

## Centerpieces and Movers

by

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May 11, 2006

I started this article the other day, but I quickly realized that it might be more complicated than I currently had time to write. However, since I have already lost so much time in coming to that conclusion, I have proceeded ahead anyway. My hope in writing this article is that I could get fanciers to understand that it really doesn't take many pigeons to start a family. In fact, in my opinion, most fanciers fail at building a family because they try to incorporate too many pigeons into the base of the family. I am not trying to say that it can't be done this way, but I am saying that as the base gets bigger, it takes more time to develop them into a family.

Conceptually starting with just a few pigeons is difficult for most fanciers to comprehend. I guess this is in part because most fanciers don't build a breeding team and then start racing. Usually these two aspects of the sport are done simultaneously, and this requires that we start with many more pigeons. Once these extra pigeons are there, we seem to just keep using them. In truth, some fanciers actually do break through the curve and actually build a family from a broad base, but many more fail along the way, or they never get the family to where it could have gone had they worked with the best of the group instead of the total group. This is further complicated when a fancier attempts to build and keep two families simultaneously to produce hybrids. Trying to build two families and simultaneously keeping a young bird and old bird race team means that the fancier must house a lot of pigeons. After a while, I think that many fanciers get trapped into keeping too many pigeons, and this leads to confusion.

The fact is that many great lofts are founded on as few as six pigeons. However, these founding pigeons are not necessarily the top pigeons in the loft. Instead, they are what I call key pigeons, which I will explain in a minute. The fancier might already own these key pigeons or he might need to purchase them from someone else but either way, the number of pigeons involved should be minimal. For instance, Mauricio Jemal started with six (it might have been five) to build the Jemal Janssen's, and Ed Lorenz first started with four pigeons to build the Stassarts and then later five or six pigeons to build the Horemans.

During my loft visitations, the vast majority of fanciers seem to know which pigeons are their top pigeons. However, they have no idea which pigeons are their key pigeons. Key pigeons are impact pigeons! They have the ability to maintain an inbred family, and they have the ability to move a less inbred forward. If the fancier fails to recognize them, then he will not be able to maintain his breeding program.

Once years ago, I became friends with a top distance fancier. Unfortunately, after knowing him for about a year, he told me that he was going to quit the sport and the he was going to sell his pigeons. I was just out of college at the time and money was tight, but I asked him if I could go in and pick out one pigeon. When I came out of the loft, he looked my selection and asked me, "With all the pigeons in that loft, why did you select that one." In truth, I was a little taken back by this question, as I would have thought he would have recognized this as the best one of his five key pigeons!

Unfortunately, I got her late in the breeding season, and was only able to get three youngsters from her (Even though she was young, the next season she became egg bound and died while I was on vacation). Of the children I was able to produce, one of them was high point champion twice, won the 300 and the 500, and was never out of the top ten in three seasons. Another won the 300, and the third won the 600. The 600 mile winner bred my high point champion and Hall of Fame pigeon that won the 400, 500 and 600 mile races all in the same year, and the double high point pigeon bred ten winners in two years. I would say that she might have been a key pigeon, wouldn't you?

From the ground, a mass of pigeons flying in the air looks like a mass of pigeons. To a hawk, one pigeon in a mass of pigeons look like a meal. In a similar manner, most fanciers can identifying top pigeons, but very few can identify the key pigeon or pigeons in a group of top pigeons. In fact, I am not sure that many fancier even realize that key pigeons even exist.

During my most recent visit with Ed Lorenz, we were sitting around talking, when he said, "Over the years, there have been a number of pigeon graders come through here, and several were able to identify the top pigeons. Three that come to mind are Piet De Weerd, Mauricio Jemal and (the late) Brad La Verne." Knowing of Piet's reputation through my teacher, and having had the pleasure of knowing the other two gentlemen personally, I would strongly agree, so I nodded to Ed statement. Ed didn't mention himself in that group, but he clearly belongs.

He then said, "Like them, you clearly have those same abilities. I have also had many fancier visit my loft to buy pigeons, and it is when a fancier actually buys a pigeon, that I know what he really know about pigeons and what he is thinking. A fancier can say this is a nice pigeon, but until he places a sizable amount of money on the table to purchase the pigeon, he is only talking? Even if you give most fanciers their pick, generally they don't hurt you unless they already have offspring from a particular pigeon, and they are back to buy its proven parents. Having watched you, I know how good you are by what you have taken out of here, and I have never seen anyone that can hit the key pigeons the way you have. At first, I thought you were identifying the key pigeons as you went along, but then I realized on your last visit that you walked into a loft that we had not been that day, and you immediately asked to purchase a pigeon that I know that you had not seen in a year. I have been thinking about that along with the order in which you have been taking the key pigeons. However, it wasn't until today that I realized that you not only have the key pigeons identified and ranked, but that you have been taking the key pigeons out of here from top to bottom less the old ones which you don't want."

