

“Stratigery ” and More.....

By

Bill “The Book” Richardson

I know I have started this article several times, and I think it is the one that my editor keeps sending back to dry dock. In looking over several of the past articles, however, thus far it appears that I have only made it as far as threatening you with the possibility of this article. In past articles I have alluded to two concepts: strategic planning and contingency planning; now I am going to add a third: chaos theory. Today I’m going to discuss all three at length, so grab a cup of coffee and strap yourself upright in your chair and don’t even think about counting sheep or you will be out like a light!

“A place for everything and everything in its place.”

We have probably all heard that phrase several times throughout our lives. As my wife will attest, I do not practice it religiously around the house. Our sink counter looks like the shelf of a health food store. In fact, one of my greatest fears occurs every other Tuesday when the cleaning ladies come to the house. A few weeks back, one of them had the audacity to toss one of my coveted three-pound coffee cans into the trash! There was a sudden howl from the kitchen that even my wife had to respond to. “They threw it away; they threw it away,” I wailed. Seeing no blood, she was rapidly losing interest. “Threw what away?” she asks. My coffee can! The dumb..... Don’t they know how hard it is to find a coffee can? (I don’t drink coffee.)

Finally, I believe she is seeing my point because her face is turning almost as red as mine. Seeing that her cleaning ladies might be in jeopardy she goes on the offensive. If anyone is a dumb.... it is you. Look at this kitchen! You can’t even see the counter!! Have you ever thought of putting anything away? It is a good thing I have my cleaning ladies to try to straighten this mess out. As she storms out of the kitchen muttering something about my pedigree, I turn and look at the counter. Everything looks in place to me and in perfect order no less... well except for my beloved coffee can that is.

My wife often refers to me as the “father of chaos.” No real rhyme or reason for my existence, but there I am. If she could just step back and look from a greater distance, she would realize just how organized I am.....in a cluttered sort of way.

Chaos is all around us. Sometimes we must take a step back to understand it and how it can make up the big picture, and sometimes when we can’t find its edges, we must learn to accept it as part of the big picture.

What is chaos theory really all about? Well, in my last article I discussed pattern recognition. Sometimes, like my wife seeing the sink counter, you can be too close to something to realize that there is a pattern to the chaos that is before you. Chaos theory is

really about “expanding the search.” There is always a bigger picture. We see things at our level of observation and at that level there just may not be enough information to make an informed decision. If we stood in the middle of the street, we would see a few houses. If we stood on top of a mountain, we could see the whole city. If we stood on the moon, we could see the earth. Again, there is always a bigger picture.

There are many who believe in eyesign, and there are probably as many or more that don't. Our beliefs are based on our experience; that experience will change with the size of the sample from which our theory is based. Chaos then is really our lack of understanding of the big picture or at least a big enough picture. To only look at eyesign from the point of view of your own loft is going to give you a very limited sample from which to base an opinion. Stepping back from the observations made in our own lofts to visit all of the surrounding lofts in the area will increase the size of the sample and improve the picture. Going to other cities or countries will improve it still further.

When I first started helping certain individuals learn my race systems, I had to learn to be flexible. Often, I have helped students in countries that I have never visited. What I learned almost immediately was that every situation presents its own form of chaos. Since I am not there to see the circumstances firsthand, I ask a lot of questions, and I do mean a lot of questions. Most people can't stand up to my questioning. I love questions. They make people think and I learn a lot from their answers.

Anyway, part of my job is to anticipate the possible types of chaos that I might run into and how this chaos might impact my methods. In some cases, where the predictability is high, my methods will be on the razor's edge; when predictability is low, I will reduce risk wherever possible. Newer students learn the basics and more advanced students are often left to make their own chaos and then we discuss the mistakes at length.

In one situation the weather provided the chaos. It was far more important that the pigeons were ready to go to a race on any day of the week, than it was to have them in peak condition on a certain day. This was definitely a different concept for me to work with, and it took several weeks to totally adapt my methods. In actuality, the chaos created by the weather made the system easier because while my student couldn't achieve peak form, neither could anyone else. Instead, the student merely had to maintain a higher, more consistent level of form than his competitors. While I could not change the chaotic weather, knowing that it was going to be something of a constant allowed me to plan for it. It was therefore part of the big picture.

Sometimes we create our own chaos; therefore, no matter how far we step back, we will still have trouble understanding the chaos, because we can't see ourselves as part of it. A good example of this might be that you are a big part of your breeding program and yet you might be quite perplexed about your own situation. When I come to visit your loft, however, I have the advantage of standing farther back from your situation and seeing you as part of the chaos.

While most fanciers are a huge part of the equation, they have significant trouble understanding the part they play in their own chaos. For instance, let's take a moment to consider the subject of eyesign. I am probably the only selector that selects for specifics in the eye, but then turns right around and breeds by the generalities of the eye.

