The Mystery of the Racing Pigeon

This is full of information on the Sport from some great flyers in Australia. Lots of good questions and many good answers. Amanda Smith did our Sport good with these interviews.

Radio National's The Sports Factor

With Amanda Smith
31/08/01

The Mystery of the Racing Pigeon

Summary:

The sport of pigeon racing is built around a central mystery: the strange homing instinct of the pigeon. Nobody really knows for sure how or why pigeons can be released hundreds of miles from their lofts, and will always try to find their way home. But one thing's for sure, the sport wouldn't exist unless they did.

Billed as Australia's most prestigious pigeon race, the MALLEE CLASSIC was held last weekend. As the pigeons raced 500 kms from Cobar in New South Wales, to Sea Lake in Victoria, nervous owners awaited their return. Amanda Smith spoke with a number of them about their involvement in this sport, and their love of these mysteriously motivated birds.

Details or Transcript:

Amanda Smith: This week The Sports Factor goes to the town of Sea Lake, in north-west Victoria, for the Mallee Classic, billed as Australia’s most prestigious pigeon race.

The sport of pigeon racing is built around a central mystery, the mystery of why pigeons will always try to fly home. If pigeons didn’t have this instinct to home, pigeon racing wouldn’t exist. But of course the sport is also based around trying to breed for speed.

Tony Sofra: Yes, you do look for different characteristics that you like, like wings and

eyes, everyone's got their theories on it, but you can't actually see what's in their brain or in their heart.

Sam Trewin: Caring about pigeons is like having to care for other people, because they eat and they drink and they sleep.

Gerard Thorpe: Just seeing them come home, that's a real thrill to know they've done 300, 400, 500, 600 miles and they've come home back to you.

Frank Wooton: Well they come home virtually, they're all in one loft here, and they come and they own about a foot square piece of territory in a cage, or in a loft as we call it. And it's self-possession of that little perch and their love for home. It's hard to believe that they only come home for the little piece of territory, but that's just about what happens.

Amanda Smith: Well, the love of home might be what motivates a racing pigeon, but how do they find their way, when they're released hundreds of kilometres from home? How do they even know which direction to start flying in, and then keep their bearings?

One theory is that pigeons use the earth's magnetic field. But Tony Sofra, a pigeon racer from Shepparton in Victoria, thinks there's more to it than that.

Tony Sofra: Personally, my own theory on it is that they use a number of factors. I think that definitely they use the magnetic field of the earth, but they also use the sun, they can use several ways I think of putting it all together, because they can still pick their way home on a cloudy day, so sun's not the main factor. I'd say that on certain days they use one lot of factors, and other days they use another set of areas to let them pick up their bearings and get home. But one thing's for sure, that none of really

know for certain what gets them back, we just know that they're able to get back.

Amanda Smith: So, at seven o'clock last Sunday morning, an international field of 454 pigeons was released from Cobar, in New South Wales, to race 500 kilometres back to their loft in Sea Lake, for the Mallee Classic. These pigeons have been training for months; they've competed in a few warm-up events, but today is the big one. First place in this race is worth $8,000. And nervous owners, or flyers as they're called, spend the day hanging around the loft, waiting for their pigeons, the ones who are actually doing the flying, to come back.

Frank Wootton: My name's Frank Wootton, from Bundaberg in Queensland.

Amanda Smith: So you've come all the way from Bundaberg for this Mallee Classic race? Why's is that?

Frank Wootton: Because it's one of the biggest pigeon races in Australia, and I've got three birds in it, and my hope is that I honestly believe I'm going to win a place, if not win the race.

Amanda Smith: So you're very confident about the quality of your birds, Frank?

Frank Wootton: Yes, I've got very good birds, and over the years they have proved themselves in top class company, and I've got one in here by the name of Little Red, 2780 is his number, and I believe that he will be if not the winning bird, he'll be in the leading pack.

Amanda Smith: How do you assess a bird of quality? How can you tell that a bird is

going to be a good racer?

Frank Wootton: Well first of all you've got to have pedigrees and so forth to go by, but performance is the one that tells all the way through. You've got to have quality, not quantity and this little bird is bred in the purple.

