was controlled by two or three great fanciers and each of these had a loyal following.

In a way, following these fanciers was sort of like an apprenticeship into the sport. It was important that the apprentice was not only loyal but that he knew how to keep his mouth shut about any information he was given. If he leaked the information, it would get back to the great fancier within a matter of hours, and he was no longer part of the flock.

Everyone was reliant on the top dog for his pigeons, so when they broke the oath, they were in trouble all the way around.

Like everything else, there were exceptions. In fact, I was an exception. I was able to short circuit the system with my natural ability to select pigeons. While I had teachers and they were important, I didn't have to hold quite the same allegiance because I wasn't quite as dependent on them for pigeons. However, as I was only 14 years old at the time, my dependence was training and knowledge. Without help, I would have had trouble accomplishing either of these things on my own.

Today, we are all much more independent in our thinking and our actions. In all of these emails that I have been receiving, I can tell that this independence is taking a toll on the beginners. They are not working to get close to the knowledge; instead they buy paper. We all want to be number one. In one of my last several articles, I mentioned jokingly that we race pigeons to be the King of something. However, I wasn't really joking.

In discussing our pigeons' pedigrees, we fail to look at our own pedigree. I am not talking about a genetic pedigree; instead, I am talking about our pedigree of knowledge. Like the lines in a family of pigeons, there are also lines of knowledge. For instance, for you fanciers that live in the city, what do you know about growing your own food? If I took you out into the country with seed stock, you would die before you figured it out. For those of you that have cars and are not mechanics, there is very little way you could just go out and start working on the modern car.

There is just too much to know, so every field of knowledge has basically developed two types of individuals: those that maintain the knowledge and those that improve the knowledge. Those that improve knowledge are the experts in their line of knowledge. In this sport, 99% of all fanciers do no better than to maintain the knowledge they are given. The remaining one percent add to the sport by continuing to build on their fundamental knowledge of the sport. The rest will struggle to keep up with these individuals.

Unfortunately, like everything else, money has probably changed this sport forever. I think the beginner is told over and over again that it is all about the quality of the pigeons; this is probably true when you put them in the hands of a fancier that knows what he is doing. If you give a good knife with a sharp blade to a knife fighter, he will do some damage with it. If you give that same knife to a beginner, he will probably cut his own fingers off. While good pigeons are important, without the knowledge, you will still be relying on luck.

I think the system failed when fanciers quit serving an apprenticeship. Sure, the average fancier can go buy good pigeons from his local breeding farm or even from Europe for that matter. However, in doing so they are shooting themselves in the foot.

Teachers want their students to succeed much as parents want their children to succeed. However, not every teacher is a good teacher and not every student is a good student. Potential teachers often fail because they are too worried about their own success to be

bothered with a student. These are not good teachers as teaching is about giving. However, for most fanciers to start giving there has to be some incentive.

Students are most times a mess. They don't have a plan and because they haven't been there, they don't know where they are going. Because they don't have a long-term commitment to anything, they don't stay committed to anything including their teacher.

I have been contacted by a number of guys that think I should teach them simply because they are there. They don't ask intelligent questions and they make no effort to be clever. They want to jump to the answer instead of listening to what I have to say.

What students fail to realize is that the old-time teacher-student relationship has been broken. Here is why. Years ago we made friends with an expert and we bought pigeons from him while we were learning from him. The teacher made money off his students by selling pigeons and the student benefited by learning from the teacher and everyone was happy.

Today the new fancier buys pigeons from a breeding farm, and then he wants the expert to train him on how to use them. For the expert, the incentive is where? That the student is a nice guy? Yet, this is today's formula. I will pay the breeding farm five times the money that I would be willing to pay the expert, yet then I should expect him to invest countless hours training me how to use it.

If the fancier believes strongly enough in the expert that he wants to be taught by him, then it seems to me that he should also believe strongly enough in the expert's pigeons that he is willing to buy them. What kind of student would be thinking that this guy is a great fancier, and I want to learn from him, but I can get better pigeons over there. You wanted to learn from him because he is beating your butt and his pigeons must have been good enough for him to do that.

