

Successful young bird racing

by Ad Schaerlaeckens

From conversations with fellow fanciers it appears to me again and again that a lot of them are stuck when it comes to understanding how some competitors manage to dominate races the way they do. That is why eyebrows are raised, accusations of drugging are made and people are guessing in the dark.

This, in particular, goes for young birds because especially in this game the differences are big. So big that even a child can understand that it cannot just be the quality of the birds that can be blamed.

In the modern 'young bird game' it is not only a question of the best pigeon, but, also of the best man it seems.

The time that young bird racing was so attractive for the average fancier because everybody had a chance to win lies behind us.

Some people (the so called 'specialists') made it a kind of art.

The 'specialists' were the artists and performed their show, the competitors or better those who tried to compete were the on-lookers.

And unfortunately the tragedy of the pigeon sport is that the common fancier and the champion are committed to each other.

SOME HELP

As there are too many fanciers still asking questions about things that wouldn't puzzle the insider it is our responsibility not to leave them in the dark.

That's why we will pay attention to young bird racing in a series of articles.

We start off with birds that are only some months old and finish off with what for some people is the most interesting part: The medical aspect.

The articles are meant for those fanciers who need some help and support but of course it will not be possible to have a ready made answer for all their questions.

Every bird has its own identity, just like a human being, and apart from that there is no such thing as 'the ideal system' or 'the ultimate secret'.

Anyone who thinks he alone has got it right or, he alone knows how to win the races, will fall flat on his face when he is confronted by reality. Because reality shows that there is a clear distinction between the works of one so called 'specialist young bird racer' compared with another.

They all have a good method but this does not necessarily mean the same method.

Since my results in young bird racing were described as the best in Holland and Belgium in several magazines my method is also a good one, though not the one and only.

So here we go.

NON FLYERS

Healthy babies will start to train spontaneously for at least one hour a day when they are about ten weeks old under normal conditions.

That's good. It encourages the appetite and will develop muscles, lungs and other organs. Every year, however, you hear the same old story: After having spread their wings enthusiastically for a few weeks this stops and they refuse to move an inch.

Some people get worried then, wondering whether they have bred some lazy bones that won't be able to win them a few decent prizes. This need not be the case though.

We talked about 'normal conditions', which means that birds at that age start moulting. And pigeons that moult don't fly.

You can clearly see that in the moulting season: the birds are unwilling to leave the loft.

There is another reason why pigeons may stop training, though: they are sick.

How can you know WHY the birds refuse to fly?

This is not difficult. If youngsters have an appetite, if the droppings and throats are okay there is no reason to worry.

The moulting process is to blame.

But If pigeons don't fly and at the same time feel weak, won't eat or can barely digest their food you can expect them to be ill, and then you have a problem indeed.

DIAGNOSIS

So it is not so difficult to make your own diagnosis.

First of all the droppings are a good guide. The whiter they show the better. The more they show green the more reason you have to be worried. When droppings are slimy and clotted and stick to the scraper, as well as combined with throats that are too red, that means big trouble. A treatment with Ronidazole and Altabactine for a week may solve the problem. (Altabactine consists of chloramphenicol and furaltodone).

They will tighten themselves up, start to eat again, the droppings improve and they will start training again. They will listen to you and they will also take a bath! Pigeons that are sick do NOT listen and are NOT interested in having a bath. Never!

BAD LUCK?

The first few months of a pigeon's life are the time to teach them good manners.

They have to behave like the fancier wants them to behave.

Young pigeons are just like people.

Everybody bringing up children knows that a good attitude comes from habits formed in early childhood.

A child that has not been brought up with a certain set of standards during the first years of his life will find it very hard to conform it later on.

At the start of the racing season you often hear fanciers moan:

'The birds were on time but the trapping was a disaster. Why the heck should this always happen to me?'

Why do others have pigeons that trap so good?'

Of course others do NOT have the sort of birds that trap good.

And those who complain do NOT have bad luck.

There may be naturally bad trappers but very few. The fancier who is not a pigeon man has MADE his birds bad trappers.

EASY TO SEE

A 'young bird specialist', as he is called in Europe can easily be recognised when he is among his birds: The pigeons know him and he knows his pigeons.

If you, on the contrary, have someone who is barely capable of grabbing a bird because they are so panic stricken that they fly out of the loft when they see him, then you can be sure you have a poor young bird racer.

How can you expect pigeons to settle in the loft and become attached to it if, at the same time, they feel threatened or scared to death whenever the boss enters the loft?

Sometimes you feel sorry for both men and their birds when you see how they mix up with them. On occasions, they may have to grab a pigeon by its wing or leg that tries to escape through his legs.

