

The Grass is Always Greener on the Other Side: OR IS IT?

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As I sit to pen these words I smile as I ponder how it is that one man (myself in this case, or any other man in so many other cases) can make so many mistakes in so short a journey, as ones life ultimately is! What I write I write from experience, often humorous, sometimes cruel.

I have always tried to share any information I have on any subject, as it really does pain me to see others make all of the same errors that I and so many others have so often already made. I do not subscribe to the very common and misguided belief that because I (or others) have learned the hard way, that everyone should learn the hard way! This type of approach or belief penalizes the birds, our charges, for our shortcomings. We are quick enough to claim credit when a bird does well, but not so quick to acknowledge our incompetence in frustrating the Herculean efforts made by so many birds that could have done well if only we had been a little more up to our task as fanciers.

I can remember vividly an occasion back in 1989. I was attending a convention in Phoenix, Arizona. I had departed Toronto that morning with the temperature hovering around the 50 degree Fahrenheit mark. When I arrived in Phoenix and walked outside of the terminal, I gasped. It was the first time in my life that I had consciously felt the inside of my lungs superheated. The temperature was about 115 degrees Fahrenheit! I spent the next six days walking in any shaded spots that I could find.

As some of my authors and I were having dinner, I was approached by an elderly gentleman, a highly successful psittacine breeder and author. He approached me to congratulate me on the publishing of several important books used in the breeding of the parrot family of birds! After he had done so, he advised that though initially successful, I had much to learn! With this, I certainly agreed and indicated that I would welcome any advice that so wise a gentleman was willing to impart to me. He said, as I listed intently, "You know, you give them to much!" Too Much? "Yes, save something for the next book," or words to that effect. Well, he was telling me that he had learned the hard way and that he felt that others should pay and pay dearly for what he had learned.

Why should you hold something back? How often will you hold something back? How much do you hold back? Or should you hold anything back at all? So you ask, what is the point of this story? Simple, I learned that few experts (and not-so-expert) in any field ever give willingly with no strings attached. Most ask, "What's in it for me?" not once, but over and over again.

Now, I am not suggesting that we all give our birds away, for free, to every person who calls or to any person for that matter. What I am referring to is more basic, more fundamental, and much, much more important. You see, you can give a person the most important foundation bird you own, but without the basics, this bird will only be squandered; without knowledge, results will never be achieved. You have heard the old adage (often applied to third world countries but really applicable to us all) that you can feed people in distress (a non-solution, short-term, never-ending, Ethiopia comes to mind) or you can give a person (or people) the tools (not just literal but also and much more important, the knowledge) with which to farm, thus allowing him/them to feed his/their family, town, and country (a long-term solution that works) for a lifetime. You effectively give people a reason to be proud!

The operative word is to teach and pass on knowledge, which insures that the recipient of the knowledge will eventually attain long-term results while maintaining his pride and sense of worth through his accomplishment.

Now, just in case there is any doubt in anyone's mind, let me make it clear once again why I write. I write what I do for the little guys out there. For those people who are not successful, for those who are scorned and beaten up every race day, for those who just want to enjoy their birds, for those who are new to our sport, for those who are tired and finally ready to see and try. I do so in the hope that you will refrain from following supposed experts blindly (and this includes me).

I want you to question, question everything, and question everyone. Do not be afraid to read, read, read and then to do, do, do, as only in reading and doing and trying will you progress. There is a mindset that I wish you to adopt (and this is applicable in any field) and that is that you can achieve results by doing proper research and then applying it to any endeavor.

In 1994, I spent some considerable time with an Asian importer of pigeons. This person and his associate in Holland were responsible for supplying to Asian fanciers the five highest selling birds ever. When these birds go to Japan or Taiwan, rarely do you ever again hear what has transpired. Were the birds successful? How did they breed? Did they found dynasties? Or were they just duds? How were they used? Were they given a proper opportunity? Were they given a chance to succeed, or were they discarded if they did not produce fruit instantly? So many questions racing through my mind, yet so few answers.

In the West, when we speak of antiquity we really are only speaking in terms of a century or two—yes, just a few hundred years. In the East, when one speaks of antiquity one speaks in terms not of centuries but rather of millennia. China was a great empire before Rome! During all of these centuries, the pigeon played an important role.

So, what has happened to this important local Asian (or for that matter American, Australian...) genetic pool? What has happened to the indigenous strains/breeds that coursed the skies of the East for all of these generations? Why is the local racing pigeon in Taiwan, China, and Japan so little regarded? Or is it really little regarded? Are there some local fanciers that have discovered the true value in these old golden strains?

