

Grading, Behind the Scenes

by

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Let me start off this article by explaining why I have asked Gene to include my editor's name (Karen) and email address on each of my articles. The fact of the matter is that writing can be very rewarding for both the reader and the writer. For me, it is an opportunity to collect my thoughts on a specific subject, and for the reader it is an opportunity to sometimes learn something without having to experience it. While we are usually better off experiencing something first hand, there simply isn't enough time to experience everything on our own.

There are many reasons why more people don't write. For some, it is the inability to focus their thoughts. Thinking back on the first article I wrote for a magazine, I can remember all of the thoughts that churned through my head while I continued to stare at that blank computer screen. An hour later, I had tried 20 opening paragraphs but with no success. Back then, I had concerns about sounding stupid, or saying something that made someone mad, but the truth is that most fanciers are far more understanding than you might think, and for those that are not, I ask this question, "Wouldn't you feel a little stupid if you were paying for a magazine that was filled with blank pages simply because everyone was afraid to share their opinions?"

If you asked me what I dislike most about writing, I would quickly say editing, followed by coming up with ideas for my articles. It is very rare that I have the opportunity to sit down and complete an article in a single sitting. Therefore, I am usually forced to reread most of my articles several times just to remember what I was writing about in the first place, and this is why it is nice to have someone else to edit my articles. Yes, it costs me a small amount of money, but, in my opinion, it is better than infringing on others in hopes of getting this thankless task done for free! Maybe you enjoy doing this task yourself, or maybe you already have someone to do it for you, but if not, I would highly recommend Karen for your editing task. Now just as a suggestion, when contacting Karen, I would take the time to do a nice job on your email to her, because if you write it poorly, she will undoubtedly charge you more. Ha!

Before I move on, let me backtrack a little bit and reiterate something that I said a little earlier. Over approximately the last five years, I have written (butchered) over 1,000 pages of text and probably 10,000 pages of attempted text. Unlike authors of other subjects, my articles are somewhat confined to a single theme, racing pigeons. Over time, it has become increasingly difficult to come up with topics on which to write. Therefore, if you have a topic that you would like to hear more about, please feel free to write me with your suggestions. You can reach me through my site listed above. In saying that, realize that while I am pretty open to discussing most subjects regarding pigeons, there are several subjects that I may not feel qualified to write about, or that I prefer not to write about, but for the most part, I am all ears. No seriously, have you seen the size of my ears? Well, I had better get on to something more substantive while I still have room to write.

I was going to write about something else today, but I have been getting a number of emails from the *Digest* connection. I say, "*Digest* connection," because in this case, a number of the emails refer to the article written by Rene Hansen of Denmark, which discussed my somewhat recent grading trip to that country. As I remember it, that article was printed in the January 2008 edition of *The Digest*. I don't know if my recent articles are causing questions to bubble up about that article, or whether the American reading public just needs more time to digest things. For all I know, (which isn't much) that may be why Gene calls his magazine, *The Digest*.

Anyway, since January, I have received approximately 30 emails associated with that particular trip as well as comments on grading in general. I guess more than anything people are curious about graders, or maybe even what they're really thinking about when they are grading pigeons. The truth is that many fanciers are intrigued, yet skeptical, about the ability of anyone who claims they can grade pigeons with any accuracy. I can't blame them really, as grading is often a misused art, and there are certainly those that have confidence in their own ability, even when they don't have any ability.

Grading appears to be a mystical art to many, and part of what makes it mystical is that the grader isn't going to tell you exactly what he is looking at, and because of this insulating factor, it is very easy for scam-artists to take advantage of the situation. There have also been many very talented scam artists that have been very good pigeon men underneath it all. Yet, people see them for what they are in other parts of their life, and they won't put faith into what they have to say about pigeons regardless of their abilities.

Some felt this way about the once well-known grader, Bob Fleming. Some have implied that when he was alive he wasn't always on the up and up, and, when he flew, he didn't achieve the results that some felt he should have achieved considering the fact that he was giving advice. However, in my view, in his proclaimed area of expertise, he was far better than most, and he wouldn't be the first person that didn't race or didn't race well but could select pigeons.

Some might say that another fancier, by the name of Art Cook, fell into the same category. However, when Art moved from the San Fernando Valley to Phoenix, Arizona, I was able to spend several weekends with him about a year before he died. Art had what I consider to be the very unique talent of being able to pick pigeons out from across the loft. In my view, he wasn't nearly as talented a selector when the pigeons were in his hand. During our rather short acquaintance, he actually helped me a lot, not so much in what he did or didn't tell me, but because he made me realize that certain important visual aspects could be seen from a distance. Ed Lorenz seems to have many of these same abilities as well.

