

## Culling: Looking For Alibis

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We have all heard, in fact today, it is politically correct to insist that everyone has a right to his opinion! Though I would agree that any person has this right, I would also insist that there are *opinions* and then there are *opinions*. It is very sad that in these days truth does not really matter as much as political correctness. Some would say that truth does not matter at all. It certainly seems so quite often. When science, or for that matter, any discipline, is impeded by these sad notions we are all the worse off for them!

To give you an example, an opinion offered by my neighbor as regards my daughter's heart condition is not of the same value as the opinion offered by my daughter's cardiologist. Nor is that of an intern of the same value as that of her surgeon. Everyone has an opinion, but not all opinions carry the same weight, nor are they all of the same value! In given situations, uninformed opinions could, and do, prove disastrous to our health, our state of mind, our political systems, our global stability, to our very being.

It's sad to say but the reality is that people as a whole are very ignorant. Ignorance makes them gullible. Gullibility, in fact, today is a condition that is cultivated by the press, government, and the educational systems in most countries. Then, this fact is preyed upon by that self-same press, by government, by interest groups of every shade and variety. You may think that I am wrong and possibly being too harsh. But am I? Think about it! Speak on any subject today and most people (friends, family, co-workers, etc.) will answer as follows, "Oh yes! I know all about that. I watched something on that the other day called. well, I can't really remember, but it was really good. And I really understand it now." Yes, I am sure you do!

Give me a break! What could you possibly have learned in a 27-minute program (or news article, or clipping) interspersed with six commercials, prepared by people with a particular and consistent view of the world? That is it. The full extent of their knowledge, in most cases, is some program, or newscast, or article that they can barely remember! But they are now knowledgeable and in-the-know. Yes, they understand fully, don't they?

The pendulum has swung too far. How I long for the inevitable and long overdue correction. How I long for a time when the only thing of ultimate value will again be *truth* in all things.

There exists no other forum where opinion (read as nonsense) disguises itself as fact or quasi fact as in the sport of pigeon racing. Here idiotic opinions are every day paraded about as fact. Nay, the idiocies are legion. So as in all my writing I wish for all those who may read this article to use what today is so uncommon and that is common sense. If your common sense tells you that an idea, or a program, or a theory sounds idiotic, it's probably because it is idiotic. Trust yourself!

Remember the really great scientist is the ultimate doubter-the great skeptic. Like Thomas of old, he must see and verify for himself all that is proposed for his belief.

Now, just in case there is any doubt in anyone's mind, let me make it clear once and for all why I write. I write what I do for the little guys out there. For those people who are not successful, for those who just want to enjoy their birds, for those who would like a different point of view, for those who are new to our sport, for those who are tired and finally ready to see. I do so in the hope that you will refrain from following blindly. Question, question everything, 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.

Leon F. Whitney, in his book *The Basis of Breeding Racing Pigeons*, makes a number of interesting observations and draws a distinction between the scientist and the layperson. The scientist, it is often said, is most interested in *knowing* than in *doing*. The scientist is in fact a *trained doubter* while the layperson believes a goodly part of all that he reads or hears. The scientist doubts all, and demands genuine proof!

## **A Passion for Facts**

The scientific method is, according to J. Arthur Thompson, the author of *An Introduction To Science*, marked by ". a passion for facts, by cautiousness of statement, by clearness of vision, and by a sense of the inter-relatedness of things." Obviously, this is in direct contrast to the emotional mood taken by most laypersons. Dr. Whitney stated in 1969 that as a class, pigeon fanciers were characterized by snap judgments in place of facts, a readiness to believe whatever appeared in print, and a dependence on outgrown theories. The average man is "looking for alibis instead of truth."

There are several words that strain at my very being. Two such words in the fancy are *performance* and *selection*. You couldn't have two more little understood or totally misunderstood words if you tried.

## **Pigeon Fancy is Not Composed of Immutable Fact**

The pigeon fancy is not composed of immutable fact but rather (in many cases) hilarious fiction. Allow me the opportunity to list several of the selection criteria used by many (these are all criteria that I have seen applied). These fanciers, on the surface seem to be otherwise sane and rational racing pigeon enthusiasts. Are they possibly misguided? All of the following observations have been used as faults by many fanciers and serious faults by some fanciers. These dubious selection criteria result in many birds being ultimately culled.

