

Midwest Classic 2013

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Pigeon racing must be one of the most unique hobbies in the world. There are very few, if any, sports that span across people in all walks and stages of life throughout the world. Fanciers have a lifelong fascination with pigeons and often decades of experience in the hobby. It is this dedication and passion that I find so intriguing. Over the past few years, I have had opportunities to write articles featuring the winning fanciers for the Minnesota Invitational Series and most recently, the Midwest Homing Pigeon Association's Midwest Classic Race. The interviews for my articles have allowed me to "meet" many wonderful flyers and learn about their pigeons and methods. This article features some of the most memorable flyers I have had the privilege of interviewing. I hope you enjoy the stories of these diverse flyers. One thing I have learned is that no two pigeon flyers do things the same. The unifying thread is that all of the programs and methods have led to success. It is all about finding what works for you.

The Midwest Classic Race brings together pigeon flyers from across the central US for one of the most competitive races of the old bird season. Birds are tested mentally and physically as they are forced to break in several directions. The Midwest Homing Pigeon Association sponsors this annual tradition. The race began in 1948. In the early days of the association, there were over 1000 members. Over the years, the Classic race has grown from 2000 birds to as many as 7000 birds and up to 17 states competing. The liberation of 4,100 birds flown from 327 lofts was on June 29th from Topeka, Kansas.

Overall Classic Winner (300 Mile section)

Denny Mosher had a special childhood. He grew up in an area surrounded by Belgium fanciers in the Quad City region of Illinois. At one time, he recalls there being close to 100 fanciers in five square blocks. I am sure that many guys wish that they would have had an opportunity to grow up among Belgian fanciers! The Belgians had a strong influence on Denny, despite speaking their native language around the clubhouse. As a young boy, he would go fishing and trade the cleaned catch for a youngster straight from a Belgian's loft. At 15 years of age, Denny began flying his own team. He funded his dues and race fees by earning 50 cents a clock for setting up the timers every week. Denny tucked away all of the advice given him and stayed with the sport for 35 years.

Denny races with the Moline East Moline club, a club with a long history beginning in the 1800s. Widowhood is the system of choice for him; he tried double widowhood but found himself going back to only racing the cocks. A small race team of around a dozen pigeons is all that Denny flies. He pays close attention to the birds: "I mix up their motivation every week or so. I might ship them without showing the hens for a couple weeks. I might lock them out of their boxes all week, and then open them for five minutes without the hens. I found it does matter what trick I use, as long as I

keep it fresh.” His training is pretty straightforward, “I try to keep what I do as simple as possible”. The old birds are trained out to about 30 miles. Once the races begin, they are loft flown for 1 ½ hours every day, with the exception of Monday (day after return) if the race was not an easy one. Denny says that it is important to stick to a routine and not always be changing things.

Race results are of great importance to Denny. He has built his loft around birds that have flown consistently well. Denny’s big Classic winner, 1080 MFLF 2010, is a blue bar cock. The mother to the bird is a Fabry; the father is a Tournier. 1080 has been a great flyer. Denny says that, “I have always believed in the theory of ‘Winners Breed Winners.’” The achievement of winning the Classic has given 1080 an early retirement from racing. He will be placed in the stock loft to breed the next generations of successful pigeons. Denny is confident in 1080’s ability as a breeder as his siblings have sired winners.

100 Mile Section Winner

Gerado Ceballos came out as the 100 mile class winner. When I called to speak with him, I discovered that he did not speak English. I have a lack of Spanish speaking skills, but fortunately I was able to interview him via email! A family member of Gerado’s was able to translate his responses. I truly appreciated her help! He wrote, “I’ve now been flying for four years. I met Walter Codney, and he gave me my first birds. He then introduced me to the ENRPC club where I learned a lot about raising, breeding, and maintaining a successful loft.”

Ceballos races on the natural system. He had a great Classic race where he claimed the first three spots on the top of the race sheet. One of my questions to Gerado was on how he manages his pigeons leading up to race day. His answer was, “Well, I take the birds training 2-3 times a week when preparing for races. I do try to make sure that my flyers are well prepared for distance races by making sure they get good nutrition. Keeping up with vaccination is important too.”