There is always the concern of imposing our will and our limited knowledge onto a subject such as the eye. It is my very strong belief that I want certain things represented within my breeding program including specific traits within the eye. Personally, I would be very afraid to breed by these traits with what little I might know about the workings of the eye. I let nature take care of this for me. As I am sure you are aware, if we asked any group of fanciers any single question about the eye, we would get many different responses. Therefore, the eye is still a very chaotic subject to all of us.

Resolving chaos is about seeing the bigger picture. However, the problem then becomes knowing if the picture you are viewing is really a big enough picture to unravel the chaos within the picture. As I mentioned, I select by the eye, I do not breed by the eye because for me, I am reasonably confident that I have unraveled the chaos of eye selection, but not the chaos of breeding by eyesign.

Strategic and Contingency Planning

I have always been a very big fan of strategic planning. Awhile back when I wrote my article on pedigrees, I tossed in what turned out to be a much smaller than expected pedigree of the father of one of my outcross breeding cocks. He was a super Janssen with a super race record. What fascinated me about his pedigree was how deliberately the matings were from beginning to end. If a Janssen hen was used on the cock's side of the pedigree, then a brother would be used on the hen's side of the pedigree. The entire pedigree was extremely systematic. This is a great example of long-term planning, and it took great mental commitment on the part of the breeder.

Planning is an art form. I carefully plan out every facet of my selecting, breeding, and racing programs. What if when you were selecting for your own breeding loft, you knew exactly what you were looking for before you even started? What if you always knew which lofts had the pigeons that could help you the most? What if you took notes on your competitors' pigeons and you knew where all of the best racers and breeders were located? What if you knew how to establish fair market value and you knew how to trade so that everyone was a winner? What if you had methods of breeding that reduced the chances of failure or methods for quickly assessing and eliminating those that were not going to produce percentages? All of these things will help you in carrying out a strategic plan.

From my perspective, to plan the future, you have to study the past. Fanciers are always telling me that they just had a great breeding season. In a way, I sort of find this funny because what are they comparing this to? Are they comparing it to last season when they had a really bad breeding season? If this is the case, then what they are saying is that this season was based on luck.

If you are a successful breeder and you have a successful breeding program, then you should be able to chart continuous measurable improvement across your breeding program. Let's say that you were in the position of starting over tomorrow. How long would it take you to regain your current position? In the hands of an experienced pigeon fancier, a good breeding program should generally be reestablished in the first five years. If this is the case, how do we go about establishing continuous measurable improvement? I have mentioned before that I create a depth chart for both my cocks and hens. In the first five-year period, if my pairings are correct, I would expect the top five positions on the depth chart to be dominated by the offspring.

However, as time passes, improvement should become far less easy to come by. This is in great part because we will reach the optimum level of genetic capability for that particular set of pigeons. We don't often get to buy the best pigeon the fancier has to offer, but we may get the offspring from the best instead. In truth, we probably spend far too much time looking for the very best pigeon. What we really need to spend our time concentrating on finding the very best that the pair has to offer.

This may be a little confusing so let me explain it a little differently. If I am only able to purchase a good cock from a great pair, it doesn't mean that one of his children won't be just as great as the children from a great cock from the same great pair, but maybe not quite as often. In either case, when a great cock appears, it will breed the same quality regardless of which cock produced it. Therefore, assuming that you are working with quality stock, improving the breeding loft is a direct function of time and selecting the correct pigeons when they do appear. There is no question in my mind that well over 50% of all great pigeons never make it into the races or onto the breeding team.

We do not want to be left with only the good ones year after year. They must be replaced with the great ones. In fact, our objective should be to move from the good ones to the great ones within the five-year period that I mentioned above. The good ones should be consistently falling out of the top five until there are none left. For example, I recently bought back one of my original Hofkens cocks because he possesses two traits that I felt needed reinforcing within my current group. Five years ago, he was my number one cock. When he left two years ago, he was the number five cock and now he is the number 10 cock. Therefore, over the last five years, I have been replacing the top 10 cocks at the average rate of approximately two a year; this a good standard rate of improvement for a loft. During this last year, I have noticed a leveling out of the family because I am starting to reach the limit of the genetic capability of the family. Ordinarily, I wouldn't expect to reach the genetic capability of the family within five years, but they were a fairly tight group to begin with.

The rise in quality isn't always smooth, so it is possible that this year's breeding might not have been quite as good as in other years, which would of course mean that maybe I didn't do my job as I might have. It is also possible that not all of the right pieces are in place to allow me to move further forward at this time. I took a chance with the number three cock this year and performed an outcross that I later didn't like. He will be a big

breeder and I lost his production for the year. As I have mentioned in the past, the Super pair produced more great pigeons this year. Truthfully, although I bred three good cocks, I am only placing one into the breeding loft. However, he will not beat out either of his top two brothers who are ranked #2 and #3, but he will replace the brother that was ranked #7 and his actual ranking will be #5. His sister from this year is ranked #8. So this might not have been a great use of their time.

