

An Excel...lent Program
by

Bill "The Book" Richardson
www.ehoremans.com

Edited by K. Ramage
kr_catalina@earthlink.net

September 9, 2009

Disappointingly, I seem to have gone into another writing slump. This is the second one that I have experienced in my last eight years of writing articles. Probably the first slump was more difficult to endure because I went through a stage where it was difficult to even write a simple paragraph. This time, the slump is a little different in that I can write all day, but in the final analysis, I don't like my own writing. Probably no one likes their own writing, but in this case, I like my writing less than that. Without a great deal of help, I could develop a distain for my own writing and then where would I be?

Maybe it has something to do with writing too much or maybe I am just tired of hearing myself (my wife says that isn't possible so relax), but for whatever reason, it hasn't been going well. Possibly many of you have never liked anything that I have written, so for you, it is going to be difficult to discern what the fuss is about. From my perspective the real down side of all of this is that I am wasting a great deal of time creating drivel that is even more drively drivel than usual, i.e. the last two paragraphs.

To make matters worse, these days, I must fight for the use of the computer in my own home. These days, it is difficult for a man to be the King of his own castle. Well technically, I have never been King of my own castle in fact in thinking about it I don't own a castle, but I did read about the concept once. Instead of a King, think of me as more like a pawn or maybe a naive if that is indeed lower on the scale. Joker is probably taken, but I don't think my wife finds me as funny as I find myself, so I probably couldn't get that job anyway. Bottom line, although I have had this gig for a number of years now, I could be out on my ear at a moments notice or however long it takes to get a forklift under those lofts out back. Like many of you seem to be, I am not delusional about my place in life. Any day my wife could develop the same distain for me that I have for my own writing, and out on the sidewalk I would go. There is nothing sadder than a circus like set of lofts going down the street on a series of flatbeds in search of a new place to reside. I have never heard of anyone upgrading under those circumstances. I digress with this story.

As with televisions, it has come to the point where there is a computer in virtually every room of our house. No, they are not state-of-the-art machines, and yes they are ridiculously slow thanks to the memory sucking tentacles of the Norton Security System. Regardless of how many we have, it seems like one of these bad boys is down for one count pretty much all the time.

Things might improve someday in the future when (if) my youngest son, Jake, actually gets them all hooked up to the router like he has been promising. However, because I am not a hardware guy, I pretty much have no choice but to defer to him. At that point, we will have a TV and computer available for everyone. Throw in a refrigerator, and there will be no need for any communication amongst us at all! (Personally, I am surprised that my wife isn't pushing this concept.) In thinking about it, if we were all in different rooms, and we did need to communicate, I suppose that we could simply email each other or call on any number of cell phones or text or something. Ah, the American Dream.

Until then my oldest son, Nick, assumes that because he goes to bed at midnight, everyone else does as well. Therefore, I practically have to pull the plug on the damn thing to get him out of our bedroom some nights. I want to be as good a dad as the next guy, unless of course it interferes with my sleep.

Then there is the dear, "Mrs. Book". Remember her? Recently she has taken to downloading every song ever written onto her I-Pod. As I am not into I-Pod (After all, I have a real life; I own pigeons.) and I don't even know who makes the stupid things, but whoever it is, they should have made a version that comes with every song already loaded. Even though that might be a little expensive, it would be worth it just to get her off my, our, ...her computer. Well...even that might not do it because about a year ago, dear Mrs. Book decided that she needed a hobby, so she got on this kick of entering contests to win free stuff, which of course again requires the computer. I guess winning free stuff is better than buying expensive stuff, so even though I am not sure what she plans to do with that coyote fur lined coat she won, I guess I can live with it. I think of that coat kind of like the lamp in the movie "Christmas Story." Even if you are a little slow (and of course you are because your pigeons fanciers), you are beginning to see that I am not going to win here because, as I solve one problem, she simply develops a new reason to be on the computer.

The other day when I threw a fit to my son about hogging the computer, he just shrugged and informed me, "Dad, you might remember that I am taking some college classes on line this semester, but if you want me to stop, I can just go on living here forever." What am I going to say to that but, "Can't you type any faster?" If I can't win an argument with a nineteen-year-old, it would be smart of me to avoid any such transgression with my dear wife, especially since I also happen to be a pigeon fancier and therefore a little slow myself. You know what they say, birds of a feather... No, in conflicts involving my dear wife and the computer, it would be much smarter to just sigh wistfully and go outside and look at pigeons. However, in my view that kind of intelligence is way overrated.

This last Saturday morning, after meeting with several fanciers for breakfast, I felt like I was maybe in the mood to write an article. Consequently, on the way home, I stopped off to get my usual artery clogging, heart stopping iced coffee, with the sugar free vanilla flavoring, and a shot of espresso from Mc Donald's. Probably many of you can recite this order for me because many of you have been on the phone with me when I have placed this order.

