

Successfully Breeding the Racing Pigeon

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Success Demands Knowledge

Some of you will know that I am an avid reader. I read anything and everything. I read things that interest me greatly, things of only passing interest, and things of no possible use or interest to me (*things* herein defined as *articles, books, scholarly papers in written, audio, and visual forms*).

One of my authors, a very successful Canadian, the chairman of a large Winnipeg private corporation, a philosopher, entrepreneur, jazz musician, artist, and consummate budgerigar and psittacine breeder, put it like this:

"In addition to dedication, persistence and optimism, success demands knowledge, and it is here that many traps lie in waiting for the unwary. You read books, magazines, journals, scholarly articles.. everything, and then you talk to experienced breeders of birds. You are inundated with dogma, good articles, opinions and facts. AH! Those facts! Therein lies the problem: so much expert advice is contradictory. The problem will always be with us."

Experts and charlatans alike parade assumptions and opinions as *facts* and propound immutable rules for your birds to live by."

Success demands knowledge! Even so you would be correct in protesting, "But bird keeping is an art, not a science." In spite of these comments, your only hope is to keep reading. You must develop-this is absolutely imperative if you are to have any hope of success-an instinct for those things that make sense.

"To develop an instinct for those things that make sense requires ingesting masses of information (and misinformation) in order to provide a perspective against which to make informed judgments. But read with an open critical mine."

In the immortal words of John Doole's Irish grandmother-in-law, "If you believe everything you read. you will eat everything you see!"

Now, dear reader, that applies as much to this, my article, as to all other books, articles, and journals you will ever pick up!

Beware of the Blind Leading the Blind

You have therefore been duly warned, I sincerely hope you actually learn something, however, my detailed knowledge of pigeon folk does not give one much optimism. This minor point notwithstanding, I am now too far along to stop!

It is my position that in life-and that necessarily also includes successful pigeon breeding-that the only thing of real or lasting importance is *truth*. Without it there is neither hope nor possible future happiness! Lf you as a pigeon fancier hope to ever be successful and ever



want to attain future happiness in your breeding and racing program, then truth from all sides is absolutely imperative!

So the inevitable question is, "What is truth?" My Webster's New World Dictionary defines *truth* as follows: 1) the quality or state of being true; 2) conformity with fact; 3) reality, actual existence; 4) correctness; 5) agreement with a standard rule; 6) that which is true

Now that we know what *truth* is, it is important to define one final word for the pigeon enthusiast before we continue, and that is the word *blind*. Now again referring to my Webster's New World Dictionary, we find the definitions of *blind* as follows: 1) sightless person; 2) lacking insight or understanding; 3) done without adequate direction or knowledge; 4) closed at one end; 5) not controlled by intelligence or reason; 6) to deprive of the power of insight or judgment; 7) anything that keeps out the light

Over twenty years ago, as a young man completing my masters degree, I had a wonderful professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada. His name was Dr. Eddie Evans. Dr. Evans was a close personal friend with degrees in Pedagogy. His favourite saying-I will never forget and it sums up most adequately the status of the majority of pigeon enthusiasts-was, "The blind leading the blind!"

So upon carefully studying our definitions above, the realization begins to dawn that the *truth* (that which is true) of the pigeon sport and pigeon enthusiasts in general seems to be that the *blind* are leading the *blind* (done without adequate knowledge and direction and is neither controlled by intelligence or reason) right into a dead end. We are therefore deprived of the power of insight and judgment. We therefore never progress, never succeed, never really win.

For those of you who may have lost my drift, Karl Winterstein might put it to you like this, "What do you wish, the steak or the sizzle?" The answer being, most never get past the sizzle!

The truth is that most pigeon enthusiasts will never see a champion let alone recognize, breed or own one!

Champions are rare! Prepotent champions are the rarest of the rare. They are rarely recognized by anyone regardless of his confidence, experience, selecting abilities, or manifold self-proclaimed studies. How often have I been called by novice and expert alike and had described to me in minutest detail the results of selection processes that proclaim so-and -so's loft to have an above average number of world class pigeons? Imagine an absolute plethora of world class pigeons in one loft alone! The novice and old pro alike are delighted, they have been stroked, their egos inflated, they have a loft full of world class pigeons. They have just been deprived of reason, judgment, insight, direction, and knowledge. They have walked into a closed-ended trap and the light was turned off. They have accepted and filled their nostrils to overflowing with the sizzle and will never taste the steak, let alone digest it! This happens continuously-the blind deluding the blind.

