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PIGEON VITALITY

Racing Pigeons

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Tradition, history, training and information about the racing pigeon. The sport of racing pigeons has a long history and involves specially trained racing pigeons who is taken to a release point, from where they are to return to their homes over a given and carefully measured distance.

The winning racing pigeon is the one who returns home at the highest rate of speed compared to the other racing pigeons. This is determined with advanced calculation which involves the distance travelled and the time it takes each racing pigeon compared to the other racers.

The winner of a race is the racing pigeon with the highest velocity, that is, the distance flown divided by the time taken. Races can often be won and lost in seconds, and to counter this, many different timing apparatus have been developed. The traditional timing method involves rubber rings being placed into a specially designed clock, whereas a newer development uses RFID tags to record arrival time of the racing pigeons.

While there is not definite proof, there are compelling reasons to think the sport of racing pigeons may go back as least as far as 220 AD or possibly earlier. Racing pigeons achieved a great deal of popularity in Belgium in the mid 19th century. The pigeon fanciers of Belgium were so taken with the hobby that they began to develop racing pigeons specially cultivated for fast flight and long endurance called Voyageurs. From Belgium the modern version of the sport and the Voyageurs which the Flemish fanciers developed, spread to most parts of the world. Once quite popular, the sport of racing pigeons has

experienced a downturn in participants in recent years, possibly due to the rising cost of living and aging fanciers.

One recent development in the sport of pigeon racing is “one loft racing”, where birds are raced against each other under the same training regime, in an effort to test the best birds rather than the best trainer.

History

Pigeons have been domesticated for thousands of years. The predecessors of modern day Racing pigeons were pigeons bred for their homing ability, primarily to carry messages. “Pigeon Posts” have been established all over the world and while mainly used in the military, some are still in service today. Modern pigeon racing originated in Belgium in the mid 19th century.

Pigeon Racing

In short, racing pigeons are taken from their lofts and must race home. The time taken and distance are recorded and the fastest bird is declared the winner. Races are generally between 100 and 1000km in distance. In the United States flights of up to 1800 kilometres have been recorded. Provided it survives the many hazards associated with racing, a single pigeon could compete from about 6 months of age and still be in competition at over ten years of age. Such feats are uncommon, however, and the average career for a racing pigeon rarely exceeds three years. To compete in a race, the racing pigeon must wear a permanent, unique numbered ring or band that is placed on its leg at about 5 days of age. For a race to be conducted, the competing racing pigeons must be entered into the race, usually at the organisation’s clubhouse, and taken away from their home to be released at a predetermined time and location. The distance between the bird’s home loft and the racepoint is carefully measured by GPS and the time taken by the racing pigeon to return is measured using one of the two acceptable timing methods. Sometimes as in some leagues there are 2 divisions. One for the young birds (usually yearlings in their first year of competition) and another for the older racing pigeons.

Traditional timing method

The traditional method of timing racing pigeons involves rubber rings with unique serial numbers and a specially designed pigeon racing clock. The ring is attached around the bird's leg before being sent to race. The serial number is recorded, the clock is set and sealed, and the racing pigeon carries the ring home. When the first racing pigeon returns, its trainer removes the ring and places it in a slot in the clock. The time that the ring was placed in the clock is recorded as the official time that the racing pigeon arrived home. From this timestamp an average speed is measured and a winner of the race can be found.

Although serving its purpose, this method has proved somewhat problematic for a few reasons:

- 1) The racing pigeon's "official time" is not the actual time it arrived, it is the time the ring was removed, placed in the clock and recorded, which could be many vital seconds later.
- 2) Exceptional racing pigeons may arrive home first on multiple occasions; knowing it is going to have the ring removed speedily, which may be uncomfortable, the racing pigeon could be reluctant to enter the loft for the trainer.

Electronic timing method

The latest development and preferred method for timing racing pigeons is the Electronic Timing System. The arrival of the racing pigeon is recorded automatically. When using an electronic system, the pigeon fancier doesn't even have to be at the loft to clock the racing pigeons as they return. Birds are fitted with a band that has a tiny RFID chip in it which can be read when the bird comes home. At the home loft the electronic scanning records the racing pigeons arrival. The pad or antenna is placed at the entry point to the loft entrance and as the racing pigeon crosses it, the electronic band is scanned. The clock is attached to the antennas. The serial number of the transponder ring is recorded along with the time of arrival. This is very similar to transponder timing systems used in human races.

