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Lew Cressler 1<sup>st</sup> Champion Loft 2007 5-25 lofts 2007 Old Birds

By Paul Walsh



## INTRODUCTION

### ***Tell us a little about yourself. How did you get involved in pigeons?***

Like many pigeon fanciers and boys in my hometown of Newport, PA, I caught barn pigeons and housed them in a make shift loft. A local homing pigeon flyer took me under his wing and gave me homers. He sponsored me as a junior flyer in the Harrisburg Racing Pigeon Club. One Saturday when my parents were out of town I took my total savings of \$20, purchased materials and built a loft in the back yard. Neither parent was interested in birds or animals of any kind; thus, in retrospect it is amazing that they let me keep my new and rather shabby loft. That was 1952 when I was 14 years old. As a junior flyer, I would send birds to some of the races as part of my sponsor's quota. The most exciting moment was to see a little blue hen home on the day of a 500-mile race. I kept the birds until I graduated from high school when I left home to attend college.

### ***Which fanciers through the years have influenced you the most (in what way)?***

I have learned from many in the sport; however, the one man who has influenced me the most was Shirl Gerlach, retired Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army. After retiring from the Army myself in

November 1986, I moved to Meadville, PA. While there, I met Shirl in November 1987. Within three months after meeting him, I had a loft built and had several pairs of breeders down on eggs. I was hooked. I was one of five members of a Meadville club. Shirl was suffering from a terminal illness at the time. I decided to move to the Harrisburg, PA area in 1990 to attend law school and fly pigeons with my old club that is now known officially as the Greater Harrisburg Racing Pigeon Club (HBG). Shirl and his wife decided to move to the area with us primarily to be close to the Hershey medical center. We decided to fly as partners with me providing the loft and Shirl providing the birds. He had been flying the same family of birds since the early 1950's.

While assigned to SHAPE(Supreme Headquarters, Allied Powers Europe) in Paris from 1951 to 1954, Shirl flew pigeons with the Paris club and became friends with Robert Sion, George Fabry, Joseph DeBacq, Edvard Roussel and Pierre Dordin. When he left France, he sent birds from DeBacq, Roussel and Dordin to his friend A. J. (Micky) Mickalauskas in New York City. Over the years Micky and Shirl developed a family of pigeons from these foundation birds. He and Shirl would exchange breeders to keep the family strong. In 1988 Micky died of a heart attack while training his young birds. The following year Micky's widow invited Shirl to take his pick of Micky's birds, and he did. Those were the birds he brought to the partnership in 1990. From the beginning he let me run the breeding program. Over the years I have introduced select individual birds into the family. The most outstanding of those were a Janssen hen from Bob Koch, a Van Dyck cock from Rick Mardis and a Janssen cock I raised from a pair of birds from Rick Mardis. Shirl was able to contribute physically to the partnership until 1997. After that, he continued to provide advice and encouragement until his death in October 2005.

I must also mention the fact that my friend and fellow pigeon flyer in the Harrisburg club, Cliff Schwartz, had to give up pigeon racing in 2006 due to health reasons. He is 92 years old and still going strong, but the pigeons became too much, especially during the winter period. Cliff is well known for his Persoons. He got his first birds from Roger Persoons in 1980. Cliff generously gave me six pairs of his Persoons in November 2006 to keep for him and breed out of them as I saw fit. This year I placed eight of the Persoons for him and me in a local one-loft race sponsored and run by the owners of the Grainland Feed Company in Schuylkill Haven, PA. We were lucky to have three entries clock first, fourth and fifth in the 300-mile race. It was a great day for Cliff and his Persoons. I shall have to see how the Persoons might fit into the family.



**BREEDING:**

*Describe your breeding program. When do you pair your breeders?*

I enjoy breeding season as much, if not more, than racing seasons. Racing success in this sport begins with a successful breeding season. I went through a period of years breeding winter birds starting with mating in late November. My intent was to have a well-trained team of older youngsters that I could fly on double-widowhood. I was also influenced by the American fanciers who were trying to emulate their European counterparts with winter bred youngsters. I did not want to lose most of the early-bred birds to the hawks; therefore, I did not settle them until March when they were several months old. By that time I had missed the most productive time for the birds to develop physically and mentally. I also lost some birds while settling as they were very strong on the wing. I eventually started to pair my breeders later each year until now my breeding season does not start until the middle of February. Besides the problem with hawks and settling the birds, I found that the second round of youngsters as a whole did better than the winter bred birds. Then I realized that our European counterparts start their young bird race season in May and not September like most clubs in the U.S. They fly youngsters that are four to five months old. It seemed to me that winter bred youngsters would not be worth the bother they created unless they were trained out to the first race station in April and May. That way they could be flown like yearlings in the fall.

