

Tennessee Here We Come!

by

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April 12, 2005

I guess one of the things that make the breeding of racing pigeons so much fun is that every year I am faced with a whole new set of circumstances. For me, this year would certainly be no exception!

If you have read any of my past articles, you know that I have spent a fair amount of time discussing line breeding and inbreeding. During several of those discussions, I have mentioned that line breeding is like being five miles away from a cliff and driving five miles an hour toward that cliff. Inbreeding, on the other hand, is like being five miles away from the cliff and driving 50 miles an hour toward the cliff. However, with inbreeding comes the possibility of higher rewards... oh and the significant possibility of devastating failure as well.

While I have done some inbreeding over the years, it hasn't always gone exactly as planned. True, this wasn't performed on a line bred family such as the Hofkens where the genes were already lined out; in fact, it would have been hard to describe those pigeons as line bred at all. I remember reading a quote from Piet Deweerdt—he said something to the effect that you don't know if you have a family until you know if your family can successfully inbreed, as very few families inbreed successfully.

When it comes to pigeons, I am generally a very cautious person. I fully believe that the worst is about to happen, so I sniff very cautiously around the bait before I commit myself. As I am sure that things are always about to go wrong, some might even call me pessimistic. This is because I have learned from experience that good ole Murphy had me in mind when he came up with his famous law: “What can go wrong, will go wrong.” Actually, I don't consider myself as pessimistic at all; the word that I would use is “realistic.” If you have been through what I have been through, and you can still be optimistic, then my guess is that you are also an idiot! Sorry to any idiots that I may have offended!

It is always extremely important for me to bear in mind that I haven't raced pigeons for quite some time, and I keep very few pigeons to boot. Using this formula, there is significant room for error.

Therefore, I am always testing both inside and outside of the loft. I have been around pigeons for a long time, and I have a pretty good idea of which pigeons are capable of doing what. However, as pigeons become more line bred, they may look the same, but they don't always continue to performance the same, especially within their family. In

fact, as I have mentioned in past articles, as the inbreeding coefficient starts to increase, performance starts to decrease. When performance starts to decrease due to line breeding, it will continue to do so each generation thereafter. As mentioned in my example involving the cliffs, if line breeding can decrease performance, inbreeding will only quicken the problem. In reality, there is no point in owning a cock bird if you don't have a hen to mate to it. There is also no point in inbreeding unless you have an outcross to mate to it.

Depending on the size and relationship of the pigeons that make up your base family, at some point there will likely be a crossover point from line bred to inbred. Obviously, this is not a concise process that happens to all of your pigeons at exactly the same time. However, this will eventually happen to almost every family. In past articles, I have mentioned that many fanciers have so much time devoted to their families that they simply are not willing to recognize the signs that their line breeding program is starting to crossover into inbreeding. Unfortunately, this is a significant risk to working a "closed family."

Closed Family and Testing

To date, my Hofkens are what I would call a "closed family." I do have one exception, and I am going to mention it here because I think it is noteworthy since it illustrates some of the testing practices that I mentioned earlier.

Something to think about!

Last year, I mated a Hofkens cock to a Colorado hen to produce several hybrids. The point of the mating was to send a money-banded youngster to one of my students who happens to live on Long Island in New York. As the mother has all white flights, and the father was a blue, I wanted to wait as long as possible to band them so that I could band the one with the most white, assuming there was a choice. As luck would have it, the first round turned out to be a white flight and a blue. Therefore, I banded the white flight with the money band, and I banded the blue with a regular band and kept her for testing.

I don't remember right off-hand exactly how many youngsters I sent him, but I think it was around six. Before shipping off the group, I went through these pigeons very carefully. I selected out two that I thought would perform at or very near the top, and, of these, one happened to be the white flight. When I got back from the Post Office, I called my friend and told him that while I thought all six were nice, I especially liked two, and that if he did everything right, it could win the money race, which happened to be something like a 420-mile young-bird race. As I suggested, those two out-performed the rest, and the white flight placed second in the race against 140 lofts even though the speeds were approximately 1700 YPM and he was flying into a head wind out on the island.

The reason that I kept the sister to this hybrid cock was specifically to backcross her to her father, which I did this year. They are both beautiful pigeons and they match each other very well. The goal of the mating was to see if the Colorado blood could be

successfully backcrossed into the Hofkens blood under inbreeding conditions. Well, it is early to make a judgment, but one of the two youngsters in the first round has five toes! While the hybrid mating performed successfully, this first round of inbreeding is questionable. While I would never make a judgment based on a single pigeon, it may be a warning sign, so I am watching them very closely.

Back to the "Closed Family"

As my family of Hofkens is primarily based around five pigeons, they are clearly becoming more line bred with every passing generation. Because I know that this is occurring, I am on the constant watch for signs that would indicate that I am moving from line bred to inbred.

As I have stated before, it has been awhile since I last raced, and I have never had the opportunity to fly the Hofkens. This has never bothered me as it might some people, because I have a feel for pigeons, and my pigeons are based on that feel. In fact, sometimes results actually muddy the water because they are often based on a given day or year. In other words, winning is a confirmation of something, be it the day, the conditions, the airline, or the ability of the pigeon. If the confirmation follows my beliefs, then I give it more attention than I otherwise might.

