

## Two Hours to Everywhere... Our Trip to Belgium and Holland July 2013

What a great trip! We visited Joosen, Casaert-Senechal, Herbots, Norman, Lemmens, Renders, Hebberecht, Van Oekel, PIPA, Kuijlaars, Eijerkamp, Koopman and Van den Heuval. We toured Amsterdam with Frank the owner of Animals to Fly as well as the company Animals to Fly and the new Dutch Quarantine and Veterinary Services. Each moment in Belgium and Holland was better than the moment before. If you look at the pictures you will notice my smile. I do not think that I spent one second on this trip without a big grin on my face. Watching my father in pigeon heaven was also so much fun for me. He is one great guy although maybe not the best influence on me in Europe. I keep telling my father there is no need for anyone to go to Belgium anymore because he did not leave any great pigeons there. My Dad wanted to bring home every superstar we saw.

We got off the plane and drove two hours to Jos Joosen. I was so very excited to visit Joosen. I have been on his long waiting list with the who's who of the greats in the pigeon sport. We were treated to a gourmet multi course lunch by Mrs. Joosen and then proceeded to visit the lofts and handle the champion pigeons. Joosen started at short distance and became a champion. He moved to middle distance and became a champion and then switched to long distance only to become maybe the best Long Distance Loft in Belgium. The amazing part of the Joosen pigeons is that he has won with the same family of pigeons at all distances. The tough races with heat and headwinds the better for Joosen pigeons. Joosen excels from Orange, Montilimar and Marseille which all come through the Rhone Valley. The Rhone Valley races are the very hardest Belgium has to offer.

Joosen does not use or rarely if ever uses any medication. He told me the Veterinarian has never been to his loft in 37 years. He laughed and then said that the famous Vets come to his lofts all the time but they come to buy his pigeons.

I was able to select from his breeders and bought five Joosen pigeons from his top pigeons. They are super long distance pigeons and there is a three year wait to get these pigeons. I now own six from Joosen and they are very special pigeons. We bought a son of 1<sup>st</sup> National Montilimar this past winter at auction in Belgium having to outbid the Chinese to get this pigeon. Joosen allowed me to select before many of the famous lofts received their late bred pigeons. Joosen's order book for 2013, 2014 and 2015 contains all the most famous names in both Belgium and Holland. These big guys are not ordering two pigeons. It seems everyone had an order of 20. Maybe that is his limit per person? Joosen let me squeeze in his order book for the

next two years. 24 pair of breeders and unbelievable success. Old school fancier but Joosen was not worried about taking us right in the widow cock and hen loft in the middle of racing season. Grain right on the floor with his pigeons displaying amazing health. Joosen was the main reason we made this trip to Belgium. The trip was now a huge success and we had been in Belgium for five hours. I asked Joosen how often does he get visitors and he said, every day. If they are treated like we were treated I can understand why.

After Joosen we drove two hours to Sebastien Casaert of Casaert-Senechal. We bought one hen from his top Kassboer Cock "Kash". Kash is a full brother to Laura the Gaston De Wouwer 1<sup>st</sup> National winner. Before the trip my Dad wrote down Kash on a piece of paper on his desk. For days I looked at that paper when I used his computer. I thought my Dad meant, bring Cash to Belgium. Needless to say Casaert put 30 late hatches in crates. I went through them and loved one baby hen. When he punched the number into the computer it was a direct daughter from Kash. The mother is a super breeding hen. What are the chances of that? Trip was off to a great start. Sebastien Casaert is one of the young superstars of Belgium. I had bought from his father many times in the past.

Day two after a two hour drive to Herbots we were greeted by Miet and then Filip showed us all the National Aces, 1<sup>st</sup> National winners and 1<sup>st</sup> National Barcelona. Amazing people and amazing pigeons. No bigger or better name in the sport than Herbots. Herbots has many many special pigeons. Filip took us to lunch and then we proceeded on a two hour drive to Knokke Belgium to visit Filip and Nickolas Norman. Great visit with the Normans and again some of the nicest people in the sport. We already own two hens from Norman bred direct from Robinson and Rhone Man with both our hens being granddaughters Zorro. My Dad wanted to add one cock. We bought one cock from Norman's #1 breeding hen bred to a son of Zorro. The dam to our new cock is the mother, grandmother, great grandmother etc. to all his best pigeons in the family now. The Norman's gave my Dad the book which is the history of the Norman Strain. They autographed it for my father. My Dad has been a big fan of the Norman Family since the 1980's.

