

## **The X Factor and Flight Mentality**

By

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Most of us have our own set of secrets that we won't share with anyone, and I am not an exception to that rule. However, I do spend a lot of time discussing topics that revolve around the secrets. In this article, I am going to dance my way around a very delicate subject. I am going to give every reader the same set of tools and then I am going to challenge you to find an answer.

I will admit that I have had some trouble writing this article. In fact, it has been the hardest article to write so far. I was discussing it with a co-worker today, and she really didn't think I had anything to gain by writing this article. Over time, she has had to listen to much of my thinking on this sport (she doesn't fly or even own pigeons, but I am her boss so she has to at least appear to listen!), so she is probably right when she questions why I am doing this at all.

On the other side of the fence, some of you are going to be no better off after you read this than when you started. However, there is something very important here, so maybe one or two fanciers will really gain something significant from this, and if they can put it together correctly, it could change the way they look at pigeons.

I first discovered this topic in 1988, and by 1993 when I left the sport, I could only partially explain it. However, even when I was out of the sport, my mind was never far away from pigeons. In fact, I didn't handle a pigeon for the next five years (I was attempting to cure myself of an incurable sickness—pigeon racing), but I still worked on this single aspect day and night. I thought about everything I knew and had done with pigeons, applied it all, and little by little a very new and very big picture opened up before me.

Shortly after I came back into the sport in 1997, I had the chance to visit a very great loft that is no longer in existence (but will nonetheless go unnamed). I will say that this loft was directed by one of the greatest powers the sport has even known. It was on this day that the entire sport changed for me. I cannot say if it was by accident or design, but there in front of me was the largest single collection of this trait that I had ever seen. Since by all indications this trait is directly related to winning, what I cannot say for sure is if it was there by natural selection or by human intervention. Therefore, I cannot say for sure if what I now know was already known, but it is very possible. If it was known prior to my discovery, then at the very least, I am in very good company.

Since I am not going to refer to this topic literally, I have invented a name for it that I think is quite fitting. I will call it quite simply "the X factor." The X factor can be defined as the common thread that runs through all true winners. "True," in this instance, means pigeons that win outright and not through circumstance. The X factor is a form of

dominance much like the alpha dog concept. When we think of dominance in pigeons, we think of two cocks fighting it out for a top nest box. That is one form of dominance. Another form of dominance manifests itself in flying ability. We all know that some pigeons are dominating flyers and others are lucky to get home. It is interesting that the pigeons themselves seem to know who has what, and it is very important to the vast majority that they do.

The important external factors to pigeon racing include weather, air line, competition and distance. Obviously, nature controls the weather and the fancier to some degree controls the rest. However, each of these has a heavy influence on how the X factor works or at least how the X factor surfaces.

Internal to the pigeon, we think of three very important aspects: health, quality, and condition. However, to these we should add the X factor. Let's put them in the following order of importance: health, quality, X factor, and condition. I think by this time, we all know the importance of health, so we can consider it a constant.

There is a very interesting and strong relationship between quality, X factor, and condition. While X factor can be present at all levels of quality, its power is greatly diminished if the level of quality is low and greatly strengthened if the level of quality is high.

Obviously, pigeons that are in top condition have a better chance of winning. However, without the X factor, the power of conditioning is greatly diminished, and without quality, the X factor is greatly diminished. The problem with conditioning is that it is cyclical at best. By this I mean that pigeons drift in and out of condition in cycles of varying length.

When pigeons are not in condition, the other three traits lie in wait for an opportunity to show themselves. This has something to do with why winners don't win all of the time. However, assuming that a pigeon is raced for three years, it is likely to race 25 times. If the pigeon's health is good and the pigeon possesses quality and the X factor, then it should have an opportunity to prove itself at least several times during this period.

Flight mentality is one of the most interesting aspects of the sport. Since I live in the desert where the ground is flat and the pigeons tend to fly generally along the freeway, I am almost always able to follow the pigeons home from under 70 miles. I know from this experience that there is no comparison between the flight of young birds and old birds. In young birds the line of flight is very sporadic. Young birds tend to circle more at the release before they choose a direction; this is very much a group effort. In fact, young birds count on the group for survival. Old birds still prefer to fly together, but there is a very distinct difference in the hierarchy of the group.

