

Article 7 - Roger Brown

There are so many preconceptions, regarding the ways in which the sport of pigeon racing should be conducted, which have a basis in poorly conceived supposition and hardly any known facts. Theories and ideas are passed down from generation to generation and followed blindly by the masses; when just a little brave experimentation would dash some of those long held ideas to pieces!

When something works for us, we tend to stick to it; never questioning if there might not be a better way. I try to accept nothing as fact until I am convinced that it is so. We still know so little about animal's behaviour and many of the old established ideas that have been passed down from generation to generation have a basis in ignorance and prejudice through a lack of understanding of the ways of birds and beasts.

Our attitude to living creatures, other than Homo Sapiens, have changed greatly in recent years but there is still a long way to go in gaining even a basic understanding of the living creatures with which we share this unique planet.

The training of our racing pigeons for competition is a topical subject just now as the racing seasons has commenced and training is in full swing. First of all let me say that it is absolutely, definitely not necessary to train the birds along the line of flight to teach them the direction home! Your pigeons home by an instinct or instincts that we still do not fully understand and it is arguable, just how important, landmarks are to the bird. Current thought is that they are possibly used to the area within 20 miles of the home loft but this is by no means certain because many pigeons have returned home over long distances without ever having seen the outside of the loft. Long ago, when but a schoolboy, I learned from Tom Silk and Billy Little that pigeons do not need to be trained along the line of flight from the race points to win races. Both Tom and Bill lived in a village outside the City of York and as all of the training of pigeons was carried out by rail in those days, they were unable to find satisfactory connecting trains from their village stations to send their birds along the line of flight. That being so they found it much more convenient to train their pigeons in the opposite direction from the race points. Strangely enough these two great flyers won most of the races and left few consolation prizes for the of the club members! So, if you think that it is necessary to train along the route of the races, forget it. Train in any direction that is convenient for you because your pigeon's home by instinct and the smartest and fittest birds on the day will be the first ones one's home! To emphasise this point - my birds trained to 160 miles were taken 50 miles in the opposite direction a few days later all but 2 hit the loft together in very good time-this week of writing. In the latest issue of the journal there is a wonderful article by Shane Smith of Bombala. The article is full of sound practical common sense and we would all do to follow his advice. If he practices what he preaches, he must have a loft of excellent pigeons. I too subscribe to the view that most of the birds that are hit by the falcons and as a result are late home are of little use to use. As a rule the Falcons do not attack a pack of pigeons indiscriminately but single out birds that they find the least fit or alert so that they have the best chance of making a kill. The fittest and most alert pigeons, on the day will generally avoid attack and keep on for home leaving the bird in poorer condition to the falcons. Now I know that Falcons take often our best birds but that does not happen when they are at their peak of fitness. It usually happens when they are not at their peak and should never been sent away! I never, ever have any time for a bird that strays into another loft. I can, perhaps, forgive a squeaker for straying to another loft but in training and racing I do not expect my bird to go into another loft. If they do they are of absolutely no use to me and I have no time for them. ***Good pigeons do not stray into other lofts.***

I believe that as, Alf Baker believed that a good pigeon would die sooner than enter another loft. There are always expectations to prove the rule but most strays that are returned are just put back into racing to be lost again. I have never heard of a champion pigeon that strayed into another loft in racing, picked up, exhausted, yes, but entered another loft, no! It is high time that flyers woke up to this fact and stopped mollycoddling useless pigeons to the detriment of their own lofts and the sport in general! If a stray enters

your loft, isolate it immediately. Give it a feed and a drink and let it rest over night. Then take it a little way down the road away from your loft and release it. If it returns to your loft and its condition is good enough for it to continue its journey don't let it enter but try to prepare it to leave. By doing so you will do the owner a favour and the sport a favour. What really makes me angry are the flyers that do not give the strays a chance to return home on their own but lock them up immediately and then send them back on the transporters. That is really stupid behaviour and it is doing no one a favour, least of all the bird. Any of my birds that come back on the transporters go into the pot -no exceptions! Unfortunately most flyer have few selection skills and they rely upon the races to sort out their pigeons for them when they should rely cull their doubtful birds. I know that occasionally a doubtful bird makes good but the vast majority of them are worthless and should never see inside of the race pannier. When you go down with your clock at the close of a race every one wants to know who's lost the most birds. No one is interested in knowing if any really good birds have been lost. *I would like to see the introduction of a fifteen-bird limit for all races.* That would really upset the mob flyers but it would compel all flyers to be really selective and would stop so many doubtful birds being sent to the races to sort them out. Sensible club tossing once or twice a week would solve all the problems of giving the birds the required experience and I am sure that the net result would be one of much improved racing. So many flyers are too lazy to toss on a regular basis and have no need to develop selection skills because it is only too easy to throw any number of birds into the races regardless of condition, this lot this week and that lot next. Certainly, under this system, the best pigeons will like cream in milk, float to the surface. However, inevitably, the best pigeons will be sent away unfit once to often and will go down. Unfortunately, under this system, too many downright bad and unfit pigeons are sent to the races when they should have never seen the inside of a race basket. Until we enforce limit racing and thereby compel fanciers to be very selective, I cannot see how the sport can progress. Every year we see novices

