

Selection

by Frank McLaughlin

Pigeon selection is one of the most debated topics of our sport. Too many theories distract from what is of real importance. In this article I will present my method for selecting superior breeding pigeons, or at the very least, pigeons with the greatest potential to be superior breeding pigeons. This article may also step on a few of the experts' toes along the way. Keep an open mind and let common sense be your guide.

Champion breeding pigeons come in all shapes and colors - big, small, ugly, pretty. It is difficult to look at a pigeon and judge its value. The following rules will help a fancier narrow down the field and make educated decisions about breeding potential:

1. The #1 thing I look for in champion pigeons is long lines of champion pigeons. There are no "one hit wonders" for me. The pigeon must have generations of major winners in the pedigree. Uncles, aunts, parents, grandparents, cousins etc. must have won in major competition. If this is not the case, I am not interested. One hit wonders are not the pigeons to build your future around.
2. Whenever possible, I try to determine how others have done with the family of pigeons under consideration. If many fanciers have had immediate success the bloodline could be very special.
3. I buy from the champion or as close to the champion as possible. The advantage of generations of big winners in the family is that you may be able to purchase pigeons related to the true superstars and still have the genes in your favor to breed major winners for generations to come. Long lines of champions should continue from this bloodline. Many lofts have the misconception that champion racers do not make champion breeders. This is the biggest mistake one can make. In my 35 years of racing and breeding pigeons I have witnessed over and over that true champion racers continue to be champion breeders. This may be because my racers are from long lines of champions. If a pigeon has racked up major wins over several years, he or she will breed super pigeons. This holds true especially for long distance pigeons that have won multiple times at tough races. You do not know what a pigeon that has never raced has genetically, but you do know what a champion has for genes. A champion racer has champion genes. The old expression applies in this case.. "the apple does not fall far from the tree". Let me stress that if a pigeon does not come from a long line of champions I do not want him.

4. One of the greatest fallacies many American fanciers believe is that crosses will not breed. Allow me to set the record straight. Some of the most influential breeding pairs in the history of the sport were total outcrosses and raised pigeons that went on to breed champion after champion for generations. There are many examples of crossed pigeons being super breeders so the cross should not be discounted. All things being equal I like an inbred pigeon that I can cross. However, if they breed a champ there is always room in the breeding loft for a crossed star racer.

Now we look at common factors and physical traits to be used in selection in order of importance. The pigeons must have passed #1-4 above to get to the actual bird in hand selection.

A) I have handled many of the greatest breeding and racing pigeons in Belgium over the last 17 years. What do these pigeons have in common? All the champions have super rich, supple, smooth like fine silk, feathering that is easy to remember when you feel it. Feather is born not made. Fanciers frequently ask me "what do you feed the birds to get such amazing feather?" It does not matter what I feed them. Super feather is genetics not some oil seed or bath salt. Select super feather when selecting breeding stock.

A1) Tied with the first factor is buoyancy, buoyancy, buoyancy. A pigeon should handle like he or she is so very light in the hand. Supple silky feather surrounding a cork body is a must. When I was a kid I had an amazing breeding Fabry cock. Like his champion ancestors, this pigeon always handled year round like he was ready for a race. It does not matter if the champ has been locked up for years. He or she should handle like cork. If you hate training like I do, breed from pigeons that live naturally in racing condition. Select buoyancy when selecting breeding stock.

B) Conformation is another mistake many fanciers make. We are not selecting for the show pen. Champion pigeons are flexible. I have seen many good pigeons eliminated because they have a weak back. Our birds are not carrying pianos, they are flying. Most fanciers can not determine the difference from a weak anatomically incorrect back from a flexible back. Champion pigeons (especially long distance pigeons) are very flexible. Champion pigeon bodies almost roll around in your hand. Flying for long hours takes a flexible body. If you watch a pigeon fly in slow motion the body is in a constant state of flux with the air currents. The tail is acting as a rudder to keep the pigeon stable. A stiff lobster type back on a pigeon adds weight and limits flexibility causing the bird to fatigue faster.

C) Character and athleticism. Champion pigeons are athletic. How can we tell if a pigeon is an athlete? Champs move around in flight with little effort. They snap from the floor to their nest with one quick wing beat. They fly around the loft with ease and lack of effort. The true champion shows confidence and has his eyes fixed on you at all times. A winner never looks dull and is always alert. I like to see the facial expressions on a pigeon. The eyes are mirrors to the soul. Again, when I refer to "eyes" I am looking at expressions from several feet. My good friend and America's all time greatest pigeon fancier Tony Melucci once said to me "A champion pigeon can fly through a key hole". Makes sense, doesn't it?

D) "Horses for Courses". Pigeon racing is tough enough without limiting yourself to a certain type or looking for that all around family. Again color does not matter. I do not see color when I select potential stock. Select by color and you will be in for a beating on race day. If you want to race long distance races you need to select pigeons from long distance champion lines. They should be medium sized at best. You may see a large long distance pigeon now and again but do not limit yourself. 90% of all long distance pigeons are medium to small in size. Watch the Boston Marathon and notice that the Kenyans usually dominate the race. They are on the average 5'2" to 5'6" and maybe up to 120lbs. Sprinters are much more powerful looking and have some size. Sprint or middle distance pigeons look like the body builders of the pigeon world but they can not stay in the air for 14 hours. "Horses for Courses" type and style for certain kinds of racing. Distance pigeons have more wing and less body, big oars on a small boat. I had a fancier call me looking to fly a family of only barless blues. I explained to him that winning is difficult enough without strictly limiting your chances for success.

Let's recap: **Long line of champions, great feather, buoyancy, flexibility, character and Horses for Courses.**

Notice that I have not mentioned eye theory, wing theory, palate, wind pipe, tongue slit, throat vein, vents, foot scales, squared under wing feathers, horns on the bottom beak and my favorite farce pulling on the pigeon's beak. Do some of the above apply? They might but if you get caught up in them you will lose track of what is really important. I will now explain my eye theory.

I am always asked things like...Do you look at the eyes? Do you use eye sign? What is your opinion of eye sign? For starters if all things are equal on two pigeons and one has a richer so called breeding eye, I select the richer colored eye. If I had a the choice between two pigeons and one had the most spectacular breeding eye in the history of the sport and the other

came from a **long line of champions with great feather, buoyancy, flexibility and character**, I would choose the latter. The pigeon with the amazing eye will be used as a pumper only.

All that you need to know about eye sign is to breed opposite eye colors together. This is to keep diversity in the line. Also, since pearl is recessive to yellow, you'll need variation in the pigeons. If you breed pearl to pearl over and over you can get washed out white eyes that are not pleasing and do not take the sun well. Darker and yellow eyes tend to take the bright sunshine better for longer periods.

I will now finish with a little secret the Piet DeWeerd used for selection. As most know Piet is world renowned as a pigeon selector. How did Piet do it? Why were the results with the pigeons that he selected so spectacular?

Piet DeWeerd selected pigeons by going to the top lofts and buying off the best pigeons. It is that simple. Go to the top lofts and buy from the best pigeons. Piet had no secret or special selection process. If someone could select champions by touch (or by eyes etc.) they could look at thousands of \$5 pigeons and become a millionaire selecting.

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