



Healthy Pigeons Win Races: Part 1

The following article comes from notes taken during a seminar given by Dr. Steve Weir at the 1993 AU convention. Updated by Dr. Weir March 16, 1999 for the I.F. home page. Dr. Weir is a small animal veterinarian in Catoosa Oklahoma. He has flown pigeons successfully for many years and helps pigeon flyers from around the country with health problems. He can be contacted at Catoosa Small Animal Hospital, Box 1559 Catoosa Oklahoma, 74015; Tel: 918-266-4009, Fax: 918-266-4143.

In order for a loft to win consistently in tough competition four things are required:

1. Good birds - the best you can obtain.
2. Fit birds - must be well conditioned.
3. Motivated birds - they must want to come home fast.
4. **Healthy birds - the most important.**

The reason that health is most important is that - you can spend a fortune on good pigeons - you can train their feathers off - you can fly natural, widowhood, double widowhood, lesbian hens, etc. - but if they aren't healthy you are going to get beat. Poor health is the great equalizer in pigeon racing.

So if we assume that healthy pigeons win races, what do we mean by healthy pigeons? When I say healthy pigeons I mean more than birds that look good, act good, fly around the loft well, have white wattles, have clear eyes, and normal droppings. Why? Because a bird can fit the description that I just gave and not be healthy enough to win a big competition. That is because:

It is a bird's natural instinct to look healthy even when not. It is the sick bird that the predator gets in the wild and our pigeons maintain that instinct to act healthy even when not. We have all entered the loft to see a bird sitting on the floor all fluffed up that we thought was healthy the day before. Upon exam the bird is as light as a feather. It didn't happen overnight. That bird has been slowly losing weight but trying to look healthy.

Pigeons can be infected with all types of organisms such as coccidia, worms, trichomonas (canker), bacterial pathogens, etc. and look perfectly healthy in every way.

It is critical that we understand there are three levels of pigeon health:

1. Poor health - this is when birds are sick and act sick. It is easy to see and birds obviously will not perform in this group. Most fanciers don't keep or race their pigeons in this condition.
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2. Apparent health - this is where we have birds that are apparently healthy in every way but are infected with various organisms that reduce performance. This is where the vast majority of pigeon fanciers keep their birds today.
3. Super health - this is the elusive goal that all of us who fly pigeons should strive for. It is the level that the top lofts who win year in and year out maintain in their birds. Very few fanciers ever reach this level and when they do they have super results every week.

The following graph illustrates what I have described above. As you can see - STRESS is what causes a reduction in health and thus a reduction in performance. What things stress our birds? - Training, breeding, racing, molting, disease, parasites, husbandry problems, etc.

[graph unavailable]

As we keep in mind the goal of keeping our birds in super health so they can give us super performance, we need to look at four specific areas. As we look at these areas, remember that we are seeking to reduce stress on our birds so that they can reach that super health.

1. Loft hygiene and design
2. Specific diseases
3. Using a veterinarian
4. A realistic health program

LOFT HYGIENE AND DESIGN: This is a very critical but highly overlooked area as far as reducing stress on our birds. Many people could greatly enhance their performance by simply doing some minor remodeling.

Ventilation: This is an extremely critical area. A pigeon's lungs are connected to air sacs which go throughout their body and even into their bones. Anything a pigeon breathes will greatly affect it. If your loft is full of dust, ammonia fumes from wet droppings, etc. you can expect your performance to decrease. Ideally, air should enter from the floor and exit at the top. You do not want a breeze blowing through the loft at the other extreme. One way to greatly help you in the area of ventilation - especially as you try to balance it with temperature control is to not OVERCROWD your birds. You can keep a much tighter loft and thus control your temperature if you don't have a ton of pigeons.

Droppings: In short scrape the loft daily. When a pigeon has coccidia or worms, these organisms are passed in the droppings. They are not, however, infective at that point. They have to sit around for 48 hours or so before they will reinfect a pigeon when eaten. If you will scrape daily you will greatly reduce the reinfection rate in your birds with coccidia and worms. You also will reduce problems with bacterial diseases like E. coli.

Moisture: Moisture is the pigeon flyers greatest enemy when it comes to health. Moisture greatly increases the viability of parasites, bacteria, and viruses. It is critical that you don't allow rain to enter the loft, waterers to leak, etc. You must also be careful with wire floors if they are open to the ground. In some cases this allows a lot of dampness into the loft which will spell disaster with your birds' health. Building a wooden subfloor underneath the wire will help in this area. The best floor litter I have ever seen as far as dryness was suggested to me by Gunnar Guttormson. He uses compressed wood pellets that are sold as fuel for wood stoves. They absorb a tremendous amount of moisture and will keep your loft bone dry. Heaters or heated floors also aid greatly in moisture control - especially in the winter.