Years ago, I made several discoveries that made me realize that pigeons use a combination of methods to find their way home. There is little doubt in my mind that young birds want to use line of sight for as long as possible. They almost have to be

forced to do otherwise. Their vision is so good that they can probably do so for 10 to 20 miles, maybe farther. Once their visual abilities become insufficient, they tend to use the sun to navigate. Obviously, this can get them in real trouble under the wrong circumstances.

This is why I never miss a chance to train on a cloudy day. We have very few cloudy days here in Arizona, so even the USAF sends its A-10 pilots out on cloudy days to fly over the nearby mountains. If it is good enough for them to train in, it is good enough for me.

The first several cloudy days, I go out to about 30 miles. What a difference. The pigeons could have been there 10 times, but on a cloudy day they will mill and mill. Now they are out of the line of site and they have no sun to work with. This forces them to use a phrase that I picked up from the movie *Star Wars*, “the Force,” as in “may the Force be with you.”

We have all heard that pigeons follow magnetic fields or waves, and from experience I believe in that theory. However, it is my opinion that these waves are either not very strong or they are very general in their direction. I also believe that in situations where pigeons overshoot their final destination, they have a very hard time finding their way back. I have found, for this reason, that circle training is a very good practice. I personally live in a situation where flybys are very likely to occur in the early races.

Because dove season opens about the second or third week of training, I use this opportunity to train in less risky directions. Training in the opposite direction has helped to significantly reduce losses. It is my opinion that young pigeons tend to get caught up in the navigation method they are currently using, and they tend to go to sleep at the switch. It is kind of like the concept of “autopilot.” The ability to retrace their steps from 15 to 20 miles is in my mind critical.

Let’s move forward now to what actually occurs at the release. When young birds are released, they react quite differently than old birds. Young birds are born with a group mentality approach to racing. For all of the reasons mentioned above, young birds are slowly gaining their navigational skills. Therefore, group mentality is critical to good decision making.

While good decision making isn’t always the result, group decisions do seem to help most of the time. The question is how big the front group will be when it reaches the short end of the concourse. From the release to homecoming, almost any time the race is over 100 miles and there are over 100 pigeons in the group, there is going to be a filtering process. Pigeons that are sick or in poor condition will be left standing at the release point or at the very least they will fall out by 30 miles.

The group will continue to thin throughout the race as the best-conditioned athletes continue to press the pace. Young birds almost never reach the front of the concourse by themselves. This is in part due to their fear of predators and in part because of their

poorly developed navigational skills. There are some loose ends here, but they will be covered next when we discuss old birds.

Old bird season is a totally different game. About now you are probably wondering what happened to the X factor -- well it is about to explode here in a very big way. If there is any holdup at the release, the big-time dominant pigeons step forward. These are the pigeons that possess the X factor. They may or may not be the ones that are in condition, but they are the top animals and almost immediately the rest of the group starts to choose one of these to follow. If the group is slow at the release, the X factor pigeons will break away. There may be one of them or there may be 10, but by definition if they are sharp, they will be in the first group. The non-X factor pigeons that are in condition will be watching this break very closely to be sure that they are included, because they have learned through experience that without the X factor pigeons to lead the way, they are in for a very long day.

While the X factor pigeons will almost always break well, not all of them are going to be in condition. The X factor pigeons that are in the best condition will set the pace. They control the direction and the speed of the flock. Some of the non-X factor pigeons may be in better condition, but they won't push the pace, because such a move would be pointless. Even if their condition allowed them to get out front, their navigational skills would be useless against the X factor pigeons, and they would force themselves into a situation where they would actually have to fly farther because of their inability to maintain a direct line of flight.

Obviously, the race is from point A to point B. However the race is decided by a combination of the fastest speeds and the straightest line of flight. Speed is a combination of quality and condition. Line of flight is very dependent on X factor.

No matter what the circumstance, pigeons don't fly in a straight line. There are a number of geographical factors and weather conditions that can cause a pigeon to steer off course. However, pigeons tend to fly in an "\$" shape with the centerline being the average. The better the quality and condition of the X factor pigeon leading the group, the less variation. As I mentioned earlier, magnetic fields are faint or their ability to pick up on them is limited. They tend to continuously test the fields to establish their outer edges. Think of it in terms of taking a dog for a walk. You walk in a straight line and the dog is all over the place. Non-X factor pigeons are like the dog. If the X factor pigeon is present, then it is like the non-X factor pigeons are on a leash. Otherwise they are on their own to drift. It is my opinion that when they wander, they are following magnetic fields. The X factor pigeons likely have a better feel for the magnetic field.

