

JOHN HALSTEAD of KINGTON MAGNA

35 x 1st SECTION IN NATIONAL RACES 2003 – 2015.

John Halstead, the subject of this well overdue loft report has one of the best records of any fancier presently racing pigeons at National level in these Islands. The above list of wins highlighted in the title includes 15 x 1st section in NFC races; 8 x 1st section in BICC races; 7 x 1st section in BBC races and 1 x 1st section CSCFC – and all these section wins SINCE his move to Dorset in late May 2002!! Add to these a further 5 x 1st section wins prior to moving to his present location and you have one very impressive CV. I should also point out at this stage that John's many section wins have come at all distances from 53 miles through to just on 700 miles, demonstrating the versatility of both the fancier and the pigeons.

I recently visited John at his lovely home set in rural Dorset and must admit that I wasn't disappointed with either the pigeons or the man and his set up



John with Nyland Vulcan 3 x 1st section in National races in 2015

THE BEGINNING

John made his initial foray into pigeon racing with his brother whilst living at Todmorden in Lancashire when still only 8 years old. His first pigeons were supplied by the local corn merchant and were housed in a converted chicken shed. Initially, John's elder brother helped with the pigeons and it was in 1967 that John won his first race when in partnership with his father Frank. This club winner proved to be good enough for 2nd Open Federation so the Halstead bandwagon was firmly on the road and going places right from the start. A little later, in 1969, John visited the renowned partnership of Hammond & Whitaker and introduced a couple of pigeons from their well known Grooter family. These proved to be an excellent investment as they produced winners from the word go, including pigeons to win the South East Lancs Fed Channel Averages in the early 1970's plus more than £2,500 in prize and pools between 1973 and 1976.

During this period the Halstead pigeons won, amongst many other prizes, 1st Pennine 2 Bird Club Niort 515 miles; 1st Northern Counties 2 Bird club Rennes 386 miles [295 members sent 590 birds]; 1st Lancs & Yorks Border Championship Club Nantes in 1973 and 1975.

The family then moved to the Midlands in 1978 and pigeons had to take a "back seat" for a few years until the family business had been established at the new location. However, one of John's entries in the 1988 NFC young bird National proved good enough for 1st section. At the end of 1988 John was on the move again as he had purchased a small holding near Abbots Bromley. This property allowed John to expand his loft set up and get down to some serious racing once again to the extent that in 1994 his young bird team won eight consecutive races in the local club. These eight wins were achieved racing natural young birds.

However, during the winter of 1994 John was loaned a video by that truly great fancier, Geoff Kirkland. This demonstrated how young birds could be raced successfully on the newly discovered "darkness system".

During the winter months John did further research into this new system and put a modified version into action in 1995. As a result of the young bird team's phenomenal success in 1995 he decided to make his first of many videos.

Incidentally the Halstead youngsters went on to win 1st 3rd, 4th, 6th, 7th & 10th section in the 1995 NFC young bird National. This initial success was followed by 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th & 6th section NFC in 1996 plus other wins in 1997 and 1999. The Midland National section was also won in 1997 and in 1998 John's entry finished at 4th Open MNFC.

Many other good performances were recorded right up to the time of John's move to his present location in Dorset in late May 2002.

AFTER THE MOVE TO DORSET

Since moving to Dorset in 2002 John has quickly established his lofts and the success story has continued in an unbroken sequence as John won his first Old Bird race entered after the move. The WESRC was won twice in 2004 with 3,092 birds and 1,862 birds competing plus 1st section NFC in the Old Hens National. The Dorset Fed was won in 2007 at the first attempt and this was followed by 2 x 1st Fed in 2008. Along the way in these years the Halsted pigeons won 1st section NFC Tarbes and Alencon plus 1st Open BBC Bordeaux and 1st section 2nd Open BICC Barcelona leading on to John's great win of 1st section 1st Open BBC Barcelona in 2009. During this time John's hens were doing some damage in the NFC Old Hen's Nationals with a couple of section wins to their credit.

THE LOFTS

I should point out right at the start that all lofts at Overways are protected by a state of the art security system installed by John at great expense!!

The property that John now lives at affords ample room for expansion of the loft facilities and so there are now seven lofts erected around the garden at Overways.

All lofts are six feet in depth and many now incorporate the German style electrically cleaned boxes. Three of these lofts face East, three face south and one, which acts as a holding facility, faces north.

All lofts are cleaned daily throughout the year.

These lofts offer John ample opportunity to house a substantial number of pigeons without overcrowding. As such he maintains a team of 29 pairs of stock pigeons along with 44 widowhood cocks and 11 racing hens.

These 11 hens are mated at different times to just 6 cocks so the reader can imagine the motivation used to get these hens "wound up" for their designated races. In fact John tells me he has used various forms of motivation including celibacy, widowhood and natural.