His winning bird is banded 68 AU 2012 COD. Gerado said, “This bird was given to me by Walter Codney. It is a Linbor cock. This bird was one of the first birds to come home in prior races so I did have high hopes for its performance.”

I try to seek advice from all of the successful flyers I interview. Gerado’s tips include, “All I can advise is to take the sport seriously, and if you are going to be a racer you have to be willing to learn and teach. I have learned a lot from the guys in the club, and they have been patient with me. You know what they say, ‘practice makes perfect.’ Also, getting the family involved makes things a lot more fun.”

200 Mile Section Winner

I was surprised, and delighted I might add, to speak with the winner of the 200 mile section. My curiosity was kindled when I noticed that someone named Tanner Michael only entered one pigeon in the Classic. And that single bird won the section

and placed 2nd overall out of 4100 pigeons. My investigation led me to discover that Tanner is an 8-year old boy from Iowa.

Tanner and his siblings race with their dad, Justin. I actually spoke with both Tanner and his dad. The family has been keeping birds since 2007. Justin's stepdad flew birds so Justin and his brother Stephen grew up with the hobby. When Justin grew older, he served in the Marines and went to college. At the sudden passing of their stepdad in 2007, Justin and his brother split up the birds. The timing might have not been perfect for Justin, due to his commitment to his young family, but nevertheless Justin was happy to have pigeons again.

Justin races with his kids in the Northeast Iowa RPC. The birds are flown on the natural system. Tanner told me that his winning bird, 32 AU 2011 CURE, is named "Buzz Lightyear." This special pencil pied cock is a Sion crossed with the "Wonder" blood. He has been a consistent racer, flown twice to the 500 mile races as a yearling, and was a top finisher in the club in 2013.

I am always excited to see dads get their kids involved with the sport; and I especially enjoy kids who love the birds. Tanner is definitely involved and a part of the future of the sport. The pigeons are special to Tanner because "they are different, and nobody has them." From the step dad who started it all, to both brothers who race today, to Justin's kids, it is special that the Michael family keeps passing on the pigeon racing tradition.

400 Mile Section Winner

Howard Bodzianowski may not be the typical flyer who races in the Classic. The stereotypical Classic racer is serious about racing old birds, focused strictly on middle and long distance races, and may even be a little easy on his young birds. Rather, Howard considers himself a young bird specialist. In fact, 2013 was only his second year experimenting with racing old birds. However, do not let this detract from the success he has achieved in old bird racing. In the Classic alone, Howard had 9 of 25 birds in the top 10% (out of 2307) of the 400 mile class.

He lives near Chicago in an area that limits the amount of pigeons you may own. Howard has to choose whether to race old or young birds. But Howard has taken full advantage of this restriction by keeping his numbers low and focusing on turning a few birds into a super team. Howard grew up with fancy pigeons and remained curious about the racing variety as a young man. Finally in 1992, Howard acquired his first racers. He flew off and on during the 1990's before consistently keeping birds since 2006.

Howard told me that there are a few people who have mentored him and helped him build a successful family of birds. He faithfully follows Mike Ganus' 1-2-3 Racing System with medications, feeding, and training. Another resource that he credits to his success is the Jim Jennings' "Secrets of Champions" DVDs. Lastly, Matt Wiesbrock of Alca Loft has been instrumental in mentoring Howard.

The winning hen, 8800 WRC 2011, was flown as a young bird. Then she was not flown as a yearling. In just two short seasons, this hen won 13 diplomas. Howard has a combination of Fabry's, Vandabeele's, Mona Lisa blood and a chocolate colored family.

Howard was an athlete as a youth. It is in his nature to be competitive and that is exactly what pigeon racing offers. His fantastic Classic race result is another achievement to add to his growing list of accomplishments which includes multiple average speed wins. Despite his old bird success, Howard thinks that he'll return to racing young birds on the darkening system in 2014.

