

The recent death of John Nicholson of Rochester in Kent marks the passing of one of the all time great long distance fanciers. Along with his son Spencer, John produced and raced one of the best teams of long distance pigeons that these Islands have ever seen - and all this to a small back garden loft. The following article was written a year or two ago as part of a series written on British long distance masters. I reproduce it here as a tribute to a truly great fancier.



John & Spencer Nicholson of Rochester, Kent.

MASTERS of LONG DISTANCE RACING

John Nicholson first started in the sport at the age of 13 and enjoyed a measure of success through to 500 miles racing on the North Road. However, after just three years John left the sport before resuming his pigeon racing career in 1980, flying in partnership with his son, Spencer. Since that time they have forged a formidable partnership whose birds rarely fail when sent to the distance.

Included amongst these memorable successes are wins at Barcelona, Marseille, Pau, Dax and 3 x1st at Perpignan with the BICC in International races. However, possibly the most memorable race of all was the BBC Palamos race of 2002. In this race the partners entered eight pigeons and the first pigeon in the clock finished at 2nd Open, with six more in the clock finishing in the first 47 of the Open result, in fact 6 of the birds were in the top 29 of the Open result. To underline the quality and stamina of these Palamos birds 6 were sent back to Perpignan some weeks later, where they performed just as impressively, winning 1st, 3rd, 4th, 8th, & 17th Open. John and Spencer's NFC Pau team also recorded good positions in 2002 making it a truly memorable season.

Once again we see a team of outstanding long distance performers racing to a modestly sized back garden loft – quality not quantity being the watchword at the Nicholson's set up.

The loft is of wooden construction with a pent style roof and measures 19 ft x 6 ft. It has three sections, two for the old bird team and the third for the young birds reared each year. It houses a total of just 70 pigeons at the height of the season this number includes the old bird race team, young birds, plus any stock birds, including past winners and old favourites.

The loft is cleaned twice daily 365 days a year and John and Spencer have fitted a thin plastic sheet, 3 mm thick, to the floor which makes cleaning out a simple and quick procedure and not a chore. This plastic covering allows the partners to disinfect the loft floor from time to time without the risk of getting dampness in the loft. An Expelair extractor fan is also incorporated into the loft design thus minimizing dust and ensuring an adequate air flow within the loft. Since the loft faces north east John and Spencer rely on the onset of warmer weather and ambient air temperatures to bring on the form naturally; this coincides with the long races of July & August.

The front of the loft is half louvered and there are covers that go over the louvers allowing air to enter but preventing the cold north easterly wind and rain from driving into the loft. The upper half of the loft front is doweled and, in the early part of the year is covered in glass, which is removed during the summer months.

The foundation of the Nicholson family of long distance pigeons, was laid thirty years ago with the purchase of a kit of youngsters from Eddie Newcombe formerly of Macmerry in Scotland but now domiciled in Malta. At that time Eddie was winning many top positions in the SNFC and was considered by many to be amongst the very best fanciers in the UK and Europe. The first couple of seasons with the Newcombes proved to be very slow going as although the birds homed well they seemed somewhat lacking in pace. Nevertheless the partners persevered with them and resisted the temptation to outcross immediately but continued to breed around the original pigeons for the first 4 to 5 years. As they got to know the birds' idiosyncracies and, they in turn began to acclimatize to the new location, things started to improve. With the exception of a few top quality crosses they have remained inbred to these originals for the last 30 years. As a result of this careful breeding plan allied to severe testing of each generation of offspring at the extreme distance, it would be fair to say that they can now be classed as the Nicholson Strain.

When they feel it is necessary to introduce a cross into the established family, John and Spencer never bring in more than one pigeon at any one time. These introductions have only been made on very rare occasions and they always opt for performance over pedigree when making their selections. If the outcross is successful, judicial breeding back to the original family baseline is of paramount importance to ensure continuation of the strength of the family. John and Spencer firmly believe that both sexes are of the same importance in a mating as both have to carry the winning genes for stamina, speed and, of course, intelligence.

