

JOHN SMALE of ABERGAVENNY

CONSISTENT SUCCESS OVER FOUR DECADES

The subject of this report can only be described as a “pigeon nut”. I say this without in any way being derogatory or wishing to cause offence as John will freely admit, he lives, breathes and dreams about pigeons. If ever he decided to write a book it would be called The Encyclopaedia Britannica of Pigeon Racing, such is his comprehensive knowledge of pigeon strains and performances.

This knowledge is not just theoretical but is allied to a hard practical edge, as, over more than 30 years, John has achieved great success at his first love – long distance pigeon racing. During this time he has won two Nationals here in Wales plus two motor cars and a Queen’s Cup for most meritorious performance over 300 miles. The National wins have been from Thurso 477 miles, when his hen also topped the Welsh Combine with 9,600 birds competing and Crieff 310 miles[also topping the Combine with 7,364 pigeons competing] and on both occasions John’s winning pigeon also won the car nom. Add to these two outright National and Combine wins many other top ten Open finishes including 2nd National Lerwick; 2nd National Cholet and 2nd National Bergerac and you have a pretty impressive back catalogue of top class performances.

Therefore, it came as no surprise to me and those who know him, that John should succeed at International racing with the BICC. This came about in the 2015 St Vincent International where his yearling blue w/f cock won 1st Gwent Greater Distance Club; 2nd section; 2nd Open BICC and 4th Open International at a distance of 571 miles, competing against 10,737 pigeons racing to all parts of continental Europe.

A loft report on this highly successful and socially gregarious fancier was therefore a priority – so here goes with a potted history of Mr Pigeon or as he is known here in Wales “The Memory Man” – John Smale.



JohnSmale

THE BEGINNING.

John first kept pigeons as a young boy and as with most youngsters these were a motley crew of strays and street pigeons. The first racing pigeons were bought in 1980 and his first loft, which is still in use today, was self built and measured 24 ft x 8ft. A second loft has now been added at right angles to the original set up and this also measures 24ft x 8ft with two sections. The racing lofts face south and west.

There is also a stock loft which is built into John’s garage and this has a large aviary attached so that the stock birds can have the full benefit of any sun that might occasionally shine on this part of Gwent. Both of the racing lofts have a deep litter of “Easibed” wood chippings to a depth of 9inches on the floors and this is removed and replaced with fresh litter every 6 months. The stock loft floor is cleaned daily.

THE PIGEONS.

John keeps a team of 30 pairs of stock birds and these contain some of the finest long distance bloodlines in the UK and Europe. No expense has been spared in obtaining the best bloodlines from the best performance pigeons available and these include a number of direct children from King’s Cup winners and Barcelona

winner. Whatever their origin they all go into "the melting pot" and the resultant progeny are then severely tested on the road.

The old bird race team usually amounts to around 35 pairs of old birds along with approximately 90 young birds. These numbers are needed in John's rural location, as the surrounding countryside is literally teeming with birds of prey including sparrow hawks, peregrines and the dreaded Goshawk. These predators take a massive annual toll on the Smale race team when at home exercise, so a large team of new stock has to be bred each year to cover these "domestic" losses before the birds even see the inside of a race basket.

THE SYSTEM.

All birds are confined to the loft during the winter months. Stock birds are mated around Valentine's Day in mid February with the old bird racers following a month later. As the birds have been confined to the loft and hopper fed throughout the winter, they are strictly rationed to no more than 1 ounce of food per pigeon per day in the build up to mating. Once they are at a reasonable body weight John then starts to exercise the old birds at home, building up to two one hour sessions daily by the time of the first old bird race. He has found through past experience that if the old birds are overweight when let out for exercise at the beginning of the season they are simply "hawk meat" as he puts it, as they do not have the manoeuvrability to avoid the aerial predators.

When John is happy with their fitness the old birds go straight from the loft into their first race, as, again from past experience, he has suffered terrible losses to birds of prey at the beginning of the season when training. Young birds on the other hand, have to endure the challenge of early training as they are young and inexperienced and have to develop and hone their homing skills. They are therefore trained from all points of the compass and liberated in small groups in order to avoid predator strikes on the main group of youngsters. The youngsters get a few races just for experience and then the majority are put aside for the yearling stage of their careers. I should point out here that John does not use the darkness system with his youngsters. At the beginning of the old bird season the racers are on a form of round about system with both the cocks and the hens exercised separately for one hour twice per day. In fact some of the old hens have been known to fly for up to three hours when on round about.

As the big National races approach the old birds are re mated and allowed to sit and have their first youngsters of the year as they were not allowed to rear young when initially mated in March. The yearling cock that finished at 4th Open International St Vincent was sent feeding his first youngster of the season, a young hen as it turned out, after having been raced on round about in the early part of the season.

The cock is literally steeped in long distance National winning blood as he has three National winners in his immediate pedigree and is a cross between Dutch pigeons from Jan Polder and Bruggeman Brothers on his sire's side. On the dam's side of the pedigree there is Andrew McFenton's Pont y Mousson National winner plus John's own Thurso National winner Gillian and Fishlock & Harding's Thurso National winner Westra Eddie. Throw in a soupcon of Lambert & Davies's famous No1 pair and you have a dead cert, copper bottomed, 24 carat winner in the making. The St Vincent International was his fifth channel crossing of the season the last one being from Tours with the BICC where he finished at 14th west section.

FEEDING.

Stock birds are hopper fed farm beans with the addition of a little conditioning seed and John's own "Dolly Mixture" in the evening.

Old bird racers are hand fed at certain periods and then when racing on the round about they have access to a hopper of food ad lib.

Various mixtures are used including Marrimans, Court Farm Feeds, Hormoform and conditioning seed.

In the build up to the longer races the old birds are fed plenty of fats in the form of sunflower hearts and Hormoform. These are fed in addition to their normal daily diet.

SUPPLEMENTS & MEDICATION.

When the stock birds are rearing they have Gemthepax added to their daily feed. Other supplements used at various times are Johnson's Tonic;Orego Stim and Carr's Naturavit.

Apart from the annual compulsory vaccination for Paramyxo the only other medication given is an eight day course of Parastop once the moult is complete. John regularly sends droppings and swab samples to the Belgica Deweerd lab and if all is well there is no need to treat.

The John Smale success story can therefore be encapsulated in the phrase "hard work and good pigeons bring success". The Smale race team are bred in the purple by a very astute stockman and are maintained at a supreme level of fitness when the racing season comes around. Fed well and worked hard they seem to thrive and consistently produce top class performances at the highest level.

Congratulations John on yet another excellent performance at the distance. Long may it continue.

Gareth Watkins



John Smale with his young birds



John Smale old bird loft



John Smale young bird section