***How many breeding pairs do you keep and how do you choose them?***

Until this year I have consistently kept only sixteen pairs of breeders. Due to a purchase of several pairs of breeders from a well-known pigeon flyer and the gift of Persoons from Cliff Schwartz in November 2006, I now have twenty-two pairs of breeders. Since I also like to take youngsters from select pairs on the flying team, I share the same problem with many fanciers. I tend to raise too many youngsters.

In thinking back over my selection of breeders, I must confess that I don't find any method except for trying to pick the best available at the time. I neither buy birds from auctions on the Internet nor search for imported birds. I was lucky to start with an excellent family of pigeons provided by Shirl Gerlach. After that, it has been a process of introducing birds from pigeon flyers with a reputation of having good and healthy birds. I believe the old timers who say that out of any flock of homing pigeons one will find 10% above average, 10% below average and 80% average birds that simply home on race day. And I believe that includes any and all birds for sale by pigeon merchants.

In recent years I have come to the realization that it is better to judge one's birds against their loft mates and not against the performance of the competition. There are too many things that go into winning a race or having a winning race season. For this reason, I now like to obtain several pairs of birds from a flyer with a reputation of having a winning family of birds. I then raise youngsters from them and compare their performance against the performance of my own family. The conditions are the same for all the birds. I believe it to be the only reliable way to judge birds that one might think of introducing into his loft for the purpose of improving breeding and racing performance. If the new birds perform better than my own, I might consider keeping them as a separate family or blending select birds into my family. If the blending doesn't work, I cull the result.

***Do you breed in individual cages? Do you line breed – inbred – or just pair winners?***

I practice line breeding, inbreeding and out crossing and have experienced both success and failure with all three. A closely related pigeon family created by line breeding and/or inbreeding like I have represents a gene pool. If that gene pool consistently produces pigeons that fly well, you are better off than looking yearly for new champions with which to stock your loft. Within a gene pool, it is not necessary to breed in individual cages to maintain the integrity of the youngsters. One of the better widow cocks on my current team is a dark blue checker, and both parents were blue bars. His sire could have been one of several dark check cousins that caught the blue hen off the nest during the day between eggs. When all birds in the breeding loft are related, it doesn't create the problem of not knowing if the breeding program produces a lot of unknown outcrosses. There is also the chance of getting better birds on average from a known gene pool that has produced winners in the past.

I am not suggesting that line breeding and inbreeding are necessary for successful results. Most of my better flyers and breeders over the years have been outcrosses of the original family with birds of similar build and temperament. I take into consideration race performance when selecting birds to mate together; however, it is a demonstrated fact that not all champion racers are good breeders and some

excellent breeders never won a racing prize in their lives. There are hundreds of champion birds produced in Europe each year as a result of their many races and method of awarding prizes. It seems from the many advertisements that every pigeon merchant has a champion he purchased in Europe that is better than any other champion that ever existed. I suspect that if the truth were known, all of us have birds better than most advertised for sale. All we have to do is find out which ones they are.

***What do you look for in pigeons? Can you explain your ideal type?***

I select my breeders based on their race and breeding performance. If they do not come from my own family, I select them on the race and breeding history of their parents and siblings. The strain name is totally irrelevant. My location is one of the longest in a very deep combine; therefore, I select for the so-called distance bird. The conventional wisdom in the sport says that distance birds should be *long cast*, and that is what I looked for some years ago. Again, I have found through experience and comparing individual bird performances that a well-balanced medium to small bird, neither too long cast nor too heavy across the shoulders, can and will succeed at all distances. For years I have graded and categorized my birds into three distant categories based on body type. They are long, short and all-around. The all-around body type as described above has performed best for me.

The true worth of a racing pigeon is not in its physical makeup, but it is the heart and head of a bird that makes a true champion. Finding such birds requires time, patience, observation, record keeping and luck. If there were any true physical characteristics that guaranteed winners, we would all be champs. Or would the result be that we would all be equal and none of us would be champs? I am not a devotee of eye sign, leg scale sign, wing sign, vent sign or any other sign; however, my birds tend to be medium sized with bright red eyes over white or yellow backgrounds, silky feathers, tight vents and flights that extend past the black bar on their tails.