A cloud of feathers is the visual proof of the ignorance of such a man. You have got to be a big optimist to expect such pigeons to storm home and trap well.

MADMAN

It is really sad to see how someone, who appears to be a normal human being, can change completely when birds refuse to trap after a race. Pacing the floor, he runs up and down, beads of sweat on his forehead.

'Come on, come on' he begs and when finally a pigeon 'comes on' and dares to land on the flap, the bird often gets a load of food thrown on top of him. The result is that even more time gets lost. In the meantime other birds may have joined and they seem to not understand. They seem to think:

'Why does this man act like a madman?'

'Why does he, like an idiot, rattle the feeding tin, and even does not hesitate to throw bits of sands or little stones?'

Poor pigeon, but even more so, poor fancier.

Loft, pigeons and fancier should be one together: a unity.

To the pigeon, the fancier should be as familiar a part of the loft as its perch. Like every animal, a pigeon gets attached to its surroundings. But if they cannot adapt themselves they may feel unwanted, and this has consequences.

ADVICE

The lesson is clear. Never chase a pigeon, not under any circumstances. Always remain yourself, even more, always try to wear the same clothes, if possible.

When I am miserable or in a hurry, I stay away from the loft because I know myself. By trying to grab a bird I might lose my temper, when I have to do so for a second time.

And under no circumstances do I want to upset the birds

So to be a successful young bird racer more is needed than a good loft and good birds.

You also need to know how to get on with youngsters, have knowledge of how to bring them up and feed them.

In the past I sometimes took pictures of my birds. You should have seen how they welcomed me, when I entered the loft with my camera.

They did not even move and would pose willingly!

As I know exactly where my birds are at all times, all I had to do was hold my hand up.

They did not even look like pigeons wanting to fly away and, of course, it is not in the nature of a bird to like being photographed. The birds WERE MADE to perform because I know how important that is. In the loft I move like in a slow motion film. At any time, I treat the birds with respect.

The result is that seeing me alone is already a signal to enter the loft.

I do not need to rattle with food nor do I need to use a whistle.

Not one second gets lost after they have come from a race and now you may understand this is not quite coincidental.

To be successful in young bird racing a good relationship with the birds is of vital importance. To me it seems even more important than feeding, vitamins and the medical part. The problem for many people is, that this is hard to learn. You can be taught how to feed, how to deal with sicknesses, but building up a relationship with live animals some may never learn.

They just lack the good feeling.

Furthermore champions know how to condition (Pavlov) their birds and that requires skill too.

Concerning this a little story about the aging Belgian Staf Martens.

He was a blacksmith, busy all week pounding on his anvil which caused a lot of noise of course.

From an important race his first bird was an early one but it landed on the roof and stayed there. Martens was desperate but not for long. Being the champion he was he realised very soon what was wrong: The bird could not get used to the silence! So he rushed inside, started to make a terrible noise on the anvil and the pigeon immediately recognised his own environment, and trapped!

HANDLING

It is the easiest thing in the world to upset young birds forever.

Take the hands of the fancier. They mean a lot to the birds. With the hands they are picked up and held. How they are being handled is important but unfortunately plenty of fanciers who don't know how to hold and handle pigeons in a proper way.

Because of that I am not real keen on going into the lofts with visitors, especially not in the young bird section.

One cannot always avoid this, though. Sometimes people come from far and it stands to reason they are curious.

Then I let them hold a pigeon and, but, it's often hard work to even watch that. Not to mention the fact they can't open a wing or beak properly.

Pigeons should know they are treated quietly and respectfully. Picking up and holding them must be done in calmly. The abdominal cavity must be flat and should lay well supported by the hollow of the hand. If you can't hold on a pigeon properly then he will try to wriggle, and you will react by wriggling as well, because he has started you off. In the meantime, the pigeon won't trust you anymore.

Thus you are creating pigeons yourself which will cause you a lot of trouble.

RELEASING

Even the letting go of a pigeon seems a skill not everyone is capable of possessing. It should be unnecessary to even have to write about something so natural, if it were not for the fact that a lot of fanciers just can't do it.

Too often I have watched people just throw the pigeon on the ground or just drop it out of their hands. This never will happen to an expert handler, though.

And people who are so clumsy with their birds will never be champions.

If you throw a pigeon on the ground or just drop it, then such a bird is under a tremendous amount of pressure to spread its wings to land safely.

So always put birds down gently or allow them to fly out of your hand round about the height of the perch or nest box.

If you think these are details, well, maybe they are, but they are important. Believe it or not, the way a fancier holds his pigeons shows whether he is a champion, or if he is someone who will never achieve this status.

