

An Immune System is a Terrible Thing to Waste

By Frank McLaughlin

How many in the sport realize that we are dealing with pigeons? Yes, they are pigeons, a very hardy and resistant creature that has millions of years of evolution behind it. I usually have to laugh when I hear how fanciers are treating their pigeons like they have the constitution of butterflies. Some fanciers worry that one missed-step will lead to disaster. My top breeding pigeons are allowed into uncovered flight pens every day of the year. From snow storms to torrential rain the pigeons go into pens whenever they choose.

Let us now look at the immune system of a pigeon. Genetics provides the quality of the immune system. However, exposure to bacteria, fungus and virus enhances and improves the immune system. Pigeons that have never been mixed with others from different lofts, drink from sanitized drinkers and live in a continuously scraped and disinfected lofts, are the very first to get sick when exposed to pathogens. Many fanciers feel that soaking the drinkers in bleach water daily is the secret to success. If your pigeons are healthy then you are doing your flock a big disservice by continually sanitizing the drinkers. I am all for changing water regularly even twice daily but I am not for scrubbing and sanitizing the drinkers. As long as the pigeons are healthy let the slime and film build up a bit on the inside of the drinkers. This type of friendly harmless bacteria living in the drinkers can only be a positive boost to the pigeon's immune system. My drinkers in the open flight pens will even grow a layer of algae inside. Algae are nature's filtration system and this filtration system can live within the drinkers. Please do not get me wrong. I would never allow my pigeons to drink from soiled water. I change water all the time. The water is always sparkling clean but the drinkers are only sanitized occasionally.

You have heard the expression, "if it is not broke do not fix it". This applies to our pigeons. If you have super health you can enhance health by increasing the exposure to mild harmless forms of bacteria by rinsing and **rarely** sanitizing the

drinkers. **If your pigeons do have a serious health problem you must sanitize and disinfect the drinkers and loft until the problem is under control.** We here at McLaughlin Lofts are into July and the pigeons have been paired since February. I only sanitized the drinkers once so far this breeding season because I was getting visitors. It makes more sense to just wipe the drinkers out with a paper towel and refill. Your healthy pigeons will be better for it.

We can build a stronger and better immune system in our pigeons. Mother Nature has given us this creature with an incredible immune system and I will now show you how to create a highly resistant pigeon. We can also enhance the immune system in many ways.

Mixing Pigeons from many places and lofts...

If you like to race and enter one loft races you want your pigeons to have exposure to as many variations of bacteria and viruses as possible at the home loft. My suggestion would be to bring in pigeons from different parts of the country. Also bring in a few pigeons from Europe and bring in some pigeons that raced in major one loft races. The variation of pathogens found in one loft race pigeons when the pigeons have been housed with thousands from around the globe is endless. This biological soup of bacteria and viruses from different lands and lofts will start you on the road to a resistant flock. The pigeons that remain healthy when exposed to this assortment of pathogens will also help your flock.

When you first mix in these pigeons from different lands and lofts you may have problems. A neutral e-coli strain found in one loft may have serious health effects within another loft. If you mix pigeons from many different lofts, some pigeons will get sick. Most will be just fine and their immune system will compensate and fight the new strains of pathogens they now are exposed to. My suggestion would be to try to keep your pigeons healthy with natural products. You may lose some but the strong will survive and it is the strong that we want. I insure they are nutritionally complete. An oregano product may work as well as an antibiotic without causing resistant bacteria. Apple cider vinegar, pro-biotics and pre-biotics, garlic, etc. can all help with building a highly resistant loft of pigeons. You are not going to achieve a highly resistant flock if there is nothing that the pigeons

need to become highly resistant to. The mixing of many pigeons from many lofts and lands will create a biological soup of many variations of pathogens which eventually leads to a highly resistant flock. Excessive use of medications will certainly slow the process to a highly resistant flock.

Parents pass this immunity to their young....

