

ROBBIE HARRIS of RAMSGATE

1st OPEN BICC PERPIGNAN INTERNATIONAL

The subject of this article is a fancier who has been literally “knocking on the door” of success in BICC International races for some years now, with consistently good performances near the top of the BICC International race results. On Saturday 1st August he finally cracked it when his “enigmatic” dark chequer hen was clocked at 8.22 am on the second morning of the Perpignan race to win 1st East section 1st Open BICC. Readers may wonder why I referred to Robbie’s winning pigeon as “enigmatic” well all I can suggest is that you read on and then you’ll realise what a singular character this hen is.

Below I have outlined Robbie’s story of his involvement in the sport.

THE BEGINNING.

Robbie started his association with pigeons as a twelve year old, catching stray pigeons in the town centre. It was through this stray catching activity that Robbie met a fancier by the name of Sid Hamilton. After a visit to Sid’s loft, the partnership of Hamilton & Harris was born. The partnership did quite well at the time especially in Channel races but as Robbie said “the female of the species” came onto the scene and Robbie left the sport in his mid teens. However, he never forgot the influence of his early mentors Sid Hamilton, his grandfather and a certain Ron Riddall on his early years in the sport.

THE LOFT.

Robbie still has the same loft that he obtained when he resumed his interest in the sport. This originally belonged to Eddie Holding. Robbie was courting Eddie’s daughter at the time and also inherited Eddie’s loft when he retired from the sport. He has been racing to his present location for only the past six and a half years.

The loft is cleaned twice daily before and after Robbie returns from work. Because he houses a modest team of 10 pairs of stock plus 35 – 45 old birds and just 35 – 45 young birds, the work load of this twice daily cleaning is greatly reduced

In the beginning Robbie used to race the birds on the natural system, but in recent seasons he has reverted to a form of round about/ceibacy system with the old birds. This entails mating all birds in February and allowing the racers to rear a round of young birds- not necessarily their own, before separating them. They are then raced separated until the BICC Tours race when they are allowed to go to nest again for the Internationals. However, in 2015 the racers were not allowed to go together again until a lot later. Robbie wasn’t happy with their form at this time and so decided to re- pair the race team so that they would be sitting or rearing again in time for the Perpignan race. The 2016 season will see him reverting to his usual system of re mating the birds on their return from Tours.

Prior to the first race of the season the race birds will have 3 x 25 mile training tosses, then maybe four or five at 48 miles. They will then be entered into the first race with the Kent Cosmopolitan Fed which is usually 110 miles. Training ceases after the birds have had their first race. They then get three further inland races up to 136 miles before their first channel race.

The race birds are never forced to fly. They can fly for as long as they like around home and when they hit the loft they are immediately called in. This voluntary home exercise takes place twice a day- early morning before Robbie goes off to work and again in the evening when he returns home. Robbie likes to develop a love of home in the birds and he thinks that by flagging them this domestic contentment may be lost.

YOUNG BIRDS

The youngsters will normally have 2 x 10 mile trainers followed by a further three at 25 miles. It’s then on to 48 miles where they are given another four or five training spins. Robbie is not too keen on young bird racing but does like them to have two or three races for experience and education and they are then put to one side until the yearling stage.

As a result of Robbie’s lack of enthusiasm for young bird racing the young bird team is always raced on the natural system.

FEEDING.

The stock birds are fed twice a day in the hopper. The race birds are given a light feed in the morning after their morning exercise then have their main feed of an evening. This is repeated for the young birds.

Stock birds and young birds are fed on Buckton's VIP mixture as are the racers when they are rearing. However, when racing, Robbie uses Versele Laga Superstar Plus mixture for the old birds. There is no special feeding in the build up to the longer International races except for the addition of sunflower hearts and peanuts to the basic mix.

BLOODLINES.

The main bloodlines in the loft at the present time include Piet Lazeroms and Bruggeman brothers with some other top long distance Dutch pigeons added to the mix. These were obtained via Robbie's friend in Holland who has cultivated these lines over many years.