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Food and water: Three things to remember - clean, clean, clean. The easiest way for birds to become infected with disease causing organisms is via soiled food or water. Thoroughly clean and sterilize your waterers with Clorox at least weekly.

Rodent control: Mice carry paratyphoid - the disease caused by salmonella. You must keep them out of the loft.

Temperature control: Big temperature fluctuations will kill form in your birds by the stress they cause. Closing up the loft at night and on cold days - especially during race season is critical for top performance. Some form of heat is also extremely helpful to reach and maintain that super health needed to win in big competition.

Insect control: Several types of worms are carried by insects. Be careful about letting birds have a lot of open loft where they can eat insects.

Overcrowding: Simply don't do it. Many people have had their best young bird season ever after a major smash in training leaving them with only 1/3 of their team. The less birds you have the less disease you will have and the easier and cheaper it is to take care of them. You should be like the marines - You only want a few good men (I'm a widowhood flyer and partial to the cocks).

Quarantine: Remember, many birds carry a ton of bad bugs and look healthy. All new pigeons should be wormed, treated for canker and coccidia, and placed on 10 days of baytril or cipro to get rid of salmonella BEFORE they are put in the general population.

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In this article we will discuss some of the specific diseases of pigeons. This is not at all an inclusive list of all pigeon diseases, but it discusses those that a pigeon flyer MUST CONTROL to be successful during the race season.

Pigeon Pox: Pox is a viral disease that is very common in young birds. Most pigeon flyers are very familiar with what the disease looks like. It produces raised, yellow, scabby lesions usually on the featherless parts of the body such as beak, legs, and eye cere. It also can be in the mouth. These lesions are firmly attached to the skin and hard to peel off. When exposed the birds will develop a fever and feel a little off before they break out with lesions. If you get it in your young birds just before or during the season you will have major problems with performance. It is highly recommended that you vaccinate your birds with the Maine Biological Labs vaccine or the Belgian pox vaccine. A good easy way to vaccinate is to take three 20 gauge syringe needles and push them through a cork to where the tips are right next to each other. Dip them in the vaccine and prick the skin on the featherless part of the breast about 1/2 inch off of the keel. Just barely puncture the skin with the needles a couple of times. You will get about 100% takes and can pox a lot of pigeons very quickly. The vaccine also goes a lot farther this way. Be sure to vaccinate at least 6 weeks before race season or training your youngsters with other unvaccinated birds as your birds will be contagious as long as they have a scab where you vaccinated them.

Paramyxovirus: PMV can be a devastating disease in your loft if you don't vaccinate. The virus produces two sets of symptoms. One, it causes inflammation of the kidneys so infected pigeons will produce a ton of urine. Instead of the white portion of the dropping you will get a pool of water around the fecal portion on the perch. The birds will drink a lot to keep up with urine production and your loft will be very wet. Two,

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it causes neurological signs such as lameness, drooped wings, twisted necks, inability to fly etc. We don't seem to see as high a percentage of birds with the neurological signs today as we used to. You cannot treat PMV once you have it and the only way to not get it is to vaccinate. I highly recommend the injectable vaccine from Maine Biological Vaccine. It is safe and effective. Due to some reports by reputable flyers that the injectable vaccine hurts performance a lot of people are using the LaSota chicken vaccine for Newcastle disease. This is very risky and not recommended as the immunity produced from it is very short lived if they get any immunity at all. I am not convinced that performance is harmed at all as many ALL AMERICAN lofts use the injectable vaccine with no problems. If you have an outbreak because you messed up and didn't vaccinate, vaccinate immediately and give supportive care. Most birds will recover - even to race again - if they can eat and drink. You may have to hand feed and water them but it is worth it, if it is a good pigeon.

Paratyphoid: Salmonella causes the disease paratyphoid in pigeons. It is a bacterial infection that causes a multitude of possible symptoms including sudden death of apparently healthy birds of any age, joint infections causing a dropped wing or lameness, infertility in cocks and hens, diarrhea, weight loss, etc, etc. This is a treatable disease and is best treated with Batril (250 mg/gallon) or Cipro (750 mg/gallon) for 10 to 14 days. Baytril (and I assume Cipro) has been shown to get rid of the carrier state of salmonella so you no longer must destroy infected birds. Remember these drugs should not be used while breeding and raising babies. Vaccination is available and is a good idea, especially if you have had a problem with the disease before. The vaccine contains an immune stimulant and seems to really give birds a boost of great health when used about three to four weeks before the race season. This disease is carried by rodents so you must keep them out of your loft to prevent possible infection in your birds.