As you should be able to see, there is a significant disconnect in the system because of this single problem, and as a result, valuable information is not traveling downhill. In fact, I would have to say that it may be one of the top three contributing factors that will lead to the death of this sport.

As students, you need to bring something to the table. When I was a kid, I was relentless. I didn't leave my teachers wondering why they hadn't seen me for a while. I was in their face 24 hours a day. In truth, most of them weren't wondering where I was, they were wondering when I would leave. I didn't wait for them to think up questions; I had all of my questions planned out. I knew I was a pain, and I always attempted to make it pay off for my teachers by coming prepared. I am a big believer in repaying people for what they have done for me. Sometimes it takes me a while to get there, but I always try to. In fact two of my current students were early mentors of mine when I was a kid.

Another unfortunate change in this sport is that it is becoming filled with "Takers": "You give me that and I will forget I ever knew you." This is why I test all of my students for

an extended period of time before I even get involved with them. I find that if they can't see the purpose in what I am doing, "Takers" won't hang in there because there is no point in taking if you don't understand what you are taking.

For the average beginning through mid-level fancier, selecting a teacher is critical. Let me mention that you would be very smart to shop around in selecting which expert you intend to adopt. Try to set up appointments to visit the lofts of any expert you think you might want to be associated with. Watch out for the ones that spend too much time bragging about their record. They will be too self-absorbed to really want to teach you anything. Also watch out for the ones that want to sell you pigeons right away. They will want to dump pigeons on you. Also watch out for fanciers that are big trainers unless you intend to be a big trainer as well. Also watch out for the mob flyer because many of them don't really know any more than you do; if they did, they would not need all of those pigeons. If you have two experts that are about the same level, consider their availability as a factor. Above all else, consider how well you get along with the individual and how well he explains things.

Have reasonable questions before you go to visit. Even when I was 14, I can remember asking questions that I knew the answer to; that way I was a better judge of how they answered the question. Understand their knowledge of breeding. Where most guys will not tell you their race methods right off, they are usually willing to tell you about their breeding program. Does what they have to say make sense?

When you have selected the expert that you think will help you the most, call him up and ask to take him out to breakfast. Tell them that you have something important to discuss with them. While at breakfast, tell them that you were impressed with their operation and because you are attempting to improve, you would like to learn from them. Without even the slightest gap in the conversation, you add that in return, you would like to buy a few pigeons each year from their quality stock to help offset their effort. Stress to them that you understand that their time is valuable, but that you think with their help that you could become a much better fancier.

Most fanciers have waited all their lives to hear exactly those words from any prospective student. Instead what they are used to is, "Why haven't you told me everything you know? After all, I have known you for a week now."

I guess I understand if you are at a lower level of sophistication and are happy that way, but I see many envious fanciers that are quite vocal about their displeasure with the expert's success. This envy is especially noticeable in those fanciers that have spent big money buying pigeons but don't have the skills to fly these pigeons with any success.

Certainly one of the more important groups in this sport are those that are mid-level fanciers. In bigger concourses, these are the guys that are between 20th and 40th every week. Often these fanciers have ten years invested in the sport, and while they are not getting killed every week, they are not winning either. These are the guys that really

need to step up. Unfortunately, they are just good enough to make it difficult to find an expert that is willing to help them.

In this case, I have two recommendations. The first is that you look to a neighboring combine for an expert that might help out. The second is often overlooked and yet is obvious. Many concourses have older fanciers that no longer fly well because of their age. However, this doesn't mean that they don't know how to fly. If you have a fancier in your area that was once a great flyer but has dropped off with age, go find out what he has to say. I have known many great older fanciers that just couldn't sit in the car long enough anymore to train properly. Yet in their day, they were great fanciers.

In closing, there is a gap in the knowledge base in this sport as I have illustrated. Nobody is going to just come up and hand you the information, so if you are on the short end of that gap, you had better think of a way to be more inventive. Like everyone else, experts like attention because it is recognition of their standing in the sport. However, since you are the one that needs the information, it is up to you to make it a win-win situation.

Until next time!

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