I cannot fully explain how I select birds for mating. For unexplained reasons, I try not to mate birds with the same colored eyes. I truly suspect, however, that eye color makes no difference whatsoever, and excellent flyers can be bred from a pair that has either similar or different colored eyes. Since all my birds are roughly the same size, I don't worry about that as a factor in mating. After considering race and past breeding performances, I will decide to mate a pair of birds if their pedigrees complement each other and they look good together. In other words, it's mostly based on a gut feeling on my part.

**OLD BIRDS:**

***What type of system do you use and how do you handle your birds during the old bird race season?***

Not knowing any other way to race old birds after getting back into the sport in 1988, I flew the natural system in the spring of 1989. After we moved to the Harrisburg area in 1990, Shirl Gerlach introduced me to the double widowhood system in 1991. We tried that with some success for several years. For the past twelve years, I have flown cocks on widowhood only. The hens of Shirl's family originally flew better than the cocks. With the introduction of other birds into the gene pool over the years, the young cocks now fly better than the hens. That has been particularly true during the past several young bird seasons.

I do not believe that "pounding the birds down the road" is sufficient or necessary to produce winners. There is no legally acceptable factor that is sufficient to produce race winners. Top health is the only absolutely necessary factor required for success. After training a bird not to fear the training basket, car ride, race basket, shipping truck and mass releases, taking birds away from the loft to fly home is no longer training. Homing pigeons know how to fly and instinctively will fly home when given the opportunity. Those who credit another flyer's success because he frequently takes his birds down the road to fly home is minimizing the many more important things required to succeed in this sport. I have observed, however, that "hard training" prior to the first race in any series may bring healthy birds into form earlier and produce a race winner, but those same birds are not at the top of the race sheet when the races get longer. I traditionally start the old bird season slowly and end up strong. In 2007 I tossed the old birds ten times before the first race primarily to reintroduce the birds to the routine of returning to their hens and nest boxes and to give me confidence that the birds were fit for racing. During the race season they get no tosses between races. I loft exercise the birds during the week except for shipping day when they get a rest. That also prevents them from being spooked by a hawk and having to fly the

distance of the race on the day of shipping. I do take the birds that are sitting out a race for a 50-mile toss on race day in order to fly them to their hens.

If a bird does not have a setback during a race, I repeat it the next week during the shorter races. I try to get all widow cocks into all the first races out to 300 miles. After that I will send them every other week. If a yearling cock wins races and consistently homes early from shorter races early in the season, I will not chance breaking his spirit by sending him to a 500-mile race or farther. I will save him for the shorter races up to 400 miles. Every race presents an opportunity for pigeons to make a mistake. I have observed that a bird that comes home directly and thus makes a higher speed than the competition can easily learn that he can stop and rest along the way and still get home in time to be fed and defend his territory.

I expect all my old birds to do well and home on the day of a race out to 550 miles, weather permitting. I fully understand the arguments in favor of having both a short distance family of "speed" pigeons and a long distance family. I have found that birds that can endure and not go down early on a long, tough race can also win a short distance race. I believe that heart, head, health and motivation are the primary factors that determine a bird's performance on any given day and not an ability to fly faster than the competition. I also believe that a bird's speed during the actual race for home is primarily determined by how much it stays on a direct route home and on the direction and speed of the wind and not on how fast he beats his wings, unless the bird has been administered steroids that are reputed to jack up a pigeon's system to increase its wing beat.

Until the 2006 old bird season I would not send a yearling beyond the 400-mile race. In 2006 I had a yearling that was well bred but had done nothing spectacular up through the next to last race of the season. I sent him to the last and longest (551 miles for me) race, and he was first club and sixth combine. It was at that point that I realized how little I knew about homing pigeons and their true capability. In the same race in 2007 I sent fifteen birds, seven were yearlings. My first three birds home were yearlings with the first bird again scoring first club and sixth combine.