500 Mile Section Winner

Can you imagine flying the Classic race for the first time and placing 1st, 2nd, and 3rd? Not only this, but also having 12 of 24 birds in the top 10% of 1067 birds? One could say "beginner's luck", but that is not the case for Robert Alvarez of Milwaukee, WI. Robert is a seasoned flyer with 35 years of experience. He began racing back home in Guadalajara, Mexico where pigeon racing is extremely popular. Later in life he moved to the US where he had pigeons in California for a while before ending up in Wisconsin and racing with the Kenosha RPC.

Robert's job forces him to travel extensively, which leaves him unable to care for his pigeons every day of the week. Fortunately, he has a great club mate who cares for the pigeons in Robert's absence. He notes that without the support of his wife and assistance from Fred Pieper (who also had fantastic Classic results of 5th, 6th and 7th), he could never keep up with his birds. Alvarez prepares the daily feed in buckets and labels everything so that whoever cares for the birds knows exactly what to do to keep them in optimum shape and health. The birds are flown naturally. Fred Pieper trains two times a week with both his own birds and Robert's. The birds loft fly twice daily. Robert believes in letting the birds fly freely and not forcing them up.

The winning hen, 2924 COM 2010, was a consistent bird bred by a good friend of Robert's in California. The bird was sent to Robert for a special young bird race. She is of Janssen blood lines. I asked him if he planned on keeping the three birds for the stock loft, but Robert told me that it is important to him to fly birds for two or three years no matter their records; too often people stock birds after one good performance, instead of looking for consistency before using the birds as breeders.

Simply put, Robert's success is a combination of planning ahead, Fred Pieper's help, and "keeping the pigeons happy".

600 mile section winner

Pigeons have been an important family tradition for Tom Van Beek. He races from the same young bird loft as his cousin, Doug Johnston. Tom remembers how it all started, "Pigeon racing has been in our family since we were kids. Doug's father, Johnny Johnston and grandfather, Floyd Johnston, were all pigeon flyers as well as Doug's brother, Barney. It was the Johnston's who got my father into racing." Tom followed in the footsteps of his relatives and has been racing off and on since 1986.

The pigeons in the Van Beek loft are what Tom calls a "Heinz 57" strain, with a few exceptions. He keeps and breeds whatever performs well. Tom flies on the natural

system. The section winner is a blue check pied hen. "She comes out of a 1/2 import from Silvere Toye, and the other 1/2 is out of my father's red family. As a young bird, it won a 300 mile race. She was also my first bird home for 4 races. It was difficult to get her in races because she was always ready to lay an egg. When she did race, she did well."

The 400 and 500 mile races are what Tom enjoys and does best at. His training consists of tosses of 30 miles, two or three times a week. When time permits, he tosses the birds in groups of five; if not, a larger group toss is done. The birds are permitted to loft fly often. 600 mile races are challenging. Tom takes care to remove the grit two days before shipping and also feeds extra so the birds put on some much needed weight as reserves for their intense flight. Since he flies on the natural system, Tom mentioned, "I try shipping them on 14 day old eggs so that they come home faster to a nest." I asked Tom what he likes in body type for his birds. He remarks that, "My bird preference is small to medium build with wider flight feathers."

Closing Remarks

Congratulations to all of the section winners and especially the 2013 Classic winner, Denny Mosher. This little article gives a bit of recognition for the efforts of the winners. However, no article can truly portray the hours, weeks, and years of work and experience that many flyers put into their hobby. Thank you to all the guys who graciously took time to speak with me.

Keep up to date with the Classic Race and view past results on our website www.midwesthpa.com. The date of the 2014 race is June 28th. View the website and click on "information sheet" to learn how to enter the race.

The Midwest Homing Pigeon Association hosts an annual convention every fall. The Fond du Lac Racing Pigeon Club is hosting the 2014 Midwest Convention October 9th -11th in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Be sure to reserve your spots in the convention race. Visit www.midwesthpa.com for entry forms and other important information.

Until next time, I wish everyone a successful breeding season. You just never know when the next Midwest Classic winner will hatch!