MANAGEMENT

Both the stock birds and the widowhood cocks are mated at the same time around February 4th. In the past this initial mating used to take place on 14th February but John has found that the earlier date has produced some of his most successful seasons' racing with birds holding their condition and form right through the programme from April to the end of July.

Once the cocks are down on their first round of eggs their daily exercise routine begins with twice daily periods of 30 minutes. Once the hens are away from them they get no more than five training spins out to 35 miles starting at 10 miles, but John says the widowers must be flying freely around home for at least 25 minutes twice daily before these tosses begin. Once these initial early season trainers are done with then the racers rarely if ever, have to undergo any further training.

During the season the hens are always shown to the cocks on basketting nights and when the longer races come around the hens are placed in with the cocks in the early hours of the morning before the cocks are basketted and taken for National race marking.

The young bird team receive as many as sixteen pre season trainers followed by twice weekly training throughout the season. John likes every young bird to have at least one race in the year of their birth with a maximum of seven races before resting them up for the winter. All youngsters are raced on the darkness system as they have been since 1995. John was adamant that this has no detrimental effects on the birds' later racing careers, as all his National and section winners have been raced on the darkness system as young birds.

FEEDING

All birds are fed communally in hoppers twice each day and are fed to appetite on each occasion as he does not like to keep pigeons hungry.

John uses the various breeding, moulting and young bird mixtures at the appropriate times. These Countrywide mixtures are produced by A E James of Bristol. However, as for racing mixtures, John uses the range of mixtures produced by Versele Laga and these include Depurative, Gerry Plus, Super widowhood, Champion Plus as well as Energy Plus.

In addition to the above, John also feeds Old Hand's Golden Boost and Hormoform with each racer having a teaspoon of the boost in his box after morning exercise and the same amount of Hormoform fed in the box each evening. One final addition to the racers daily intake are redskin peanuts obtained from the local supermarket and fed in the build up to the longer races.

THE PIGEONS

Since moving to Dorset, John has developed his own family of long distance pigeons. This is based on just three pigeons purchased from the late Jim Biss and one Southwell hen from the late Ernie Deacon – both these fanciers incidentally were King's Cup winners from Pau with the NFC. Having written this, John's Barcelona winner from 2009 was in fact bred from a combination of Janssen Van Den Bosch x Grondelaers x Meuleman bloodlines that won well for John out to 300 miles when he was living in the Midlands.

In 1999 some Gaby Vandenabeeles have been introduced from M & D Evans and these have won well through to 450 miles as old birds and have proved exceptional young bird racers.

With a view to maintaining the loft's success at all distances, John has recently introduced some Reynaerts, Koopman, Kees Bosua and Louis Thijs Heremans Ceusters. These will have to conform to John's strict selection criteria if they are to find a permanent home at Overways.

John likes to line breed within his established distance family but will on occasion, introduce some good quality hens which he mates back with his foundation line stock cocks.

During our recent visit to John I handled most of the foundation pigeons which were all "getting on a bit" but nevertheless still showed their class.

The main man so to speak is without doubt Nyland Ashley a dark chequer cock and winner on the road of amongst other prizes 1st section 2nd Open Barcelona 2008 having been 46th Open Palamos the previous year. He proved to be just below medium sized with a bit of depth to the front of the keel [but not deep keeled] and sported a lovely violet eye. He is sire and grand sire of many prize winners at the distance and his type and colouration could be seen in many of the lofts inmates both at stock and in the race team.

Next to hand was a magnificent chequer w/f cock – "Nyland Nadal". Nadal is the winner of 1st Open BBC Bordeaux at 429 miles 12 hours 8 mins on wing with only 30 birds clocked on the day. Now 12 years old he handled like a two year old, being wedge shaped with broad shoulders tapering off to a one feather width tail. He sported a yellow racing eye and was bred from M & D Evans and Paul & Jayne Newbold Vandenabeele bloodlines.

"Nyland Ruby" proved to be a medium sized long cast blue cock, again of M & D Evans Vandenabeele bloodlines which was a winner on the road and has proved to be a top class stock cock since his retirement with one of his children, winning 2nd Open BICC Alencon in 2014 with 6,823 pigeons competing.

A number of the other stud sires were handled and they all conformed to the same type with the long distance cocks being slightly smaller than the middle distance and sprint pigeons with all having superb feather quality. One of the top stock hens was a small dark chequer named Nyland Trixie. Now 12 years old she too handled much younger than her years and is the dam of 1st Open Palamos. Trixie is certainly bred for the job as she is a granddaughter of Jim Biss's Matrix 3 x 1st BICC Marseille.

We then moved on to handling the race cocks and first to hand was the dark chequer "Nyland Platinum".

