

Developing a Feel for Pigeons

By

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Well, things are starting to finally cool down here, which is a welcome change. Along with the cooler weather, the molt is also finishing up and, suddenly, I have some newly feathered friends to look at instead of the naked park rats that have been running around the loft for the last several months. The two concepts, cooler weather and newly molted pigeons, tend to come together quite nicely actually, and it makes it fun to go out and look at them once again.

This time of year is actually pretty important to the future development of my loft as this is when I make the final decisions on the makeup of my breeding loft going forward. Up until now, I have played many mind numbing games of “what if” but this is where the smoke begins to clear. Let’s face it though; nothing is final until all of the pieces are in place. I am still awaiting the delivery of a very key pigeon so until that happens, I really can’t plan out my matings with any degree of certainty. Ordinarily, I could plan down to where I thought this pigeon might fit into the ranking, but this particular pigeon will be so high on the food chain, that any preplanning would be a waste of time because this pigeon is likely to shake up the entire order from top to bottom.

I have probably mentioned this before, although I don’t know if I have ever gone into any great detail, but I am pretty big on grading youngsters in the first and second week after they are weaned. To me, this is when they most resemble what they will be like when their molt is complete. During the period in between leaving the nest and completing the molt, youngsters tend to grow quite rapidly and as their bodies lengthen, they often become awkward and gangly. Unfortunately, during this growth period, their muscle doesn’t lengthen as quickly as their skeleton. Instead, the lengthening process pulls the slack or flexibility out of the muscle for a period of time. Eventually, the skeleton stops growing and the muscle catches back up by lengthening and regaining its flexibility. At this point, the muscle on the better pigeons will return to a consistency similar to that of when they were youngsters. Lesser quality pigeons tend to fall short of regaining the muscle flexibility of their youth.

Some youngsters have poor flexibility to begin with, so in the end they will wind up with this same poor flexibility. Since there is a range of acceptability, it is up to either the basket or the fancier to determine what portion of that range they will accept. While it is popular for fanciers to say, "Let the basket decide," in reality when there is a range of acceptability, the basket is only going to differentiate to the minimum acceptable level. Since logically, far more pigeons will come in at the minimum level versus the maximum level, without the fancier's involvement, muscle quality will continue to drift toward a minimal or marginally acceptable level.

Based on the above, I grade pigeons a number of times during their first couple of weeks out of the nest. Through the gangly period, I typically only look for what I consider to be serious flaws forming but not much more. However, during this period, I do compare their development against other pigeons within their age group. Later, as the molt finishes up, I begin comparing each youngster against their grading right out of the nest. When I have identified those pigeons that have best completed the full circle, then I again compare them with their loft mates.

Even before they leave the nest, I have handled every youngster so many times that I know each of them by feel. Once transferred to the young bird loft, I have no trouble distinguishing between them and I know exactly who their parents are. While I may look at my youngsters quite often, I am amazed at how many fanciers never do. Their excuse is "Well, I am afraid to look at them because then they will hit a wire or get hit by a hawk," as if these things won't happen anyway.

Whenever I bring in pigeons from other fanciers, I handle them quite often over the next several months. Good or bad, pigeons from another loft are different from my own, and I want to understand those differences. To get better, you have to not only know your pigeons, but you need to take every opportunity to study everyone else's. Unlike visiting someone else's loft where you can maybe handle a pigeon once or twice, when their pigeons are in your loft, you can handle them as many times as you like, and it gives you a real chance to study them carefully.

When I was young, my teacher used to say, "Always stay in the middle of the road. If you leave the middle of the road, you will get lost and then you will have to find the middle of the road again. You only live so long, so stay in the middle of the road." For this reason, I do not like pigeons that are too big, too small, too wild, too tame, too long, too short, and so on. To me, these pigeons are not in the middle of the road.

I am not trying to say that every pigeon should look like every other; however the fancier must determine what his range of acceptability will be. Whenever a range is established, there will be extremes to the norm at each end of the range. The wider the range of acceptability, the more difficult it will become to manage the family. The narrower the range, the more limited the pigeons will become in winning certain types of races. Some fanciers will determine the range of acceptability themselves, and others will rely on the basket. The truth is that it is pretty important to be able to do both. On average, the race results from a particular course tell the fancier which types of pigeons are successful for

that course and which pigeons meet the acceptable minimal requirements for the course, as those that do not meet the minimal acceptable requirement will presumably be lost during the races.

By studying the successful pigeons a fancier can learn to identify those traits that made the pigeons successful. Probably, it would make some sense for the fancier to build the core of his loft around these successful traits. Those with the highest percentage of these successful traits would be at the core and those with the lowest percentage would be at the extremes. This does not mean that the pigeons at the extremes cannot win, but by definition they should only win under extreme circumstances; otherwise the fancier is not observing the right traits.

