

Tom Schilling wins the 2017 Million Dollar Race!

February 2017 marked the 21st birthday of the South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race...and the celebration might still be going on at the Tom and Nikki Schilling household. Their pigeon Little Miss Nikki did something no other pigeon has ever done in the Million Dollar. She not only won the main race, but nearly won the first "Hot Spot Car Race" by a fraction of a second. She also won the Zandy Meyer Memorial Mercedes in addition to the Knockout competition. These wins make her one of the most successful Million Dollar pigeons in history! Little Miss Nicki is by far the largest money winner in the history of the race and perhaps the history of the sport. Tom Schilling entered only three pigeons into the Million Dollar and they were shipped over in my June 15th export. More on Little Miss Nikki later.

In 2016 we brought our two children to South Africa for safari and the Million Dollar Race. We thought that they would go once then not consider going back. However, they loved the experience so much that both Lia and Landon insisted that they go back in 2017.

This past January, we left for South Africa and headed to Cape Town. If you decide to attend the greatest pigeon race in the world, I highly suggest you go on a 5-star safari or visit Cape Town. Either can be done before or after race weekend.

Upon arriving in Cape Town, we visited Table Mountain. Cape Town sits between this mountain and the ocean. The clouds roll over the top of Table Mountain, reminding one of a table cloth, hence the name Table Mountain. The views from the summit and the rotating gondola on the way up are beautiful.

During our time in/around Cape Town, we visited the Jack Ass penguins, Seal Island, Hout Bay, False Bay, an ostrich farm and the Cape of Good Hope. The area is incredibly beautiful and comparable to Hawaii. Of course, Cape Town is now my wife Robin's dream place to live. Even many of the European fanciers are adding vacation homes in Cape Town. Pictures will be posted soon on my website.

After our time in Cape Town, we flew back to Johannesburg and drove an hour to Emerald Resort and Casino/Heron Banks Golf and River Estate. The Resort was reserved for pigeon fanciers attending the Million Dollar Race. There were fanciers everywhere including the most famous names in the sport...Paul Smith, Alfons Klaas, Werner Waldow, Michel Wouters, Philip Brantegem, Hardy Krugar, Gerald Koopman, Kfelt Spithoven, Henk Jurriens of Eijerkamp, Nicolas Norman, Florea Sorin, Lee Fribbins, Seville Penkin, Jan Hooymans, Mike Ganus, Mark Kitchenbrand, Mark Gilbert, Frank Daelemans, Hans Paul Esser, Thomas Gyselbrecht (PIPA), Nicole Deweerdt, Andy Skwiat, Bill Rixiy, Jurie and Jurie Erwee, etc.

Within Emerald Resort we stayed at the Bush Lodges. They consisted of two bedrooms, three bathrooms, a living room and kitchen. There were several options for lodging, from the more

traditional safari style bush lodges, to more traditional hotel rooms. The resort was next to a wildlife area with roaming African game and adjacent to the Vaal River. Plenty of entertainment was available including a Kids Zone, Casino, indoor water park, outdoor pools, and several bars/restaurants.

Our first evening was spent on the most perfect river cruise down the Vaal River. It was a winning combination of a stunning African sunset, great company and unlimited food and drink. There were many pigeon fanciers from all over the world on this cruise, making it a special kickoff event.

The next day started with the basketing of the race pigeons, followed by an evening at the River Boma Braai/Breeze Restaurant. We enjoyed a traditional South African barbeque under the stars and local live entertainment.

At basketing the pigeons looked spectacular. The entire process was overseen by independent auditors. I was able to handle many U.S. pigeons during basketing and felt that USA had a tremendous chance at back to back victories. Most in attendance believed that the U.S. pigeons were the birds to beat. Several German fanciers shared their opinion as to why the USA has dominated for several years. It reminded me of a quote from one of the trainers of the Million Dollar Race, "We can always tell the pigeons that passed through the hands of Frank McLaughlin."

As usual the preparation and condition of the pigeons were outstanding. The final training toss was held the day before shipping but, sadly, several pigeons were lost on the final flight. Many fail to realize that the Million Dollar pigeons are trained every day but Sunday. Only two of the six training tosses are published each week on the website. Throughout the entire season, no rust will be found on the pigeons training for the Million Dollar!

