

A Systematic Lie, Part V

by

Bill “The Book” Richardson

www.ehofkens.com

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After pages and pages, we have now covered the conceptual differences between natural, widowhood cocks, widowhood hens and double widowhood, and, somewhere in here, I promised to try and tie these topics up into some sort of bundle. Boy, I am going to be happy to finish this article!!! I once worked with a guy that told me that when presenting something to never say anything more than, “watch this.” I now see the wisdom of this sound advice! So, watch this!

Before I take on a new student, I have what appears to be a simple little game that I like to play. I ask potential students to play this game because it is easy to say that you want to learn something, but, in application, most people don't want to learn anything. Instead, they want you to give them the answer, and while I might guide a fancier along, I rarely just come out and tell a fancier anything.

When I was a young boy, with the help of my father, I earned the money for my first bicycle by selling papers. On the day that I purchased it, I still remember my father telling me, “You have worked hard to earn this, so I am sure that you will respect its value. However, if you loan it out, others will not treat it with the same respect. I made you earn the money so that you would learn to respect the value of your time.”

I guess the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree, since I don't outright tell people what I have learned for the same reason; they won't respect the information because they didn't earn it. Many fanciers want to learn things related to the sport so that they can beat their competitors, but once they learn it, they can't wait to tell their competitors what they have learned. Once something is common knowledge, the information has lost its value because everyone is equal again. Since I am the one that put in all of the hard work into learn whatever it is that I happen to know, I am also the one that decides who will receive what information and how that information will be provided to them.

Therefore, if I can drive people off with a single question so much the better. Again, while my little game appears simple at first, as the student begins to use up all of the simple answers, he starts to realize that maybe the game is more complicated than he first thought.

I often hear things like, “Well you know the answer, so it is easy for you.” However, there was a time when I didn't know the answer to that question and many others, and I struggled just like them. The difference is that I didn't have anyone to coax me along when I got stuck. Instead, I had to rely on my brute strength approach (my version of a

logical approach). When most fanciers see the determination that is required to learn under my methods, they give up, and that is no disgrace to them because it is hard to know how difficult something is going to be until you have experienced it. Unfortunately, by that point, it is a little embarrassing to quit. There have been times when a couple of fanciers have disliked my method of teaching. However, while I can appreciate the fact that they might not like my methods of teaching, if they are going to learn from me, then they will have to adjust to my methods. The fact is that I am more surprised by those that hang on than I am by those that quit.

The truth is that almost everything in life is much more complicated than it appears at first glance, and there is always someone that is willing to carry things to a different level. The other day, one of my students said, “You know Book, when I first met you, everything you had to say was so different and complicated sounding from anything that I had ever heard before. You laid out the big picture for me, and even with you explaining it, I couldn’t see the edges of that picture. However, now that I am getting more comfortable with your approach, I am starting to realize that I am constantly hearing other fanciers saying bits and pieces of the same things, but they don’t realize what it is that they are saying, so they can never put it all together.”

My point in mentioning this is that in order to understand something, we often need to reason out aspects associated with the past, present, and the future. During this process, we need to apply these aspects to what others have done before us (history) and then apply them to what we are doing (the present) so that we can project the future. The fanciers that my friend was talking about in the above, were aware of what was happening to them at that moment, but then never looked back through their own history to see if there might be a trend, and the never compared their results with the results of present and past fanciers (other than to say I beat him or he beat me) to see if there was enough of a trend line to develop a generality. Instead, they looked at their own results, and thought about it just enough to utter a few words, and then promptly forgot about the whole thing.

If I am going to build a loft, I don’t just run down and buy a bunch of lumber. I think about lofts that I have built (the past), and I think about other lofts that I have seen (the past), I think about the system that I am interested in racing (the present), I think about how many pigeons I am going to need to make the system work (the future) and so on. Obviously, each of these things is going to have a big impact on the type of loft that I am going to build.