I got kind of red in the face and said, “Well Ed, you are right, in that I have memorized all the key pigeons and that I have been trying to take them in order. However, in my defense, I was doing so because I was never sure how far you would let me go before you said, ‘Enough’ (I pretty much assumed that this conversation meant that he was saying, ‘Enough!’)” Ed has many top pigeons, but still he understood the concept of key pigeons.

There are two distinct factors that make a pigeon key to the loft. They are either the centerpiece of the loft, and thereby contains all of the best physical traits of the loft, or they have unique traits that when added into the family will allow the family to move in a different direction. I call the latter “movers”. So, how do you tell the difference? Centerpieces are relatively easy to identify because they tend to match up very well with virtually any pigeon of the opposite sex from their respective family, whereas, pigeons that help the loft to move in a new direction are different enough from the rest of the family that only a select few from within the family will match up with them correctly.

In an inbred family, pigeons generally don’t get better from generation to generation (let me make it clear, that I am not talking about the building of an inbred family; instead, I am talking about the family when they are pretty much fully inbred). Genetically, what you have is what you will have until the family goes into a down turn or you introduce something different by means of an outcross. The more inbred the family, the more likely that the great pigeon or pigeons in the loft will be centerpieces. This is primarily because, through inbreeding, the gene pool of the family is getting smaller. By definition, in an inbred family, the centerpiece must be an extraordinary pigeon that is not only capable of producing many great pigeons, but is also capable of reproducing itself in terms of level of quality. If it is incapable of reproducing himself, then the family is on the downhill slide. Because these pigeons are not flown, one must judge them for a consistent or declining level quality through their offspring, and this can often take several years. It is not enough to say that you think the son is better than the dad or successive generations are better than the first generation.

My view has always been that if I can identify a centerpiece, but I can’t identify an offspring of equal quality, then it is time for an outcross. For instance, my top cock is an inbred, as are his sisters, and he has a double inbred son that I believe has a chance to be at least as good as he is.

Picture Mr. Ed

Picture 54, Double Inbred Hen

Picture The Yellow Eyed Hen

Picture The U Cock, son to Mr. Ed

I am basing this on the fact that I can take any hen that I would mate to the dad, and mate it to the son, and not feel like I had lost anything. Therefore, like the dad, this son has the centerpiece qualities. While the son has several excellent brothers, I cannot say the same for them. However, the son has four sisters that have these centerpiece qualities as well.

#### Example 986

Still, these are all double inbreds, and it is unlikely that I can continue to inbreed much closer without some sort of eventual problem. When they become too tightly bred, and I no longer have the confidence that I am maintaining quality, then I will be forced to step back to the last successful generation and outcross and then backcross. While these inbreds are my core breeders, I have mated the top cock to several less closely bred pigeons this year with the hope that it will give me a little room to maneuver without them being so inbred. To demonstrate this centerpiece quality a little further, when I finish a round with the top key cock, I remate the same hen to his son.

When a pigeon is considered to be a key pigeon, but it is not a centerpiece to the family, it may have the ability to move the family in a different direction. These pigeons are usually a product of out crossing and then back crossing. To re-obtain the level of inbreeding, offspring from successive generations will likely be backcrossed several times. For instance, if a cock is from within the family, and the hen is the outcross, then a daughter from the pair will be mated back to the father to create a first generation inbred. This may even be done a second time by mating the granddaughter back to the father/grandfather (I would usually double back like this). By double inbreeding back to a parent from the family side of the mating, much of the outcross will likely be lost. Therefore, while we may see some movement within the family in either direction or vitalization of the family, by the time these pigeons have been doubled backcrossed, they are going to be more like the family than the offspring. At this point, these pigeons are in the position to be out-crossed again. If I am looking for movement, I may even go back to the same outcross family.

The next thing that I am interested in is compatibility within these key pigeons. Clearly, a skilled fancier with the ability to identify key pigeons could go out and purchase three key cocks and three key hens. These could be related or unrelated; however, it is unusual for them to be related because if you took six key pigeons from most lofts, you would wipe out the loft. Therefore, most of the time, fanciers purchase several unrelated key pigeons from several lofts. This is where compatibility comes in. In the process of building a family from unrelated pigeons is extremely reliant on the compatibility of the majority of the pigeons over the first three generations. This is because in reality, the first generation produces weak hybrids, and it takes several more generations to work through this problem.