In February 2008 the members of the Penygraog Homing Society Racing Pigeon Club in Wales won an award to fund a new electronic timing device. The club was able to obtain the device thanks to funding from the All Wales award initiative. Club secretary John

Williams said: “The electronic timer certainly makes it a lot easier for us”.

One-Loft Racing

One-Loft Racing is the process of training racing pigeons bred by many different breeders in the same loft, under the same trainer and in the same conditions (as opposed to trainer against trainer in their own lofts and usually with their own racing pigeons). It is thought to be the fairest method of proving which bloodline or breeder is best and usually provides the highest amount of prize money. Racing pigeons are recorded by electronic timing systems scanning the birds as they enter the home loft with winners decided by as little as 100th of a second. The racing pigeons are all taken to the same release point and they return to the same home loft, so therefore it is the fastest bird to complete the journey from A to B. One loft racing is now becoming very popular all around the world with fanciers able to compare their bloodlines on an equal basis against the many other racing pigeons.

Training a racing pigeon

Racing pigeons are housed together in a specially designed dovecote or loft. From about five weeks of age until the end of its racing career, the racing loft is the pigeons home and this is where it returns to on race day.

Young racing pigeons are usually trained progressively for at least six months before being allowed to compete in a race event. A racing pigeon's initial training involves familiarising it with the loft and its surroundings and training it to use the various features of its home (e.g. entry points). It is also this critical time that the racing pigeons learn commands, such as entering the loft when the trainer whistles.

After a few weeks of initial training and 'homing in', the young racing pigeons are allowed outside for the first time. This is usually before they can fly strongly so as to prevent an overzealous pigeon from flying away before it can find its way back home. As the birds grow older, they become stronger and smarter and are therefore allowed to fly further and further away from their home loft. When a few trainers fly their racing pigeons in the same area, these loft flying kits (as flocks of pigeons are called) can number in the thousands. This 'loft

flying' familiarises the racing pigeons with their home area and builds fitness. It does not, however, help them much in relation to finding their home from long distances away, a fundamental of pigeon racing. As confident flyers, the young pigeons are taken on progressively longer 'training tosses', driven a distance away from their home and released. This is like the format of a real race, however on a much smaller scale and it is usually not timed in the same way as a race. This practice of loft flying and tossing continues throughout a racing pigeon's career.

Training methods are as varied as the racing pigeons themselves. Some of fanciers believe their system is the secret to their success and guard these hard learned lessons closely. Most fanciers will explain their basic strategy, but some may be reluctant to share the details of their success. One of the most popular systems for training racing pigeons is widowhood. This system uses motivation to try to give the racing pigeon a sense of urgency on race day. The use of widowhood is usually begun by first allowing the racing pigeon to raise a baby in their nest box. After the baby is weaned the hen is removed and often the nestbox is closed off, from then on the only time these birds are allowed to see their mate or enter the nest box is upon returning from training or a race. This conditioning is one of the key elements in a lot of training programs for racing pigeons.

Hazards

Since racing pigeons often fly over a great distance in the unprotected sky, they are at risk of meeting birds of prey, such as the Peregrine Falcon, which is a major predator of racing pigeons. As many racing pigeons has been killed in training or competition, some racing pigeon fanciers has been suspected of killing birds of prey, such as falcons.

As many racing pigeons has been killed in training or competition, some racing pigeon fanciers has been suspected of killing birds of prey, such as falcons. One believes that the racing pigeon rely on the earth's magnetic field to navigate. In this regard there has been found some evidence indicating that mobile phone towers may be interrupting the navigation of racing pigeons. However, there has been no public research to confirm this theory.