X factor pigeons test the edge of the field less often. Again, remember the movie *Star Wars* and the phrase, "The Force is strong in that one." The X factor pigeons have line of flight locked in. The only questions in front of an X factor pigeon are its own level of quality and its conditioning.

The group will not and cannot run away from them unless there is another X factor pigeon in the group that happens to be of equal or better quality and in better condition. Should this happen, the X factor pigeon that is in lesser condition will feel no fear about falling back. Again line of flight is not his problem.

When an X factor pigeon falls back from the group, a great deal of pressure is released from the entire group because other non-X factor pigeons will now feel confident to drop back as well. Going back to the “\$” pattern, on average an X factor pigeon will fly 10 miles out of the way in 125 miles (not including geography and weather). An unprotected non-X factor pigeon may fly as much as 30 miles out of the way in the same distance. Therefore, the difference can be 20 to 40 minutes in arrival time. If this is consistent through 600 miles, a non-X factor pigeon could be forced to fly 800 miles for a 600-mile race.

Here in the USA, most of the courses fly from sparsely populated areas to densely populated cities. To go along with this, most concourses also fly the easiest direction with the fastest speeds. When pigeons reach the city, they are greatly hampered by wires since they refuse to fly under them. They also often tend to focus on freeways which are often not going quite the same directions but often present fewer wires to contend with. Freeways, faster speeds, and wires are all positive attributes for the short end and disrupt the true picture of X factor.

Going back to our front running group and its return to the short end of the concourse: for this example, it has now been narrowed down 10 to 20 pigeons. Leading this group will be one or several X factor pigeon. However, at this point, “leading the group” really means nothing when you consider that well conditioned non-X factor pigeons and the X factor pigeons are wing to wing to wing on their return. If the X factor pigeon lives on the short end, he will drop out and the group could be in serious trouble if he is the only X factor pigeon. It may stun or even bring them to a sudden stop as they must now begin to navigate for themselves. We have all seen our pigeons return home with others that didn’t belong to us. They circle or land before drifting off. These are non-X factor pigeons and without the help of the leader, they will take twice as long to get home.

If a non-X factor pigeon lives on the short end, he will fall out and he will have a very good chance of winning the race even without the X factor. In this case environmental factors will play a big role in the race. If the environmental factors favor the long end, then the X factor pigeon will still have a chance.

However, assuming the environmental conditions are equal, the short end has a chance to win with the X factor pigeons and non-X factor pigeons, while on the long end, only the X factor pigeons have any real chance of winning.

It should be pointed out that approximately 5/100 possess the X factor, and about 1/100 has the quality to go with it. Therefore the first group is really very unlikely to have more than two or three X factor pigeons. Therefore, on a percentage basis the short end is the place to be.

Competition plays a key role in the exposure of the X factor. Because X factor pigeons make up such a small percentage of the population, when competition is too small the X factor may not even be present in the race. In this case, the race will likely be slow as the pigeons are likely to fly considerably farther due to their reduced navigational skills. It is more likely that the front flock will have only one X factor pigeon and he will be key in deciding everything.

What I have consistently noticed is a much higher concentration of X factor pigeons in competitions of 75+ lofts. This is where they can play the biggest role and make the truest impact which then promotes them in the gene pool. In this situation, there will almost always be an X factor pigeon in the race, and they tend to surface more consistently.

In huge competitions, X factor pigeons tend to impact the race in a less significant way. They still do their job the same way, but it doesn't tend to surface in the same manner. Here, even several hundred miles into the race, the front group may be made up of several thousand pigeons. For all of the previously mentioned reasons, the importance of the X factor can be seriously distorted. Air lines and geography can play a very big part when the group hits the short end of the concourse.

In closing, I would like to point out that pigeon racing is very much a divergent process where pigeons are sifted and reduced. If we start with 100 young birds, between training, racing and culling, we are likely to finish the third year of training with 10. However, in this ten, the concentration of the X factor will be very high.

In summary, the X factor is a critical part of racing. Even though it is present in young birds, they tend to be too inexperienced to use it. The X factor pigeons lead the break, control the speed of the front flock, and the line of flight. The X factor seems to show up best in medium competition, and it makes up a very high percentage of the race team population in pigeons that are three years and older.

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