Amanda Smith: What does that mean, 'bred in the purple'?

Frank Wootton: That means he's got a pedigree about a mile long and there's so many winners in his family that if he lets them down, he'd be a disgrace.

Amanda Smith: Can you tell a good bird by looking at it?

Frank Wootton: Usually you can tell a fit bird. They vary in all shapes and sizes, but birds of medium build usually they're better than bigger birds. You can usually pick healthy birds, they shine like a new two-bob, their eyes are usually very bright and they're very alert. They're not like a street pigeon. A street pigeon runs around and it always looks dull, and always like it could do with a good feed. But a very well bred bird always looks alert, and it is such an exhilarating sport. You cannot believe the kick you get when you see the birds coming home.

Amanda Smith: Now tell me about that, describe to me the feeling when you see your birds coming home.

Frank Wootton: Well you're looking at the sky just about endless hours, you usually allow about 60 mile an hour for them to fly, and suddenly in the distance you'll see a pack of sometimes 10, 15, maybe a couple of hundred birds heading straight at you,

and they are just a series of dots. Until you realise this is them. The adrenaline starts pumping, you start calling them down and you call them in like a dog, you whistle to them and subsequently they respond, and there is no feeling in the world that can go anywhere near matching it. And just to have one in the first lot, because they usually break into groups, just to have one in that first pack gives you one good chance.

Amanda Smith: Well with this race today, from the dots in the sky that we're going to see at some point, as they start coming back, how soon are you going to know if Little Red is up there in the front?

Frank Wootton: Well you can tell them by their colours, and Little Red, because of his colour, when they're coming across it's very easy to pick him because he's brown, or red as we call them, and it won't be hard to pick him because he'll be looking over his shoulder looking down and saying '*There's that mongrel that sent me down here.*' So by the same token, if he goes along the way he should, he won't be hard to pick, because if my judgement is right, he'll be that far in front on his own, you'll only have to look for one.

MUSIC/PIGEONS COOING

Gwen Crawshaw: I'm Gwen Crawshaw, from Campbelltown in New South Wales.

Amanda Smith: How did you get involved in pigeon racing?

Gwen Crawshaw: Well about 32 years ago I met this young boy and he had pigeons and it's just gone from there. We've both carried on with the sport. He was a package deal, yes. (laughs)

Amanda Smith: And what's attracted you to pigeon racing, to get involved with your husband and to stay involved?

Gwen Crawshaw: It's something a family can do together. You can all be involved, you can include your kiddies, you can take them to the club, you do it in your backyard, you're not separated, so it's great in that respect. And birds are wonderful things, you can teach your kiddies so much through them.

Amanda Smith: Such as?

Gwen Crawshaw: Well just the love of animals, the respect that you have for them, how to treat animals, and it flows on from birds.

Amanda Smith: How involved have you got in the administration of pigeon racing, that sort of thing?

Gwen Crawshaw: I started off at our local club level. I got involved there doing a job called the race secretary, and my husband was our Federation representative, and he would go along to the meetings there once a fortnight, and over the top of our Federations there is the Australian Pigeon Fanciers' Association, and I sort of headed in that direction. And I was asked if I would stand to be one of the directors of which the men voted me in, and I was the first woman voted in to be one of the nine directors, and I've been there now for 12 years.

Amanda Smith: And what does that involve, Gwen?

Gwen Crawshaw: Going to meetings, the day-to-day running of the association, the directors if there is a dispute with councils in our own council area, you go along and you try and mediate with the councils for your flyer.

Amanda Smith: What sort of disputes?

Gwen Crawshaw: Basically neighbour disputes. A lot of people unfortunately don't like pigeons, and you go along and you point out the good points and that pigeons are really quite fun and healthy animals to have, and if you can point that out to the councils as well as the neighbours, you usually have a win.

Amanda Smith: Now with pigeon racing, it seems to me that once the birds have been released and you're waiting for them to come back home, there's rather a lot of waiting around in this sport.