E. coli: This is a related bacteria to Salmonella and PRODUCES THE EXACT SAME SYMPTOMS. It is much more common than salmonella and probably a lot of what people are diagnosing as salmonella based on symptoms alone is actually E. coli infection. You treat E. coli with antibiotics but you should have a culture and sensitivity run before you treat as this bug varies a lot in what drug kills it best. I have made vaccines for some lofts with chronic problems and helped them, but this is not usually needed. E. coli is a big secondary invader and birds that are stressed with worms, coccidia, canker, and other problems tend to be much more susceptible to it. If you have had E. coli problems in the past it is critical that you control all other disease problems to keep it from recurring.

Worms: Pigeons get a lot of different worms including roundworms, capillaria, tetrameres, and tapeworms. Since Telminitic is now off of the market, ivermectin is the drug of choice for all but tapeworms with which we use droncit (1/4 cat pill per bird). Ivermectin at the rate of 1/10 of a cc per bird orally will take care of the others. Remember, you must scrape the loft daily to prevent reinfection of your birds after you worm them. The wormer ONLY KILLS WHAT IS IN THEM AT THE TIME AND DOESN'T PREVENT YOUR BIRDS FROM BECOMING REINFECTED AGAIN.

The BIG FOUR - the following four diseases account for 95% of the poor performance in racing lofts that is related to health.

1. Ornithose complex: This is probably the most common cause of poor performance related to health. I am not talking about overt respiratory disease where the pigeons are coughing, sneezing, blowing snot on the walls, etc, but SUBCLINICAL DESEASE. Remember, that a birds respiratory system is integrated into it's entire body. ANY LEVEL OF INFECTION WILL GREATLY HAMPER PERFORMANCE. In most birds the only signs of mild subclinical infection you will see are 1) An excess of tears in the eye. When you press on the waddle you will see bubbles form in the corner of the eye. 2) When you put the bird's beak next to your ear you will

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hear a distinct "puff" each time it breathes. A bird that is not excited should not produce hardly any sound when it breathes. You should treat your race team for 10 days before the season starts and three days at the first of each week during the race season for respiratory infection. My favorite drug combination is Tylan (2,500 mg/gallon) and Doxycycline (750 mg/gallon). This is one of two problems that you must practice defensive medicine with while racing. I would typically never recommend using antibiotics without having the disease - but you WILL PICK UP RESPIRATORY INFECTION IN THE BASKET. Recently a drug called Suanovil (Spiromycin) has become available. it is very effective and can be used in place of Tylan in the Tylan - Doxycycline mixture. The dose varies with the form you buy so read the label.

2. Coccidiosis: Coccidia is another problem that will really hurt performance. I maintain that you should treat your birds if you HAVE ANY LEVEL OF INFECTION. This differs from some of the European vets that treat only if you get a large # of the bug on a fecal check. I disagree for three reasons: 1) Coccidia is shed in cycles. One day there will be a lot in a bird's fecal and the next day very few - you can get fooled from day to day. 2) Individual birds vary immensely in there level of infection. Unless you are going to check each and every bird on your team you will miss some with large numbers. 3) If you have any coccidia, as the stress of racing and training goes on you will soon have a ton. You should treat and keep it under control. Remember, coccidia is not infective when it is first passed in the droppings. It has to sit around for a couple of days first. So, SCRAPE YOUR LOFT EVERY DAY and you should have a minimal coccidia problem. Treat with Sulmet (1 Tbs/gallon) or Amprol/Corid (1 tsp/gallon). Another great drug is Baycox if you can get it.
3. Canker: Canker is caused by the one-celled organism that is called trichomonas. You cannot rely on looking for the typical canker lesion of cheese in the mouth as to whether you have the bug or not. Any level of infection (like respiratory) will really hurt performance. You can only diagnose it with throat swabs by a veterinarian. You should treat before the season and as with respiratory treat during the season. Two to three days at the first of every other week during the season should do the trick. Use emtryl (1/4 - 3/8 tsp/gallon) or Ridsol (3/4 tsp/gallon)/ Spartrix also works but must be given individually. It is critical to make sure the drug you are using is working . Have throat swabs checked after you have treated! We are seeing resistance to emtryl and ridzol. If you have a strain of canker in which these two drugs don't work use Flagyl (metronidazole) at 1500-2000 mg/gallon for three days
4. Haemoproteus: This is a blood parasite that is transmitted from bird to bird by pigeon flies. It will cause anemia and very poor performance. To prevent transmission you must control the pigeon fly - it will not pass from bird to bird just by contact. To treat haemoproteus if you have it, treat for two weeks before the season and two days during the week each week of race season. Use atabrine at 200 mg/gallon. The pill form is not available anymore, but most pigeon vets can get a generic form of the powder and prepare it for you to use. It initially was very expensive, but now is getting more reasonable.