- 1) Pigeons with black tongues culled
- 2) Pigeons with little white spots on back of throat culled
- 3) Pigeons with weak backs culled
- 4) Pigeons with weak vents culled
- 5) Pigeons with poor feather culled
- 6) Pigeons with poor wing configuration culled
- 7) Pigeons with poor eye sign culled
- 8) Pigeons with too deep a keel culled
- 9) Pigeons that are too small culled
- 10) Pigeons that are too big culled
- 11) Pigeons that are too flighty culled
- 12) Pigeons with hard muscle culled

- 13) Pigeons with inadequate muscle culled
- 14) Pigeons who do not have sensitive pressure points culled
- 15) Pigeons with poor flesh culled
- 16) Pigeons with too much flesh culled
- 17) Pigeons who do not turn their heads when you rub their vents culled

It is absolutely true that culling is essential to progress, but let us at least understand where and why it should and must be used in the sport of racing pigeons.

### **Failure to Thrive**

There is only one reason to cull and that is *failure to thrive*. If a bird in the nest or at any other period in his or her life is unable to grow and thrive, then this individual is of no value and is actually a threat to your colony and must be removed at once. Once your colony has been established this should be your only reason to cull. Now notice that I have stated that, "Once your colony has been established."

Now I personally dislike deep-keeled pigeons, poorly feathered pigeons, hard muscled pigeons, pigeons that are too large, pigeons with poor flesh, as well as flighty birds. These are considerations that I always keep in mind at all times. These, however, are all personal subjective preferences. I could have added pigeons that are white, pigeons that do not have a pretty face, and a myriad of other things. However, as I have already stated, these are all my personal preferences and do not necessarily hinder a bird from becoming a Champion!

The truth is that Champion racers come in all sizes, colors, and strains. They can be deep-keeled or apple-bodied, with exceptional or poor eye sign (depending on who the latest guru is), spotted or non-spotted throats, weak or strong backed, hard or soft muscled, poor or silky feathered, black tongued with or without sensitive pressure points! These are the facts! Look at any group of documented champions and you will find a great variety of all of the aforementioned faults exhibited. Yet these birds have shown themselves to be superior to the vast majority of their peers.

Now remember that you should-actually must-only keep the type of bird that you personally like. Learn beforehand what your preferential type is because you scrape droppings for eight to ten months of the year and only race for about two months of the year. It is imperative, therefore, that you like your birds in the off season as well as the on season. I have often heard people express the opinion that the bird they preferred was the winner, regardless of how it looked. I can guarantee you that if the bird is not to my subjective taste I do not want it regardless of how many wins it has! It is not enough for the candidate to win; you must ultimately like and find him/her pleasing as well!

### **Sizzle or the Steak?**

As previously stated, the key to success in any endeavor is research. Proper research! We must be careful not to allow emotion to hamper our choices. Set your goal, prepare the steps required to properly achieve that goal, and then systematically execute your plan. Do not deviate knowingly from your plan unless your research indicates that some of your considerations were inaccurate. If this is the case, make the appropriate shifts and continue upon your path! Remember that success does not come overnight. Yes, you think you know and understand this fact, but do you really? Probably not! You must be patient; it takes time to learn and refine your ability to care for these feathered warriors. It takes time and effort

to begin to appreciate the fact that our charges are not just simple birds, but rather complicated individuals that must be harnessed to do our will-against overwhelming odds. It is a test of both the fancier as well as his birds. It takes years to master our sport. Most never will, but that is also OK, as the joy is in the doing and trying and progressing one step at a time.

Most will say that you compete against your club members, your combine, your federation, interstate, and some even nationally. Well, in a real sense you do, but in another sense you are your own greatest competitor. Where you began is the guidepost; where you ultimately end is another guidepost; what you did in between is the test and measure of your success. Did you learn to appreciate your charges as the marvel that they truly are? Did they give you (and your family) great enjoyment? Did you have fun? Do you still feel about your birds the way you did when you were nine? Is the excitement still there? If the answer to these questions is *yes*, then you were a great success and are a great fancier. If the answer is *no*, then regardless of the local or national awards that you may have attained, I am sorry to say you were and are a failure!

The pursuit of pigeons is something that truly is in your blood. It gives you great joy; it is always new always exciting. When it is motivated by other factors, the joy and wonder is lost and it becomes just another stress in your life.

### **Culling Is Directly Related To The Research That You Do**

I have often heard expressed the sentiment that the key to success in racing pigeons is culling! I have heard people say, "I cull and have culled better than you will ever have!" This goes along with the bright spark who seriously states that he has forgotten more than most or I will ever know. As I have stated before, a sieve is not my idea of a great scientific mind or even a lowly pigeon mentor for that matter. I have heard many fanciers express just what percentages of their birds are culled every year, huge numbers on a percentage basis. I have seen articles state how thousands of birds were bred and culled over a particular fancier's lifetime. The numbers are staggering-just as staggering as the waste. The reasoning (or rather what I would call the lack of reasoning) of all of this is, "I cull severely therefore what I have is great, if not the very best." Most fanciers see or hear this type of statement and are amazed and somehow in awe.