LEAVE THEM ALONE

It's best never to allow strangers in your loft or let them grab birds. Do not pick up the same birds too often, either.

You know how it goes. When fanciers come to visit you, you want to show the birds off, but I have sometimes been sorry, afterwards. You always want to show your favorite birds because you feel proud of them. But it is often these birds that go lost as they do not feel at ease any more in their loft.

Don't ever lose temper. Never get mad, pigeons have a good memory.

Being too rough can have nasty results and to regain a pigeon's trust is not simple. It may take weeks or, sometimes, you will never succeed.

As I said before the hands of the fancier play a big role in the relationship between fancier and pigeon as you have contact by means of your hands, during the week when feeding and whenever grabbing a bird for whatever reason.

Pigeons should not regard hands as something to be afraid of. Scared birds are made so by the fancier's hands.

They have been taught to fear them!

Successful young bird racers have hands as well, and they are no different from the hands of those clumsy fanciers!

I will tell you about a routine of mine, it is fun and it is rewarding.

RITUALS

Every night before the birds get ready to roost, the same ritual gets performed.

When I arrive with my feeding tin containing grit, different sorts of seeds (treats), I pay attention to every single bird. They get some seeds and peanuts, and sometimes, I stroke them on the head to allow them to play with my hands.

Sometimes that playing looks more like fighting (I pretend to throw the bird off the perch) but I always make sure that the pigeon stays in charge. And every evening the same thing happens, all over again.

Quite soon the birds get used to that routine and enjoy themselves. When I enter the loft no bird moves. It is as though they are saying: 'Oh, you have finally turned up?'

It happens that some will start cooing as soon as they see me.

When I hold out my hand birds will even want to come and sit on it because they expect to get a treat.

Sometimes fanciers say pigeons do not hurry home to join their partner or to be on the nest but they do it for the fancier, that's why they trap so well. If there is one thing I cannot stand it is pigeons that won't trap. Being home in time but not being registered is something to cause a nervous breakdown. My babies trap as though the Devil himself is behind them. They storm in! How different this is from fanciers who can't control themselves, and are eaten up by their own nerves when a race is on.

GRIT

So my birds love my hands, they expect a treat or a nice fight whereas others have hands birds are scared of.

And a hand is a hand I would say.

If pigeons have no confidence, the owner will hold his hands out only to find the birds want to fly away.

I mentioned grit.

One may wonder why it is necessary to give grit every day?

Well, grit is a most important substance to pigeons.

It is far more important than vitamins and other things, which are being talked about as though there is some mystery attached to it.

Why does one pay so little attention to grit?

One cause is that grit is not advertised, however important it is. And why does one rarely see advertisements for grit?

There is no profit in it! In fact one does not earn much selling pigeon food either, which explains why you see so many other things are advertised.

The strange thing is, though, that grit which is so useful, does not belong in the loft. Dust will gather on it and for some mysterious reason pigeons won't eat grit that feels used and dusty.

It should be fresh always.

That's why new grit should be given regularly and you should not leave it in the loft for days.

Some fanciers will throw the grit that pigeons do not want any more on a stone terrace in front of the loft and whenever it has rained and the grit is clean again the birds will go to the ground, as they now seem to be fond of it.

If you have had grit in the loft for a longer period of time, you should wash this, give it to the birds again and see what happens then.

As grit is of such a great importance a fancier should do whatever he can to have his pigeons eat it as much as possible. The calcium and minerals will do much good to the birds.

The fact that it is so cheap does not mean that it is not valuable, on the contrary.

PERCHES

Perches have got to look like perches. The so called 'vee perches' (like a 'v' that is upside down) are good for birds that rest, they are no good in a racing loft for babies.

Occasionally you see those 'vee perches' neatly arranged next to each other and underneath each other.

It looks nice indeed but they are no good for the following reasons:

- If I want to get hold of birds it's too easy for them to flee.
 - It's impossible to leave peanuts or treats on them.
 - The pigeon is incapable of holding on to it if you want to play with it.
 - They don't offer opportunity to pair.
 - Pigeons like hiding away. In a loft where there are only vee perches this is impossible.
- Furthermore there should be lots of perches. Pigeons don't feel right when there are 40 of them and 40 perches as well.

If all the perches are occupied then that may be a pretty sight but for a good atmosphere it is not recommended. If a bird finds it hard to actually get a perch then that won't make

it any easier for him to feel settled.

All champions are aware of the fact that birds should be comfortable in their loft at any time

There have always been fanciers who knew exactly what to do to win young bird races. Way back it used to be mainly men who were known to be the real animal lovers. People 'who slept with the pigeons' and were able to build up such a strong relationship with them that they returned home for the fancier it was said. But times have changed.