Over the years, I have developed a very strong view on the subjects of quality and compatibility. There are many levels of compatibility, and the fancier that is willing to work with a lesser level of compatibility will never achieve great success within his family. Many will read this and say, "That's obvious." Is it? If it is then I would have to ask why so many fanciers purchase excellent unrelated pigeons and then proceed to breed downward. Assuming that these fanciers truly started with excellent pigeons, most fanciers simply can't tell the subtle differences, good or bad, from generation to generation, and, therefore, they have no idea where they are headed until they are too far down the path. Therefore, for every family that is going up in quality, there are many more that are on their way down. Ascending families will always have three things in common: key pigeons, quality and compatibility. Descending families may start from a position of quality, but they either lack the key pigeons or they are incompatible.

We now need to consider two different categories of key pigeons: related and unrelated. Let's discuss the unrelated key pigeons first. To keep this simple, let's use the example of three cocks and three hens. Because they are all unrelated, there is a reasonably small chance that all of the matings will be compatible, and there is also a reasonably small chance that none of the matings will be compatible. In fact, most situations will be somewhere in the middle. As the number of compatible matings go up so do the chances for success. For true success, it is most likely that these pigeons will need to be 75% to 100% compatible, and for a slower descent, the pigeons will probably be 50% to 75% compatible. Past that, it is likely that there will be a rapid descent in quality. Assuming total success, the family has the potential to move up to the capability of the gene pool and assuming total failure, the family will move down to the lowest common denominator. Further, the more key pigeons you add to the formula, the greater the chance of at least some incompatibly.

There is a plausible solution to incompatibility, and this is to cull out the ones that are not compatible and either have less key pigeons, or add more key pigeons. While fewer key pigeons may eliminate the problem, it can also narrow the initial gene pool still further; however, it is probably still the best answer to the problem. Adding new pigeons to the base pigeons, may correct the problem with the incompatible pairs, but it may also create new situations of incompatibility. Changing out pigeons to gain total compatibility could be a slow and expensive process, and because you are going to need time with these base pigeons, I would not recommend several years of milling around the starting point.

When it comes to unrelated pigeons, it might be best to increase the number of pairs by a couple of pairs, and then remove those that are incompatible. Remember that in order to fully test compatibility, it is a good idea to test the matings as many ways as possible. Because it could take two to three years to get through all of the matings and have enough offspring to prove out compatibility, you can see why it is important to get going as quickly as possible. This is also another reason for starting with fewer key pigeons because it cuts down on the possible combinations. Again, the more you test the base pairs, the more you will know about compatibility.

Anytime two pigeons are mated together, there will be the issue of compatibility, but there will also be an issue with the level of compatibility. We already know that when we mate pigeons together, some will come out bad, some looking good, and some looking good and racing well. Clearly, we don't want to work with the first, and while the second is the most common, it is important that we go past this and work with those that look good and race well! Saying that it looks good without proof really isn't saying anything other than the pigeons look nice. Many fanciers believe that because they start out with winners, they are assured success. I can assure them that compatibility of two pigeons is far more important than the racing success of either pigeon within the mating. The mating either works or it doesn't work, it doesn't kind of work.

For compatibility to be considered successful, we need to consider two factors: range of quality and percentage of quality. Range of quality identifies offspring from high to low. For instance a winner is a 10 and a cull is a 1. Fully compatible pairs produce offspring that are 7s, 8s, 9s or 10s. Anything below that and there are some genetic difficulties going on. Some pigeons breed a lot of 7s, and occasionally they breed a 10. Which one is the fluke? Percentage of quality is the number of pigeons that a pair produces that are of worthy value. Again, on a scale of 1 to 10, a pair might breed two 7s, three 8s and a 9. Therefore, the average would be an 8 with the potential of throwing an occasional 10. Great pairs consistently place several pigeons a season at the high end of the quality range, and they almost always place most or all of their children in the top end of the percentage of quality.