Gwen Crawshaw: There is a lot of waiting, but in a race like the Mallee, it's when you get to meet flyers from all around Australia, and we're lucky this time to have flyers from overseas come in. So you meet up with old friends, discuss different changes that have come along, and it's the friendship, you meet some wonderful people in the hours that you wait.

Amanda Smith: Well one thing that happens to fill in time while all the flyers are gathered at the loft, waiting for their pigeons to come home, is that they hold a Calcutta Sweep.

Man 1: *Rightoh, Group D consists of the Cairns pigeons, the Cessnock pigeons, and the Corio pigeons, the birds that's leading the averages, eleven birds together.*

Man 2: *Eleven in that group, pretty high class pigeons there as Barry said. Been in the first 50 most of the races, OK? We've got 50 already. Any better than 50?*

Amanda Smith: All the pigeons out there competing today have been put into groups to be auctioned, and flyers bid to buy a group. If a pigeon in the group that someone has bought in the Calcutta Sweep ends up winning the race, that person scoops the pool.

Man 1: *Hundred? We've got a hundred dollars anywhere? Going for 95, going once, twice, 95!*

Amanda Smith: I'm at the Mallee Classic Pigeon Race, in Sea Lake, a little town with a population of 600, and named after a nearby salt basin, in north-west Victoria.

The founder and co-ordinator of the race is Barry Trewin. Now the Mallee Classic is what's known as a 'one-loft' race. It works quite differently to the usual pigeon racing club events, where the birds race back to their individual owners' lofts. Here, the pigeons have been living and training at the one loft, under the care of Barry Trewin.

Barry Trewin: People from all over Australia and from international areas can actually have pigeons sent to me, they're sent as young pigeons to the loft here, and they're all raced on equal terms. There's no advantage given to anyone entering, they all race equally so the best pigeons will actually come to the front.

Amanda Smith: So what happens is that you get all these people's pigeons in this loft here, which is in the old footy sheds in Sea Lake. This is the loft that they call home, and for how long do you have them before the race?

Barry Trewin: I start receiving birds in November, and I'll have some of the birds from November right through until August or September, the day of the actual race.

Amanda Smith: And is that how long it takes for a pigeon to call a particular loft home?

Barry Trewin: No, it doesn't take that long, but what I'm trying to do is get the birds a little bit more mature, so they can actually handle the conditions of the racing because there's stress and things like that involved with pigeons. So to have an older bird is a lot better than racing younger ones.

Amanda Smith: Are there specialist racing pigeons, Barry, I mean are there some pigeons who are sprint specialists and some who were distance specialists?

Barry Trewin: Yes there are, and what we're finding with the race is the fact that we've got pigeons that are imported from Belgium, that are very fast sprinting pigeons, as well as the Tasmanian pigeons, which are called the Tassie Sprinters. They specialise in sprint racing. Then we have pigeons that have been based on the old Australian bloodlines, which are better at tackling the harder day racing, and can work their way home, maybe not as fast as the others, but can pace themselves. So they do very well at the distance. So there's quite a difference in the pigeons and I'm now finding that owners are sending half and half to hedge their bets, so to speak, if they get a fast race, they've got their faster birds there, and if it's a slower type race, with a bit of wind they'll have their harder day pigeons there to handle that type of thing.

Amanda Smith: What do you find attractive and of interest with pigeon racing?

Barry Trewin: I'm fascinated with the ability of the pigeons to be taken to an area and then released and to fly home, and since taking on the race I've met so many different people and talked with people from overseas, it's created quite more of an interest to find out more and more about the pigeons, on the motivation and the different breeding, and also I'm very interested in the different coloured racing pigeons, and I've got quite a number of different coloured ones myself, and hope to work on their genetics and that later on. So I've just been quite fascinated on their ability to find their way home.

Amanda Smith: And like father, like son. Sam Trewin is the race co-ordinator Barry's 8-year-old son. Sam's a keen flyer, and helped his Dad build the big loft in Sea Lake, for the Mallee Classic.

Sam Trewin: The first time when we saw the football oval, it had this shed, so Dad thought if we made up this special race everyone could join in. We built the loft out of old pieces of wood that we found, and we needed more space for some new birds, so we built a new loft. It took us only 11 months to finish both. When it was actually made there was heaps of people helping, because they all wanted to join the race.