The young bird specialist of today would nowhere near fit that description. He would just laugh at the methods of the fanciers of the old days. The 'animal lover' of the past has made way for the expert in whose heart there is no place for sentiments.

One of those sentiments is feeding. Less successful fanciers are often too soft with the birds. They have 'too big hands' or in other words, they feed too much.

LEAVE NO FOOD

During the racing season there should never be food in the young bird loft. Many fanciers complain about frightened youngsters who won't do as they want. The main cause of this is that they keep leaving food in the loft and that's **WRONG!**

Livestock have to eat; therefore food is a means to control animals. Horses, dogs, dolphins and pigeons, it makes no difference! The beautiful eyes of a human being don't carry them away, but they do fall for the food.

Pigeons should never be really starving but, on the other hand, they should always be pleased to see the handler and the feeding tin. Food and handler should be one.

The appearance of the fancier should be the signal to get food or a treat and consequently a sign to enter the loft!

Of course there may always be the obstinate ones who do not understand the game and do not storm in like others. It is very easy to turn such birds into undisciplined birds for the rest of their lives.

What should you do to create such awful birds?

Wait for them to trap after a lot of begging and calling and then... feed them!! Reward their obstinate behaviour!

There is no better way to spoil them forever.

LESSON

On the other hand, it is not that difficult to turn such birds into tame, willing pigeons you would enjoy having around. Instead of rewarding them for bad trapping they will have to be taught a lesson: **'NO FOOD FOR YOU TODAY!'**

More to the point, if you have 50 youngsters, of which 46 react to you when you call them, don't feed those four who will not listen. Not one seed.

The next day already you will get results, and they will do what you want them to do: Listen and trap!

I have a sort of trap before the young pigeon loft which could be described as a combined 'reservoir/supertrap' (see photo). At the back of it there is a window. It is ideal to put off those pigeons who are determined not to come in.

It happens that people who visit me are astonished when they see a pigeon outside in that 'reservoir' at night.

That was **NOT** because I hadn't paid attention. I knew very well that I had left a bird outside. The pigeon was being punished!

What I do?

When the pigeons are in, I will shut the window at the back of the trap and this will not be opened until the next day. Those who did not come in with the others are made to

sleep outside. That's not too hard, that's necessary. The birds really won't get ill from being outside for one night.

You have to be disciplined with pigeons. You should not have to adapt to their behaviour, but they have to adapt to yours!

You are the general; your pigeons are the soldiers. And a soldier who is not disciplined will never be a good soldier. Disciplining is part of every domesticated animal and disciplining often means: 'If you don't want to listen you will have to put up with the result.'

THREE PERIODS

Of course you must start disciplining early but not too early.

A young bird in my loft is confronted with 3 different periods.

a.

Until they are about 2 months old the birds get a lot of freedom, they are left to explore their surroundings as much as they like. The more they have been outside the less they are likely to be frightened by whatever things. It is indeed a disadvantage that those little curious babies have to touch everything with their beaks, just like a child does, using its mouth when it is born. The birds peck at everything, pull it, touch it and enjoy themselves. That's dodgy when you have gutters, flat roofs etcetera around, but you have no choice. Freedom during the first few weeks is important. If you start straight away by giving them limited freedom you will have disciplined birds early but you will lose them easily. That's why the period of limited freedom should not be started too early on.

b.

After that period of freedom and food in abundance comes the next phase. That's when the birds are about 3 months old.

For a whole week they get so little food that they rush up to me the moment they see me. This does not hurt them, on the contrary.

To cut back their food for a few days is the best cleansing system for the stomach and the intestines there is.

I use this temporarily system as a training to make it clear to the birds who is in charge and what I want: Manners and discipline!

And I must say: They learn a lot during these days.

They want to fill their stomachs but there is insufficient food. And they will be made aware of the fact that they depend on me for that food. That's something they should remember for life.

This period of hungry feelings will give tremendous benefits later on. Of course after that learning period of a week one can't go back to the old habits.

c.

After that training period the birds should be disciplined. From now on the food they get is sufficient, but no more than that.

From now on I do not leave them hungry, but just a bit peckish. They will also be allowed (or forced!) to fly twice a day and when they have flown out they will be called to come in immediately.

I do not allow them to linger on the roofs any more. Roofs are the territory of town-pigeons, not of our racing birds.

Some fanciers always carry food in the pockets of their overalls.

They always wear the same overalls when they are near the pigeons that always get bits of food, even if it's only a few grains. Such people know what they are doing.