On Wednesday we drove two hours and visited Chris Hebberecht. This was another highlight for me. I am just crazy about the Hebberecht pigeons. My friend Tim Atkin from England drove over to Belgium for two days and his first stop in Belgium was with us at Hebberecht's. Tim is starting over in pigeons and wants his pigeons ready this time next year. Tim is ordering pigeons because his loft construction has not started yet.

Tim asked me about Hebberecht's best pigeons and money was no object. I said buy from Pancho-Jelle, Champion and Jempy. When I asked the prices of the young from the top pigeons Chris said "Ohhhh, very expensive, very expensive" like we were 12 year old boys. He is probably in his 50's like us. Finally I was like so Chris "How Much?" Chris said the prices each from Champion, Pancho Jelle and Jempy. My friend Tim said 'I will take two from Champion, one from Pancho Jelle, one from Jempy'. Chris suggested one from Vip and one from Santos. Tim was back in pigeons. They were extremely nice pigeons. Some bigger than expected but I have always selected smaller type or asked for smaller perfect pigeons.

I bought a son from Hebberecht's champion "Vip" and a full brother to "Vip". Two outstanding young cocks to add to our other 15 Hebberecht imports bred from his best pigeons. It was great selecting the two stars from the late bred Hebberecht had to offer.

Next we drove two hours to Balen near Antwerp to meet up with Ulrich Lemmens for two days. Ulrich took us to Bart Van Oekel the first afternoon and then to his own lofts. Tim bought from Bart's best pigeons. Like Hebberecht, Crazy prices at Bart's. Black Diamond and F-16 were beautiful pigeons but just too big for me. Tim bought from the very best at Bart Van Oekel for July 2014 delivery. We then headed to Ulrich Lemmens loft. Ulrich let us spend two days in his guest house and left a fully stocked fridge and made us breakfast each morning.

If you are not familiar with Lemmens you will be soon. Incredible young fancier at 26 years old and six days after we left, Ulrich Lemmens won 1<sup>st</sup> National Tulle 14307 pigeons. Ulrich's pigeons are based around De Gust and he spares not expense to add the best available to this line. All gorgeous pigeons at Ulrich's.

What was amazing to see is the young champions in the sport are going with all natural products and staying away from antibiotics. This is the new trend in Belgium. The young champions are also relaxed and marched us right in the racing lofts the day before shipping the Bourges National. I can remember the days in Belgium when we would have to crawl by the widowhood loft going no closer than 100 feet. These guys are not worried about that, they do not keep to a strict routine and like to have fun. The guys laughed that Bart Van Oekel never goes to the loft before 9 am. The pigeons work around the owners schedule and respond. Bottom line is you need great pigeons. Does not matter what you do, if you have great pigeons you can be successful. I was never much for strict routines. If you apply a strict routine what happens when you break this routine like shipping a race?

The next morning Ulrich brought us to Ivo Renders, a small loft with outstanding results. Tim ordered from Ivo's best but I was not buying sight unseen on this trip. Ivo brought out late bred from his two top breeding pigeons. I selected a 35 day old cock that was incredible and he was vibrating like a washing machine on spin cycle. I did not like the children he showed me from his foundation hen so Ivo went to the breeding loft and pulled out a gem he had kept for breeding. One touch and she was mine. Both pigeons have the same sire and my Dad was so very pleased. These are super middle distance pigeons. They were much more my type. Medium sized buoyant pigeons.

We went to Ulrich Lemmens breeding lofts and I tried to buy one from his best Kassboer pair but he gave the young pigeon to my father. Ulrich and I have become friends the last couple years and he made my father so very happy. Tim bought four from Lemmens best two cocks including the De Gust. Tim's buying was over and in a day and a half he dropped more euro than he can probably think about. Those Belgians are going to love seeing us in the future. Interesting note is Gaston De Wouwer of Kassboer fame bought from the same pigeons at Ivo Renders that I did. He was there two weeks before us. I was so pleased the young cock I bought was only two weeks old when Gaston visited and my hen was hidden in Ivo's breeding loft.

Thursday afternoon we drove two hours to PIPA and they treated us very well. We toured the lofts and handled the pigeons with Freddy the loft manager. Carlo Gyselbrecht spent a few minutes with us and we talked pigeons with Freddy and Yannick De Ridder the owner of Flander's Collection. Yannick is famous for his De Rauw Sablon and Marcel Aelbrecht pigeons. Freddy gave us PIPA loft coats, books, hats etc. Very nice set up and serious players in the sport. It is quite remarkable what PIPA has become and accomplished.

