

Returning to the Sport

By Paul Gibbs

Towards the end of 2019 I had a phone call from a fancier wanting to know if he could pay me a visit as he was looking to acquire a few pair of stock birds as he was starting up again in the sport. This returning fancier's name is Ashley Elford who resides in the Mid-North Coast town of Kempsey in NSW. Kempsey is a rural town located about 15km east of the coast and 346km north of Sydney and 398km south of Brisbane pretty much in the centre between the two east-coast capital cities with a population of around 28,000.



Now that my geography lesson is finished I can get back to the main purpose of this article and that is to write about Ashley, his past involvement in the sport and where he is up to after having completed his first year back racing.

As stated above Ashley made contact with me after noticing that I had placed a few birds on one of the local pigeon auction web sites stating that he liked what he saw with regards the photos and pedigrees of the birds listed and thought I might be worth a visit.

Anyway, from this visit a friendship developed and Ashley and myself now talk frequently by phone and visit each other when possible as Ashley lives about 85km (1hr by car) north of me and although I have retired, Ashley is busy running his building business.

I must say that when I first payed him a visit I was quite taken with his set up, living on a 2acre lot with plenty of space not only for his lofts but for his business needs as well. The view to the south over the valley from his back deck is breath taking and has a very peaceful feel about it. (Refer to photos) The lofts are located a short distance from the house with the race loft and main stock loft situated near the western side property boundary with the front of the loft facing east.

As Ashley's property has a reasonable slope to it (from the front to the back) the main lofts are suspended off the ground and split level with the stock loft being on the lower level. The stock loft is divided in two sections with sixteen breeding boxes in each and to complement this he also has a stock loft that faces the back of his house that comprises of fourteen individual breeding pens to cater for his special pairings.

Now as he is returning after quite a few years away from the sport Ashley is in the process of trying several very well bred bloodlines in an endeavour to find out which families will perform best for him. Among these are some very well bred Houbens, Van Loons and a small number of other bloodlines.

His results on his first year back in the sport (2020) allowing for a shortened season due to Covid-19 was I feel quite impressive, one that Ashley should take a lot of satisfaction from. The race program only allowed for ten races as the federation was flying north into Queensland, but due to the border closure the season ended earlier than anticipated.



At the completion of the shortened series Ashley finished equal 3rd in his club averages with a membership of 11 and 9th O/A in the Federation averages that has a membership of 28. This being achieved in his first year back after a prolonged absence. I believe this was a pretty good effort.

While the Mid-North Coast Federation does not have a large membership and can fluctuate between 25 to 35 members, it does take in one of the longest boundaries that I know of, in fact the distance from the most northern member to the most southern member is approximately 200km with six clubs participating. As you can imagine this can make racing very difficult as “over fly” can make a big difference as to whether you win your club never mind the federation and can contribute to young bird losses if not trained properly as being able to pull away from the “mob” is paramount, especially in the early races and/or on a fast day.

Generally speaking, the MNCF fly north and south along the coast-line on alternate years, this of course gives fanciers at both ends of the federation a chance of being the Federation Champion, again this depends to some extent on the wind on the day as the winds during the race season are predominately south/south west which generally means that when racing from the south the velocities are faster than when racing from the north and of course living as close as possible to the coastline can also be a benefit.

In an effort to give you the reader a little more insight into how Ashley became involved in the pigeon sport, and how he manages and trains his birds I gave him a list of questions asking him to answer those he thought relevant to himself and to email his responses back to me when he had the time. Those questions and answers are as follows.

***Q1** How, what and when made you decide to take up the sport of pigeon racing.*

When I was 11 yrs. of age my mother took me to the movies to see that great film “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid”, where the short film beforehand was a Walt Disney production about a boy in a wheel chair that kept and raced pigeons, this film was called “Pidge, the Pigeon that Performed a Miracle”. (Many older fanciers may remember this film). This was the start of it, keeping just a few “backyard” pigeons.

***Q2** How long have you been involved in the sport with regards racing your pigeons.*

The first time was when I was about 14 yrs. of age, and now after a prolonged break I am preparing for my second season back.

***Q3** Which clubs and federations have you been a member of.*

The first club was the Port Macquarie Club, then the Crescent Head Club and now with the Kempsey Club. All clubs are/were affiliated with the Mid North-Coast Federation. (The Crescent Head Club is no longer operating).

***Q4** Which families/bloodlines do you currently keep and where did you obtain them.*

My main two bloodlines are Van Loons obtained from Kevin Burt and Paul Gibbs. The others are Houbens that were obtained from Blenhaven Stud (John Hanson) and from Hudson Lofts. Along with these are a few birds obtained from local fanciers Tony Arscot and Warren Mustow of Port Macquarie and Barry Malone, a good friend that races in Sydney.

***Q5** How many pair of stock birds do you keep and how many young birds do you breed each year.*

Due to only having returned to the sport I currently have 44 pair in stock and will be looking to reduce this number once I have been able to see which pairs are producing the goods. I am hoping to reduce this number by half in the next year or so. As for the number of young birds bred, this year I have bred around 125 for myself along with several pairs for another new fanciers, and some for a friend in Sydney to test for me.

Q6 Do you train/house hens and cocks together or separately.

They are all kept together.

Q7 Describe your loft design and size.