However, when you change the matings around, you may find that while a cock may have been brilliant with one hen, he may be very average with another hen. This is especially common when you are working with pigeons that are not related in the first place. Going back to the definition of a key pigeons, I talked about centerpieces and movers. When the pigeons are unrelated, they are not centerpieces because if they happen to look alike it is only in phenotype. As their parents bred a range of youngsters, unless we have the opportunity to see the parents, we have no idea what that total range was. If we like the phenotype of the pigeon, but it happens to be at one end of the range or the other, we may be surprised by variation of its offspring. Even when all six are compatible by phenotype, each pigeon is located somewhere in its own range, and none of the ranges are likely to match each other. Therefore when pigeons are not related they are virtually always movers.

If you have stability in an inbred family, and, you outcross to an unrelated pigeon that you think is a mover, the movement that he provides is somewhat controlled by the genetics of the existing family. However when you throw three pairs of movers together, there is no controlling the movement, and this makes it much tougher to control the outcome. Genetically, because they are unrelated, movers have the change to move sideways, forwards or backwards. Again, it is very likely that some will be moving forward while others are moving backwards.

Over time, I have noticed that fanciers that have an inbreeding program are far more likely to be able to identify the key pigeons. In fact, to keep an inbreeding program

going, you need to be able to identify the key inbreds. The key pigeon concept allows you to quickly identify the real pigeons, their type (centerpieces or movers) and the strength of the loft. I want to point out that as a breeding concept, key pigeons are important. However, if we were to only kept the key pigeons, we would never have enough pigeons to race. Therefore, while in the short-term the concept of key pigeons is important and in the long-term it is very important, it is only a piece of the puzzle. Whether you can identify key pigeons or not you are still going to need the other top pigeons as well.

When working with a related inbred family, the key pigeon concept is very different from working with an unrelated family of pigeons. Because the genetics will be much tighter in an inbred family, there are probably going to be far more centerpieces than movers. Again, as the name suggests, the centerpieces will be those pigeons that are the most central to the inbred family. While I hear fanciers claim that their inbred family is getting stronger, and while this is theoretically possible, it rarely happens. For the most part as a family inbreds are at their peak, so the question is exactly how long you can keep them at that peak. This is why out crossing and back crossing are so important to the continued success of the family.

While out crossing can provide some opportunity for a family to get better; it can also be difficult to control. Because the outcross is a mover, when backcrossed, it can do as much to move the family in a different direction as it can to maintain the family. Once you are moving in a new direction no matter how imperceptivity slow that may be, your family is no longer where it was. If you continue to introduce related outcrosses into your family, you will move faster and faster toward that family and away from you own family. This is one reason that the Janssen's have made such a big impact. They have extraordinary genetics, and they are amazingly compatible with most other families. When introduced, they are so compatible that the fancier finds himself wanting to move in that direction simply because it is so easy to do. While not all Janssen's are shorter distance pigeons, most are. In the first generation the hybrids tend to maintain the distance of the base family, but with each successive generation, the Janssen's begin to dominate, and the distance starts to go out of the family.

Rather than continuing to outcross in one direction, many fanciers add in the best performers as the backcross. This is not a bad approach because it broadens the genetic base, but it doesn't let any one outcross start to dominate the fancier's base family. Some fanciers bring in pigeons from other lofts that they like, and, when they are successful, they cross them into the base family to produce hybrids. If these are successful, then they backcross them once or twice into the family. Here again, if they do not come from a single common loft, then they will not dominate your bloodlines, and they will have little effect other than to broaden the genetic base.

The point of inbreeding is to produce hybrids. To do so, you are going to need one family and a number of outcrosses, or you are going to need two inbred families. When you are working with two inbred families, you are breeding blind. By this I mean that you are not receiving any results driven data about either one of the families you are

working with. Instead, you are basing everything on the results of the hybrid produced by the two inbred families. This is a very indirect method of validating your family.

When you are breeding hybrids out of two separate families, the offspring can never be backcrossed into either family, so they are really only good to race. When you introduce a cross, it can only be introduced into one of the two families. While the cross might work well in that family as a backcross, this new combination may not work well with the other family to produce hybrids. While the outcross as a percentage of the backcross may be limited, it can still have an amazing effect on the outcome. The truth is that it really doesn't take much incompatibility to topple a family.

Backcrossing is an art form. While it has the potential to improve the family and improve the vigor of the family, it also has the power to destroy the family. In my view, I always want to double backcross any cross that I introduce, and I want cross and backcross against a centerpiece. In my view, this is a safety measure that ensures compatibility and alignment of the bloodlines. If problems occur before you can get through a double backcross, then you saved yourself a compatibility issue. Once through a double backcross to a centerpiece, there will be a significant amount of alignment with the core of the family.

Until next time!

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