On Friday, attendees had the option of going on a shopping excursion in the charming town of Parys, participate in a golf tournament at Heron Banks, or take part in a fishing competition on the Vaal River. My wife, son and I chose the fishing tournament, while our daughter preferred shopping. During our time fishing along the river, golf carts were available to those who opted to drive 500 yards and privately visit the pigeon lofts.

It was a unique seeing pigeon fanciers out of their element, competing in a golf tournament or fishing in the Vaal River. Where else could you enjoy a barbecue while trying to catch river monsters with Gerald Koopman, Filip Brantegem or Hardy Krugar? It was a great touch to a well-planned event.

My son Landon wrestled in a large river catfish which made the fishing tournament a huge success for him. Andy Skwiat won the fishing tournament for the USA, continuing the winning streak from last year. Paul Smith and Sara Blackshaw paired to win the golf tournament. I wish I could have been in both places to watch some funny moments!

Although the race was the main event, I was amazed by the massive pigeon lofts. The loft sits on the edge of the golf course, with nothing but fields and no confusing buildings for landing options. It is understandable why the location is conducive to settling pigeons. The loft consists of 22 two large sections on each side and plenty of room to expand on the existing 44 sections. This could very well be one of the biggest racing lofts in the world. Unfortunately, due to its size, photos don't do it justice. This year the loft will be completed and all the pigeons will be quarantined there. This should provide a much smoother transition for settling and trapping in the 2017-2018 season.

On Friday evening, we had a welcome dinner and cocktail party at the hotel in the Kilimanjaro Room. Thank you gifts and call outs were given to the organizers and shippers, as well as updates on weather and plans for future events. We then partied with international fanciers, enjoying the South African hospitality. The fanciers from South Africa are extremely kind and welcoming. We have so much fun with them every year we attend!

Amidst all the fun Friday night, the organizers were focused on the weather forecast indicating intense weather patterns throughout South Africa. The welfare of the pigeons is always top priority so the Million Dollar decided to postpone the race for the first time in 21 years! Since February is summer in South Africa, the weather rarely suffers more than showers and afternoon thunderstorms. However, this year was unusual, with the entire southern region engulfed in rain for several days. Fortunately, the rain gods were smiling on the event and no rain fell on Emerald Bay!

The Million Dollar Race made a tough but important decision. Other races around the world may not have had the courage to make the right decision. We cannot race pigeons by a schedule and should always do what is best for them.

On Saturday we viewed exhibits at the E & E Center and enjoyed the trade stands with their displays of the most modern pigeon products, gear and electronics. We spent the afternoon poolside in the near perfect warm and sunny South African climate.

No one could have predicted that the postponement of the race would lead to the most enthusiastic and dance-filled awards dinner ever. We were all still winners and could relax and party with the continued dreams of victory. The banquet room was transformed into an elegant candlelit event and became a 21st Million Dollar birthday celebration, with cake and a champagne toast. Like all meals and food throughout the event, the main course was 5-star and endless, along with the dance floor being occupied into the wee hours.

The Million Dollar Race has continued to be a success, due to the passion of the amazing staff, starting with Sara Blackshaw, Managing Director Air Sport Internationale, Michael Holt, Race Director, Pieter Saayman, Marion Branford, and Joan-e Holt, as well as the head trainers, Willie Van Beers, Corrie Naude and Andre Van Wyk. A special thank you to the loft assistants who do such a great job caring for the pigeons. The South African Million Dollar race is the pinnacle of our sport and, with this team in place, will continue to be the standard that others aspire to be!

At last, the weather cleared and the race was planned for Wednesday February 8th. The weather experts showed that forecasting is not an exact science predicting clear at liberation. Unfortunately, the liberation was not clear, so the birds were moved north to avoid inclement weather arriving from the south.

Liberation was filmed and was a beautiful site, with the winged athletes cutting up the South African skyline. As the group headed north for home, the excitement grew. Winning the Million Dollar Race is life changing in many ways. This is the greatest event our sport has ever known and can only be compared to a golfer winning the Masters Tournament, a soccer player winning the World Cup, the Superbowl in football or the World Series in baseball.

By winning the Million Dollar you become etched in the history of the sport along the others before you. International fame follows the victory. Pigeon racing is the only sport where any entrant can compete head to head with the most successful and famous in the sport. Not everyone has the stomach to compete on the world stage. However, it's better to compete and not succeed than to avoid the competition completely. The level of competition in the Million Dollar Race is what drives most of us each year.