I used to go to Starbucks, but I am more at home at Mac Donald's, especially since they can't hear what you are saying through the intercom when you place the order, they can't comprehend what you have ordered, they can't correctly formulate a total cost for the coffee, and most of all, they can't make their coffee the same way two days in a row. I would complain, but they would probably fire the responsible person and then I would have to begin the training process all over again. Anyway, every day, I leave there with such a sense of superiority. It is ego building really.

Armed with my ice coffee I returned home to begin writing. It was a glorious morning with puffy white clouds dotting a deep blue sky and bunnies running about the yard. The sun was out and the birds were singing... not mine, those little ones that hang out in the trees and have no racing value. It was a great morning to be alive (I am scene building...work with me here). I was more motivated to write than I had been in weeks, so I was excited to get started. With coffee in hand I rushed down the hallway toward the computer in the bedroom when suddenly I came to an abrupt stop much like a horse does when it sees a rattlesnake in its path. However, this was no ordinary rattlesnake, it was my dear wife coiled up...sitting in my...our ...her...computer chair eating a symbolic apple and hissing softly to herself.

As we covered earlier, on seeing this development a smart person would have said, "A great day to go look at birds, don't you think?", but I was enthused and I wanted to write, so I said, "You going to be done soon?" Without even looking up she replied, "No." I thought there might be something further to the proclamation, so I stood there like an idiot waiting for more; however, nothing was forthcoming. "But I need to get on the computer," I said. She replied, "So." (Good, apparently she was in a good mood.) With the caffeine from my coffee surging in my veins, I unthinkingly blurted out, "I have things to do you know, and you and Nick are always on the computer these days." Stupid, I know but there you have it. Probably this was the equivalent of telling the executioner at the electric chair that my feet hurt and I would like to soak them in two buckets of water during the event.

With jaw stiffening, she turned her head slowly toward me and as if studying a sloth, some other slow-thinking repugnant creature, or me. She began hissing in her best condescending tone, "What could 'you' possibly have to do that could be so urgent?"

I must admit, she does have a really good condescending tone, and if I wasn't currently the recipient of that tone, I would have been quite impressed. I brushed all of this aside, and in a last ditch effort, I continued this line of mindless prattle. Almost gleefully and with a hint of triumph in my voice I proclaimed, "I must to write a pigeon article." After

all, pigeon articles are obviously very important, and even she should be able to understand this I thought to myself. I could see that pretty much this was a done deal, and I had pulled it off right in front of my two sons who had managed to magically appear to witness the probability of ensuing carnage (me).

Not to drag him into this one sided domestic squabble, but Ed Lorenz likes to point out that in some countries, pigeon fanciers are not allowed to vote or hold public office, because they are considered half-witted. Well you can add computer usage to the list of things that the half-witted are not allowed to do, because on hearing my apparent weak line of reasoning, my dear wife, like Miss Liberty and the scales of justice, put both palms face up as if weighing the situation. "Hmm," she said slowly, "Let's see here, I could continue downloading my I-Pod songs, which make me very happy, or I could stop what I am doing so that you can write another abysmal article about a dirty little hobby for your subculture little friends (that's you guys and I told you she was in a good mood).

Realize that ordinarily, I would have defended you guys with my quick wit, but I was still pondering her use of the word abysmal. To the best of my knowledge, I think she had mispronounced that pink stuff that settles your stomach when you are not feeling well, but I decided not to bring this up and take the chance of making her feel stupid. She continued, "You can't write, they can't read, and nobody else cares about your miserable little hobby, does this circle of life never end? Run along now while downloading my songs is still making me happy."

As if announcers at a golf tournament, I heard my youngest son, Jake, softly whisper to his brother, "What a sendoff!" to which Nick replied, "It will only be a sendoff if he is smart enough to get moving, which is what I am going to do right now in case there is any blow back." As you can see, they clearly have my back covered.

Marty Ladin once told one of the wives in his club, "If you were my wife, you would be living in a one bedroom apartment in Pacomia, but because my wife is a lawyer, and I don't want to live in Pacomia, I gritted my teeth and move right outside to look at pigeons, which is what I should have done in the first place.

Now, several hours later, I have just come back into the house to discover that my wife's I-pod must be up-to-date because it appears she went off shopping. Poor salesman..."I pity the fools." Since the computer is mine all mine and she is somewhere out of sight I now pronounce myself King of the household, sooooo "Let's Get Ready to Rumble."

It is clear, at least to me, that when Microsoft developed Excel, they had pigeon racing in mind. Never has a tool been so tailor-made for any sport. It is easy to work with and pretty much anyone with a computer already has it available at their fingertips. It is programmable at the spreadsheet level or through an offshoot version of Visual Basic, so it is possible to program it to do pretty much anything...as long as your wife will let you use the computer.