***But what about the danger in losing or otherwise destroying a yearling's racing career?***

I send a bird to a race when it is his turn and he shows signs around the loft of being in excellent health and on top of his game. I am aware of the conventional wisdom that calls for sparing promising young cocks during their young bird season and only flying them out to 400 miles as yearlings. The theory is that they don't come into their own until they are two years old and older. I fly an old bird team consisting of 32 widow cocks. I lose very few birds during the race season. I generally have between 25 and 28 remaining at the end of the season, and that is only if there is a smash race. I carry only 16 of them over for the next year and supplement the team with 16 birds from the fall young bird season. I have come to believe it necessary to test the birds earlier than conventional wisdom dictates. A young cock that shows promise as a young bird will make the old bird team, but a yearling that has not demonstrated any above average results in two years will not advance any further. In addition, I have noticed that when faced with a very difficult race, old birds with a lot of experience in long and difficult races will do well while their inexperienced team members no matter how old will perish. Time will tell if pushing the birds leads to deterioration of my old bird team.

***Do you use a preventative medication program on your birds, and do you have a medication and supplement program you use before and during race season?***

I believe the Vets when they say one cannot medicate the birds to prevent disease. I do put the birds on seven days of Dacozine 4 in 1 two weeks before the first race to destroy the ever-present canker and cocci pathogens. During the 2007 old bird season, I did not administer any medication of any kind to the old bird team during the race season. I do follow the recommendations of the McLaughlin Loft and give the birds Red Cell on Tuesday and Thursday along with brewer's yeast one day and whey the other day on their grain. I also follow the light to heavy method of feeding primarily cereal grains upon return from a race and for the next several days through Wednesday, followed by increased grains containing protein and fat several days before a race. Upon return from a race, I have water for them with a mix of fructose and electrolytes.

Antibiotics do not discriminate between harmful and helpful bacteria. When they are administered to a flock of birds, they destroy not only the bad bacteria but also the gut bacteria necessary for

maintaining good health in the birds. Constantly killing the good gut bacteria in a pigeon will adversely affect its immune system. There are many strains of E. coli with only a few being harmful. In addition, E. coli exists in every living creature. You may think you can eliminate E. coli from the birds. But, you will only infect them the next day with your very presence.

Excessive medication also damages a bird's liver and low dosages allow bacteria to mutate until the medication does not work when the birds really need it. While putting antibiotics in the drinking water for a few days between races may occasionally give a bird or two a boost and cause it to score high in a race, the long-term affect is detrimental to the health of the racing team. Nothing demonstrates this better than watching a team on this regimen have its highs and lows. A healthy team of pigeons will score steadily close to the top with multiple birds on the first drop and an occasional out-of-turn win. I do not believe that a pigeon that is being constantly medicated can come into form. Form comes with reasonable exercise, time, health and luck. Some look for physical signs on the pigeon to judge its form and fitness for racing. I have done so in the past and have kept detailed results of physical signs and race results. After analyzing the results, I decided that I was not smart enough to select the winners in that way.



#### YOUNG BIRDS:

***How many young birds do you start with every year on your race team and how do you prepare them for the races?***

I start with too many, and each year I promise myself that next year will be different. For the past dozen years or so I have had a team of between 65 and 70 to start the training period. I then have between 50 and 60 at the end of the season from which to select 16 widow cocks and as many hens. Next year I plan to have only about 50 at the start. For the past five years my young birds began seriously tripping when two months old. They would leave for hours at a time. I couldn't leave them out in the afternoon because they would trip for four or more hours and return after dark. It is very strange to see a flock of birds fluttering around the loft in the dark trying to figure out how to get down safely. As a result, I would lose a dozen or more birds that dropped out during the trip and never returned. Some may suggest that only lazy or worthless birds are lost in this way, and the exercise weeds out the weaklings. I don't believe this for one minute. And since it can never be proven one way or the other, it doesn't make any difference.

This year I decided to see what would happen if I began their basket and road training when they began to disappear during loft exercise. They began their long absences in early May. I then took them

about three times to 5 miles, 10 miles and 17 miles. After that I jumped to 43 miles. I lost two birds during the experiment. By the end of May I had the birds ready for the first race. I did not lose any birds off the loft.

***But surely that isn't enough tosses to prepare the young birds for the race season. How can that many teach the birds all the tricks to succeed in the races?***

I think a few more tosses help; however, when I met Shirl Gerlach in 1988, he told me how he prepared his young bird team of 24 birds for the races. He learned the method as a sergeant in the pigeon corps just prior to and during the first year of World War II. He took them twice to 5 miles, twice to 10 miles, twice to 20 miles, twice to 50 miles and next sent them to the first race. He would put the birds up all together during the first toss at each distance. The second time he would release a basket at a time. Of course, this method depended on the birds coming good each time. If they made a mistake or had problems, he would try and fix the problem and repeat the toss.

