

Pure Strains

©by Silvio Mattacchione BA MA

Silvio@silvio-co.com

I cannot begin to imagine how many conversations my partner in the pigeon fancy, Mr. Jim McLean, and I have had over the past four years. We discuss everything and everywhere. On our way to conventions, in planes, in cars, and yes, even in trains.

Most of our best times and greatest pigeon discussions take place at Desserts Plus, the most remarkable Italian food restaurant in West End Toronto. Good food, great locale, dear friends, and in-depth discussion. That is what the pigeon fancy is really all about-or more to the point, if it isn't now, that is what it was really intended to be! Not the solitary pursuit of #1-all alone and at all costs-which in fact is what, for so many, it has become.



Jim McLean and I will never forget 1996, for it was the kind of year that bares the heart and tempers the soul. On January 28, 1996, I flew off the highway in my Toyota 4x4, hit six trees and totaled it. I stared my own mortality in the face! That same year Jim's loft burned to the ground and we lost 87 pigeons, including two sons of St. Thomas and the exceptional "058". Less than a month after my accident, Jim lost his brother-in-law to cancer, and several months after that, Jim's daughter, Jennifer, had her arm totally severed when side-swiped in a freak car accident. Ten operations later, Jennifer, "the fighter," was back on track. Thank you, God, for that mercy!

The year 1996 is almost drawing to a close. Neither Jim nor I will ever forget it! However, during all the grief our friendship and our pigeons and all our conversations drew us closer together. We shared each other's pain. No doubt in years to come there will be both good and bad times, but we will weather them if we just learn to take what life presents us with, one day at a time.

Well, what did Jim and I conclude? We concluded that being #1 really was not as important as recognizing and achieving a certain level of overall excellence in the quality of stock that you voluntarily choose to keep and propagate. Which is, I suppose, a very long-winded way of getting to the point of this, our conversation, on the subject of pure strains.

Before we begin let us define both terms *pure* and *strain*:

The definition of *pure* according to my Webster's New World Dictionary is as follows: 1) free from anything that adulterates or taints; 2) unmixed; 3) of unmixed stock or pure-blooded; 4) that which is pure.

The definition of *strain* according to my self same dictionary is also as follows: 1) ancestry, lineage; 2) the descendants of a common ancestor; race; or stock line; 3) a line of

individuals differentiated from its main species or race by certain generally superior qualities; 4) an inherited character or tendency.

Our working definition for a *pure strain* would, therefore, of necessity be as follows: An ancestry or lineage; the descendants of a common ancestor or stock line differentiated from its main species or race by generally superior qualities, inherited character, or tendency; unmixed, free from anything that adulterates or taints.

Now, if memory serves me correctly, the racing pigeon is the product of the mixing together of several different breeds of pigeons including Horseman, Dragoon, Smerle, the carrier pigeon, and others. In different countries, different pigeon breeds formed the base from which the fanciers worked to develop their homing pigeons to lesser or greater degrees of perfection-usually lesser. The modern racing pigeon is therefore a hybrid and therefore not a pure breed at all.

In point of fact, the modern homing pigeons is not a pigeon at all, but more correctly speaking-that is, from an ornithological point of view-a dove. That is why in Dutch it is more correctly referred to as a *postduiven* (messenger-dove).

The most successful modern racing pigeons were developed in Belgium. This development began in approximately 1810, and by 1868, W.B. Tegetmeier in his *Pigeons: Their Structure, Varieties, Habits, and Management* could write:

"From the fact that many of the breed come from Antwerp, they are not infrequently known as Antwerp's or Antwerp's Carriers. in rapidity and power of flying these birds far exceed any other variety of pigeon with which I am acquainted. This power of flight is conjoined with an attachment to home that is not surpassed by that of any other pigeon".

In time, these Antwerp carriers, as well as the short-faced pigeons of the province of Liege, were crossed.

The homing pigeon of Belgium is the result of the crossing of the Cumulet of Antwerp with the Smerle of Liege. The Cumulet was described by Mr. Andre Coopers, secretary of one of the Belgium Societies in 1868, as being of Flemish origin with white eyes, and having a habit of flying so high that it was gone from sight for several hours. The Smerle, he advises, is of Wallon origin, with a short beak and having several recurved feathers on its neck. It did not fly as high or as long as the Cumulet, but it was much more rapid. Finally, in Belgium, the Bec-Anglais (Dragoons) were also crossed, and so these three varieties formed the basis for the appearance of the better-built, stronger, faster, and more precisely cultivated homing instinct of the modern form of homing pigeon.