There are several top fanciers in this country that are excellent judges of pigeons, but their skills are more refined for the particular course on which they race. In other words, if they were to move to another location with different circumstances, they would probably either not adapt very well, or it might take them a while to adapt to a new style of pigeon and the environmental conditions of their new course. Yet, they are perfectly capable of judging pigeons in their current environment.

What is extremely rare is the grader that can go anywhere in the world and achieve the same level of success with his grading. Having this ability is somewhat self-fulfilling for these fanciers because they have the opportunity to see those traits that change from course to course, as well as the opportunity to see those traits that are common to all good pigeons.

Most of Europe tends to fly the same general course under the same types of conditions, and they have been doing so for many years. In fact, when they recently switched directions for a few races due to the bird flu, there were a lot of losses. When racing, pigeons tend to sort to the

lowest common denominator (toughest speeds and conditions), whether it is on a single course or courses flown in different directions. Because the European course has remained the same for many decades, their lowest common denominator tends to produce a very specific type of pigeon with very distinct characteristics. Since these characteristics are developed through the population that is left after the races are over, Europeans tend to believe that these traits are "the answer" instead of "an answer", and that their version of "the answer" applies all over the world. Likewise, a fancier flying the north course in Southern California might not understand what it takes to fly the northwest course in Phoenix, Arizona. For most fanciers, applying what they think they know from one course to another often proves disastrous, and this is why when most fanciers relocate, they meet with little success.

Understanding the differences between courses and environmental conditions takes a great deal of study and time, and when you are racing, there really isn't that kind of time to spare. I always had a great deal of respect for the very good selector, Brad LaVerne, because he both flew and graded pigeons at a pretty high level, and frankly, that is not common.

Why aren't there more graders? First, I don't really think that grading is totally a learned art. Instead, I strongly believe that most successful graders are born with an innate ability to judge and work with animals. I think these individuals must find that special animal to work with at an early age. In fact, I don't personally know of a top grader that didn't start this sport very early in life, with the possible exception of Bob Fleming, and that is only because I don't know when he actually started with pigeons. As I have some insight into Fleming's area of expertise, I will say that his skill set (eyesight) could have been learned later in life, as it tends to be a more visual method of grading, and thereby less dependent on innate ability.

Sometimes just knowing something is possible is enough to make a person spend time studying it. In my case, my own personal eyesight has always been a problem. When I was younger, I was very near sighted. After Lasik surgery, I am now very far sighted; however, I lack consistent detail in my current sight conditions. When I was younger, I couldn't see pigeons on the far side of the loft, so I didn't think it was possible to pick pigeons that way. However, after watching Art Cook, I realized that it wasn't because it wasn't possible to do, I just didn't have the physical ability to do it. However, unlike some, instead of closing my mind to the possibility, I just had to be shown that it was possible. Once I realized that it could be done, I began working on my own modified version of what Art was doing.

Some will correctly tell you that I have picked pigeons from the far side of the loft. However, while this isn't luck, it is extremely dependent on the right pigeon being at the right focal length, with the right light and in the right pose, so that I can see what I need to see. However, I know better than to rely on my personal ability to do this consistently. I remember once several years ago, I was grading a loft in Minnesota, when just such an event happened. Certainly, when I see it, I have no doubt about what I am seeing; it just isn't that common to get perfect conditions. Art Cook's eyes were so sharp that he could practically select pigeons across the loft in the dark.

Both Bob and Art tended to look for traits that were common to all pigeons instead of individualistic traits that were more course-specific. There are, of course, dangers in focusing totally on the common over the specific, as not all good pigeons do well under all course conditions or the conditions between courses.

Because graders learn through experience, it is unlikely that any two have the exact same experiences and therefore have the exact same approach, even when one trains another. The fact of the matter is that if a true grader trains a student to be a grader, it is highly unlikely that the student will match the grader's ability because it is highly unlikely that the student will

possess the same innate ability. Instead, what usually happens is that most graders are exposed to grading by a less skilled teacher, and the student takes to it like a duck to water.

As a grader, I am very interested in the common and specific traits of all pigeons. I am also extremely interested in the terrain and environmental conditions of each course. As I implied earlier, there are many good pigeons that never win simply because they are not on the right course, and there are many lesser pigeons that win simply because they were raced under conditions that suit their specific skills.

Therefore, while I am looking for those pigeons that possess the best common traits, I am also looking to narrow that group down by specific traits to the pigeons that are right for the course. However, because of all of the importing of pigeons going on, very few lofts are at a point where I can actually do more than compare common traits against my standard of common traits. Under these conditions, the strength of the common traits associated with quality become more important than the specific traits themselves. However, when quality is applied over specifics to a particular course, it will either adapt to the specific traits necessary for that course, or it will be replaced. In other words, it is nice to start out with a high level of quality, but in the long run, it will be the highest quality level with the best specific traits for the course that wins out.