Most fanciers understand all of this, but when it comes to thinking about pigeons themselves, most fanciers have never really sat down and contemplated the past, present or future of the sport, and how these things apply to them. In fact, I am stunned by exactly how many fanciers decide to race a specific system without ever looking at the constraints of the system.

I mentioned the concept of developing a “generality” a couple paragraphs back. Because there are so few clear-cut answers to this sport, we all pretty much need to work from

generalities, and those with the best set of generalities tend to be the best at this sport because they don't get all hung up with the exceptions to the rule (this is of course another generality). Generalities are learned through observations that are made about the past and applying them to the present and then using them to project the needs of the future. Therefore, this is a sport that is as much about think backwards in time as it is about thinking forwards in time.

While I have seen fanciers go successfully through their entire racing careers without ever putting anything together, I find this kind of sad because beating the other guy shouldn't be more important than enriching you. Learning should always be the biggest part of anything that we do, and, in terms of this sport, winning should be somewhere down the list. As I have discussed in the past, success can be measured in many ways, and most of those ways don't include a race sheet!

Over the last 35 years, I have raced very well at times, and I have become pretty well know for my selection and breeding techniques. If you asked which was more important to me, I would have to say that one's racing ability doesn't often transcend the borders of his own combine, whereas knowledge transcends all borders. If you bring up your racing exploits to another fancier outside your combine, I will guarantee that he will spend the entire time thinking, "Yeah, but who does he fly against," or "He couldn't have done that racing against me." However, as a good selector, most fancier are intrigued and they want to know things like, "Can he really be as good as everyone says" or "Let's see if he can find my best pigeon" or "Let's see what he really knows" or "Can I learn something from him." The bottom line is that even though most fanciers might not outwardly admit it, knowledge is more important than success on a race sheet.

I guess your point of view, has a lot to do with your approach to this sport. There is a very fine line between the fancier doing all the work for the pigeons and the pigeons doing all the work for the fancier. I hope that I have made this clear throughout this series of articles. Those that live and die by the race sheet tend to miss all of the things that are going on behind the scenes simply because they are too busy doing all of the work for their pigeons.

I share Garth's view from the movie Wayne's World, where he says, "Build a stadium and they will come;" however, I will offer my slight twist, "Build a breeding program and winning will come." From my point of view, it is better to put time into your breeding program and "let" your pigeons do the work instead of spending all of your time "making" them do the work, because the funny thing is that when you "make" them do the work, you suddenly discover that you are doing the work for them. However, unless you take the time to step back, and look at the picture that you have created, you will never realize that this has become the case.

In my view, the most natural racing systems probably provide the most accurate results; however, in truth, it is hard to employ a totally natural method of racing pigeons, and, so while this article may be in comment to the double widowhood system, those comments could be applied to pretty much every system in one way or another. Still I think we all

know that there is a difference between “making” our pigeons perform and “letting” them perform in the most natural way possible.

Every Loft should have a Theme

I have already said this several times, but this article is not about Carsten Petersen; instead, it is about the double widowhood system (DW), which is employed by many fanciers. However, because Carsten quoted me, and that quote happened to be about his situation, I need to use his situation as an example; otherwise, the quote will not make sense. Probably, it won't make sense anyway, but that is a whole different issue.

It is my general opinion that unlike other systems, DW tends to leave the breeding loft without a “theme”. Ok, I am sure there are several of you out there that are wondering what I mean by the word “theme”. We all want our loft to represent what it is that we are trying to achieve. Maybe we want to be a great short or long distance champion, or maybe we want to be a great young or old bird champion. To achieve these goals, we need to have a theme. My current theme incorporates both the Hofkens and Horemans under the umbrella of an inbreeding/hybrid program. Everything I that I do is designed to fit under the umbrella of the theme that I have chosen.