Thursday evening we shipped the Bourges National and attended the big post shipping cookout and party. Those guys really did this up right with endless barbecue and great beverages. All the best of Antwerp were in attendance.

Friday morning we said our goodbyes to Ulrich and drove two hours to Holland and meet up with Henk Kuijlaars. Henk took us on a two hour drive to Hans Eijerkamp Lofts . Eijerkamp is still the most amazing place ever to visit. Trying to describe Eijerkamp's is like trying to describe the Grand Canyon. You have to see it to believe it. My Dad had never been before. Henk Jurriens was a great host and a friend for many years. Henk Jurriens

showed us all the big dollar pigeons. Henk Jurriens manages the pigeon business at Eijerkamps.

My Dad was focused on the Heremans Ceusters pigeons and they were extremely nice. You would need a week at Eijerkamp's to see all the great pigeons living under those roofs.

Next we drove two hours to Koopman's and that place was also very impressive. Gerard is all class and like the others, he is about the nicest guy you could ever meet. You can only be happy for all his success because he is still the same guy he was 15 years ago. I traveled in Taiwan with Koopman back in the late 90's and we had some kind of fun. I remember us each telling the other that someday we wanted to become professional pigeon fanciers.

I was supposed to select two inbred Kleine Dirk pigeons for a friend. Gerard had his loft manager round up six late breeds which were the only pigeons ready. I selected two gems and when he gave the prices it was 15,000 euro for the pair. Needless to say they were a little above the 3000 euro each my friend wanted to pay. The demand for Gerard's pigeons is just crazy which reflects in the price.

We went up through his home into the second story breeding loft. Gerard's pigeons were awesome and you could not find one speck of dust in the entire upper level of his home/breeding loft. When I told my wife I wanted to have my breeders in the second floor of our home she immediately said. "Gerard must be single".

Saturday morning we were off to Anton Van Den Heuval. Anton is a small loft with incredible results against thousands weekly. 25 years of major success against the best of the best in Holland. Very, very nice pigeons. I selected three late bred pigeons at Van Heuval from his #1 cock and best pairs. These three were taken from his breeding loft and were planned to be used by Anton as his breeders. Anton competes against the best in that region of Holland and he is a working guy that has been a champion forever. We looked at results and Van den Heuval is entering a handful and Verkerk and De Bruijn are entering an army. Van den Heuval was doing just as well or better in many cases.

Saturday afternoon we met with Frank Nebig and owner of Animals to Fly located right outside Amsterdam. Frank collects and quarantines all the pigeons exported out of Europe. What an incredible facility and Animals to Fly are experts in moving every possible animal and bird around the world. From finches to giraffes, Animals to Fly can handle it. We also toured the

new Dutch Quarantine and Veterinary Services. This is a separate business from Animals to Fly and is being set up with state of the art bio-secure avian quarantine rooms. Nothing is left to chance with the ventilation, climate control, lighting etc. All the pigeons are kept under full time Veterinary supervision.

Frank brought us on a tour of Amsterdam. Incredibly beautiful city and I had no idea it was the Venice of the north sitting below sea level. We did a boat tour and walking tour before going to dinner on the ocean. Amsterdam is quite the place to visit but I must admit I am a little too conservative for that city. Next time I go to Amsterdam I will bring the better wilder half that I married.

I forgot to mention that along the way we bought three pair of Heremans Ceusters. One pair, which we have two youngsters looks like they will be the parents of a National Ace Pigeon of Holland this year. These pigeons are quite the hit in Europe right now so we own from the best of Leo Heremans.

My Dad had a great trip and he is now 80 years old. I wish I had his energy. This trip was a thank you from me to him for all the help he provides me with the pigeons and in every other aspect of my life. I wanted him to have any pigeons he wanted. He said it was his best trip ever. I spent way too much money when I should not have. He wanted everything and if it excites him that is good. We went for five Joosen, two Kassboer and two Heremans Ceusters and came home with 21 new pigeons.

I keep telling my Dad, no need to go to Belgium anymore because the best Belgium and Holland has to offer moved to Hanson Massachusetts. My father has been studying the pedigrees, books and internet info on our new pigeons since we returned. We have not been able to stop talking about the trip. The only downside of the trip is we must move out some really good pigeons to make room for some (hopefully) really good pigeons.

Like Filip Herbots said, "buying new pigeons is like buying dreams", our dreams will be sweet for quite some time.

Frank McLaughlin