NOT THAT IMPORTANT

I do not think that the composition of the food is of that importance which does not mean one cannot make mistakes.

Food for young birds can be too heavy, (too much protein) but I have never believed that it all depends on one percent more or less of certain grains. Too many champions have got too many different ways of feeding to make me believe that it makes such a difference.

After weaning my birds get 'regular mixture', so no barley or depurative for birds which are still very young. There are too many little seeds in depuratives.

Little seeds should be avoided when birds are real young. They are tempted to go for these little seeds first and the result is that they have to pick too much and, therefore, have trouble filling their little crops.

It is better for them to swallow the bigger grains. A mixture of the heavier type of food without purifiers but with peas for the protein will benefit the youngsters.

This feeding method changes when the birds are about 10 weeks old and the disciplining and training starts.

DIFFERENT

From then on they get the same mixture seven days a week.

In the past I handled differently. Then they got diet shortly after the race and gradually I put more energy in the food by means of grains containing fat such as corn.

But that was in the past.

I changed my way of feeding since the Adeno/coli problems came up.

It is a proven fact that when there is the pressure of Adeno or Coli birds will be less vulnerable when you do NOT change the food.

For the same reason the water should be clear. If there is something in it like tea or vitamins this may cause the birds to drink less due to a taste they do not like. This may upset the 'water household' inside the body, which may contribute to be more vulnerable to Adeno/coli.

On the day of basketing I give them a double portion in the morning so that there is some food left before they are being basketed in the evening.

The advantage of doing this is that they can eat when they feel like it, but they will not do this just before basketing.

In this way the pigeons will never be hungry when I want to get them ready, and they will never suffer from a full crop either.

A full crop can be deadly. Whether it is filled with food or water does not matter.

SUMMING UP:

1. Young birds get plenty of food that is rich of protein and plenty of freedom the first three months but no food containing small seeds.

2. A period of a week's training follows. Food is given then, very sparingly and kept light.

3. Later they get limited freedom and have to come in right after flying out. No more sitting on the roofs from now onwards and the food mixture is the same always.

4. On the day of basketing I make sure they don't leave hungry, but not with a full crop either.

Does it have to be like that? Not necessarily, but my youngsters have won everything for many years, so I can't be far wrong.

In the old days fanciers in Europe did not start breeding babies until February when the days got longer and temperatures higher.

But times have changed.

Nowadays most Dutch and Belgians mate up the birds end of November so that there are babies on New Year when the new rings are distributed.

As far as Belgium is concerned, it is a necessity to have youngsters that were born in December or January at the latest.

There they start racing youngsters early May and naturally birds must have a certain maturity to be basketed.

In Holland, young bird racing starts nearly two months later but the Dutch too have been practising so called 'winterbreeding' since long.

This has to do with the growing popularity of the young bird races.

In the old days this was different.

Young bird races did not matter too much; people raced babies because they had to be taught for the future, they needed experience.

Nowadays youngsters are raced to win, for that you need older birds, which explains why the Dutch also practise 'winterbreeding'.

The definite change took place way back in 1953 with the start of National Orleans, an initiative that created a lot of opposition at first, which was sparked off by the fact that the first Orleans race was destined to be a complete disaster.

'See, that was too far for young pigeons' sang the pessimists.

As for Germany young bird racing is no big deal still, that's why the Germans mate up the birds later than the fellow sportsmen in the neighbouring countries.

CHANGES

Since the 80-ies young bird racing did not only become popular, fanciers also found that babies could easily handle 3 or 4 long distance races and these races became the icing on the cake for many.

Even those who always were against them felt forced to conform.

That's why older birds one needed; they can be better motivated, they are easier to race on the nest or widowhood, and there are fewer problems with the moult.

But in 1999 people of the 'Animal protection' spoil the fun.

They said races farther than 450 kilometres are too hard on the birds and they were banned, including the greatest race in the world, Orleans, with one time an entry of over 200,000 birds.

The fanciers that had specialised on long distance with babies were furious. Young birds get lost indeed but this happens mostly to inexperienced babies the first times they are being raced from shorter distances.

Their protests were in vain though and long distance with babies became history.

LESSON

Talking about early breeds the Belgians and Dutch have never understood why foreign buyers want such birds. They themselves do not even think about buying them.

The reason is no serious fancier will want to get rid of them, they need these for themselves, as they cannot race summer breeds and they think about the future as well.

Young bird racing became popular but old bird races are more important still and for that you need birds that are experienced in their year of birth.

Late breeds are unfit to race as a baby and as old birds, that's why the champions can spare them.