The partners have an aversion to big pigeons as their birds are small to medium, and some of the smallest hens have bred some of the best pigeons. As with all things that are required to fly, the bigger it is, the more energy is required to keep it in the air.

The partners believe that in-breeding is the best way to keep a tight winning gene pool, as with out-crossing the fancier can never be quite sure where the winning birds will emerge. However it has been proven time and time again that a good outcross brought into an in-bred family can produce "hybrid vigour" in the subsequent offspring. As a result of the strict application of Darwin's principle of "survival of the fittest" that is strictly applied here, the present day family has evolved into a distinct type that differs from the originals in that they are smaller with more front and less length.

This carefully thought out breeding plan has resulted in the Nicholsons' producing a number of successful breeding pairs, and these in addition to pairs that have been selected to go together because they have performed well at the extreme distance, form the basis of the present family.

All birds whether they be yearlings, stock birds or those penciled in for the marathon race programme in June, July and August, are mated in early to mid March. Once the first round eggs are laid it's a case of exercise around the loft and short training tosses out to 30 miles. At this time the loft is left open whenever possible for the birds to come and go, collecting nesting materials from the garden.

The partners have a training spot for both young and old birds, which is around 30 miles which they use whenever they think the birds need a pipe opener. Occasionally young birds are given some longer training tosses before the Young Bird National, around the Southampton area, which is about 80 miles. John and Spencer do not believe in single up training and as a result all birds are always released together. The old bird team, after their initial training, then go to four or five 80 mile inland training races before competing in 2 or 3 200 mile channel races. They are then set up for their first crack at a long distance International race having had approximately four weeks rest from racing with just a few 30 mile training spins in the intervening period to bring them up to the mark.

The birds are raced naturally and the old bird team is normally around 40-50 pigeons. Sometimes during the season they might separate certain birds in order to give them an extra edge and have found that during these periods of separation the birds exercise with renewed enthusiasm.

The longer International races are between 600-700 miles and for pigeons to compete in these types of races, special qualities are required - stamina, intelligence and the ability to fly many miles on their own. These individuals are the epitome of pigeon racing and "they do not grow on trees".

Since the Nicholsons race their pigeons on the natural system and expect their birds to compete in 2, sometimes 3, 500-700 mile races in any one season they cannot always be sent in their favourite nest condition. They firmly believe that if a pigeon is of the right quality always provided that it is fit, it will perform well in any nest condition. However, if they were to choose a specific nest condition they would aim to send the bird sitting around the time of hatch, or a few days either way. This would be both cocks and hens.

With regard to feeding, the partners do not believe that you can over feed a pigeon that is being prepared for an International race, especially when you consider the workload they are expected to undertake in any given season. The reader should be aware of the fact that ALL birds, including yearlings and late bred, are expected to compete in races out to at least 560 miles each year. As a result the birds have a normal widowhood type mix in front of them at all times. This is supplemented with peanuts and linseed plus a home made "cake mix" in the build up to a long race. On return from a marathon race they have access to honey dissolved in warm water in the drinkers and are fed a light depurative type mix for the first day after return and then it's a case of straight back on to the racing mixture

The young bird team is also fed the same high carbohydrate widowhood mix to which 25% barley is added, throughout the season. This mixture is fed both morning and night and feeding stops when the birds start to leave the barley. With regard to young bird education, John and Spencer have not noticed any difference in the later careers of birds that have raced as young birds or those youngsters that have merely been trained – but they insist that the young birds must have some training in the year of their birth.

The birds are treated for canker as a precautionary measure throughout the season and they also receive a treatment to ensure that there are no respiratory problems using Doxycycline, once again purely as a precautionary measure. The only other specific used is garlic and the drinkers can usually be found to have half a bulb of garlic in them 365 days a year to which multivitamins are added mid week. The partners do however ensure that the birds have access to fresh supplies of grit and minerals on a daily basis.