It seems that the love of pigeons felt by the Taiwanese dates to antiquity! Their love and respect for birds is "in the genes," so to speak! So I ask a very simple question? Where are the Taiwanese (Japanese or Chinese) pigeons? Who has cultivated them? Why do we in the West never hear anything of them? Can it be that the modern Asian pigeon flyer/breeder of today has progressed so far ahead of the skills of his ancestors? Can it be that the local breeds were of so little significance? No, somehow I doubt it. Where, then, is the respect for ancestors and all that they achieved in the area of homing pigeons? As so many Asian fanciers flock to Holland and Belgium, are there others who are possibly a little wiser (possibly who have already unsuccessfully walked this European path) who have now taken a slightly different approach to the relationship between local and European birds? Now this is a very interesting and loaded question! It is a question that will not endear me to my European comrades but I really want you to think about it.

Are all successful Taiwanese fanciers flying straight-bred European birds? I have never had the pleasure to visit Taiwan to see and speak to the local fanciers personally, but the answer to the above question is that somehow, I doubt it.

As the races come to an end in Europe, the Taiwanese and others line up, wallets in hand, ready to pay mega-dollars for supposed mega winners. Will this guarantee their future

success as breeders or racers? I doubt it seriously! Research is the key to success—nothing more or less! Remember what I have written previously, for in this understanding one will begin to see and understand the proper direction to explore!

Remember there is nothing that is pure in this world! If memory serves me correctly, the European racing pigeon is the product of the mixing together of several different breeds of pigeons including Horseman, Dragoon, Smerle, the carrier pigeon, and others. In different countries, different pigeon breeds formed the base from which the fanciers worked to develop their homing pigeons to lesser or greater degrees of perfection. The modern European racing pigeon is therefore a hybrid and therefore not a pure breed at all. Now this is a really important fact to always have in mind!

The homing pigeon of Belgium is the result of the crossing of the Cumulet of Antwerp with the Smerle of Liege. The Cumulet was described by Mr. Andre Coopers, secretary of one of the Belgium Societies in 1868, as being of Flemish origin with white eyes, and having a habit of flying so high that it was gone from sight for several hours. The Smerle, he advises, is of Wallon origin, with a short beak and having several recurved feathers on its neck. It did not fly as high or as long as the Cumulet, but it was much more rapid. Finally, in Belgium, the Bec-Anglais (Dragoons) were also crossed, and so these three varieties formed the basis for the appearance of the better built, stronger, faster, and more precisely cultivated homing instinct of the modern form of homing pigeon.

So where am I really going with all this material? Well, I want you all to understand that what the Europeans started with 186 years ago was a really mixed bag. A real hodge-podge, so to speak. Most modern fanciers, not only in Asia but everywhere, believe that a Janssen, any Janssen, is as good as any other. That is, they are genetically somehow of equal value. This same belief is held of Stassart, Sion, Bricoux, Mueleman, Gits, Grotters, Gurnay, and countless other supposed pure strains.

Each fancier somehow takes great comfort in a pedigree—especially a well-produced one! I had related to me how the birds were auctioned after the Chinese race, and how the more professional looking the pedigree was, the more the Chinese fanciers paid! I ask you, is it fundamentally any different in any other country? I dare say that the real answer is no, it really is not!

European, American, Canadian, and so many other families of racing pigeons are very important, but if you understand genetics you will not disregard your own local strains. In fact I am sure that there are some local fanciers who have discovered to their delight that possibly the real value in importing foreign birds is in the concept called heterosis! As a matter of fact I am sure of it! Hopefully soon, those fanciers that have done what I have suggested will share their information freely with others. These fanciers in many cases are your local champions. These people intuitively understood that a winning combination could be brought about by combining the best from the West with the best from Asia.

You see, the real secret (if we can call it that) for producing exceptional racers is to cross inbred lines! This means that you must locate exceptional local pigeons that have been inbred and introduce to these lines foreign strains that have also been inbred. The result just might be an explosion of new vitality. What I mean is that when two (or more) inbred lines of pigeons (or livestock of any kind) are crossed and the hens (females) are crossed back to either side, we should immediately see very big improvements in everything from fertility to livability. In our case we are interested in racing performance, and yes, this 25%–75% cross will give us just that.

All of the advances made in breeding commercial animals over the past 50 years have been based on this one principle. This principle is referred to as *heterosis*—often called the magic

bullet! Once you have identified your prepotent sire and have proceeded to develop a truly inbred line of pigeons, then what? Well, what we seek is always to improve! We wish to objectively improve our stock while maintaining longevity.

Always look, never be content! Always seek to modify and manipulate nature (the odds) in your favor. You must develop a rapport or friendship with other like-minded and multi-talented pigeon enthusiasts who have also produced inbred lines.

Cooperate with each other to further develop each other's families. Think seriously about your future; view your ambitions on a long-term basis. Do not consider your local birds as inferior or the European birds as superior because these absolutes just do not apply, generally, across the board. Your local stock has great value. It is acclimated to your special conditions. It is uniquely developed for your conditions, and together with new blood from the West, magic can, and does, happen—but only if you have the courage to see and pursue what so many others will never do! Stop wasting your money, do your research, and purchase good, honest, hard-working birds. Cross these with your local stock and smile as you collect the winnings! Then drop me a line and tell me if I was right or not. Either way, try it. You could end up with new friends, and you could end up totally ahead of the game!