It isn't until the birds get out over 40 miles that they start to come directly home. It is my experience that at shorter distances they can see the loft and/or familiar landmarks and tend to trip a little before coming home just as they do during loft exercise. I usually expect the birds to fly an hour before arrival home until they get to the 43-mile release point. Shirl always talked about the "zone of disorientation." That is the distance between 20 and 40 miles from the loft. Within 20 miles the birds orient on familiar landmarks that they learned while ranging during loft exercise. It isn't until the birds get out past 40 miles that their geomagnetic compass works.

Have you ever noticed how a flock of birds will take tight circles upon release before eventually heading in the direction of home? Then on other times the birds will not hesitate and head directly for home. An article in the June 2007 edition of the *Natural History* magazine explains what is going on with the birds. I believe that every person who races homing pigeons should understand what the article contains. I quote it here for your information.

*"Homing pigeons and other birds can sense the Earth's magnetic field, an ability that helps them find their way home even when the home is hundreds of miles away. But how this magnetic sense works remains one of the most puzzling questions in sensory biology. To learn the birds' secret, Gerta Fleissner, a neurobiologist at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, teamed up with physicists and other biologists. Their investigation focused on the skin of the upper beak – where the mysterious magnetic sense is thought to reside. With powerful microscopes they identified three clusters of nerve endings on each side of the homing pigeon's beak, each cluster oriented along one of the bird's three perpendicular axes (beak-tail, wing-wing, and back-belly). Inside the nerve cells they discovered something even more intriguing: two kinds of magnetic iron oxide – square platelets of maghemite and bullet-shaped particles of magnetite. The investigators propose that an extremely delicate arrangement of intracellular minerals constitutes the long-sought receptor of birds' magnetic sense.*

*Here's how they think it works: Each pair of clusters (one on each side of the beak) is tuned to detect one of the three perpendicular spatial components of the Earth's magnetic field (north-south, east-west, and up-down). Depending on how closely a pair of clusters aligns with its magnetic-field component, the maghemite platelets in the clusters line up and magnetically attract the magnetite bullets. The rearrangement of maghemite and magnetite in all three pairs of clusters triggers nerve impulses to the bird's brain, enabling the bird to sense the angle and intensity of the local magnetic field and fly home. Fleissner located similar iron-bearing nerves in several other bird species, and she suspects all birds possess them."*

I use 17 and 43 miles because of the convenience and geography. The 17-mile toss takes me across and beyond the Susquehanna River several miles. That prevents the birds from going up or down river. When faced with a major water obstacle immediately upon release, birds tend to avoid crossing. It seems that they do better if they have a flying start on the obstacle. Many flyers have told me that they did not understand how they lost birds on a short, 30-mile toss. I usually get a blank stare of disbelief

when I explain the “zone of disorientation.” Birds don’t always fail at this distance. Sometimes they have been slowly worked up to that distance, and they are able to orient on landmarks. Other times they fly until they get to where they can orient on the earth’s magnetic fields or until they do come to a familiar landmark. In his book, Joe Rotundo explained the phenomenon in a different context. He said his first toss was from 40 miles. Any bird that couldn’t make it wasn’t worth having. Joe did very well with his birds even if he didn’t understand the underlying science behind his birds’ homing ability.

The most important thing one should take from this discussion is the fact that sometimes it is not the fault of the birds when they are unable to orient even if they are perfectly healthy and well trained. Solar flares, geomagnetic storms and extreme low-pressure areas found in hurricanes do interfere with our birds’ ability to use their magnetic sensors. As a sport, we do not take such things into consideration when planning a race release. The result is usually a smash with many good birds lost.

***Are you telling us that you prepared for the September young bird race season in May?***

No, I’m telling you that I put the young birds on the road in April and May to prevent losses from the loft. When I mate my breeders, I have them on 16 hours of light to stimulate their mating and provide more hours for them to feed the young in the nest. After weaning, I continue to keep the young birds on 16 hours of light. Anyone who does this must understand that the additional light must be provided before sunrise and not after sunset. After the basket training in May, I then discontinue the extra lights for the young birds. That results in a reduction of approximately two hours of daylight for them. Their daylight went from 16 hours to 14 hours. Within a week the young bird flock begins a serious body molt. In nature the reduction of daylight beginning in June triggers a hormonal change within the birds to initiate a molt before the onset of winter and/or the migratory period. By artificially creating the same situation the young bird team molts earlier and faster than normal and is fully molted out before the first race.