Breeding racing pigeons

Pigeons are sexually mature at about six months of age. However, fanciers will often wait until the pigeon is a few months older before breeding. The hen lays two eggs 36 hours apart. The first egg isn't incubated until the second egg is laid to ensure both eggs hatch at the same time. The incubation period is 18 days. Racing pigeon breeders are careful in selecting birds to pair together so as to continue improving the breed and gain a competitive edge. It is this selective breeding that has given rise to the racing pigeons of today, capable of finding their way home from over 1600 km away and flying at speeds in excess of 130 km/h. Hens are often capable of laying upwards of 12 eggs per year, and squabs usually leave the nest at approximately 4-6 weeks of age.

By region

Asia

Pigeon racing is becoming increasingly popular in parts of Asia, where millions of dollars are bet on the races, just like horse racing.

Oceania

Australia

The largest Racing Organisation in Australia is the Central Cumberland Federation. In Australia, velocities are recorded in meters per minute. The state of Queensland also has a number of clubs and organisations. The biggest of these is the Qld Racing Pigeon Federation Inc (QRPF). Located in Brisbane, the QRPF has a long history dating back to the 2nd World War. Each year the QRPF organises pigeon races for its several hundred members. These races start at approximately 145 km in distance and continue on a gradual basis out to distances of over 1000 km. A specialised transporter is used to transport the racing pigeons to the release points. This transporter enables the birds to be fed and watered on route before mass release at a predetermined time for their flight back to various home lofts. Many thousands of racing pigeons compete in races each weekend during the winter months.

Australia's Premier One Loft Event is the Mallee Classic held in Ballarat Victoria, which is the only event to attract international recognition and sponsors, such as the "Best Western Hotel" chain and

JV Marine World the Largest boating show room in the southern hemisphere.

The sport of pigeon racing has been declining around Sydney with pigeon club members gradually dying off as fewer younger people take up the sport. The high cost of feeds and fuel have also contributed to the decline.

Europe

UK

The first regular pigeon races in Great Britain started in 1881. The British Royal Family first became involved with pigeon racing in 1886 when King Leopold II of Belgium gifted them breeding stock. The tradition continues to this day, with a bird of Queen Elizabeth II even winning a race in 1990.

The **National Flying Club** is a British pigeon racing club, and open to anyone in England and Wales

In the United Kingdom Pigeon Racing is regulated by 6 independent organisations.

- Irish Homing Union (IHU)
- North of England Homing Union (NEHU)
- North West Homing Union (NWHU)
- Royal Pigeon Racing Association (RPRA)
- Scottish Homing Union (SHU)
- Welsh Homing Union (WPHU)

Belgium

The **Janssen Brothers** (Louis, Charel, Arjaan and Sjef) are a famous and very successful pigeon racing family from Arendonk, Belgium.

Louis Janssen, born 1912, is the last of the Janssen Brothers still alive.

Descendants of their pigeons can be found racing all around the world.

Romania

Pigeon racing in Romania is one of Europe's hot spot in the sport. Many pigeon breeders join the National Association every year, triggering more and more competitive challenges. Another aspect is the image that has changed in the last decade in regards of pigeon racing, since nowadays it stands for a fine art within the country, with high prizes and bets. A high collaboration with pigeon fanciers from Belgium, Holland, Germany and so forth is also observed

Turkey

The sport is popular in Turkey. In May 2008 a nine part, 1,150-kilometer pigeon race from the town of Manisa to Erzurum was organized with participants from many pigeon associations across the country.

USA

The sport was introduced into the United States about 1875, although regular pigeon racing did not begin until 1878.

The sport of pigeon racing is growing in the United States. According to the American Racing Pigeon Union, one of two large accrediting groups, there are 15,000 registered lofts in the U.S Pigeon racing is banned in Chicago.

Africa

South Africa

The richest One-Loft Race existing is found in South Africa. The Sun City Million Dollar Pigeon Race involves no less than 4,300 racing pigeons from 25 countries which compete for their share of the \$1.3m prize money. While the overall winner can cash in US\$200,000, the runners-up can win cars and smaller monetary prizes. The pigeons participating in this race are brought to South Africa as squabs months before the race, and then trained to orientate to a single loft. On the day of the race all racing pigeons will be released 550 km out on the South African veldt and race back to the same destination.