While I have used it at the spreadsheet level for an number of years, I more recently started looking to at the Visual Basic level. Being a former FoxPro programmer, I have always avoided Visual Basic, but in a few short weeks, I have been able to learn Visual Basic for Excel (EVBA) at least to some level. Truth is that for some reason Excel EVBA conforms to a FoxPro methodology. In other words, I using EVBA as a method of programming in FoxPro.

Some would say, now why would you do that. Well the answer is simple. I am a pigeon fanciers. I am already writing fairly complex code in EVBA, and along the way, I am able to learn aspects of EVBA where they is needed. If I work on it long enough, I probably will eventual replace my FoxPro methodology with actual EVBA. However, to this point, I have been able to do pretty much everything using this method.

As you might remember, I wrote an article about a year ago called the “The Matrix” where I explained how to determine the level of compatibility amongst your pigeons. Although this was a pretty simplistic use of Excel, it is a good example of how the product can be used for a vast array of record keeping functions including band lists, pairing possibilities, pedigrees (my next endeavor), race records and so on. At the very tail end of my FoxPro programming, I was developing some code to automatically produce pedigrees simply by entering the band number of the youngest pigeon in the first position of the pedigree. I had a prototype of this program working, but I changed jobs and sort of lost touch with programming. About a year later, I met Dave Shewmaker and he was all excited to show me a program that he was in the process of developing. Amazingly, we had chosen the exact same methodology, only as I remember it, he had developed it in VBA. Probably he never finished his program either, or otherwise he would be a very good programmer, as programmers never really finish anything. It is sort of like plumbers calling a plumber when their sink gets clogged. Soon I am going to give it another shot in EVBA.

To be honest, this program pretty much saved my butt earlier this season. For the most part, fanciers generally contact me to buy pigeons in the October-November timeframe, but this year I had several fanciers contact me in February. You might remember the article that I wrote about mating my pigeons in December of this year, well by February I was right in the middle of producing my second round. In fact the eggs were about to hatch. Fortunately, a year earlier, I had added on approximately five pairs of breeders to the breeding program, and between that and the five or so pairs that I keep around as extras in case anything goes wrong, I had enough pigeons to cover these requests. However, to get this done, I was going to need to break up a number of pairs, and as a result I would basically loose the second round.

To make matters worse, all of the affected pairs were still in the process of producing hybrids. Generally, I breed my hybrids in the first two rounds and my inbreds in the second two rounds. That way I can send the first two rounds out to race, and I can breed the inbreds in the late spring and early summer when the pigeons come out the best. To be honest, the reason I had the extra pairs on hand is that I was in the first throws of expanding my breeding pairs so that I had enough for two sets. One set would do nothing

but produce hybrids and another would produce inbreds. That way, I would no longer have to go through the process of transitioning from hybrids to inbreds.

Had these requests come about a month later, things would have worked out fine, as I would have been in the process of breaking up a least some of pairs anyway. But being that it happened when it did, I had to make some tough decisions. I guess if you are going to lose a round of production, it is probably best to lose a hybrid round over an inbred round, and had I already been producing inbreeds I would have turned these fanciers down.

Still, I had to make a number of decisions, and I had to make them quickly. To deal with this situation, I started creating various lists using Excel. I have been keeping my general records in Excel since 1998, and I have settled on the methodology of listing the cocks on one side of the page and hens on another side of the page. I generally list them by age, starting with the oldest at the top to the youngest at the bottom. Once listed, each cock receives a numeric designator and each hen receives an alpha designator. When I list the youngsters by band number on another page, each one has a combination of these two designators next to its band number (i.e. 15,H). This identifies its parents as cock 15 and hen H.

Although I list the parents across from each other when I am creating the list, this does not have to be the case because and cock can be mated to any hen and at any time, so there is nothing to the parent's positioning on the list other than I do list them by age. Instead they are linked by the alphanumeric designators that I place next to the each youngster on the band list. It is very possible and, in fact, frequently happens that cock 9 might be mated to hens A, J, and L during a single breeding season. If I were to write every pair down, it would probably come out to 40 or 50 pairs on paper, yet there would really only actually be 30 pairs of pigeons involved.

As soon as I get the bands, I list them using some of Excel's built in functions. For instance, if you type the bands year in one of the cells in Excel (for example 2010) and then you grab the corner of the cell and drag it straight down 100 places, you will have 2010 printed out 100 times. You can do this for the club insignia and the year as both are constants for that particular year. If you type a band number into the first cell and then the next consecutive band number in the cell below it, and then you highlight both cells and grab the bottom corner of the cell, you can easily drag a hundred consecutive numbers. Once the year, club, and band number are in place, the rest of the information can be filled in at the end of every round. It is really a very simple process.