Most lofts don't have a theme; they just have a bunch of breeders. Often, none of these breeders have anything in common with each other and the fancier has no real idea where he is going. I am often asked, “How can you can take a new set of pigeons and build in a direction so quickly,” or “how can you make a change in direction so quickly?” The answer is very simple; I have a theme. Actually, I have two themes. One theme is temporary and defines the selection period, and the other theme is long term and defines the future of the program.

The temporary theme (the selection theme) is based on the pigeons that I initially either select into or out of a program. The pigeons need to fit together in some way in order to form a theme. Sometimes how they fit into a theme is clear cut and sometimes it isn't. In the case of the Hofkens, I received a group of very good pigeons, but they were not of my choosing, and, while there was a general theme, not all of the pigeons that I received fit that theme. Therefore, the ones that weren't central to my theme were moved out. This didn't make them bad pigeons by any means; in fact, most went on to have great success in other lofts. Still, they didn't fit my theme.

The Horemans, on the other hand, had been built around a well defined theme for many generations, so, in this case, what I tried to do was to select the pigeons that I believed best represented that theme (direct offspring from champions lineage, best breeders, middle of the size range, varied lines...) and, because there were so many good ones to choose from, it was easy to stick to the theme.

Sometimes, we need a specific ingredient that we believe will make our family better, so we may bring in a small group of pigeons for consideration. While there may be some very good pigeons within this group, they may be in no-man's-land in terms of a theme,

which means that they are somewhere between being culled out completely and having a theme of their own. In situations like these, it can often take several weeks to work out all the details of this temporary selection theme. However, often in the end, they usually can't stand on their own either because we purchased too few or because the overall quality just isn't good enough. Therefore, these pigeons become an ingredient to another theme, or they are removed from the loft altogether.

For instance, I recently purchased some Husken Van Riels because I thought they had an ingredient that would benefit my breeding program. While I originally purchased 8 pigeons, they will probably boil down to two excellent pairs and that just isn't enough to stand on their own. However, because of what they can potentially add to the program, they will probably be blended into one of the two families.

Once the temporary (selection) theme is complete, it goes away, I either begin building my future theme or I adjust my future theme to incorporate any new pigeons that can stand on their own. Right now that appears to be a two family inbred/hybrid breeding program with the ingredient pigeons HVR's playing some part in one of the families.

Clearly, there are many fanciers out there that race a system like DW, don't have a theme, and just have a bunch of breeders. However, there are also some very good fanciers out there that race double widowhood, have great pigeons (mostly purchased) and still don't have a theme or at least a concise theme. Obviously the reason for not having a theme is pretty apparent, but these fanciers just never developed one. In the case of DW, it can sometimes be very difficult to develop a single theme because the system itself provides for a number of different possibilities. This is because it focuses on both sexes and short and long distances.

For the theme of the loft to be correct, it must have an excellent tie between three things, the task at hand (the type of race course), a consistent and reliable test, and a breeding program that not only incorporates the results of the test, but produces better pigeons for taking that test. By themselves these three points are extremely complicated to create and maintain; however, when you include both sexes and short and long distances, along with the three mentioned above, it is easy to find yourself working with 12 variables.

As we have discussed, the best widowhood cocks are cock based pigeons, and Carsten had some excellent examples of this type of pigeon. At the same time, the hen based pigeons are best at the distance, and Carsten also had many excellent examples of these as well. In both cases, Carsten has purchased many or most of his breeders from excellent stock in Holland.

It is my guess that Carsten has made a significant investment in his current breeding stock, with the hope of building a family for the future. We have already discussed how buying pigeons from one location and racing them in another may provide certain types of success, but not necessarily total success. He has purchased the best pigeons (and hopefully the best bloodlines), but now as part of step two, he also needs to transition the successful race winners into the breeding loft and then as part of step three, he will need

to prove that all of these pigeons can be blended together to produce winners. Those are to say the least, very difficult steps. Therefore, if he is to be successful with this transition, it will likely take several generations.