The race loft is 7.2 metres long x 3 metres wide with a 900mm walkway along the front with a flat roof that I am going to change to a pitch roof as soon as I have time. It has a suspended timber floor with metal walls. The stock loft is 4.8 meters long and comprises of two sections with 16 breeding boxes (8 in each section) and adjoins the race loft

Q8. How long do you train your race team for each day.

As I am self-employed, (managing my own construction company), means that I have to work/train my pigeons around the demands of my business, but generally I try to train them at least once a day for 1 hour and can vary between the morning and/or afternoons.

Q9. How do you prepare your race team prior to tossing and what would be your typical tossing program.

Once the birds are ranging away from the loft and flying freely for at least an hour without showing any signs of stress I generally commence short tossing of around 5 km moving them on only when they show confidence and trap quickly to the loft. It is only then that I move them on, tossing no further than about 50km after which I may consider club tossing and/or tossing with a friend if I want them to go further.

Q10. Do you have a preference to race hens or cocks, and if so why.

As I house and train both sexes together I have no preference for either, having experienced success with both.

Q11. Do you feed a commercial mix or do you mix your own.

I do use a commercial mix, but I do add various grains to this mix to suit the weather conditions, distance to be flown and the expected velocity, along with what may be the expected hours spent on the wing.

Q12. Do you administer any additives/supplements i.e. Pick Stones, Pink Mineral Powder, Grits etc.

Yes, I do use some when I can, as many are not available locally due to my location with many of these supplements having to be ordered online. But those used are those that many fanciers use and include Pink Mineral Powder, Grit, Probiotics and Vitamins.

Q13. Do you medicate your birds as a preventative and/or treat regularly for Canker, Worms and Cocci

I don't indiscriminately use antibiotics, but I do regularly treat for Canker, Cocci and Worms.

Q14. Do you use a Vet to have bird dropping tests and/or throat swabs undertaken.

As I live in a rural location, most vets in the area are very knowledgeable when it comes to cattle, horses and sheep etc. but there are no bird experts locally, especially when it comes to treating/diagnosing issues with racing pigeons.

Q15. When selecting a bird for stock, what criteria do you use.

At the moment I rely on the bird's pedigree, its confirmation and eye sign, along with the reputation of the previous owner/breeder. In the next couple of years I would also hope that my results will become a primary selection for future stock within my own loft.

Q16. Is there anyone in the sport you admire, and if so why.

There are several fanciers that I do admire, but it would be unfair of me to name them in case I missed out on naming someone, but I must say I do admire all pigeon fanciers that take on the commitment to the sport as the difficulties seem to increase each year.

Q17. Are there any changes you would like to see implemented in the sport, and if so why.

I think there is too much enfences placed on club and federation point scores and all fanciers need to be more caring and respectful to others, as a lot of friendships can be lost. The sport, like all sports should be about "sportsmanship" more than anything else.

As mentioned earlier, this is Ashley's second stint in the sport, his first stint commenced in 1985 when he was a member of the Port Macquarie Club. He finished up racing in 1998 as marriage was looming and he and his wife Leah had purchase the land where they currently live.

So, being a builder Ashley of course was kept busy building their home at this time and it wasn't long until two daughters came along, so as with many young couples life was busy and it wasn't until recently did Ashley find the time to once more devote to pigeon racing.

Over those early years (1985 – 1998) Ashley's results were quite outstanding and were verified by the number of prize/merit cards that he showed me which was also a good effort considering his loft location at the time as he lived in the Port Macquarie Hasting suburb know as Rawdon Island (Not an island as we know it) which is located a fair distance off the line of flight being west of the coastline.

Twenty two years later now sees Ashley return to the sport, and if early results are any indication it would appear he has picked up where he left off in 1998 having now been successful in three MNCF clubs – Port Macquarie, Crescent Head and now Kempsey.

To finishing up this article I proceeded to ask Ashley the following five closing questions:

***Q18.** Can list your major achievement's/results in the sport.*

Winning the Federation National in 1995, winning the Federation Two-Bird Championship along with breeding my father, (who raced in the early days) his Young Bird Derby Winner.

***Q19.** What would be your most memorable experience in the sport.*

I am driven to do my very best in all my endeavours, and although I have achieved some good results during my early years, winning some big races from what could be perceived as a poor location at the time, and with my current location being very similar and having finishing my first year back being equal third in the club averages, 9th in the Fed averages, along with winning 1st, 3rd and 4th in the Club Breeders Plate I believe this to be my most memorable achievement to-date.

***Q20.** What would you like most to achieve in the sport.*

To always be competitive and achieve good returns each week, but most importantly to make life-long friends that all share a love of pigeon racing.

***Q21.** What would you like to see done to promote the sport.*

Try to help people understand and learn what pigeon racing is all about, and promote all the positive outcomes that the sport has to offer.

***Q22.** What advice would you offer to a novice or junior fancier coming into the sport.*

Seek out a good fancier in your general location, one who is liked and well respected and learn from him. Start small, don't stress over early disappointments. Try and make your early days enjoyable. The sport of pigeon

racing has many challenges, but hang in there, it will pay you back with a life-long memories and many friends.

I would like to thank Ashley for his time in helping put this article together, and to wish him all the best in his return to the sport and hope that you the reader enjoy it as much as I have in writing it.

As it will be 2021 by the time you read this article I would like to wish everyone a “Very Happy and Safer New Year”.

In closing I would like to quote Mahatma Gandhi who once said – ***“Be the change that you wish to see in the world”***. If we all do our bit then 2021 and beyond may be of benefit to us all.



