

Is it Better to Whether the Weather or Not

By Paul Gibbs

Pigeon racing has seen some dramatic changes over the last couple of decades, but I fear that we the fanciers have not exactly kept up with these changes. Sure, most have kept up with changes with regards loft designs, medications, systems, management (to some extent) and to changes with regards bloodlines/families of pigeons kept. It is here that I believe many of the woes in our sport have arisen. Which part of the above am I referring to you may ask, well mainly the part regarding families/bloodlines kept and the management applied to them.

I have mentioned my views before in some regards as to what I still believe is the main cause of issues plaguing our sport today. Without actually spelling it out (one of the main problems that is) is I am always weary of who might read these articles, but I'm sure that by the time you have completed reading this one you will know to what I am mainly referring.

Prior to the 1980's most pigeons that fanciers owned and raced were imported during the early 1900's and were made up generally of those birds renowned for being able to fly long distances and remain on the wing for many hours at a time. These were the birds that the Europeans at that time were concentrating on. As a result those particular families that came to Australia adapted very well to conditions here I believe partly because there wasn't the so-called "science" as applied to racing as there is today. These birds were able to fly 600 and 700 ml year in and year out with excellent returns being recorded.

I can only relate my experience to experiences on the east coast, where for many years most federations, especially the large ones like the NRP, FRP, SCF, NCF and CCF to some extent (every third year) always flew the northern route along the east coast all the way to Rockhampton in Queensland, a distance of 1200 km to fanciers in the SCF. These old European families were continually developed in being able to successfully fly this route for many years. There would not have been a loft in those federations mentioned above that would not have contained a large percentage of these early birds.

What happened you may ask, well during the mid to late 80's the legal importation of European pigeons was once more allowed. Again, so what you may ask, well things in Europe had changed. Fanciers there began to specialise with the advent not just being placed on marathon races, but special clubs and federations set up to cater for fanciers that wanted to specialise in short/sprint and middle distance races. Even in the distance clubs things began to change with the practice of distance racing being with older mature birds only. Birds competing at races from 800 km to 1,000 km more and more are 3, 4 and 5 year olds. When you tell distance fanciers in Europe that we expect our yearlings, to compete from this type of distance they laugh and say no wonder you Aussies need to start each season with so many birds.

Let's go back to the more recent imports. In the first few shipments there was a mix of birds imported, those that could fly long distances bred from generations of birds that had strength, stamina and a "gate" for flying long distances, then there were the others, bred to give "their all" over short middle distances with a much faster "gate". Unfortunately for most Australian fanciers, the long distant birds took too long to mature and we have proven to be impatient with these birds. Another factor against these birds being more readily embraced here could be that there are no Long Distance Clubs or Federations as such, purely set up to cater for distance fanciers, another reason could be that out of a 20 or so week season there may only be 2 or 3 races conducted over 800 km, so what's the use of keeping this type of bird all year for possibly only 2 weeks of completion.

So where has this left us? Well more and more as seems to be the case, the majority of pigeons being imported are those of the short/middle distant breeds, as importers have seen a demand more so for this type of bird that the distance ones. I believe this to be the case, as there would seem to be a bigger emphasis these days on winning club and federation averages and to do this you need to be very competitive in the short/middle distance events, as this comprises the majority of races.

These days club and federation averages, in lots of cases, are further broken down to Sprint/Short, Middle, Long and Overall averages. The chance of a long distance family alone being able to make a fancier the Club or Federation Champion is virtually nil.

Another reason that I believe short and middle distance birds are more in demand, is that all the special races and big money races such as Squeaker Sales, One Loft Races, Breeders Plates and Special Ring Races worth thousands of dollars in a lot of cases are conducted from races up to a distance of no more than 500 km or so.

When one looks more closely at a lot of these imported "Short and Middle" distance birds it can be seen that in the majority of cases these birds are rarely raced by their founders at distances exceeding 500 km and in many cases not over 250 km. With short distance races commencing at 80 km and more often than not, these birds are again 2, 3 and/or 4 year olds and still never are entered in races over 500 km. As a result it may be time that fanciers and federations here consider abandoning 1,000 km races all together and conducting two 800 km races instead, or even one 800 km race to complete the season along with an additional 600 km or 500 km race. (Anyway it's food for thought)

Another important consideration that we tend to forget here is that in mainland Europe, pigeon racing countries such as Germany, Holland and Belgium mainly fly in a southerly direction during their summer months, and that their predominant wind at that time of year is from the south, in other words they race with mainly a tail wind.

What does this mean? Well, in my opinion it means that we have developed special families of birds, just like the old NRP, FRP and SCF fanciers did for many years to suit the condition that they race under year in and year out. It is therefore my view, many of the pigeons we now race here are at times asked to race under conditions and distances that they have not been bred for. I doubt that many of them like head winds, as the heavy going doesn't suit their "gate". In other words (to some extent) it's like racehorses, a heavy track affects the "gate" of a horse as there are those that win on a heavy (slow) track and those that prefer to race on a quick (dry) track.

Wind speed and direction, as most fanciers are aware, determines the velocity, direction from which they return home and bird losses.

In my opinion, for what it's worth, pigeons clubs and federations along the eastern seaboard should never release birds in any form of easterly wind for reason I am sure you all know.

My motto with regards this matter is; ***"If in doubt, don't let out"***.

For what its worth, this is my view, and everyone should have one, if you don't then you should form one, other wise people who have no idea about animal care and management at all, especially with regards to racing pigeons, should not form one, but unfortunately they will and do!

We have to demonstrate that we are not only seen as being pro-active in the development of policies, but more importantly putting in place and enforcing policies that ensure the well being of our birds is first and foremost our primary concern.

Where you may ask has all the above come from, or why I am concerned, well let me quote from the RSPCA web site as direct to me by a fellow fancier, and I quote: **"What is the RSPCA position on pigeon racing?"** – *"Pigeon racing presents several animal welfare concerns. Racing pigeons may be susceptible to predator attack from birds of prey or other animals during the race. The races usually cover very large distances, which places high physical demands on the pigeons. In order to cope with such races, pigeons need to receive adequate physical training and be in excellent body condition prior to the race commencing"*.

"Migrating birds including racing pigeons pose a major biosecurity risk in relation to the spread of infectious bird diseases from one geographical region to another".

“Issues of overcrowding and housing management also need to be addressed. Codes of practice for the keeping and racing of pigeons do currently exist, however these are voluntary and therefore not enforceable by state or territory governments or the RSPCA. RSPCA Australia advocates the regulation of pigeon racing competitions to prevent races from being held over excessive distances, in adverse weather conditions or over unsuitable terrain”.

The last three lines should be a concern and warning to all fanciers and federations.

Be warned. “Is it Better to Whether the Weather or Not”?