The race was streamed live on the website which included interviews and predictions. Finally, after several hours of scanning the South African sky from my office in Hanover, Massachusetts, the pigeons arrived. Once the dust settled, Tom Schilling was announced as the winner of the 21st Million Dollar Pigeon Race. The U.S. flag was flown at the top of the race sheet. For the second year in a row, the winning pigeon had passed through the hands of Frank McLaughlin before shipping to South Africa!

Tom's pigeon, named after his wife Nikki, won the race! Little Miss Nikki did something no other pigeon has ever achieved, not only by winning the race, but also winning the Knockout Competition and Mercedes (which will be paid out in cash). To win the Knockout competition, the pigeons must finish in a certain percentage over the last four Car Races. The remaining 69 knockout pigeons compete for first bird home in the final \$25,000 prize. Little Miss Nikki won the 1st prize of \$200K and the \$25K Knockout prize. Tom had the confidence to place the pigeon in every possible nomination pool which included a \$90K Mercedes. Little Miss Nikki nearly won Car Race #1 by a fraction of a second, which makes her success even more remarkable. Tom Schilling entered three pigeons into the Million Dollar Race, had all three pigeons make the final race, two in the prizes and all three returned.

Little Miss Nikki was 5th Grand Average and her nest mate Dora was 29th Grand Average. Who says you need to enter a big team to have success in the Million Dollar Race!

Ten days after winning, Tom was presented his winner's trophy (the solid gold pendent) and his check in Las Vegas at the Ipigeon Gala. The Million Dollar Race and Sara Blackshaw sponsored the banquet for all in attendance and announced and distributed the awards to all the USA winners. Some of the highlights at the awards banquet were the Car Race winners, Darrell Bartz

& Mike Serrao and Manny Rodriguez & Arthur Vega, as well as Car Race Average Speed winner Manny Rodriguez and Arthur Vega.

The top 50 Pigeons were auctioned off live on February 25th with Little Miss Nikki being bought back at the auction by Tom Schilling. It is very exciting to have the pigeon return to the loft of her birth and maybe even breed a Million Dollar Race winner in the future. Congratulations Tom for such an incredible season and for bringing your champion home!

More highlights from the season included 8th Place Final Race for Rory Smith, with a three-bird entry, 4th Grand Average Mike Chafardon, 14th Grand Average Wilfon-Rhodes, 19th Grand Average Jojos Loft and Calinas Loft and 25th Grand Average Ganus Family Loft. The 2nd Overall Grand Average was an unpaid U.S. entrant I shipped over, so the pigeon and fancier did not get the credit or prize money.

This past season USA won too many Car Race prizes to list, including 10 of the possible 20 Car Race prizes in the very tough Hot Spot Car Race 5. USA had two firsts in Car Races, as well as 1st Car Race Average, as mentioned previously. In the Car Race Averages, we had 1st Me Fui + Gallo Loft, 4th Steve Furlonge of Irish Syndicate, 7th Jones Boys and PJ's Loft, 8th Ado Family Loft, 10th Mike Chafardon, 12th Bill Rixey of C and W Syndicate and 18th Wilfon-Rhodes.

The USA had their share of Two and Three-bird Challenge winners. Darrell Bartz and Mike Serrao, Ado Family Loft, Si Se Puede Loft of Richard Martin won both the two and three bird Challenge, as well as Me Fui + Gallo Loft.

I was so proud to ship the winner to the Million Dollar for the 2nd year in a row! Nothing would make me prouder than to ship the winner three years in a row. Little Miss Nikki was shipped over in the second group in the middle of June 2016. Looking at the results, we had super successful racers in each shipment. You need to send your best. This coming year, the teams are four (4) birds for the same entry fee of \$1,100.

My first shipments to South Africa leaves on May 15th followed by June 5th. The last shipment for the year will be June 27th. I will need the pigeons several weeks before your planned shipment to be included on the export paperwork.

I would like to thank everyone who entered last year and hope that you are looking to send your best for this coming season. I will always do my best so that your pigeons arrive into South Africa in perfect health and condition. Let's see if the Million Dollar winner will pass through the hands of Frank McLaughlin for the 3rd year in a row. Send \$1,100 entry fee and \$180 export fee to the address below with your pigeons starting April 1st.

For more details on entering the race, shipping, export dates, and my services, please visit:

<http://www.mclaughlinlofts.com/export-dates-to-south-africa.html>

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