I don't want to make it sound like I ignore results, because I don't. Instead, I have a little counter in my head that is keeping track of how many pigeons I am sending out, what the quality if those pigeons are, and how often they come to the top of the loft or the top of the overall competition. As I have an idea about pigeons, I pretty much know the type of feedback that I should be getting over a certain period of time. If I don't happen to get that feedback in what I consider to be a timely fashion, then I start looking around for a reason.

For instance, in 1999, I had an auction involving 32 pigeons. I knew there were many very good pigeons in that auction, but in the first year after the auction the only pigeon that I really heard about was the 2000 Snowbird average-speed winner that was out of one of them. However, the following year, I heard very positive results from approximately 2/3 of them. That was confirmation! When I was in Florida last year, three different people came up to me and said, "Remember when you had that auction...." That is what I am interested in hearing.

Over the last seven years, it has become very clear to me that the Hofkens family or at least my Hofkens family has the unique ability to blend in nicely with many other families. In fact, I can only think of one outcross that didn't work out for me as expected. Probably, I should have been creating hybrids through out-crossing all along, but, because of the limited number of pigeons that I keep, I really didn't want to get hung up in handling a bunch of unrelated pigeons in the earlier stages of the game. Further, I have limited my out-crossing because each out-crossing requires the use of a Hofkens breeder, and I needed these breeders for use in the family more than I needed to produce hybrids. Nonetheless, I have always kept this concept in the back of my mind, because of what I am about to explain.

Building around Key Bloodlines

Over the last seven years, I have been in what I would call “phase one” of my breeding program. During that period, I identified and narrowed down my family to five key pigeons: Topman, De Welches, the Yellowed Eyed Merckx, the Pearl Eyed Merckx, De Welches, and the Bird of Paradise. While I could have gone on with the rest, in my mind, it was these five pigeons that I wanted to build around. Therefore, in 2000, I drastically reduced my pairings and started primarily working with these five pigeons.

Improvement vs. Increased Line Breeding

It was shortly after the Stalin-like purges of 2000 that I first encountered a problem that was new to me. Although the five pigeons that I had chosen to build my family around were excellent pigeons, they clearly had the ability to produce even better pigeons. At the same time, with such a limited base and with the passing of each generation, my inbreeding program was becoming tighter and tighter.

If I didn't turn the generations, I couldn't get to the final product, but if I turned the generations too quickly, I risked the possibility of not raising enough out of each generation, and, thereby, reducing my chances of bringing enough of the genetic past forward. I have stated before in great detail how important it is that you bring the best pigeons forward within three generations of the last superstar.

The more pigeons produced within each generation, the better the chances of bringing the genetic past forward, yet the longer you spend in a single generation the less chance that you will ever get where you are going. In starting with such a limited base, I knew that the crossover point from line breeding was probably going to be somewhere between five and ten generations.

Line breeding is something like using a dimmer switch on your living room lights. The first generation is like having the light full on, and with each passing generation, the dimmer switch is turned down a little to the point where things start getting dark. Therefore, the first generation is still very bright and you can affect a great deal of change by your selection of matings. However, with each passing generation, your ability to improve your family becomes extremely limited.

What sped me along a little faster than normal from line breeding to the brink of inbreeding was the fact that the Pearl Eyed Merckx and the Yellow Eyed Merckx were brothers, the son to De Welches was out of 929 and 929, and the Merckx brothers share the same grandparents. Those are the problems that I can remember right off.

Now I could have slowed the process down by spending five years on each generation, and it would have been 25 years before I reached the end of the fifth generation. I could have also gone the other route and reached the end in five. Basically, I chose the latter and here is why. In so doing, I could do both at the same time.

Because my breeders were young, I was able to quickly produce a very solid second generation. Once they were producing the third generation, I could continue to produce more from the first generation. If the first generation produced a better pigeon than the first time around, then I simply replaced the lesser pigeon for the following year's breeding. The most recent success story in this regard is the 392 cock from last year. He is similar to his grandfather, the Pearl Eyed Merckx, but he is a much better pigeon. He is out of the second generation pigeons at a time when I was already working on fourth generation pigeons. Think of it as being a general. I was able to move my tanks up front and at the same time maintain an excellent supply line that stretched clear back to the rear.

A Change is Coming

It was at the end of the fifth year that I realized that, like it or not, I was entering phase two of my breeding program, which was the transition from line breeding to inbreeding. I was first tipped off to the situation because the improvements between generations were getting smaller, and, at the same time, I was getting far more excellent pigeons from each generation. In fact, this year, I wound up with a half dozen young hens that were functionally identical.

It was at this point that I remembered my good friend Mauricio Jemal and what he had said to me several months earlier. I will paraphrase it the best I can: "Book, where I failed was not within my family, but in the fact that I hadn't started a second family. Eventually every family will become too inbred and with that inbreeding comes diminishing performance, and, finally, when the pigeons have reached their maximum breeding performance they have reached their minimum racing performance. It is at this point that you need that second family."