Well, I propose for you a different way of looking at these truly novel ideas. My simple question is just this: If you did your job right in the beginning (when you selected your original stock) then why, pray tell, are you still culling all these years and thousands of birds later? Yes, this is the question! Why? Do you not really have any clue as to what you are doing or why? Do you not have any idea of the background of your birds? Why are you unable to progress? Why are you still culling at a prodigious rate? Culling as described above does not engender awe but rather only pity for both the birds and the fancier.

My idea of a great loft is not one wherein hundreds of birds are bred every year only to come up with a few pearls. These are neither great lofts nor great fanciers, nor even great birds. Yes, said fancier may be at the top of his club or combine, but at what cost, and of what value are these birds to the average fancier? If these fanciers were *really* good they would take the few birds that really do the job and eliminate-once and for all-all of the rest! In doing so they would eliminate the yearly senseless culling of supposedly inferior stock. One would hope that they would then progress to the next level of excellence.

In 1996, Jim McLean and I flew to Florida to watch (I believe) the AU race. Upon our return I saw several Canadians at the airport and we stopped to chat. Inevitably, one of the fanciers spoke of his results (little of his location) and puffed himself up larger than he

already was. I was amazed as to the numbers he kept and finally stated that though I had never seen his birds or his operation nor his location I was probably safe in saying that the bulk of his success in any given year was due to less than six pigeons! He confirmed that, in fact, this was the case, and I asked pointedly, "Why do you keep the rest?" Was there a good reply, or for that matter any reply? Well not really. At least not to my face directly!

In my combine we have approximately 75 members, and the Up North Combine in Toronto (one of the largest in North America) has about 250 members. My combine has eleven races in old birds from 130-550 miles. There can only be eleven birds that win 1st. Now, if any given fancier won 30% of the races he would be doing well. If you have good consistent hard working honest birds, a kit of 12-20 birds will be all you really need. The question then is why are you breeding hundreds of birds? Why would you breed from any other than the ones that consistently do the job for you? That is the real question. If so many fanciers- especially those who puff themselves up-are really as knowledgeable as they claim, then why all the numbers and why all the culling so many decades later?

Here is my advice to any pigeon fancier: Take the time to do your research properly. Take the time to find good honest consistent pigeons. Pigeons that suit your personal subjective preferences. Pigeons that can perform to the level that you will require of them. Purchase said birds from reputable fanciers either locally or at your state, provincial, or national level. By *reputable* I mean from a fancier that demonstrates that he has a plan, a direction that he follows, a reason for being, other than to breed prodigious numbers that then are culled to show his inability. A fancier who has learned the value of well organized record keeping, the value of real observation, and why this study is of value. If someone claims to have a great memory and quote numbers at breakneck speed (this is your cue to beat a hasty retreat) remind him that possibly through all of those thousands of matings, and even greater thousands of cullings, that he may just have introduced even one error. Do not purchase the birds sight unseen but rather make the effort to see the fruits of your research.

Purchase *quality* as opposed to *quantity*. It may seem difficult to purchase a \$1000.00-\$2000.00 dollar bird, but if you do your research properly this will prove much more cost effective than purchasing 20 at \$100.00 each or 20-30 at \$50.00 each and never really getting anywhere. For most fanciers the numbers give a better feeling of security. Well, to each his own, but no doubt you will be doing a lot of culling and even more buying. Think about all the \$50.00 and \$100 and \$200.00 dollar birds you have purchased over the past ten or fifteen years and how many are still around. You probably spent \$10,000.00-\$20,000.00 dollars on birds with no real results. Tell me, would you not have been better off saving your money researching your purchase and buying the appropriate bird at the right time? I know you would have! We all say it, but the goal is *quality* and not *quantity*.

The severity of your future need to cull is directly proportional to the amount of thought, effort, and research you are prepared to put into your original purchase. Do not accept birds from all and sundry! To do so is a terrible trap that may bog you down for years to come. Do not accept birds that are physically not to your subjective preferences! Once again, this is a trap that once sprung is difficult to emerge from! Once you have made a well-educated and well-researched decision, give yourself time to succeed. If you find you have made an error in your selection, do not pass the error on; nor should you cull and cull youngsters waiting for that one pearl. Have the courage to cull once and finally. Cull the stock birds that you found through experience are either not up to snuff or are only producing a very, very low percentile of acceptable progeny. Only in this fashion will you progress. Keep your eyes always open for that small loft fancier (or the larger loft that demonstrates longevity and true ability) that loves his birds that uses good common sense and produces good, honest, hard-working, consistent birds. Breed only the birds that you can handle properly. Breed

only those numbers that you can properly accommodate without overcrowding. Cull only those who under your management fail to thrive. Race all the rest weekly keeping only those that achieve a certain level of competence that you decide is acceptable. Most of all, enjoy your pastime!