If you truly wish to ever achieve any level of competence you must come to the realization that true mentors are exceedingly few and far between. So forget your mentor-all his teachings and preachings, all his hang-ups and delusions.

Rules for Success

Rule 1: Make your own mistakes!

Birdkeeping of any kind is by definition a hands-on activity. Do not be afraid to make errors. It's O.K.! You only really learn by doing. However, you must learn to recognize your errors,

learn from them, and do not repeat them. How often have you heard someone say, "But so-and-so has had and been in pigeons for thirty years, and he does it like this or that"?

How this blindness infuriates me, as the truth really is that so-and-so who does it like this and that has not had pigeons for thirty years but rather for one year thirty times over. He has learned nothing, and never will, because he neither recognizes nor acknowledges his errors-another case of the blind leading the blind.

Rule 2: Read everything, study everything, but do so critically!

Yes, by all means read the old favourites like *Old Hand*, *Violet*, and countless others. But do not delude yourself that these dinosaurs have anything of value to offer you. Read these to develop your instinct for misinformation in order to provide a perspective against which to make informed judgments. We have come so far since these extinct fossils paraded assumptions and opinions as facts. Also remember that new modern charlatans are on the sidelines just waiting to move into center field.

Read and study everything everywhere and use only what truly makes sense and can be supported not by opinion or assumption but by fact. In our sport as well as many others-animal and human-MDs and DVMs are reporting studies in all areas from genetics to performance. Read them all!

Rule 3: Learn and apply knowledge of genetics!

If you wish to learn and apply knowledge of genetics, then read and study all you can get your hands on. Most material written by pigeon enthusiasts for pigeon enthusiasts is rubbish, absolute quackery with little or no basis in reality! How often would you, a reasonable human being, go to a janitor to have a triple bypass or to an auto body or collision person to recommend the use of pharmaceuticals? What a question! "Never," you say! Yet I see this every day! You may in fact be able to expertly fix a fender, but can you spell the word genetics let alone apply its principles or even vaguely understand what these principles are or mean? Yet I watch people listen intently to these charlatans and disregard confirmed knowledge of genetics that has been applied to the fields of poultry, cattle, horses, dogs, and so on. So you say, "But Silvio, a pigeon is not a chicken, is not a cow or horse or dog." And I repeat a fender fixer is not a geneticist and cannot claim knowledge that he does not and never will have! By insisting that you can learn nothing from those who have rightfully made tremendous progress in these other related stock areas is to wear your ignorance on your lapel!

Rule 4: Stock sense is essential!

There are some people who really do have a gift with animals. This gift of recognizing quality in animals is called *stock sense*. If you were a successful dog breeder or cattle, pig, sheep, or horse breeder, then you probably have this stock sense. This usually cannot be taught; you usually have an aptitude for it or not.

No matter what you breed, the principles are and always remain the same. Once you come to know what does or does not constitute a quality animal, you are well on your way. Good stock sense stacks the probability of potential success much more in your favour than in that of someone with no such sense. You can quickly see this in how one handles and relates to his stock. Most people don't have it!

Rule 5: Two pigeons in one!

Do not be fooled-and almost everyone is-when handling and evaluating a pigeon. Most people pick up a pigeon, pull its beak, (I'd like to pull your nose and see what I can conclude from this); force open its mouth (yes, I have confirmed the existence of a tongue

and throat); open its wings (recognize nothing and close them knowingly); and comment on its weak vents (yet I have never seen vents not up to their purpose) and/or weak back (not knowing that the back is actually between the birds shoulders). These real experts look at a pigeon's eye or eyes (in reality all they can do is confirm that yes it has two), and then either proceed to have an orgasm or declare that they have better.

The reality is that no one can conclude anything from the physical makeup of two equally well-constructed pigeons. If you are honest, you can, in reality, only confirm to someone your own personal subjective preferences. Not all opinions are of equal importance or value, all by definition are subjective; but the corollary of this is not that all opinions are of equal value because the truth is that they are not (see stock sense).

Now in each pigeon there are actually two pigeons: the one physically that you see, and the hidden bird that you have no way of seeing, and therefore no way of judging.

When you evaluate a bird, you must of necessity evaluate both what you see in front of you and what is in the bird and you cannot see. In horses this is often called *heart*. If you misjudge this you lose your chance to own the champion.