Alerted by Mauricio's words, and drifting farther back in time, I remembered (and you may also from previous articles) that my teacher Don Falkenborg was extremely interested in inbreeding, and he always kept three totally unrelated families. Interesting, Don based his families around distance. By this I mean that he had a short-distance family, a middle-distance family and a longer-distance family. The biggest of the three families was the middle family that was based around 400 miles. Don would always say that the majority of races are between 250 and 500 miles and a pigeon that was based around 400 miles would have a strong chance of winning anywhere within these distances.

Don also always said that if you bred exclusive within these families (not crossing one to the other), the short-distance pigeons would tend to get shorter and the long-distance pigeons would tend to get longer, and that you needed the middle to keep both ends honest.

Before I continue, I would like to point out that I didn't just realize that a change was coming because of six youngsters. No, instead, a number of tests that I had been running all came back indicating that a change was coming. At the same time, sensing change, I

went into a strategic planning session that lasted several months. This planning session was based on three possibilities.

Option #1

The first was to enact immediate evasive maneuvers such as out crossing and then back crossing. This is extremely risky to perform as a short-term option because if the two blood lines happen not to work well together, it may take a while to find out. By the time you do find out, the new bloodlines may already have engulfed the old bloodlines to such an extent that there is no turning back.

Option #2

The second option is to bring in individual pigeons for out crossing with no intent to back cross. However, if this is the option, then it is time to “crank up the gain” in your family through inbreeding (further concentrate the blood lines). Here again, assuming that you are housing a limited number of pigeons, inbreeding in itself requires a significant number of pigeons. When I hear fanciers say that inbreeding is no big thing, I immediately know that they don’t know what they are talking about. To keep the line breeding going will require approximately 15 pairs of pigeons. To inbreed will take another five pairs of pigeons. To have enough inbred pigeons available to produce the number of hybrids to effectively fill a race team will take another 10 pigeons, which then must be mated to ten outcrosses.

Option #3

The third option is to either buy into a second family or to build a second family. I tried this several years ago with the Devriendts, but they didn’t work out for health reasons, so they went by the wayside. The problem is that in those two years, the Hofkens have become far more line bred, and now I know that I am at the crossover point. Therefore, I just don’t have the time to waste building a second family! So, if I went with this option at all, I determined that the only real possibility was to buy into a second family.

Realize that I have three goals. The first is to maintain the Hofkens family in the best way possible; the second is to sell pigeons where practical; and the third is to enter pigeons into the money races for testing as is practical. Goal number one drives how many are available for goal number two. Goal number three is the byproduct of Options #2 or #3, and they really don’t affect goals #1 or #2 in any way other than validation that goal #1 is on track.

I churned this around for almost another month before reaching a conclusion. In the end, I decided to incorporate a three-pronged attack. First, at the end of May, I decided that I could and should wait no longer in performing a full-blown test of the inbreeding capabilities of my Hofkens family. Second, over the summer, I purchased several unrelated pigeons that I thought would cross into the family in the “short term.” Third, I selected and purchased three pairs of truly excellent Horemans pigeons from my good friend Ed Lorenz.

Much to my relief, the inbreeding program went amazingly well! I raised approximately a dozen excellent inbred youngsters out of three Hofkens pairs. In the process, I mated one pair brother/sister, one pair father/daughter and one pair mother/son. As not all of these youngsters were old enough to breed when I put the pairings together this year, I was only able to use two of them right away. Both are being crossed against my “short-term” purchases to produce hybrids for the money races.

The short-term pigeons are interesting in themselves. I have selected several unrelated but similar pigeons for this purpose. Obviously the first intent is to use them as short-term crosses as mentioned above. However, there is a second intent as well. They are so similar because as soon as the hybrids are shipped off to the races, they will be mated together to produce more crosses that I can mate against my Hofkens to produce hybrids.

The three pairs from Ed Lorenz are going to be a long-term project. I honestly don't know how I could have done better in my selection of these pigeons, and, frankly, regardless of how I selected, obviously Ed played a very big part in allowing me to buy from his very best. As quality is not an issue, over the next several years, I will attempt to increase the family from three to ten pairs. The Horemans have already proven that they can inbreed, and I have already started this process. In fact, two of the pigeons are from a father/daughter mating, and they have been mated together to produce double inbreds.

To speed the process along (and based on last year's inbreeding results), over half of this year's matings are producing inbreds. While I realize that this may seem a little radical when compared to my stance on inbreeding from even just last year, my breeders are very young and I have plenty of time to run a test program.

In wrapping up this article, I would like to make one final point. Now that I have entered the valley of inbreeding, there is a whole new game afoot. Where I used to turn the generations rather quickly to make as many improvements as possible as quickly as possible, this is no longer the case. Inbreeding can only go so far, and as I have limited space, I cannot afford massive line bred populations sitting on the side lines. Therefore, I intend to allow the average age of my breeders to move from 3 years old to 5 years old. I will also be building a stock loft so that I can fortify my base family.

As I am only in the process of doing this for the first time, I can't say if it is a good thing or a bad thing right now. What I can say is that I am gaining speed and the cliff is probably getting closer. However, at this point it is something of a fatal attraction.

Until next time!

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