Keep in mind that just because pigeons do not breast feed their young they still pass on immunity in pigeon milk. When your pigeons are exposed to this extensive biological soup of pathogens and are immune to these pathogens, they pass this immunity to their young. Could these young have an advantage in One Loft Races? Absolutely. One loft managers will tell you that there are pigeons that arrive from the same lofts each year that develop health problems. It would not surprise me that the pigeons from the most sterile lofts, coming from a closed off family of pigeons have the most problems. I believe that the lofts with the most health problems are those that sanitize and disinfect the most. The reason they sanitize and disinfect is because of the health problems so this cycle keeps the pigeons from ever building a strong immune system.

Vaccinate, Vaccinate, Vaccinate....

The more you vaccinate the better the immune system and the more resistant the pigeons. The more you stimulate the immune system (vaccinations, exposure etc) the better the immune system and more ready the immune system becomes when it is time to fight a disease.

It scares me when a fancier says they have never vaccinated their pigeons for PMV. Pigeons vaccinated regularly for PMV also pass this immunity on to the young in the nest. If PMV strikes a flock where many generations have been vaccinated, the virus may just cause some loose droppings and a drop in performance. If PMV strikes a flock that has never been vaccinated, the death count will be very high.

Now to the Loft....

If your pigeons are kept healthy with natural products, a deep litter system is the best system to enhance the immune system. Pigeons should be allowed to pick around in the deep litter and be continuously exposed to the normal gut bacteria in the droppings. This continuous exposure only enhances the immune system. The more the immune system is used the better it becomes. An example of this can be seen in teachers, doctors and nurses. They rarely catch the illnesses of their students or patients.

Before going to the deep litter system you must make sure your pigeons are worm and parasite free. Wood pellets that are used in wood burning stoves are our favorite deep litter. Healthy pigeons that are kept in a deep litter will shine and be so very vibrant. They will also be less likely to get sick and the young will have much greater immunity coming out of the nest. If you are an entrant in one loft futurities the last thing you want is a pigeon that needs to be kept in ultra hygienic conditions to survive.

Many years ago a US loft was having big success in One Loft Races. This loft was known for keeping the pigeons in an unsanitary state. Could the terrible conditions at the home loft give the pigeons an advantage when placed in the one loft race? Did these babies have a better immune system because they were able to survive in their own loft? I am not advocating deplorable conditions but if your pigeons have not been exposed to anything at home, what is going to happen when they are exposed to everything someplace else?

Let us look at humans for example. Years ago before standards improved we could get sick by just drinking water in a foreign land. Our immune system was not used to the bacteria in the water. The natives were just fine because their immune system had adapted to and took care of the bacteria in the water.

Another example are kids with lack of exposure to many kids always have the most health issues going forward. Play structures and preschool may cause some problems early on but will prevent many problems later on. Today parents do not let their kids roam and play in the dirt. The kids do not get into everything we used to get into. Hand sanitizer is now the norm. Heaven forbid the kids will be allowed to play on a farm and then eat lunch without washing their hands. Again

I am not saying be foolish with the kids. Just let them be around pets, pigeons, kids and animals. A strong healthy immune system takes care of us nearly 100% of the time. 40 years ago we never heard of so many allergies, gluten allergies or food allergies in general. These issues have to be lifestyle related more than anything else. Our immune system is just not what it used to be because it is not challenged nearly as much as it used to be.

This above advice can help you attain a highly resistant flock. The weak will eliminate themselves. Do not panic if one or two have a health problem. Separate out the problem and try to determine what the issue is. We do not treat the entire classroom if little Johnny is sick. Do not treat your entire young bird team if one is sick. **Pigeons remain very healthy if they are not overcrowded, are parasite free and nutritionally complete.** Minerals are the most important aspect of keeping pigeons nutritionally complete. Applying these principles over a period of time will increase your performance and the overall health of your pigeons.

A well lit, well ventilated, and spacious loft is the big secret to health and success. More room and less pigeons will also increase health. Stress, nutritional deficiencies, lack of ventilation, lack of sunlight and overcrowding will cause a breakdown of the immune system which will lead to health problems. The healthier your pigeons, the stronger and more efficient is their immune system.