Platinum's wins include 2 x 1st section BICC Perpignan plus 28th Open Barcelona. He was a long cast pigeon with outstanding feather quality and a broad full green circle of eyesign.

"Nyland Javelin" proved to be a long cast wedge shaped pigeon with three top 30 finishes in National races during the 2015 old bird season. His bloodlines are Buschaert x Van den Bosch.

Then we came to the undoubted star of the old bird campaign – "Nyland Vulcan" a winner of 3 x 1st section in National races in 2015 including section wins with the NFC, BBC and BICC and all in south westerly winds. Vulcan had broad shoulders and a yellow eyesign and is of predominantly Kees Bosua bloodlines.

I could go on and on relating the top class racers that we handled but I must mention one more top widowhood cock. This was "Nyland Henry" a small to medium sized winner of 2nd section NFC Tarbes and 5th section 18th Open Pau BICC in 2015. He is from a Ken Hine sire when mated to a daughter of Nyland Ashley.

Other notable pigeons previously raced at Overways include "Nyland Untouchable" a winner of 1st section NFC Tarbes and 1st Open Barcelona in 2009 when he finished at 264th Open International against a field of 27,627 birds, but unfortunately lost on a training toss the very next year.

"Nyland Maurice" winner of 1st Open Palamos and grandson of Ashley.

"Cassius" who had the same sire as Ashley and winner of 1st section 2nd Open Barcelona and 1st section 13th Open Perpignan.

Our final loft inspection came with the widowhood/celebate/natural hens team of just 11 pigeons. Amongst these were blue w/f hen winner of 2 x 1st section in Nationals in 2015 and a blue pied hen winner of 1st Open BICC Falaise OH's National in 2014. Both these hens fitted into the hand like a glove and were of the same high quality as the widowhood cocks.

BREEDING POLICY

John has a very simple breeding policy which has stood the test of time in as much as it has enabled him to breed winning pigeons for the past 40 or so years. This policy entails sourcing the very best bloodlines available and then breeding and testing the offspring so that they produce John's ideal type of pigeon which is well balanced, well muscled along with a strong back and rich silky feathering. They must also have a good strongly coloured eye and a one feather width tail. Just as importantly the resultant perfect physical specimen should be successful in the races John sets his sights on. This is achieved by rigorous selection of the birds which all have conformed to John's ideal type and also have impeccable pedigrees to match.

As examples of this rigorous selection process I outline here the treatment of some of the loft's foundation pigeons and star racers.

Nyland Ashley mentioned earlier, was raced through to Tarbes at 548 miles as a yearling winning 17th section NFC.

Nyland Cassius underwent a similar testing process to finish at 17th section Tarbes as a yearling. Incidentally, both Ashley and Cassius went on to win 2nd Open Barcelona later in their racing careers.

Nyland Henry too was treated similarly and finished 9th section Tarbes and is pencilled in for a tilt at Barcelona in 2016 if all goes well.

RESULTS

I don't like filling my loft reports with long lists of the subject's previous wins but will outline below some of the many highlights of John Halstead's long and distinguished racing career.

Over the years, in a number of locations, John has topped the Federation in every organisation he has competed with. This includes the North Staffs Fed with as many as 9,388 birds competing, Staffordshire & Moorlands Fed; Derby – Burton SR Fed; Burton & South Derbyshire Fed; Dudley Fed; South East Lancs Fed; Dorset Fed and the WESR Combine.

Add to this list

3 x 1st Open BBC; 1st Open BICC and 1st Open CSCFC plus 35 x 1st Section in National races 25 of which have been won in the last 8 seasons alone.

Then of course there was the winning of 1st Open Barcelona in 2009 and 1st Open Palamos in 2011 just to add a little icing to the cake.

MEDICATION & SUPPLEMENTS

This is a very short section as John resorts to medication as little as possible and in 2015 did not use any medication whatsoever with his old birds – and yet it proved to be one of his best season's racing.

However, he does use certain products which he firmly believes are beneficial for the birds in that they keep the birds healthy and aid condition. The three most important of these are:-
Hormoform.

Old Hand's Golden Boost – which he makes up fresh each week.

Osmond's Enviroboost – essential to keep young birds and late breeds healthy.

Other supplements used are Gem Trikanox; Gervit W Multivitamin and Aviform Prolyte.

On speaking to John it became obvious that he is a meticulous planner and nothing is left to chance. His breeding pairs are rigorously selected so that he invariably puts the right cock to a complementary mate. Each racer has a programme drafted out for it with the aim of producing top form at the specified time of the pigeon's target race. This incessant attention to detail has reaped rich rewards for John over more than four decades and I can't see anything changing much in the years to come.

Congratulations John on a truly remarkable career in pigeons. Good luck for the future.

Gareth Watkins