Amanda Smith: And these are the old changing rooms for the footy club, are they?

Sam Trewin: Yes.

Amanda Smith: And why is this a good place for a loft?

Sam Trewin: Because it's got more space and it's in the open so they can just circle round in the oval plus they can land in there.

Amanda Smith: How many of your own pigeons have you got?

Sam Trewin: I would have to say around about ten.

Amanda Smith: Do you know them all individually?

Sam Trewin: I only know them if I can tell them apart, because a few of them look exactly the same, but I find their differences.

Amanda Smith: Got any in this race?

Sam Trewin: Three.

Amanda Smith: And what are your expectations of how they're going to do?

Sam Trewin: I hope if I get in the first three, I'll be glad with them. But last time I had raced, I got third and I'd like to achieve a second for once.

Amanda Smith: Do you give them names?

Sam Trewin: Yes.

Amanda Smith: What names have you got flying today?

Sam Trewin: I've got Blueberry, Blacktail and Over Sea.

Amanda Smith: And which one of those do you reckon's the best?

Sam Trewin: Over Sea.

Amanda Smith: Why?

Sam Trewin: Because it's from Thailand and they have to fly around lots of times, and the one Over Sea is pretty good.

Amanda Smith: Is it called Over Sea because it's from Thailand?

Sam Trewin: Yes.

Amanda Smith: And there seems to be a lot to know about pigeon racing and looking after pigeons, do you know very much about it?

Sam Trewin: Caring about pigeons is like having to care for other people, because they eat and they drink and they sleep. So if you wake them up in the middle of the night, they can hardly go back to sleep. And they need a clean floor, so they don't get any poo in their ring, because if they do their foot gets swollen, and it hurts. So my Dad would always go down and he would see if any of the birds are OK, and if they're not he would see if he could treat them. Normally you can do it.

Amanda Smith: And Sam, do you reckon you'll stay in pigeon racing for a long time?

Sam Trewin: Yes, because I like the sport and it's very fun to do.

Amanda Smith: Well this all sounds very wholesome, but there is a dark side to pigeon racing. Mallee Classic race co-ordinator, Barry Trewin says that like so many sports these days, pigeon racing has had to deal with the issue of performance enhancing drugs.

Barry Trewin: People have tried to use those things, but what happens to the pigeons in the end is they destroy the birds, and it's not worth dabbling in that type of thing. It's basically only people who feel that they need to use those things to enhance their pigeons because they're not good enough to win. People should actually look at obtaining the better quality pigeons, that's why this race has been actually set up. People can actually put their pigeons here and compare how their pigeons race against everyone from around the country on equal terms. So it's not like someone's using steroids here, because I do have a vet, but the birds have stress medication, and vitamins, and it's probably like a five star motel for them, this loft, but we don't use any of those type of things, because at the end of the day these pigeons can be taken home and bred off, and totally against that type of use of drugs.

Amanda Smith: What sort of drug is a pigeon given and how is it given to the pigeon?

Barry Trewin: The main drug that they would try and use would be the cortisone, and they would administrate that by putting drops in the pigeon's eyes, and it makes the young pigeons fly harder and faster, but at the end of one season, those pigeons will be no good for racing or breeding ever again, so it's quite cruel to do that type of thing. And there's other ways to get your pigeons to race faster, which is what I was discussing before with motivation, because that's more of a natural thing to use with the pigeons, to just motivate them to come home to their home. And if you look after the pigeons and develop a love for their home, I think a person would do a lot better.

Amanda Smith: But it's not illegal in the way that it might be in other sports?

Barry Trewin: Yes, it is. It's very heavily been used in Europe and they've really cut down and cracked down on the people. I would hate to think that it's been used in Australia, but there's obviously people that would go to that extent to try and win. So, well they're entering it into association rules and things like that now, to have birds tested where they feel that the people may be using enhancing drugs to better their performances.

Luke Jarvis: I'm Luke Jarvis, from Ballarat.

Amanda Smith: How old are you, Luke?

Luke Jarvis: Nine.

Amanda Smith: And you're a pigeon racer?