So where am I really going with all this material? Well, I want you all to understand that what we started with 186 years ago was a really mixed bag.

By following Rule 7 and Rule 8 from my previous article, those people who possessed the qualities laid out in Rule 4 (Stock sense is essential) recognized that Rule 6 (Nature is not on your side) was against them. Through hard work, good common sense, and even better stock sense, they gradually (over a 60-100 year period) developed a superior flying machine, the progenitor of our modern homing pigeons.

In each generation through these developments, some few visionaries preserved and developed the superior raw material that gradually filtered its way down from them to their friends, associates, acquaintances, and eventually, to the general public. Eventually, all benefited through the stubborn persistence of the few who persevered in their beliefs. So it was that in time the names of these visionaries became legend.

Through the efforts of Mons Ulens of Antwerp, the Belgians rapidly increased the range and ultimate speed of their birds. By 1911, it was claimed that there existed no loft in Belgium whose birds did not in some way descend to a greater or lesser degree from Mons Ulens' pigeons. This claim was made and documented by Mons Gigot. He traces the Ulens pigeons through all of the following Belgian strains:

"Vekemans, Van Schingen, Wuydts, Devos, Debruyn, Classens, Delderenne, Devalerioia, Pitteville, Salsman, De Page, Cassiers, Van Den Eynden, Gigot, Delmotte, Jurion, Grotters, Sluys, Wauters, Wegge, Janssens, Hansenne, Rey, Nivel, Smits, Menier, Rimbeau, Thirionet, Claes, Swiggers, Carpentier, Toulet, Desirant and Gits" (W.D. Lea Rayner, *The Creation of a Strain*).

Mons Ulen originally created his family through inbreeding to an extremely successful key subject (see Rule 7: Prepotent sires and dams are the rarest of the rare).

The late Chas Wegge, as was already noted, had his origins in the Ulens pigeons. Wegge was supreme in races over 200 miles in tremendous competition. Chas Wegge was an intense inbreeder and his focus was his champion, "Vendome", and the Red Vekeman Hen. Many of the more recent great Belgian strains were derived from the inbred pigeons of Chas Wegge; these include Janssens, Stassart, Sion, Bricoux, Delbar, and Catrysse.

But are these more recent strains really *pure* as most of today's fanciers would understand the word? Well the answer is, "No!"

Most modern fanciers believe that a Janssen, any Janssen, is as good as any other-that is, they are genetically somehow of equal value. This same belief is held of Stassart, Sion, Bricoux, Mueleman, Gits, Grotters, Gurnay, and countless other supposed *pure strains*.

Each fancier somehow takes great comfort in a pedigree-especially a well produced one! I had related to me how the birds were auctioned after the Chinese race, and how the more professional looking the pedigree was, the more the Chinese fanciers paid! (You may say, "Silvio, that is so silly," and yet I ask you is it fundamentally any different in any other country?)

Inbreeding has and always will be the key to all progress vis-à-vis the breeding of superior livestock of any kind; that, by definition, also includes the racing pigeon. Again by definition, *inbreeding* is the continual-and I stress the word *continual*-mating of individuals of the same related stock. More than this, the truly correct form of the word *inbreeding* designates only the mating between brother and sister or between offspring and parents (that is daughter/father, son/mother) in one or more generations. Please note that nothing else constitutes inbreeding! *Linebreeding*, therefore, is applied to matings of a degree of consanguinity not included above! In the minds of most breeders today, there is no recognized distinction between inbreeding and linebreeding. Most of what fanciers commonly refer to as *inbreeding* is not such in reality.

Outbreeding is the actual method pursued by the great majority of racing pigeon fanciers, since inbreeding can be quickly relied upon to disclose any recessive genes (read undesirable) carried by the stock with which a fancier is working, and most fanciers prefer not to know (read ignore and not acknowledge) that their stock carries such undesirable genes. Outbreeding, therefore, allows them to delude themselves. How often have you heard, "My breeding policy is one of performance, best to best"? Well, this breeding policy is really one of perpetual hope-hope (for the best) that they are actually doing something positive, when in reality, they willingly perpetuate undesirable characteristics within the breed. Now these same people with their heads in the sand would be the first to trumpet, "But everyone knows that the bulk of race winners are the result of outcrossing." I would

answer that this proves nothing, since under the current almost universal policy of outcrossing, no other result is even remotely possible because the majority of youngsters born result from the mating of unrelated parents. This, therefore, cannot logically be even remotely interpreted as indicating that outbreeding (read outcrossing) is either the best or the most likely method to arrive at the production of champions.