Obviously, graders can't see the genotype of a pigeon, and instead they rely on the phenotype to suggest what direction the genotype might be going. However, even though a grader can see the phenotype, it is a lot like looking at a photograph in that you don't know what happened just before or just after the photograph was taken. Because the genotype is actually developed over many generations, the pigeon itself is just a snapshot in genetic time. Therefore, understanding where the genetics behind each specific trait are headed can be difficult because they can be staying the same, strengthening, weakening, or changing. However, if a fancier consistently selects for a specific trait or a set of specific traits, he will eventually affect the genotype through the phenotype, and this is why selection practices are quite important to controlled breeding practices.

In line with what I have already said, my goal in grading pigeons is to first point out the top quality pigeons, and then if I am in a situation where I can do it, I point out which pigeons are best suited for the course conditions. As each course has many different conditions to consider, I am looking for the optimum intersection of conditions on that course. As part of the grading process, I am also very interested in separating the leaders from the followers, and if I accomplish this and the fancier listens to my advice, the loft can't help but improve. However, there are generally very few leaders in most lofts, and most fanciers are unwilling to cut back that far, so I have been working on modifying my grading scheme so that it will help the fanciers to better incorporate their followers into the breeding program. In our society, the word "follower" has a negative connotation. However, in pigeon racing, some followers prove to be very consistent racers (not winners), and later, they can play an important part in the breeding loft? However, selecting out the right followers is very difficult, and in fact, it is usually more difficult than selecting out the leaders.

I would like to point out that the aforementioned focuses on about 5% of the pigeons that I grade. The remaining 95% are just poultry. While increased shipping limits look good on paper, they are the driving force behind this high percentage of poultry. Most fanciers are so overrun with poultry that they can no longer distinguish between these pigeons and their truly good pigeons. When this line becomes blurred, one tends to get mated to another, and this dilutes the quality of the good pigeons, and soon, the fancier doesn't own any good pigeons. The situation becomes so confused that most fanciers lose confidence in dealing with the situation, and as a result they turn to a grader to deal with the situation for them. Assuming that things haven't gone too far, a good grader can generally sort the situation out for them, but unless they

understand how they got into the situation in the first place, they will only get right back into the same situation again.

Fanciers should view a grading session as a learning experience, and because of this I offer the following advice. If you are ever going to have your pigeons graded, take the time to grade them yourself before you take them to the grader. This will give you a baseline knowledge of what you think of each pigeon. If you are right about which pigeons constitute poultry, then in the future, you shouldn't need a grader to help you with this. When the grader is grading your pigeons, instead of wasting your time arguing, try listening! You are paying grader for his opinion. Listen to that opinion, study that opinion, love that opinion, hate that opinion, but don't argue about an opinion that you both asked and paid for.

Take the time to study the areas where you and the grader agree. When pre-grading pigeons, most fanciers tend to reach their conclusions based on feeling that they suspect are right but that they don't fully understand. However, if the fancier's feelings line up with those of the grader, there is some confidence to be gained on the part of the fancier. A fancier should also study the differences between his and the grader's opinion. The fact is that when compared to a really good grader, most fanciers only know a small subset of what the grader knows. Try not to declare him wrong until you have studied every angle. It is possible that he may see a bigger picture than you do. By the way, most fanciers would benefit in a similar fashion if they graded out their racers before the season, and then compared their grading and racing results.

Finally, let me be the first to say that while grading may appear mystical or glamorous, it isn't. There are many thousands of hours of hard work that go into becoming a top grader. There are not many days that I don't handle at least 50 or more pigeons that are either my own or someone else's, and on many weekends, I will handle my entire loft three or four times, even though I have handled each of them hundreds of times in the past. This is the physical side of becoming a grader. There is a much bigger mental side to grading, and by the way, I don't ever think that a grader becomes so good that he can stop learning. At the same time, I do think that graders run out of time to learn, or at least learn at the rate they did when they were younger.

There is also the physical work of grading events. To avoid the dust, I wear a mask and a grading coat, and this gets extremely hot after a couple of hours. In almost every case, between traveling and visiting other fanciers, the grader is working on short sleep, and most big events turn into 15-hour days. Grading takes a great deal of concentration, and if you lose your concentration at any point, it will take you time to get it back. While I like to be right on every pigeon, you can't think about right or wrong or pretty soon you are obsessing on that and not on the grading. It is critical that the grader calls it exactly like he sees it, and not based on what the fancier would like to hear. On this last trip to Denmark, I was asked to grade many of the same pigeons that I had graded on the first trip. Had I made my calls based on what I thought the fancier wanted to hear, I would never have remembered what I had said the first time around.

The fact is that because of the time and effort that grading takes, if it wasn't for what I continue to learn from these experiences, I would have long since quite grading. The truth is that just writing about it makes me feel tired.

Until next time!

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