Luke Jarvis: Yes.

Amanda Smith: And how did you get into it?

Luke Jarvis: Well my Dad first started, because his brother got him into it, so I always thought that I might start racing pigeons as well.

Amanda Smith: And what does it involve?

Luke Jarvis: You let them out for a flight nearly every day and every now and then you take them out for a toss, and that's about it.

Amanda Smith: Do you get to know your pigeons personally?

Luke Jarvis: Yes, because I always ask my Dad what they are, like are they hens or are they cocks, or are they pies or something like that.

Amanda Smith: Are there other sports you're involved in, or is this your favourite one?

Luke Jarvis: I'm involved in other sports, like basketball, and footie.

Amanda Smith: And what's different or special about pigeon racing, compared to

basketball or footie?

Luke Jarvis: Well it's to help something else get fit and not let them get extinct, so you breed the pigeons so they don't come to extinction, and you don't really have to do what the pigeon does.

Amanda Smith: Which today is to fly 500 Ks into the wind and rain.

Well now, do these mysteriously motivated pigeons know when they're in a race for home, as opposed to when they're let out to have a little training fly? Frank Wootton, from Bundaberg, believes pigeons do know when they're racing.

Frank Wootton: Basically, yes, because they are schooled up for this and they are trained accordingly, and they start with shorter points and then they go through to further points, and they keep increasing the distance, and if those birds, they know, they get hyped up, and they know when you're in there catching them to send them away, they know, they've got a brain, only about as big as a pea, but they've got more commonsense than most humans. So that's just how it goes. And the remarkable feats they do, to be taken 300 miles away from home, thrown out with no navigation maps or anything else, and to fly home at about 50 to 60 miles an hour, is a pretty remarkable achievement. And it's not many human beings can do that. Take them out in the bush you'll get lost as easy as hell.

Amanda Smith: And how much time do you spend with your pigeons, Frank?

Frank Wootton: Well basically it's a full-time hobby. You're there every day with them and you're usually in the loft an hour, an hour-and-a-half every day. But they get to know you, they know everywhere you're going to move and everything else, and if you're hard on them, or if you're nasty to them they'll be nasty to you, they just won't

turn up when you think they are. But they're like ladies, if you treat them nice they'll do everything nice for you. And that's the name of the game, is it's the bond and the understanding between them that creates all this interest in it, and the birds just love coming home because they've got a good home to come to and they're happy at home. The ones that don't come home are usually the unhappy ones, that's why they don't come home.

Amanda Smith: So some don't come home? What happens to them?

Frank Wootton: Well you don't know exactly what happens to them. Some of them are just not good enough, some fall by the way, or sometimes they just get lost and they just don't know where they are. What happens to them after that, nobody really knows. But it is unfortunate that there is a percentage, it's only a small percentage, but we'd all like to think they all come home. But if they all came home, we wouldn't have to breed any new ones for next year. So you've got to say Well it's a Catch-22 situation: do you want some new babies that are going to look better than last year's, or they're going to be better. Or are you going to keep going with the ones you had all the time? So you've got to fill the gaps, and it's the law of nature you know, there's a few predators out there might get into them, but they only get a few. But by the same token you've got to aim for what you're trying to achieve, and that's to have good ones, and birds that'll come home and that are happy to come home.

Amanda Smith: And when the pigeons do come home, how is their race time clocked and registered? At the Mallee Classic, Barry Trewin has put a pretty high-tech set-up into place.

Barry Trewin: I've actually had to do a lot of research on the equipment to use for this. Because there's a lot of international interest and from Day 1 I wanted to run the event as professionally as I could, I've obtained electronic clocking systems from Germany, a proper system for this type of racing which is not available in Australia, so the company set them out from Germany three weeks ago, and the system itself is worth $10,000, and to explain it simply it works like the barcode system at the supermarket. The pigeon actually has a special life-ring that they put on when they're

only babies, so that's their identification for life, and when they come to the loft here and are ready to race, they have an electronic ring, which is also attached and registered through the computer. When the pigeons come home, they run through a halter into the loft at what we call a trap, but it's not a trap as such, they just enter through that entrance and they run across a plate, which records the ring, so it's like a scanner at the supermarket and it's all done computerised so it takes out any human error, and it declares a winner down to 1 hundredth of a second, so if you're going to run something professionally, you need that type of item.