So unlike foreigners it is summerbreeds Europeans want when buying birds. It seems as if they are more patient. Waiting for half a year or so to breed from the birds they bought is the price they gladly pay for quality.

GET THEM TRAINED!

As mentioned before the young bird racing in Holland does not start off until summer.

In the past babies were trained just before the racing season started but fanciers have learnt their lesson.

Pigeons that are not trained until they are six months old will not make it so they started training youngsters earlier, when they are four months old maximum.

Especially during the first training tosses the weather must be nice, of course.

Watch out for strong winds when training birds that lack experience. Whether it is headwinds or tailwinds does not matter.

Now everybody knows what it means to race birds that hardly ever saw the inside of a basket before.

Sometimes you can read about Super champions that dominate the young bird races with birds 'that were never trained'.

I think they are not Super champions but Super liars.

They claim 'they never train' because they want to impress. As if they want to say: 'I can even be that good with birds that have no experience. Imagine how devastating my results would be if I would race birds that were trained well.'

'STUPID'

The result of not training birds properly can clearly be seen with late hatches that are raced as old birds.

No plumage will be left of these summerbreds raced as yearlings.

'Because summerbreds are stupid' is the saying.

I think this is a strange point of view. I don't see why birds born in autumn should be classed as more stupid than their brothers and sisters born early in the year.

Such birds are not stupid but behave stupid.

So training is a must, all those champions who take their birds training regularly don't do that because it's fun. They do it for a reason.

What I am saying can be highlighted with concrete examples.

- In some clubs here are separate competitions for early breeds and late breeds, in fall.

They are released at the same time, but there are different result sheets.

You should compare these results!

I have never ever witnessed a race where the younger birds could compete with those bred in winter. Only occasionally does a late bred win a decent prize but on the whole the differences are enormous.

- In the past 'Holland Belgium contests' with babies were organised in autumn. The Belgian birds had been basketed about 15 times, Dutch birds about 5 times. The Dutch could hardly hit the prize list with their inexperienced birds.

- There is the smash from National Orleans in 1981.

In those days some combines raced on Saturday, others on Sunday. We raced on Sunday and due to bad weather 3 races were cancelled.

Those who raced on Saturday were luckier and were able to race every weekend.

Then Orleans came and we all participated. The race ended in a real disaster for us.

6 Days after the release only 25 per cent of the birds had returned home.

The birds of the 'Saturday flyers' however did better and made mince meat of us.

I do not know if it is necessary to toss the birds five times a week as Americans do but I do know that even the best birds will fail if they lack experience.

- I live in Holland, right on the Belgian border.

Some of my neighbours are Belgian fanciers. The last week of July we, Holland guys, have our fourth young bird race from 210 kilometres.

The same day the Belgians race the same distance. Their birds get home far better than ours but... those Belgian birds may have been basketed 15 times or more by then.

A few weeks later both the Dutch and the Belgians race from 400 kilometres. Now there is no difference, as the Dutch birds are more experienced.

AMERICA

I have never heard such a lot of nonsense spoken about pigeons as when I was in America years back.

I won't say Americans are dummies but the questions I was asked were dumb indeed.

- I was asked for the address of Bricoux who passed away about 50 years ago.

- Somebody claimed to have the pure Wegges. Wegge's birds were auctioned after he passed away in 1898 and they turned out to be mainly birds he himself had bought)

- Another guy wanted to know how I felt about crossing the Hofkens strain with that of Mr X . Hofkens had no strain and that name of Mr X I only know from advertisements in foreign papers. Not only hasn't he got a strain; he hardly wins any prizes, either.

- And I was stunned to hear that some sportsmen over there worm their pigeons every month regardless if there are any worms or not. Such remarks alone are bad enough to make you tear your hair out.

- What surprised me also was the way they train their birds. Three or four times a week.

I wrote about that in a Dutch magazine, some Europeans picked up the American system and began to train their youngsters very frequently too.

But in spite of that they did not find themselves better young bird racers.

Why such intensive training works in America and not in Belgium or Holland?

I think because the Europeans live close to each other and the mass of birds need not split directly after the release, like in America.

But what the Europeans found was that training made a difference indeed, provided one does not exaggerate.

They also learnt that an introduction to the basket is tremendously important.

INTRODUCTION

You put birds under enormous stress when they are basketed for the first time.

They are scared stiff and wild.

They mess each other up, because they are anxious.

How different pigeons behave that are used to the basket. These are calm.

To know what I mean you should release your inexperienced birds together with those of a fellow fancier who has taken his pigeons training often.

His birds can't wait to fly; even without one single turning they will leave for home.