That is the theory, and in practice I have found it to be the case. This year I decided to also clip the 10<sup>th</sup> flight, so it would be there during the race season. About 1 June I cut the 10<sup>th</sup> flights of all the birds about two inches from the wing, let them dry out for at least a week, and then pulled them. Also, on 1 June, I locked up the team and kept them that way until about 10 July when the 10<sup>th</sup> flights were fully grown in and the body molt was almost over. During July they were allowed to fly about an hour in the morning and a half hour in the evening. I put them back on the road about three weeks before the first race.

***Do you train to the first station before the first race?***

I don’t believe it absolutely necessary to take the birds to the first race station before the race. After the pigeons are taken beyond 50 miles, they have no idea how far away their loft is. For the Harrisburg club, the average distance of the first race is 150 miles. I fly 160 miles. I have started young birds at 300 miles as their first race experience. They do just fine. I believe they simply orient and head for home. If they are healthy and don’t run into any misfortune along the way, they will make it home. I also believe that a bird that is equally fit but with considerable race experience will do better than a novice in its first race. It is for this reason that I like to get all my young birds in every race possible.

Our combine has a 20-bird shipping limit. We are also allowed to ship 20 trainers to be liberated one hour after the race birds if there is crate and truck space. Unfortunately, that is not the case during the first several races. If one has 60 young birds on his team, it is obvious that he cannot get all of them into the first two races. As a result, I take my team at least once to the first race station or somewhere close to it before the first race. I like a group toss or club training race to give the birds the experience of flying with a large flock of birds and having to break for home. This increases my comfort level when I can say that all my birds have been in at least one simulated club race before sending them to longer distance races.

***What racing system do you use – dark, light or natural?***

I guess the answer is natural, but to understand my answer I must first describe my flying loft. It is 30 feet long and 10 feet wide with an entrance from the rear into a 3 feet wide hallway. There is an electric fan on each end and heated floors throughout the loft to increase ventilation and lessen dampness during wet and foggy weather conditions. It has four compartments. Facing the loft from the front, there is a large young bird section containing box perches only on the right end with an adjoining aviary. The

second section from the right is a smaller young bird section with box perches. Next and third is a yearling widowhood section with 20 nest boxes, and last is the old bird widowhood section also containing 20 nest boxes. All sections have solid walls and are connected with about a foot square opening on the floor that can be covered and closed. Through a bird's flying career, it will move from the young bird section on the right of the loft to the old bird section on the left. When all openings are uncovered, the birds can roam freely throughout the entire loft. I trap through a stall trap situated between the second and third sections that opens up into a box from which the birds can go either right into the young bird sections or left into the widowhood sections. They must negotiate a bob trap that can be covered to direct the birds into the proper sections. The same stall trap is used during the young and old bird race series.

I neither have the capability nor the inclination to use the darkening system. I am told that many birds are lost on this system. Since I don't like to lose birds, that method is not for me. You have heard how I use increased lights to stimulate breeding and an early molt. I don't mess with the lights during the race season. During the old bird season the young birds are kept in their two sections and aviary. After the old bird races, I pick my 16 widow cocks for the next year and settle them in the old bird widowhood section. I then open the little door in the wall separating the second and third sections and let the young birds do their thing as they please in the nest boxes. I train and race the young birds to the perch until the young birds begin to mate up and the cocks begin to drive their hens. I then separate the sexes with the hens in the large section on the end and the cocks in the second and third sections. I don't like to do this unless necessary because it requires loft exercising the sexes separately. When they are separated, I let the sexes together for several hours before shipping day and on race day.

After the race season starts, it would not be necessary to do any road training so long as the birds are healthy and flying for extended periods during loft exercise. If the birds simply circle the loft and land in 15 minutes, road training may be necessary. I find, however, that taking them away from the loft to simply have them exercise will probably not solve the underlying problem causing the birds not to fly voluntarily. I do realize that the local hawks may harass the birds so much that the only way to keep the birds alive and well is to take them away from home to exercise. After saying this, I do confess that I take all birds that are not in the race basket for a 50-mile toss on race day. In addition, I routinely take the birds to the same place on Wednesday. I do this primarily to observe their orientation upon release. If they leave the basket and fly directly towards home, I know there is nothing interfering with their magnetic compasses and they are ready for the race. Any birds that come late are closely checked and put on the bench for the weekend race.