These lines are kept pure at the moment but Robbie intends to bring in a cross at a later time and test these against his present bloodlines. Robbie's ideal pigeon has silky feathering and just sits calmly in the hand. Nevertheless he accepts that winners come in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Unfortunately, a fox got into the stock loft last winter and killed all Robbie's stock birds. Help was at hand in the form of Robbie's Dutch friend who kindly bred him a round of September late bred.

Mark Cowell has also been a great friend to Robbie over the years and I know that this help has been greatly appreciated.

PERFORMANCES.

I asked Robbie to relate to me some of the performances that have given him most pleasure. Readers should be aware of the fact that Robbie has only been racing to his present address for six and a half years, so here goes:

"When I was 1st section 2nd Open BICC and 78th international Pau in 2011 when I sent just the one pigeon was very gratifying. Also clocking my hen from Marseille last season when I was 6th Open BICC again with my single entry was another pleasing performance. Then there was winning the Kent Cosmopolitan Fed and Kent Combine from Le Mans as I always dreamed of topping the Combine when I was a kid. However, winning 1st Open BICC Perpignan is very special to me as it was achieved by the same hen which was 6th Open BICC Pau International."

MEDICATION

All birds are cankered when sitting 7 days then again about 3 weeks before racing begins. I also worm the birds using a form of pills for individual birds.

Multi vitamins are given in the water twice weekly, especially on return from water races. Other than that he feels that fresh air and clean water are the order of the day if you want to keep your pigeons strong and healthy.

Before finishing this article I feel I have to give an insight into the terrific individual character of Robbie's Perpignan winning hen and will let Robbie tell the story of this enigmatic character in his own words as related to me when writing the report on the Perpignan race.

"The winning pigeon for me is a 4 year old hen raced on the natural system and feeding a 4 day old young bird at time of basketting. This hen was unraced as a baby because she was lost off the loft one Saturday morning when I let the youngsters out forgetting that the Scottish National was liberated from Ypres a little time before! She was reported in Edinburgh later that same evening to my surprise. Bearing in mind the fact that I hadn't trained my youngsters yet! The chap that had her in wanted to keep her so I said ok. He then gave her 2 x 10 mile training tosses after which she returned to him. When she was let out next time she was off back here! I was on holiday in Ibiza when my good friend Mark Cowell who was looking after my birds phoned me and said he had let a pigeon in and when checking the ring number with me it was this hen that had flown single up from Edinburgh as an untrained youngster!

Her breeding contains the bloodlines of the Gebroeder Bruggeman and their famous pigeon Orhan, and the bloodlines of Piet Lazeroom and other long distance pigeons from North Holland. She also flew the Pau internationals in 2013 & 2014 winning 6th Open BICC.

So to the preparation for the 2015 BICC Perpignan International race.

I let her out for exercise the day before basketting and she disappeared for 3 hours plus! I was worried sick because the weather had really set in high winds and heavy rain. I thought at first a hawk had got her or she had hit wires, but on her return she had mud on her ring and around her beak. I don't know if the bad weather had put her down somewhere, when I let her in the loft the strangest thing happened - she started to attack her cock bird! They were feeding a 4 - 5 day youngster and every time he went up to the box she attacked him knocking him out to the floor. Each time he went to get in the box she just attacked him. The hen when she is separated always flies down the garden to where ever I am sitting and parades and shows off around me, but this day she attacked the cock and I thought she had lost her head! On the day of basketting I let her cock

back in the section and she was having none of it, so I put him back in the loft next door. The hen, since she has been paired and on her youngster, hasn't wanted to know me at all, but on her return from Perpignan on the Saturday morning when she hit the loft and went on the trap she started parading and playing up to me for about 30 or 40 seconds with me saying nicely please go in!!"

I think you will agree that this hen is something special.
Congratulations on a terrific win with a very special pigeon.

Gareth Watkins



Robert Harris with son Alfie, 1st Open BICC Perpignan



1st Open BICC Perpignan for Robbie Harris