Inexperienced birds, however, are so shocked and stressed that they may not leave the basket, sit still on the ground or won't move from the roof of your car.

There is something else to consider, though!

WATER

Years back Japanese filmed the Orleans race and sent me a video copy.

I looked at it boringly until it reached the point where the pigeons were given water.

Those pictures made me open my eyes wide with amazement. The birds rushed to the water troughs, and when birds are in such a hurry to drink, it means they are thirsty.

But... the tape also showed that some birds did NOT drink, because they didn't expect to be given water it seemed.

Those birds that did not drink must have been at a tremendous disadvantage when they started the journey home.

From the same race my first bird would not trap because it was completely worn out.

Three minutes got lost and that was enough to NOT win the National.

The funny thing, however, was that it was an easy race with tailwinds. It couldn't have been the weather or the distance, which had been so tiring for the bird.

After I had seen the video, I think this bird of mine had not drunk and I know why. It was my favourite and as I was scared to lose it, some races were skipped. The other birds arrived home not tired, as they had learnt how to drink in the basket.

It happens to me that while my babies come from a race during hot weather, stray birds follow them into the loft.

The first thing they do is look for the drinker.

Birds can stand the heat while flying home, but if they did not drink in the basket this seems to make all the difference.

From 300 kilometre races the birds in our Federation are sometimes basketed the night before the release, other times two nights before.

It seems to make more to be in the basket for only one night when the weather is hot, but... most losses are suffered when the birds are basketed in the evening and are released the day after.

When being in the basket for two nights birds get a chance to drink and there is a better race.

IN CONCLUSION

Once a champion described the way he trained his babies.

This was done gradually. Five kilometres, then 8, 10 and so on, until one day he took his first round about 15 kilometres away from his home.

And while he sat at the roadside next to his baskets, he saw his second round fly over.

'What the heck I am doing here?' he asked himself.

It seems that young, healthy pigeons fly much farther away from home than we think.

So taking them away for 3 or 5 kilometres as some do seems to be a waste of time.

What some do is put the birds in the basket and release them in their own backyard the following day, just to make them used to the basket and teach them to drink.

This is far from stupid.

An advantage of frequent training is also that it seems to delay the moult.

Fanciers found that birds that were given a few weeks off in the racing season will moult quicker than those who are raced frequently.

The big question for many is how frequent birds should be trained.

I think that it depends on the country or the area in which you live.

If you live isolated from your sportsmen, training should be done more often.

The Belgians do not train during the season. They think it is a waste of time and a waste of gas but this does not seem to be a good method for those who live in America or other countries, though.

I do not know the situation in America, Japan, Taiwan and so on but I regret to say that both in Holland or Belgium there is a lot of jealousy.

Especially in young bird racing. For some mysterious reason long distance champions are less criticised. Once a foreign fancier visiting Europe said: 'Here everybody seems to hate everybody.' Fortunately it is not that bad.

One reason for this jealousy is frustration, caused by foreign buyers. They go and buy birds from people who can hardly win a decent prize. They skip the fanciers with the real good birds. Why is that?

Most foreigners want pedigree birds, and many champions in Holland and Belgium do not have them. They just have good birds, which are, in most cases, something different. As I said for some obscure reason it is mostly the people who do good in young bird racing who are made to suffer.

The reason is many just do not want to realise that also in young bird racing you need quality.

People suspect the 'specialists' to have a 'secret potion' or a secret at least that they do not want to share with others.

Terms as cortisone, anabolic steroids etcetera are most often heard.

You know what I think?

If you criticise fanciers for racing too well you may just as well criticise them for trying too hard with them.

The criticism shows little decency, little knowledge, no brain and no common sense. What people often forget is that the champions put a lot of hard work into this and that they are good handlers.

But can you criticise them for that?

I think the predicament of the expert will continue as long as the losers do not realise they need to have good pigeons, and to be a good fancier.

THE OPPOSITE

I have learnt that the less successful fanciers are more likely to experiment with drugs and medication than the people they get beaten by. The funny thing is that there are plenty of fanciers who should know better.

They are those people who performed well in the past, but who do not appear to be doing so, now.

The fact that they managed success without dope and medication in the years past they seem to have forgotten, though.

What they should ask themselves is whether they have still got the same grade of pigeons or, whether they have just lost some interest in the game.

What Champions have in common is their belief in the good birds, a careful selecting by the result, and no-nonsense breeding: They pair the best with the best. They breed many babies, race many babies and eliminate many babies and that's it! They leave it to their fellow sportsmen to breed from 'name birds' because they know there is little in the name.

THE TYPE?

Many pigeons that raced super as a baby are related to birds that also performed excellently.