There you have it, the methods of two masters of long distance pigeon racing. I will add here the performances of the Nicholsons' SEVEN Spanish Diploma winners. To win a Spanish Diploma the pigeon must appear three times on the result of the BBC Palamos/ Barcelona race – it takes some doing to win one let alone SEVEN.

The Nicholsons 7 Spanish Diploma Winners

Barkis

BBC Spanish Diploma Winner (1)

1st Sec, 5th Open BBC Palamos

4th Sec, 22nd open BBC Palamos

3rd Sec, 21st Open BBC Palamos

17th BICC Perpignan

3 x Palamos, 2 x Perpignan, 2 x Pau, 1 x Marseille, 1 x Dax

Dorrit

BBC Spanish Diploma Winner (2)

19th Sec, 94th Open BBC Palamos

11th Sec, 47th Open BBC Palamos

4th Sec, 22nd Open BBC Palamos

4th BICC Perpignan

9th BICC Marseille

19th BICC Pau

3 x Palamos, 2 x Pau, 2 x Perpignan, 1 x Marseille, 1 x San Sebastian

Kate

BBC Spanish Diploma Winner (3)

2nd Sec, 5th Open BBC Palamos

3rd Sec, 7th Open BBC Palamos

7th Sec, 34th Open BBC Palamos

3rd BICC Perpignan

3 x Winner of Greater Distance Single Bird

Hetty

BBC Spanish Diploma Winner (4)
1st Sec, 3rd Open BBC Palamos
13th Sec, 45th Open BBC Palamos
14th Sec, 73rd open BBC Palamos

4 x Palamos, 2 x Pau, 1 x San Sebastian, 1 x Dax

Dora

BBC Spanish Diploma Winner (5)
19th Sec, 125th Open BBC Palamos
2nd Sec, 8th Open BBC Palamos
13th Sec, 44th Open BBC Palamos

Miggs

BBC Spanish Diploma Winner (6)
9th Sec, 74th Open BBC Palamos
10th Sec, 33rd Open BBC Barcelona
4th Sec, 18th Open BBC Barcelona

2 x Palamos, 2 x Barcelona

Barkisson

BBC Spanish Diploma Winner (7)
14th Sec, 99th Open BBC Palamos
3rd Sec, 13th Open BBC Barcelona
9th Sec, 40th Open BBC Barcelona

7th BICC Marseille
8th BICC Perpignan
17th BICC Marseille
26th BICC Perpignan
Also flown another Palamos, Perpignan & Pau

The Nicholsons 7 BICC International Winners

Perpignan Susie

BICC Winner (1)
1st BICC Perpignan
28th Hens International
138th Full International

Little Nell

BICC Winner (2)
1st BICC Pau
3rd BICC Perpignan

Nancy

BICC Winner (3 & 4)
1st BICC Perpignan
1st BICC Perpignan
10th BICC Dax
25th BICC Barcelona
26th BBC Palamos

Marley

BICC Winner (5)
1st BICC Dax
4th BICC Dax
11th BICC Pau
Flown NFC Pau & San Sebastian
Also winner of Greater Distance Single Bird Dax

Sarah

BICC Winner (6)
1st BICC Barcelona
117th Hens International
364th Full International
4th BICC Marseille
198th NFC Pau
368th NFC Pau
Also winner of Greater Distance Single Bird Barcelona

Jinni

BICC Winner (7)
1st BICC Marseille
11th BICC Barcelona
14th BBC Palamos
26th BICC Perpignan
56th NFC Pau
127th NFC Dax
Also winner of Greater Distance Single Bird Barcelona

The Nicholsons National Flying Club Certificate of Merit Winner

Cornelius

1998, 16th Open NFC Pau, 555 miles
2000, 56th Open NFC Pau
2005, 92nd Open NFC Tarbes, clocked on day of liberation, 562 miles.