Leaving our ranks because they believe that they cannot compete against the mob flyer. The selfishness and jealousy exhibited at the highest levels within the sport are also a factor causing flyers to leave the sport. This seems to be a very common problem in many clubs. Flyers are so obsessed with blaming the Falcons for all their problems. I don't deny that they are a huge problem, but believe me; we the flyers are our own worst enemy! Certainly the Falcons are out there attacking our pigeons and pigeons panic when attacked and go to pieces. However the majority of fit and healthy pigeons keep on for home and those that cannot handle the pressure will never be any good either as racers or breeders. This is natural selections and survival of the fittest and any flyer ignoring this and pampering poor racers will never make a successful flyer. So, when an injured pigeon returns home, tired and flown out, certainly have pity for its plight. Do not do as so many do and marvel that it could return home in such a distressed state and reward it by putting it in the stock loft, in the mistaken belief that it is a special bird that has given it all to return home in difficult circumstances. In reality it was most likely to have been lagging far behind the race leaders, neither alert nor fit for the task ahead of it, never in with a chance to be a winner. Occasionally such birds turn out to be good breeders but the vast majority are useless and only downgrade the stock loft. Many times I have been given a bird with an impeccable pedigree that has returned home injured and of no further use for racing. I can assure you that most of them were absolutely useless as breeders and, in fact, only one was ever of any value. I would have saved myself a lot of trouble if I had refused them all! Now I would never accept one and I would have no confidence on a loft based on such pigeons. I read in a U.S. pigeon magazine, which I consider to be one of the best of its kind in the world, of a leading flyer who trained his birds privately to 160 miles and only kept the birds that returned home prior to his return. That's a good idea, says I and set out to do likewise as I can not restrict myself to my back yard for five months of racing. So, I put my birds on a crash course as soon as I considered that they were working hard enough around the home loft. 1st toss 32 miles, no losses, 2nd toss two days later, 45 miles, no losses. 3rd toss two days later 55 miles, 4 lost. Wet weather then intervened for over a week so the next toss was 11 days later at 75 miles. A good day with light head wind, 4 lost. Next toss 6 days later, again 75 miles, fresh head wind. Released in small packs over two and a half hours, I reckon they ran the gauntlet of a falcon or two as several were injured and 8 lost. Next toss six days later, 160 miles, headwind 60% home on my return and 20% the next day, mostly injure, 20% lost. Considering that the small team gave poor coverage against falcons on the 160-mile toss I consider the result to be excellent. All late birds are treated as culls and are written off as lost. Most interesting to me is that the best returns by far were from Janssen pigeons, five pairs registering no losses what so ever in training. Some straight Janssen pairs registered only one loss did my outstanding Desmet-Matthys Cook when crossed with a Janssen (only one lost out of seven). Other experimental crosses gave very poor returns and second crosses were a disaster in all but two matings. I know the distance is not so very far but

how many of you would dare toss your bird at 160 miles?) But it has proved to me in no uncertain terms that straight Janssens (There is no such thing as a pure family) are excellent pigeons and best, in my best experience, mated along different lines within the family. This is often referred to as mating the old lines onto the new. Taking the bird 160 (as the bird flies) miles involved a round trip of almost 800 klms and a long day of driving with many delays at road works along the Pacific highway. Something that I do not feel inclined to repeat for a while. After culling all latecomers I am left with a very handy team of pigeons, which includes some nice 2 and 3 year olds. I am very fond of 2, 3 and 4 year old pigeons that have not had the stuffing trashed out of them in their first season. They can turn into very reliable racers. When I note that most of the birds that I considered I loose no sleep over those that did not make it. Noticeably most of those that had been hit by falcons before, or second day birds were lost. One final point of interest was that 3 birds were sent back from lofts 50 miles from the release point. One bird had a few feathers missing on the rump but was not injured, as were the other two. I never considered them to be the equal of the best. Obviously nothing will turn them into good racers and they are culls. The more I study pigeons, season after season, the more I am convinced that with experience, we can usually pick out those birds that will never make the grade. However, I am always aware of my fallibility and like to have some proof that my instincts are right. I have never been able to understand and never will be able to understand why most flyers start their birds a few klms down the road and slowly progress a few klms at a time until a limit of thirty & forty miles has been reached prior to the first race. Some progressive flyers, past and present, recommend a first toss at forty miles. I am a little hesitant to go so far and usually start around twenty-five to thirty miles. I fail to find any useful propose being achieved by releasing birds closer than twenty miles from the home loft unless sprinting them in twilight prior to an important race. It seems to me that there are a lot of flyers that are obsessed with pedigrees, most especially a lot of novices. Once I buy a bird the pedigree goes into a file or gets lost amongst a pile of papers and I rarely look at it again. If I don't like a bird, I don't use it for breeding these days. Once I used to and more often than not their progeny were useless and I had wasted another precious year and a good mate for nothing. It is hard to forget the cost of a bird and pedigree, but once they are in the loft they should all be regarded as freebies and any bird not up to scratch culled without any hesitation. Hard advice to follow and a mistake that I have made over and over again, but I hope that I shall follow my own advice in future.

So often we buy birds and we soon come to realise that they are not of the quality we seek and try them in the forlorn hope that we are wrong but we never are. For those of you who think that the years stretch endlessly ahead and a lost season is of no consequence, let me tell you are wrong. The seasons fly by and the day will speedily arrive when you come to realise that there are not so many seasons and you will regret all those wasted years! When pairing my stock I never force a pair to accept each other. If they don't take each other immediately I separate them and try them with other suitable mates until I find two that like each other. I don't believe in forcing them to take mates that they do not take an immediate shine to. By the way, don't forget to run plenty of eggs from your best pairs, you never know for how long you will have them for!