So it seems that youngsters performances in their first year is related to type. 'It is in the blood' they say here.

Some birds seem by nature more mature at an early age.

When I hear people talk that racing well with babies has nothing to do with quality, but everything with medication or 'drugging' I feel sorry for them. They will never make it.

LOGIC

A lot of people tried all kinds of medications, but ended up disappointed.

In the past when Orleans was immensely popular in Holland the injection needle of a vet was well known. Pigeons were injected en masse so that it became almost obvious that the winning bird had been needled, also.

But if the winning bird was needled, was the needle also the secret?

Use common sense. If half of the basketed pigeons are red then there is a big chance the winning bird is red as well.

But should you therefore buy reddish birds because they win easily?

One expert had never made a secret of the fact that he used eye-drops from a Belgian vet.

So what happened? In the whole area they started to copy him, everybody started using the same eyedrops.

But nothing changed! The expert remained the expert, the losers kept on losing.

The late Flor Goris was the first who used the lighting system. He raced extremely well with birds that did not moult.

And again others began to imitate him. They also lighted the feathers out. It only lasted a little while, though. Goris kept sweeping the floor with his competitors. Because he had the better pigeons and he was a better handler people realised later on.

NAIVE

From another point of view it would be naive to suggest things remain the same and nothing has changed throughout the years.

For example: To race well and never at all cure against canker has become almost impossible. A routine cure now and then has become a must.

But this should be an adequate cure! That means long enough and certainly not less than the doses that are prescribed.

Most champions medicate thoroughly before the racing season, which means for about a week and later on, during the season they not take chances.

The most popular products are Ronidazole and Flagyl.

Pigeons can make a spontaneous recovery from diseases such as coccidiosis but a bird that is infected with canker will never be able to recover spontaneously. Canker is a disease all pigeons can be affected by sooner or later, regardless of the quality.

So measures should be taken.

And vitamins?

Do not expect miracles from them. No one has ever proved that pigeons need extra vitamins, not to speak about what sort of.

Many champions only give vitamins to breeders or, after a treatment with anti-biotics due to a disease.

The late Flor Engels who past away last winter at a blessed age was a Super Champion.

You know what he said?

'Never in my life have I given vitamins. Should I have to administer now as is advised in many adverts? No way! The manufacturers who want to make money make up these ads, they are not made up by champions. And is it not the champions who have a message and we can learn from?'

Those were Engels' words about vitamins.

And what about popular products such as tea or garlic?

I tried this all out. The birds in one section got tea. The others did not. The birds in one section got garlic, the others did not. A group of birds got vitamins, the others did not.

But never did I notice any difference in condition or results. I discussed tea, garlic and other stuff with scientists who know what they are talking about. 'If you believe in tea or garlic give the birds tea or garlic' was their unanimous answer. You may feel better, but the birds don't.

REAL STRANGE

Something peculiar should be said about medication against canker.

In the past we saw that a canker cure encouraged form! It seemed to free them somehow and the birds reacted immediately.

For that reason it made sense to cure before that important race you wanted to win. If you cured the birds regularly, say every 2 or 3 weeks, as some people do, then you would not get that sudden rise in form.

But things changed.

If you medicate against canker now (at least in Holland and Belgium) the week that follows the result will almost sure be poor.

So the effect is quite opposite than it used to be.

I discussed this with some scientists; they were aware of it but did not have an explanation.

But many fanciers have had a lesson and dare not medicate before a race any more.

OTHER PROBLEMS

Coccidioses and worms seldom present a problem to young birds. Moreover, medicines for these are so-called 'form killers.'

For worms you have to watch pigeons, which are on the ground in an aviary, but not young birds. They may have other problems. Problems with the intestines and respiratory problems for instance.

For that many champions cure with furoxine or altabactine, which are products based on chloramphenicol and furaltodone.

Never use these 2 products together, though. You may poison the birds. Respiratory problems, ('ornithosis' people say, which is probably not the right name) must be taken seriously. It is considered to be the main cause for poor results.

The striking thing is that it is often the same people who complain. I think they are on the wrong track as they try to suppress respiratory problems with medication. What should be done is to try and PREVENT by having good lofts, plenty of fresh air and no draught! Also by selecting the birds well. Many problems start with the first pigeon that got ill by not separating this one from the others straight away.

Medicating all the birds in order to just heal one or two is also a big mistake.

Anyway do not believe in secrets. The experts do not have them, nor have the vets.

There are good birds and bad birds, good lofts and bad lofts, good fanciers and bad fanciers. Secrets there are none.

And remember that medicines are designed to help sick pigeons and not to enable them to fly faster!