Healthy Pigeons Win Races: Part 3

This is the last in a three part series taken from the seminar given by Dr. Steve Weir at the 1993 AU convention in Chicago. Updated by Dr. Weir March 16, 1999.

Using a Veterinarian

If you will remember back to part one we discussed how critical it was to keep our birds in "Super" health - not just apparently healthy as MOST OF US DO. Organisms that cause canker, coccidia, respiratory

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disease, etc. can be present in our birds, greatly hampering our performance, yet the birds still look and act good. The only way to know if you have coccidia, worms, trichomonas (canker), and haemoproteus is to have fecals, throat swabs, and blood smears done. For all practical purposes it is easier to have a veterinarian do it for you. If you monitor and control these problems before and during the race and breeding seasons, you will be way ahead of the game and can achieve that "Super" health. Using a veterinarian gives you many advantages including:

- You will know if you have a problem.
- You will not treat needlessly
- You will know the proper drug to use.
- You will know the proper dosage of the drug.
- And you will know how long to treat.
- It will cost less \$ by far in the long run.

This following scenario is a typical one that I receive on the phone and by simply using a veterinarian it could be avoided. "Hi Doc. I'm having a terrible problem in my young birds. I had a couple die and my buddy told me it must be canker, so I treated them with emtryl. That didn't work and I had 5 more die. Another friend came and looked at them and said it was coccidia because they had greed droppings so I gave them some Amprol. They sort of acted better, but they got bad again so I put them on some Terramycin for salmonella. Since then I have lost 25 more young ones and the ones I have left look terrible. What do you think". I think he could still have a young bird team if he just would have sought professional help first. Any veterinarian is capable of doing fecals, throat swabs, and blood smears and it isn't that expensive. If you are having problems and the common things like coccidia, worms, canker, etc. can't be found by your regular vet, just get in contact with one of the pigeon veterinarians around the country. They are very versed in pigeon medicine and would be glad to help.

A Realistic Health Program

- Before YB races: Vaccinate for pox, PMV, and paratyphoid 30 - 45 days before training begins.
 - Before breeding in the winter: Vaccinate all old birds, breeders, & YB you are keeping for PMV and paratyphoid.
 - This will get all YB vaccinated two times for PMV and paratyphoid as youngsters and will give all OB and breeders a yearly booster.
 - Before racing: Screen race birds (esp. OB) for haemoproteus. Treat if you have it with atabrine and then treat two days weekly during the season. If your performance drops off during the season and you aren't treating because you didn't find it before the season - recheck in case you missed it.
 - Before racing: Treat all race birds for ornithose complex for 10 days. Treat AT LEAST every other week during the season for three days the first of each week to prevent infection from exposure to other race birds.
 - Before racing: Check all birds for worms and coccidia. Treat if needed. Recheck every two weeks during the season and treat if needed early in the week.
 - Before racing: Treat for canker for three to five days. Treat at least every other week during the season to control canker picked up in the shipping crates.
 - Before breeding: Check all birds for worms and coccidia. Treat if needed. Recheck every two weeks during the season and treat if needed.
 - Before breeding: Treat all birds for canker and retreat every two to three weeks during the breeding season.
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- If you will follow this health plan you will control the common bugs that your birds will get. If you are getting sick pigeons on this program you need to consult a pigeon veterinarian to help you solve the problem - as it won't be the easy stuff.

Miscellaneous questions:

Q: Every time I have a fecal checked my birds are loaded with coccidia. I have treated with Amprol and Sulmet, but they aren't working. What can I use.

A: The problem isn't the drug - both work - Sulmet is better - but the drugs are fine. Your problem is reinfection due to poor loft hygiene. Remember, coccidia when first passed in the droppings will not infect another bird. It must sit around for 36 - 72 hours to sporulate and become infective to other pigeons. If removed during that time it can't infect another bird. Coccidia is also a self-limiting disease. In other words when a bird eats a coccidia oocyst it multiplies a FIXED number of times in the bird's intestine and then is shed out completely. If you take a bird infected with coccidia and put him on a wire where he cannot ingest fecal material he will "cure" himself of coccidia. The only possible reason you are having problems since both of the drugs you have used work is that your birds are getting reinfected. CLEAN YOUR LOFT DAILY.

Q: I had several old birds develop large blackish growths on their bodies and wings. Only one to a bird. What is it?

A: What you are describing are "blood warts" or as we call them basalomas or temporary tumors. They are benign growths thought to be related to pox virus. They will eventually dry up and fall off and will not hurt the bird. If you tie a string around the base of the tumor and cut off it's blood supply it will fall off a lot sooner. Don't worry about them. Most flyers have never seen it and it likely won't be back in your loft again for a long time.

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