I have lists for everything. I list them by age, quality, pairings eye color, distances, types and so on. The nice thing about listing things in Excel is that you also have the ability to color-code your various entries to denote one from the other. For instance, let's say that someone wants to buy a breeding cock from me at the end of the breeding season. I simply mark those in red on my master breeding sheet. That way I can easily keep track of what is going and what is straying. Let's say that I don't feel several pigeons have lived up to their billing during the breeding season, and I might want to replace them. I

simply denote these band numbers in green and so on. It is very easy to set up a color key in Excel so that you can keep track of what the different colors mean. Sometimes I have as many as 15 different colors going at once.

Getting back to my problem in February, I started off by color-coding the pigeons under consideration in tan. Then I began the process of analyzing them based on quality, compatibility (the matrix), pedigree, sex, age, distance, color, eye color, and I created a listing for each.

As I have mentioned before, many of my pigeons have scheduled matings for the next three years, so I had to evaluate where I was in that process. Two pigeons were eliminated from consideration simply because they were to be part of a critical mating sometime in the next year or two. In a way, this evaluation process is a two edged sword. Not only do you need to be careful of what you let go, but you also need to be sure that I am not creating loose ends within the pigeons that I am keeping. For instance, I recently obtained the last direct daughter from the famous 747 cock. Being an older hen, she did not settle in as easy as some, so I was only able to produce three youngsters from here this last breeding year. This was not unexpected, and I was really taking an all or nothing gamble for this coming year when I brought her in. At that point, I planned to mate her to her son for the entire year. Had I let the son go as part of this deal, her value would have dropped considerably. I might have gained on one pigeon, but then I would have lost on another.

As I have mentioned several times, age is an important factor in many of my decisions and it isn't always just because a pigeon is old. Every year, I breed almost exactly the same number of youngsters but, unfortunately, they are not always dispersed so mechanically. Some years, I sell more and some year I do not need as many in the breeding loft. There are a lot of reasons why the distribution isn't as even as the number produced tends to be. As the same time, I work very hard in an attempt to keep about three pigeons of each sex in each band year. Ideally, there would be three 10-year-old cocks and three 10-year old hens, three 9-year-old cocks and three 9-year-old hens and so on. However over the course of time, things happen and this distribution gets disturbed. As with the race team, there are usually more pigeons in the younger years and they tend to thin out overtime. Nonetheless, it is critical that you do not want to let this get too out of hand.

Four coming up on five years ago, the Super Pair went nuts and bred many great pigeons in a single season. Also in limited breeding, they produced three more excellent pigeons over the next two seasons. Now five years later, I was starting to become concerned about the bubble that this was creating in my breeding loft. I simply had too many pigeons in that year from this single pair. As a result, since the beginning of the year I have sold about half of them off. Now, instead of nine from that year, I have four as well as the three from successive years. As a result, down the road in later years, I will not have to rely on or replace as many of these pigeons when they get older. As these pigeons have all been successful, some might think that this is foolish. In fact, I remember reading something that Piet DeWeerd said about keeping those old hens

around for as long as possible. However, in my view, if you are incapable of replacing your good ones, and you must rely heavily on your old ones, you will soon be lost.

I am reminded of a short story. In 2005, I visited the loft of a very very well known fancier in Europe. As I do not want to offend anyone, I will not narrow it down any farther. His cocks were in my view pretty average, but his hens were terrific. However, as I looked through them, I started noticing that his hens were 8, 9, 10 and 11 years old, and it was pretty clear that he had been pushing them pretty hard. When I got done looking at them I said, you know your hens are your strength, but they are too old and you have been pushing them pretty hard. You had better be thinking how you are going to handle this. He scoffed at me, which I can live with, but that certainly didn't change my opinion or his situation.

As I always like to know how these things turn out, I have been getting reports back on this fancier ever since. I understand that in 2006 his breeding hens pretty much completely failed him, and at the end of that year he bought an entirely new breeding loft and has had little success since. That is how old breeding hens can help you. It doesn't hurt to work with one or two, but they need to be the exception, not the rule.

As you can see, there were a number of considerations that went into this February request, but as a result, I was able to make some very good decisions, and thus far, I have not had to look back at those decisions with any regrets. There is nothing more painful in this sport than to realize that you have sold the farm. I talked to a fancier a while back that had a pigeon do well in Taiwan. Soon there was a stream of fanciers visiting his house on a regular basis, or at least until they were sure that the shelf was empty. He was lamenting some of the decisions he had made, and now he does not race well and there is little hope that he will race at that level ever again, especially since the money he earned through the sale of his pigeons had been used in other areas.

If you have not been using Excel, please give it a try. It is truly the best planning program possible for the sport of racing pigeons!

Well, time to go as I hear Mrs. Book slithering....ah ...pulling up the driveway. Time to grovel!

Until next time!

Book

This article is copyrighted by Bill Richardson. Articles cannot be reproduced without the permission of the author.