Amanda Smith: And that's as opposed to a kind of manual clocking system that would have been used in the past, or is probably still used quite a bit, yes?

Barry Trewin: Most flyers in their areas have what we call an old manual clocking system where you actually have to physically catch the pigeon and take a race rubber off the pigeon's leg and place it in the clock and then hit the clock off to register the pigeon being home. With this system that I've got here, the pigeons do not get caught, they can enter the loft and they're just clocked straight to the computer, so less stress on the pigeon at the end of the day and it's a lot more professional. There's no time taken the pigeon is recorded as soon as it's entering the loft, so it's a lot better.

Amanda Smith: Now, as we've heard, the Mallee Classic is a special, one-loft race, which means the pigeons are all flying back to the same place where they've been living and training for the past nine months. But how do other races work, the ones where the birds are all flying back to different lofts, since the backyard lofts of their owners, are all going to be a different distance from the race start point? Gwen Crawshaw, from the Australian Pigeon Fanciers' Association.

Gwen Crawshaw: Well, they're our club races and Federation races. Everybody, all the flyers, have a timing device, whether it's the manual clock or the computer clock, and you are surveyed by a registered surveyor, and they tell you your distance in metres and part metres, and you multiply the distance the air miles you fly to the time in minutes that you have flown, and the fastest velocity is the winner of that race.

Amanda Smith: Right, so it's adjusted for the slight differences in distance from the release point to the various lofts that the birds in a particular club are flying to, is adjusted, so that it all works out?

Gwen Crawshaw: It's all worked out, yes, and the men are very particular that there's a set formula to work it out and naturally the fastest velocity wins, that you can be say 50 kilometres shorter and still win because you're adjusted time is the fastest.

Amanda Smith: Well with this race Gwen, today, what will happen to your bird after the race? Because you either have to leave it here, because this is its home, or what happens? I'm not clear on what happens there?

Gwen Crawshaw: Well with us, if our bird, well hopefully our bird will get home today, we will take it back to Campbelltown and we will use it as a stock bird. It's proven itself in a big loft race like this one, and we'll take it home and breed for future years from it.

Amanda Smith: How do you stop it from wanting to home back to this loft?

Gwen Crawshaw: You don't let it out of your loft, it stays in what we call our stock cages.

Amanda Smith: So that means it doesn't get to fly at all again?

Gwen Crawshaw: Unfortunately no, but these stock cages, they're fairly big

compartments that they fly around inside, they're not in tiny wee little budgie cages, they are in a decent sized aviary for the want of a better word.

Amanda Smith: But I guess it means that they don't race again, so in effect this is to compete in a one-loft race like this Mallee Classic is the only racing a bird does.

Gwen Crawshaw: These particular birds, yes, it's the only race they do.

Amanda Smith: That's interesting, because I would have thought that if you had a good bird that raced well in this race, you'd want to race it again, but you can't.

Gwen Crawshaw: No, you can't unfortunately, it's the only drawback on this race, but if you've managed to get a bird home, it's worthy of your stock loft. So it's earned its place.

Amanda Smith: Because it means you're going to get good birds from it?

Gwen Crawshaw: That's right, yes, it's earned its place in its stock loft, and it will breed babies for future races to win.

Amanda Smith: But by nightfall last Sunday, there was still no sign of any pigeons coming home. Some heavy weather had set in; and the most robust of the competitors didn't appear until the next morning, flying in through the rain. Alas Frank Wootton's 'Little Red', wasn't among them, nor were Gwen Crawshaw's or young Sam Trewin's pigeons. First and third places went to entrants from Thailand, and second place went to a Melbourne entrant. So, for all the other owners, it's back to their own lofts, to try breeding a new pigeon, that might win them next year's Mallee Classic.

And that’s The Sports Factor. Michael Shirrefs is the producer. I’m Amanda Smith.

Presenter:
Amanda Smith

Producer:
Michael Shirrefs