Without a theme, the transition from the racing loft into the breeding loft is extremely difficult, and the more fragmented the test, the more inconsistent the results of the test. For Carsten, this is where a theme is going to be extremely important! He needs to know what his future focus is going to be. Right now, Carsten is still a young man, so he might want to focus on everything, but one day the job, the family and the pigeons will become too much to handle and then he will need to refocus. However, since he is already transitioning, it would be a good time for him to transition into a situation that he can handle. Still, as I mentioned earlier, the success of this transition is largely based on Carsten limiting the number of variables that he incorporates into his theme.

In terms of this sport, at 47, I am a rather young man myself, so I don't want to come across as the old wise man telling the younger fancier how to go about his business. Therefore, let me give the example that I have in mind and it involves Tiger Woods, the great American golfer. Obviously, we all know that Tiger came into the game with an amazing power swing. While in golf terms, Tiger is still very young, he came to the realization that he needed to change his golf swing in order to prolong his career. While he could have waited until he was forced to do so, he was clever enough to not wait that long. If the greatest golfer in the world can think ahead, then we probably should be working on it ourselves. With this analogy, maybe my suggestion will be more palatable.

Double widowhood has had an interesting history, and I think it is important to this discussion. As we have often discussed, today, many fanciers are locked into the cock based pigeons, and they have provided many great results under 300 miles. As many areas are no longer racing the 600 mile races, most fanciers with these cock based families are scrambling to cover the 400 and 500 mile races. Therefore, many fanciers have adopted the DW system in an effort to increase their numbers and to make the hens available to help cover the 400 and 500 mile races. Granted the hens from the cock based families are not as good at the distance as the hens from the old hen based families, but they generally still have about 100 miles more distance than the cocks. This gives most fanciers coverage through the 400 miles and possibly through an easy 500 mile race.

To be a champion in all distance racing, you must finish the season strong, so some fanciers are experimenting with two new possibilities or evolutions to the system. First, under current methods of racing double widowhood, there is also the distinct possibility that either the cock or the hen will get lost. While DW is not quite as dependent on the stability of the mating as a pure widowhood systems are, losing a mate is still disruptive to the DW system. Therefore, for those fanciers that have more room and more breeding pairs, there is always the option of having a separate set of mates for the cocks and a separate set of mates for the hens (these mates don't fly the races), which essentially turns DW into two separate systems. While this would obviously make the system more stable (especially where the widowhood cocks are concerned), it also almost doubles the number of pigeons the fancier is forced to keep (including breeders).

Somewhere in here, I would think that fanciers would start to realize that the point of DW was to maintain a reasonable number of breeders. Once fanciers start to add in all of these mates, they might just as well increase the number of breeders and go back to racing the natural system.

I really think that this second evolution is just under way, and I think it is gaining some speed. A number of fanciers have come to realize that the cock based hens still don't really cut it at the longer distances, especially on those courses where they still race a 600 mile race. Therefore, there is a new move afoot to purchase hen based families to cover these longer races. As I discussed in one of the earlier parts to this article, here in the United States, there is no money to be won during these distance races, so there is really no incentive to put big money into this approach. Therefore, the real race, at least in the American sport, is now between those fanciers that will spend the money to retool for the distance, and those fanciers that want to do away with races over 400 miles.

Now let's go back and talk about the elusive second step, the evolution of the breeding loft. This leads to my question to Carsten, "If your cocks are all from cock based families and they win short, and your hens are from hen based families and they win long, and you put both of them into the breeding loft, then what do you suppose they are going to breed?"

Assuming we are retiring successful cock based cocks from the short distance races, and hen based hens for the long distance races, I would think there might be a problem in the breeding loft for at least three reasons. First, because there are more short races, and, therefore, more tests, the cock based cocks will dominate the breeding loft (which is how the cock based cocks got started here in American in the first place).