***Are there any feeding methods you use – do you break them down, do you keep them hungry for control purposes or do you let them have all they want?***

I do not like to keep the young birds hungry. I sacrifice a little control to ensure the birds fly for an hour or more when left out of the loft. When they return from the races, I have no problem getting a good trap. The young birds follow the Satinette droppers to the landing board without any prior training. I don't advocate overfeeding. I do believe that the young birds should have a sufficiently nutritious grain mix to ensure proper physical development and enough reserve to get them home from a race should they be out overnight because of a bad day, poor release or individual mistake. I also feed the young birds light to heavy between races as I do the old birds.

***If you get a sick bird do you try to cure it? Do you use preventive medications on your birds?***

You have my views on preventative medication above. If I suspect any bird in my lofts is sick, I isolate it and attempt to identify the cause. Dr. Paul Miller and the Pennsylvania State Veterinary Lab have been very helpful over the years in diagnosing pigeon health problems. If the bird is worth saving, I will treat it individually. If not, I will cull it. If there is a chance the rest of the birds may also be affected, I will treat the flock as required.

I first experienced the annual adenovirus/E. coli complex in 1993. Ever since then, it has been a constant struggle to get the young birds past the two to three weeks during which the virus reduces the birds' immune systems and makes them susceptible to bacterial infections. When symptoms such as regurgitation of grain and flat droppings appear, I will treat the flock with a broad-spectrum antibiotic for a week and rest the birds for two weeks. This sometimes requires me to skip one of the early young

bird races. For me the young bird season has become a time to select candidates for the old bird team. To push the birds during the adenovirus/E. coli period, risks the danger of excessive bird losses. I have found that by suspending training and racing during this time the birds will fully recover and repay my patience during the latter part of the race season. I believe that many of the young bird losses during training for the races and during the first couple of races are due to flyers not recognizing the non-obvious symptoms early in the onset of the disease. It must be obvious to the reader that I prefer the old bird race season.

#### GENERAL

***Do you think your position is a good one as far as combine races are concerned? How big is combine? Club?***

Our club belongs to the United Pigeon Combine. It is a large combine with eight clubs and 119 paid members in 2007 lying west to east from Hagerstown to Baltimore, Maryland and north to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. We have 24 paid members currently. I fly 90 miles farther than the shortest member in the combine. Some in the Harrisburg club fly even farther. For this reason alone, we need birds that can endure on the long, tough races. When there is a late release or very slow long race, our birds frequently run out of daylight before making it home on the day of the race. Fortunately, our second day birds frequently beat day birds on the shorter end. We have northwest prevailing winds that favor the lofts lying to the east. Because of our greater distances, Harrisburg lofts do well in any race that has a slow start and fast finish. They occur only rarely, but we have topped the combine when the weather favors our situation. Some of us have won a number of combine races during the nine years we have been associated with the UPC, but it is not a common occurrence.

***Is there any kind of health program you follow regularly? If so, explain it to us. How do you medicate and for what reason?***

I inoculate all young birds with Sal Bac, PMV-1 and pigeon pox in June. All birds receive a booster shot with Sal Bac and PMV-1 vaccine in December. I medicate for a week with Dacoxine 4 in 1 before the breeding season and before each race season as described above. Other than that I do not medicate unless necessary.

***Can you give us a little history on your Champion Loft award for the 2007 old bird season?***

***List your flying results.***

As I said earlier, I start a race season slowly with the birds, and they tend to come on stronger later as the races get longer. That was the case in 2007. I qualified for the award with five of the longer races. The distances of the five races ranged from 357 to 551 miles. I had three first places and 2 second places in club competition. It was a team effort with no bird being clocked first twice. Racing homing pigeons in the Harrisburg club is very competitive. No one flyer dominates the race seasons from year to year. Any flyer can top the club and combine as has been demonstrated over the years. The club atmosphere is competitive but friendly. Everyone seems happy even though on any given race day some are happier than others. And since it usually is a different group happy each week, we all look forward to next week when there will be others who are happy.