For example, in 1960, a small horse was born in Oshawa, Ontario. As a yearling, he was offered for sale for \$25,000 (Canadian) and there were no takers. His owner retained him, trained, and raced him. In 1963, Northern Dancer won the Kentucky Derby and Preakness went on to become the most prepotent sire in all history. I watched at a yearling sale as his sons and daughters sold for between \$1.5 and \$3 million (U.S.) each. E.P. Taylor would eventually refuse \$40 million (U.S.) for the Dancer. He founded a dynasty worldwide and single-handedly created a horse

My point is that all of the experts and fender fixers evaluated the horse that they saw, and not the one that they couldn't, and they were all wrong: Most pigeon enthusiasts are all wrong!

Rule 6: Nature is not on your side!

If you wish to breed good pigeons, or good animals of any kind, you must come to truly understand this simple truth. What truth? Well, the simple truth is that Nature abhors order. Nature is the great equalizer; Nature does not willingly admit of extremes. Left to herself, Nature reverts to the common form. Nature never progresses from less order to greater order, but always from order to disorder if left to her designs.

Most current livestock survive in the form in which they exist because they are beneficial to man in that form. They exist in that form because expert herdsmen (or geneticists, scientists, and others) have applied known genetic principles to common stock so as to modify them to their own ends, i.e., more milk, more meat, more eggs, faster horse, and so on. If man took himself out of the equation, the result would be a reversion or extinction of the form.

What does this mean? This means that once the prepotent sire or dam is actually discovered-usually by accident-or uncovered, then you must at all costs develop a line around this specific bird. You must not dilute him because you will eventually lose the quality that makes him great. You must perpetuate as many offspring in as many combinations as possible. Inbreeding is your tool! If your sire or dam doesn't put up with it, then he or she is not the prepotent specimen you believe him or her to be! If this is the case, you must look to uncover another! You can learn much of breeding by studying the theories of Chaos and Relativity!

Rule 7: Truly prepotent sires or dams are the rarest of the rare!

They are to be cherished, and unlike diamonds, they will not last forever. Use them wisely! To find one is truly like panning for gold. You go through tons and tons of rock and dirt to find only a grain-a nugget-of real gold. That is why it has value, because it is rare! Yet once found they are never appreciated nor properly used. This is because people ignorantly believe, "Oh, well, I'll find or breed another." Well, good luck because the reality is you rarely will.

So, Silvio, why do you say this? Well, here is why. Let us say, for arguments sake, that a pigeon only had 25 pairs of genes. If this was the case, then each pair of pigeons would produce approximately 33,500,000 different genotypes. You must admit that this is an incredible number. But how many genes does a pigeon really have? Well he/she has 6,000 pairs, which really means that if each pair was heterozygous they would in fact produce 3 to the 3,000th power different genotypes. Do you understand just how big this number is?

So what becomes only too clear is not that variations occur-because this is the norm-but rather that offspring of a prepotent sire or dam can be so consistent! This is why prepotent pigeons are so rare and valuable. Go back to Rule 6 and reread it-Nature dislikes order! Only through a well-defined, well-thought-out and executed plan can you seek to thwart Nature's law. Most people lose. Once the sire or dam is gone, so is their, and their human owner's supposed, ability as a great breeder. You see, it had nothing to do with them or their ability; it had to do with chance and blind luck. So it is with so many self-proclaimed master breeders with many, many all-American accolades. Were they really master breeders or just extremely fortunate to have a long-lived prepotent sire?

Rule 8: Cross inbred lines!

Once you have identified your prepotent sire, as defined above, 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's odds in your favour.

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. What I mean is that when two or more inbred lines of pigeons, or livestock of any kind, are crossed, and we then breed the crossbred females back to either side, we should immediately see very big improvements in everything from fertility to livability.

All of the advances made in breeding commercial animals over the past fifty years have been based on this one principle. This principle is referred to as *heterosis*. So what am I saying? Well, Horst Hackemer, remember that red inbred Mueleman hen, sister to the "Patriot", and that blue Hofkens hen-both wonderful pigeons with great flesh. We should breed those hens to my inbred Spanjaards and share the progeny! Cooperate and we both win! Shall I call you or will you fax me?

Rule 9: Introduce only what you absolutely know to be fact!

Never use a pigeon in your program, no matter how good or how great a performance, unless you know exactly his genetic origin. Why do I say this? Well, you could destroy twenty years work in just a few years. If your family means anything to you, never risk it!

In conclusion no one can ever hope to breed consistent high quality racing pigeons unless he thoroughly researches and understands the background of his pigeons. Anything short of this is self-delusion and self-deceit and cannot hope to succeed over a long period of time! The blind leading the blind. All I seek is the truth!