Cornelius's other performances over 500 miles include:

107th Open NFC Dax
364th Open NFC Pau
526th Open NFC Pau
536th Open NFC Pau/Saintes
567th Open NFC San Sebastian, 568 miles
8th BICC Perpignan International, 610 miles
22nd BICC Perpignan International

He also flew NFC Pau 1999, back in race time but not clocked.

Cornelius has flown the channel 33 times, a total distance of 11,500 miles and he has flown over 500 miles 10 times.

PLUM

3 x Barcelona – 692 miles
4 x Marseille – 600 miles
1 x Palamos – 666 miles
1 x Perpignan – 610 miles
1 x Pau – 560 miles
1 x Dax – 511 miles
1 x Bordeaux – 450 miles

11 times over 500 miles
9 times over 600 miles
7 times in the top 26 in National Races over 600 miles

Best 3 performances:

2nd BICC Marseille (beaten by a loft mate)
5th BICC Marseille
11th BBC Palamos (beaten by 2 loft mates)

In 2005 Plum became the 1st UK pigeon to fly Barcelona, Marseille and Perpignan in a 4 week period, chalking up 1900 miles in these 3 races

A brief summary of what these birds have won:

7 Spanish Diplomas with the BBC
7 BICC International Wins
2 Europa Trophies (best average all International races)
NFC Certificate of Merit
7 Greater Distance Single Bird NFC races

In the last 10 years John and Spencer have clocked 65 pigeons from either Barcelona or Palamos. Some record!!!

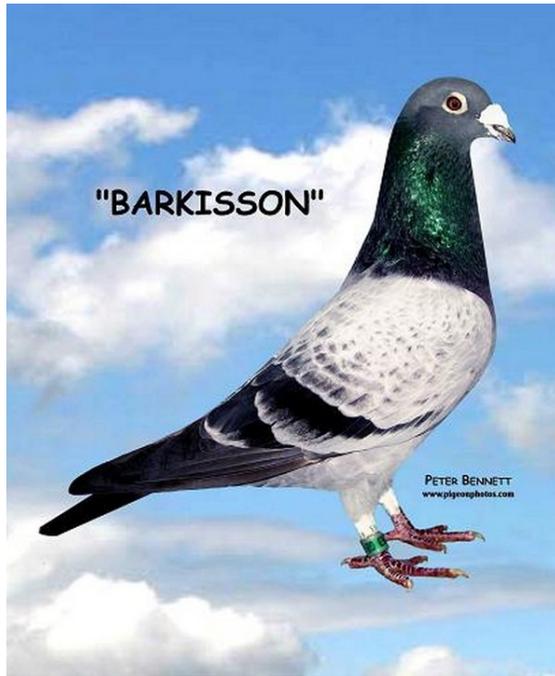
Gareth Watkins



The loft



Nicholson loft Old Bird section



Nicholson Barkisson



Nicholson Kate



Nicholson Little Dorrit



Nicholson Miggs



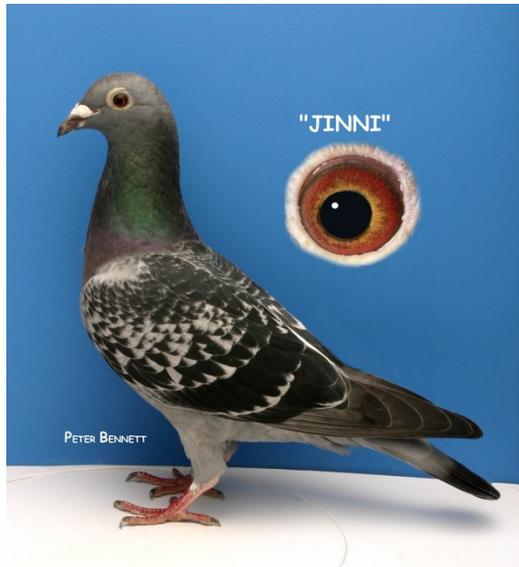
Nicholson Nancy



Plum



Cornelius



Jinni