***Do you believe in bird entry limits? Do you believe in clocking limits?***

It's more a matter of necessity and tradition than belief. Limits in our combine are set by the amount of space in our shipping truck. If we had more space or fewer flyers, I am sure our limit would be increased. Clocking limits are traditional among American racing pigeon flyers. Ours is a culture that idealizes a single winner in all sports competitions. It seems that there can be only one winner, and all the rest are losers. A winner might have the fastest bird home without getting another bird for thirty minutes while the second place bird may belong to a loft that had five birds on the first drop. It is clear that the second place flyer had the best team performance. In my mind, that second place flyer won the day if not the race. The European prize system is based on this principal.

Our combine has a three-bird clocking limit. In spite of my sentiments on the subject, I fully understand why Americans prefer clocking limits. Our clubs and combines are generally widely scattered geographically. Because of location and/or weather conditions, many races would be totally dominated by one or several lofts. Since we view all birds after the first as losers in the race, there is no

need to clock a lot of birds. In addition, for many being higher on the race sheet takes some of the sting out of not being first.

***Please describe how you feed?***

During breeding and racing seasons, I feed twice a day in hoppers. I do put a cup of grain in the nest boxes when they are driving and feeding youngsters. At that time the birds get all they want to eat. In the winter when the birds are separated, I feed only once in the morning. I try to feed at the same time every day. The racing teams are always fed upon return from loft exercise or training tosses. In order to feed at regular times, I exercise the birds early in the morning. Since I am retired, it is convenient for me to manage the teams in the way. The birds usually exercise in excess of an hour each morning; thus, if I do exercise them in the afternoon or evening, it is only for a short time. That has not seemed to have any adverse effect on race day.

I have been feeding Brown's International Mix for several years; although, any clean multi-grain mix should do. During breeding and molting, I supplement this with additional maple peas and safflower as needed. As I described above, I feed light to heavy during race seasons. I feed a purifier mix with barley and other cereal grains after a race gradually increasing the regular mix until two days before shipping when I supplement the mix with safflower and a small amount of Spanish peanuts. In the winter I supplement the regular mix with 30% barley. I try to feed the birds based on the temperature and tasks I expect them to perform. I use 70 degrees and regular exercise as the standard with a bird's requirement under the circumstances being approximately one ounce of feed. The birds want and require more to eat when the temperature decreases and/or they must exert themselves flying.

***If you could pass on one piece of advice to fanciers young and old, what would it be?***

There are many things one must do and not do to be successful with racing homing pigeons. As Shirl used to say, "It's all the little things that count." Besides knowledge, the most important attribute a racing pigeon flyer must have is patience.

***If you had the opportunity to change something in the pigeon game, what would it be?***

I would change the attitude of American racing pigeon flyers that each race has only one winner with all the rest of the birds being losers. This measure neither reflects the quality of a race team nor the skill of the loft owner.

***Do you have any goals in the sport? What awards have you received?***

I can probably best answer that question by saying what goals I do not have. I do not want to become a millionaire selling pigeons. Neither am I much concerned about gaining a reputation of being a "master" racing pigeon handler or being number one in the sport. I have always tried to create and constantly improve on a family of homing pigeons that has more of the above average racers and breeders and less of the below average birds. My birds have earned me a moderately above average level of recognition in club and combine awards. Except for a second place Digest Ace Loft Award in 2000, I have not applied for any national recognition. My greatest reward from this hobby comes from knowing that birds I have bred and birds that have been bred from my birds have won races and recognition for at least a dozen other fanciers that I know of. Probably the best example of this can be seen in the *Racing Pigeon Digest* of 15 January 2006. Ted Lesniara of the Lehigh Mountain Combine and his many accomplishments are featured in an article. There is a picture of Ted "holding his outstanding pigeon." That red grizzle cock was bred from a red grizzle hen I gave to a friend.

Speaking of recognition, I would like to thank the IF for providing me this opportunity to share a few thoughts with fellow fanciers. In the process, however, I would like to say that my comments in no way mean that I think I have discovered the right way to manage racing pigeons or even the best way to do so. What I have described is the way I have found works for me. The birds constantly remind me how little I really know and how much I have to learn about them. I'm not the one who must fly home on race day. My only job is to create the environment in which my birds can do their best. I am always open to new ideas. And that is why the many hours of effort on the part of the IF and its officers to compile the awards on a national basis and give fellow fanciers the opportunity to share their thoughts makes for a better sport. Thanks Lew Cressler.