The point is that like all of you, I am far from perfect. The difference from many of you is that I analyze my linear progression to death. I never go forward without looking backwards first. When I have identified areas of weakness, I proceed to correct these areas as part of my strategic plan. Bringing in the original number one cock was not really to correct a weakness, but to reemphasize several of his strengths. At the time I originally owned him, I didn't have a trait set that was conducive to emphasizing several of his superior traits. I was able to gain a percentage of the trait but not the full trait. Now, I have two hens that will allow me to gain everything he has to offer.

As he is older now, I will hold back the two hens that will allow him the best opportunity to demonstrate these traits. Therefore, I will breed him to both hens this year. By doing so, I will gain the advantage of producing half brother/sister pairing for next year. Such pairings will further accentuate these positive traits.

In recent articles, I have spent some time discussing inductive logic. The point of inductive logic is to work from a known position and to move toward a predicted position. In reality, this is strategic planning in a nutshell. As with inductive logic, the further out into the future you project, the more fragmentation is likely to occur. In a perfect world, I would like to achieve a straight line from point "A," the known, to point "B," the projected. However, sometimes I realize along the way that point "B" was not necessarily where I wanted to go. This is where I want to be sure that I have left some wiggle room. On the other hand, I don't want so much wiggle room that I lose sight of my objective. Where I would like to be is somewhere in the "middle of the road."

Sometimes, we place ourselves in the position where we "must react" to save ourselves or we are given "the opportunity to react" to improve ourselves. These are usually tactical moves. Sometimes these moves are carefully planned out fall-back positions. Both are part of contingency planning. The better the strategic plan, the better the contingency planning.

As I mentioned above, each year one of my first acts toward defining my strategic plan is to develop a depth chart. From this I analyze quality, vigor, breeding strength, percentages, genetic stability, distance capability, sex balance and so on. As these are constant goals, I am always moving toward them and for the most part, this year's plan is an extension of last year's plan.

At some point, in the near future, my strategic plan will require the development of a second family. Although I don't fully expect that I will begin work on a second family

for a year or two, I am already scoping out possibilities and one of them could come sooner than expected.

The contingency plan is a little more difficult to develop. I mentioned buying the original cock back. This was a move toward contingency planning. Because he has several traits that I would like to develop further, I am planning to breed him with two hens (as I already mentioned). If they pan out the way I expect, their youngsters will be heavily incorporated into the base family. I call this move part of the contingency plan because any move that does not get me directly from point “A” to point “B” is part of the contingency plan. What this original cock has is different enough from the strategic plan to require a shift in the strategic plan. In this case, I am preparing for “the opportunity to react.”

Last year, one of my pairs produced two youngsters in two different rounds that had the exact same flaw. If two or three pairs had produced this flaw, I would be in a very different kind of contingency situation. First, I would have to determine how far back this flaw went and if it could be identified from a specific line or from a specific pigeon. Then I would be looking at elimination techniques. I might also be looking at the possibility that the bloodlines were getting too close, and how I should handle this problem. (I did all these things and came to the conclusion in this case that it was limited to the pair.) This is the type of contingency planning where we must react quickly to save ourselves. This is also when we need to be sure that we have left ourselves plenty of wiggle room.

Each year, I pair a certain number of test pairs as part of the strategic plan. They really are not there to further the goal of the strategic plan, but instead they are there as an opportunity to activate a potential contingency plan. If all appears to be going well with the strategic plan, these are sent out to fly and I only hold back the best one from each pair. Last year when the flaw occurred in the two youngsters, I immediately held back all of the youngsters from the contingency pairs just as a precautionary measure. As I was breeding out of three brothers and two sisters and I didn't see the problem for the rest of the year, I evaluated and later backed away from the contingency offspring with the exception of one that will now become part of one of the contingency matings this year.

By planning that something will go wrong, I am turning it into a constant and I am turning a negative into a positive much like I did with the weather and my flying system. I have mentioned mating this original cock to two hens this coming year. One hen is from the heart of the family; the other hen is from the fringe of the family. The first mating will be a strategic mating and the second will be a contingency mating. The contingency mating was not available when I last owned the cock. However, when mated to this hen, I will be expanding the gene pool in a direction that I am expecting to take advantage of. This is likely to result in a shift in the direction of point “B”.

Because it is somewhat complicated, I have hit this subject from different directions now with the hope that it will start to make sense. What you need to take with you is the idea that chaos is really only your lack of understanding from the sample size available to you.

There is always a pattern; you just have to find it. Strategic planning is the heart of the breeding program. Without it there will be no direction. Contingency planning can be a “must react” situation, or it can provide “the opportunity to react.” We are always better off if we can plan for a contingency move.

Until next time!

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