Getting back to our discussion on development, although there are exceptions (not many), I would venture to guess that 90 to 95 percent of the pigeons I will work with going forward receive very high ratings in the period just after leaving the nest. However, even within those who show some promise at an early age, there are some that just don't seem to go full circle in terms of development. In other words, they start out on the fast track, but then as time goes by their development either slows or, in some cases, it stops altogether. They never make it back to the level of promise they showed early on in life. Conversely, those that do not have it early on, virtually never develop it later on in life either.

This reminds me of several related stories. Throughout my school years, I was surrounded by a group of unusually good athletes that ranged from several years younger to several years older than me. Although these were virtually all guys, the one that sticks out in my mind was a rather tall, thin, quiet girl from the sixth grade. Back in those days, the government required fitness testing on a yearly basis, so we were required to perform many physical tests, including the 50 yard dash, the 660-yard dash, push ups, sit ups, pull ups, and the broad jump to name a few.

In those days, people didn't move around like they do today, so we all pretty much completed grade school together. While I had known who she was since kindergarten, I really didn't know her that well, but with the results of every fitness test she was suddenly gaining notoriety as about the most amazing thing that any of us had ever seen. In fact, she was breaking about every male/ female record that had been recorded to that time.

In the process of breaking the records, she did so many pull ups that the teacher finally just told her to get down. She had three consecutive broad jumps of over 9 feet and killed everyone in all of the dashes. Later while we would greet each other while passing in the hallways of middle school, I lost track of her in high school. However, I ran into her rather unexpectedly at my 20-year class reunion, and she had not changed a bit. Teasing her, I told her boyfriend about all of her physical achievements in grade school, and I finished up by saying, "You know, I always thought I would see her on TV in the Olympics or something." He kind of smiled at me and said, "Well, you had your chance because she was on the Olympic Rowing team in 1980 and 1984." Now that was

awkward, don't you think? I thought about coming back with, "Yah, well, I raced pigeons really well as a kid," but I was afraid that she might have done that, too. Turned out she was a neurosurgeon as well, and oh, I still have pigeons. The point is that she showed her athletic ability early on and she was obviously able to compete at a very high level later on in life.

The vast majority of super athletes are born with their physical ability, and then it is up to them to first, want to compete, and second, find a sport that fits their athletic ability and third, work hard enough to refine those skills. I mentioned that I grew up with many very good athletes. Many of them went on to become college stars, a few of them became professional athletes, and several have even gone on to become top-level coaches. Having grown up with all of them, I can tell you that without exception, those that made it the farthest were also the best athletes at a very early age.

Although I examine the physical traits of each pigeon very closely, I also observe their interactions with loft mates and with me. I don't like pigeons that are fighting all the time, or that are afraid to defend their space. I also don't like pigeons that are afraid of me or are too determined to get away from me. We do not have to be the best of buddies, but I don't need pigeons that explode off the nest into my face or that create a scene when I try to catch them. Here again, I watch the extremes pretty closely. In other words, behavior is just another range of acceptability, and I hold to a very tight range of behavioral acceptability.

Like people, some pigeons have a wild streak and they are constantly making trouble both inside and outside the loft. They use any excuse to get into their neighbor's business, or they are the last ones to trap. While I will tolerate a little bit of individualism, I am not fond of pigeons that invade nests, break eggs, beat up on youngsters, and create a general atmosphere of unrest in the loft.

I knew several kids like this when I was growing up. One in particular was very gifted physically, but he was also a bully and sports didn't really fit his image. However, one day I saw him playing football with several other kids in the park behind my house. Eventually, one of the kids accidentally threw the football over a 4-foot wall on the edge of the park and everyone sprinted after it to see who could get there first. One of the kids put his hands on top of the wall in an attempt to vault it, another tried to jump to the top of the wall, and this athletic kid simply hurtled the wall as if it wasn't even there. Upon being the first to reach the football, he immediately picked it up and threw it into the stomach of the kid that had thrown it over the wall in the first place. Clearly, he was physically gifted, but not someone that you could or would want to work with and, as long as I knew him, he was always on the edge of trouble.

Some fanciers seem to think fighters make good racers. Personally, I have found that fighters generally fight so much in the crate that they are too tired to fly the race. This is not to say that I like timid pigeons either, but in my view, pigeons should fit in with their loft mates without a lot of fighting, and they should want to work with the fancier.

Ten or so years ago, there was a group of boys that used to come to the YMCA where I work out. I guessed at the time that they were about my son's age and therefore about in the 7th grade. Like most kids, they were pretty loud and it was not long before I realized that they belonged to various sports teams at my son's school. One of these kids was clearly more athletic than the rest, and one day I saw him bench press 185 pounds three times, which was pretty amazing for that age. However, although athletic, I am not sure I ever saw him actually work out. Instead he preferred to perform amazing feats for his friends.