You must always keep in mind that inbreeding favors the production of homozygosity, and if selection criteria are astute, a steady, continuous build-up of breeding merit, and therefore, emphasis upon the production of a family. Outcrossing has just the opposite effect. Therefore, it follows logically that if a breed is to advance, then inbreeding must, of necessity, be the tool with which it is accomplished.

A word of extreme caution is necessary at this point: Remember that inbreeding is a tool to an end. It is a special purpose tool. In and of itself, it cannot create anything new; it can only fix in a family desirable or undesirable genes by bringing all genes to a homozygous state. If the fancier was unfortunate enough to choose incorrectly in his original stock, then the task of breeding out the undesirable characteristics may prove totally impossible-and so it does in most cases.

In the hands of a visionary such as we have had in the past, it is possible to conclude that an inbred family can be purified, in which case the offspring would be almost identical in appearance, equally good racers, potential winners on race day, and ultimately, very valuable stock birds. In addition, such a family would be highly desirable for outcrossing because of their homozygosity.

My goal is to achieve a standard of excellence within the limits of a pure line. Very few fanciers anywhere have ever really established their own family of birds into what a biologist or geneticist would consider a pure line, The most basic reason is that a concerted effort must be employed over a great many generations to accomplish this end. This is rarely ever done. In the USA, Canada, Belgium, Holland, etc., almost every loft is really a mixture of many families.

The reference to a *pure strain* today has very little biological or genetic significance. The name *Sion*, *Gurnay*, *Bricoux*, *Janssen*, *Stassart*, or *Gits* really has no real value to us other than to acknowledge the continuing fame of individuals who were very successful in imparting a common standard to their family of pigeons. Their pigeons were families, yes, but were they really pure strains as we defined in a biological sense? The answer is that they were *not* pure strains or pure lines developed in the fashion of Wegge or Ulens.

The word *Janssen* really now imparts to us the idea of a type of pigeon, as does *Sion* or *Bricoux* or *Stassart* or *Dordin* or *Gurnay* or any other name. It is recognition of a level of excellence that probably no longer remotely endures in the fashion in which it was envisioned and originated in the hands of these specially talented masters. The modern birds that today carry these world-renowned names have little-almost none-of the genetic heritage and characteristics that the originators of these lines sought so hard to uncover, and to greater or lesser degrees, to fix.

Today, in most cases, when someone relates to you his strain, it means very little other than the fact he owns a pigeon. It would be very difficult for you to have an accurate mental picture of the pigeons if someone said he had *Janssens*, for instance. They could today be large, even very large, or medium or small in size; they could be deep-keeled, or apple-bodied, or anything in between. They could be hard muscle, soft muscle, no muscle; tame or wild as banshees; all colors; large wattle, no wattle; red cere, no cere; long legged, short legged. You and I have seen all of these and more. Muelemans are the same, and for that fact, almost every other supposed strain. In each and every fancier's hands, these pigeons

change and vary. Remember and reread Rule 6 (Nature is not on your side). Nature never progresses from less order to greater order, but always from order to disorder. In the hands of the originators of these families, we had a certain (lesser or greater) degree of order. Eventually, in the hands of the mass of fanciers worldwide, we naturally revert to disorder, or what I referred to as *common form*. Whatever qualities these masters fixed to lesser or greater degrees was eventually diluted and lost in the hands of lesser fanciers. It really takes very few generations for this to happen-as little as one or two in most cases.

Most fanciers love to race. Once the season is over, for the most part so is their interest for yet another year. They really just love to see them come home. Most fanciers are not dedicated to a lifetime of trying to achieve a specific breeding goal-the result of which may be total failure in the end anyway. The old adage is that "half the fun is getting there." As for me, win or lose, I will continue undaunted, mating father/daughter, brother/sister, looking for that most elusive of all qualities, a pretty face. Each year they look more and more like peas in a pod, each year more structural uniformity, each year prettier faces; what more can you ask?

No, I guess we *can* ask for more-more discussion, more conversation, more true friendship, more cooperation, more of us helping each other to realize our own individual dreams or goals, more sharing of truly limited valuable genetic heritage,* more trust, and much more tolerance and gratitude.

Regardless of what the pundits say, I live by my own Rule 1: Make your own mistakes. Birdkeeping is by definition a hands-on activity. Do not be afraid to make errors. You only really learn by doing, so get out there and do it and develop great friendships in the process. If you do this, whether you win or lose, you become the real winner and the true master.

** Thanks very much, Horst Hackemer. You are truly a gentleman who has achieved excellence.*