Second, when you mate a short distance cock to a long distance hen, you will produce some short, middle, and long distance pigeons. In theory, the short distance cock will potentially lose some speed and gain some endurance, while the hen will lose some endurance and gain some speed. However, in the second generation, if all goes according to the laws of natural, the cock will gain very little from the hen, and the hen will lose their ability to race the distance. This will almost assuredly lead the fancier back to where he was when he was relying on the cock based hen to cover the 400 mile races.

Third, in order to avoid all of this, the fancier would need to either keep a set of short distance cock based cock and cock based hen, and a set of long distance hen based hen and hen based cock, and thereby at least double the size of the breeding team, or the fancier would have to continually buy hen based hen in an effort to offset the dilution by the cock based cock.

Again, going back to my very first article (The Relationship between Age and Quality) you will see that without outside help, it is going to be very difficult to maintain more than 12 pairs of pigeons. On a standard double widowhood system, a fancier might be able to do this; however, on a hybrid double widowhood system, such as the one

described above, this is very unlikely to be the case. It would be my guess that it would take at least 24 pairs of breeders to make this system work.

In this instance, it is unlikely that the fancier is building toward a better breeding program, especially since once he crosses over the 12 pair threshold he is going to need help from an outside source. At the same time, the fancier will be further hampered because these breeding pairs would have to be split between the short and the long distances, which will either lead to more pairs or too few pairs in each category. Again more pairs leads to quality issues, and too few pairs leads to issues with line survivability (it is hard to maintain line of pigeons when you are operating with less than five pairs). This is where we come back to the word “theme”. The theme of the loft is based on what the fancier is trying to accomplish. For instance, when I race widowhood hens, I know that I am going to give up a little in the short races to gain a lot in the long races. While I may lose in the short races, I am only going to be a couple of minutes behind, and I can make this up later on in the long races. Once I concede the shorter races, and concentrate on the longer races, I can also focus on a single sex, and since I believe in bring a gun to a gun fight, I am going to go with the hens. Therefore, my theme is breeding hens for distances of 300 through 600 miles. By focusing on a single aspect, I can base all 12 pairs on that aspect. Once I break that focus, down into two three or four subgroups, the theme is shortly lost, and so is the breeding program.

Conclusion

Since Part V of this article has been something of an ongoing conclusion, I don't think that we really need a conclusion to a conclusion, so I will try to keep this to a very limited recap.

Again, in my view, the natural system still provides the best overall theme since as the name implies, it is still the most natural system because it incorporates both sexes and somewhat more natural nesting conditions. In order for pigeons to win under this system, they have to be self-motivated, and clearly the best pigeons are self-motivated. Because winners under this system are self-motivated, they tend to bring this very important trait into the breeding program where it is once again translated back out to the next generation of racers. Also under this system, the cocks can be tested at the distance, and this is extremely important to the breeding program as well.

My second choice of systems is still going to be widowhood hens. While I think this is an excellent system, I still have reservations about the number of breeding pairs, the number of young birds, and the number of hens over all that are required to make the system work. Unfortunately, this can still be a big weakness to this system. I also can't help but be concerned about the availability of hen based families. Before employing this system, I would carefully consider the shipping limit of the area that you race in. While this is still something of a forced motivation system, it still has a theme that can be carried from the race team to the breeding loft.

Racing widowhood cocks leaves me a little cold in terms of a theme. While cocks are excellent during the short races, they are generally very average on the longer races. Worse yet, while they tend to come into the season strong, they generally go out of form after so many weeks, and unfortunately, this usually happens during the distance races where they are already questionable, so they can be easily lost.

To me, DW is just another way to race more pigeons under the semi-widowhood system. On paper it appears great because it allows the cocks to do what they do best, and hens to do what they do best, but this translates to at least a dual theme, and together those two themes just don't work very well in the breeding loft. It is also a forced motivational system. Between increased numbers, forced motivation, and poor transferability into the breeding loft, if you are going to be in this sport long term, I would at this point reconsider the use of this system. Obviously, this kind of runs counter to the current trend in thinking, but that is nothing new for me.

Until next time!

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