Once in high school, there were weight rooms for them to use, so they quit coming to the YMCA. However, shortly before this, I learned that my son actually knew the athletic kid pretty well, and as I was always curious where his athleticism would lead, I would occasionally ask my son about him. Although he was pretty muscular when I last saw him, he apparently grew very quickly after that because he became the starting running back and, he wrestled as a heavy weight at 230 lbs. Interestingly, it was his friendship that eventually prompted my son to take up wrestling in his senior year of high school.

When I eventually saw this kid at one of the wrestling practices, he was a physically fit as a person could possibly get. Yet the thing that I remember most about him was his poor work ethic. He always seemed to be coasting at half speed. Still there was no doubt that this kid was a great athlete with amazing size, strength, and quickness, so the potential was always there should he ever decide to use it.

Since I often watched my son at wrestling practice, it wasn't long before I became friends with the wrestling coach. Knowing that he had coached many great athletes in his 30 plus years as a coach, I asked him where he thought this kid fit in. He responded by saying that physically this kid was in the top three athletes he had ever coached. He went on to say that wrestling is an individual sport, and at the state championship level everyone is a great athlete, so at that level it basically comes down to heart. In his view, heart comes from a love of the sport you have chosen, and without that love there cannot be the necessary level of commitment and for this kid commitment was the question in coach's mind. He finished up by saying that the kid was still young and that he might find commitment to one of his current sports at the college level or he might even find another sport that better fit his ability, but the clock was ticking.

There are great athletes like these within our pigeons as well, and as often as not they also lack heart for what they are doing. Things come easier to them at an earlier age, so they see no need to develop a work ethic. The significant difference is that where the aforementioned kid still has other possible options, our pigeons do not as they are pretty much limited racing. They say that good-looking people are given better opportunities more easily, but they are also held to a higher standard because of their looks. Pigeons with physical potential gain more attention than other pigeons, and they are held to a higher standard as well. This extra attention makes any failure more painful to the fancier and therefore more noticeable. When a potentially gifted pigeon comes along and then does not perform, it stands out like sore thumb.

Several years back, a friend sent me a picture of a pigeon that had flown very well for him as a young bird, and he wanted to know what I thought of the pigeon. It was a nice bird, but knowing that he flew widowhood, I told him that it probably wasn't going to take a nest as a yearling and that it would never be very good at holding its nest.

The fancier was clearly disappointed by this answer and he really didn't understand how I could see this from a picture. About a month went by and I received a second email stating that this fancier had settled eight yearlings to nests in the old bird loft and the only yearling that had not been settled was the young cock in question. When asked how I knew this was going to be the case, I tried explaining that the pigeon had a weak head, a weak expression, and a lack of commitment in its eyes. To be very honest, to me, it looked more like a hen than a cock, and with its other cumulative problems, I believed that it would be very unlikely to fight for a nest, which of course is a big part of the widowhood system.

The point here is that even though the pigeons had developed enough physically to win for this fancier, it had developed an attitude of fear and fear was going to override its ability to commit. I could see its fear in the picture and clearly the cocks in his loft could see it as well. When they challenged his commitment to hold his nest, out of fear he folded and chose the floor. On the opposite side of the equation, for every fearful pigeon, a bully is born and the loft is disrupted. We call it a race team because the pigeons are supposed to work together and, at least for the cocks to work together there needs to be a level or harmony in the loft and that comes with a balance of power. In a very different time, my dad told me, "You'll catch it if you start a fight and you'll catch it if you walk away from a fight," and this is exactly what he was talking about. Hold your nest and no more.

Ultimately, for any athlete, it always comes down to ability, attitude, and commitment. As already stated, the best athletes show the fancier some promise right out of the nest. In fact, by 10 days it is already possible to determine some things about a pigeon's strength, attitude, and commitment. Some pigeons have a dull flat color in their half-opened eyes while others will have a much shinier look to their full-open eyes. Growth takes a great deal of energy and strength. Those that lack energy and strength are being challenged by the growth process. When a youngster has both energy and strength, its eyes take on a defiant look as if it will protect its space.

At every feeding, I pass my hand a couple of inches over the heads of the youngsters. The dull ones just sit there, and the energetic ones leap up and make a popping sound as if defending their nest. As they get older, some will try to hide behind the parents as if afraid, and some will be more curious. Fear at this age is a developing attitude and it later it can lead to a fear to commit. These and many more traits will continue to show themselves throughout a youngster's development. All we have to do is observe.

In closing, there are always going to be wanted and unwanted tendencies amongst any group of pigeons. We want to apply the wanted tendencies toward the core of our family, and we want to move away from unwanted tendencies. We do the latter through a

combination of observation and the basket. Unfortunately, observation is a learned process that can take the fancier years to develop. However, once learned, a fancier can use his observation to save a great deal of time. Finally, in most cases, there is a strong correlation between the quality of a pigeon just out of the nest and what it will turn into later on in life.

Until next time!

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