

800 Miles on the Day ... an Achievement of a Lifetime

A Tribute to a Master Flyer – Norman Coker

The sport of racing pigeons is almost as old as recorded history. It was once known as the Sport of Kings. As with most sporting endeavours there is a Holy Grail ... in mountain climbing it is Everest, in cricket it is the Ashes, and in pigeon racing it is **“Doing the Distance”**.

In the quiet moments around the club rooms, and when pigeon fanciers start reminiscing about past performances and achievements and the ears of the novices prick up, the talk inevitably gets around to races where a particularly hard fly was involved, sometimes involving difficult weather conditions, but always involving considerable distance.

Nobody remembers who won last year's 300 kilometres event! And speaking of measuring distance, who seriously uses kilometres when talking about races of 500 miles or more?

When pigeon fanciers talk about racing distances of 500 or 600 miles they are getting serious. And when such races are flown on the day they take on a special significance. There was a time in Canberra, not the easiest place to race pigeons in Australia, when 600 miles had never been flown on the day, despite many years of trying. And then a fancier called Karol Wojcik did it in 1976 with two birds on the day from Charleville, a distance of 630 miles. Twenty years later Charleville was again flown on the day but Karol's feat was lauded as something very special at the time, and rightly so.

On the 15th December 2009 something very special happened in New Zealand. A Whangaparaoa fancier called

Norman Coker flew 800 miles on the day. The pigeon that performed this feat was released from Invercargill at 6:30am and completed the 802 mile fly in 14 hours, 45 minutes and 49 seconds, a velocity of 1456.82 metres per minute. Not only does this feat involve a significant ocean crossing, the Cook Strait, the last 40 minutes of the flight was completed in the dark of night (the sun had set at 8:36pm and the moon had set one hour earlier).

In terms of achievement there have probably been pigeons that have raced further on the day, and maybe faster, but by any objective measure this was one hell of a fly. Such things don't happen by accident. Norman Coker, otherwise known as “Norm” or “Grumpy” to those who knew him well, had been racing pigeons for almost 70 years. His story is one that includes successes and frustrations, good races and bad, but always there was an unfaltering love of the sport and unconditional respect for the pigeons themselves.



“Grumpy” handling one of his family of pigeons

70 Years of Pigeon Racing

Grumpy started racing pigeons in Devon, England, when he was around 11 years of age. It all started with a mate telling him of some stray pigeons that were hanging around a granary. After several hours he managed to catch two ... a red chequer and a dark blue chequer. Both birds were without life rings and both birds flew Berwick, some 400 miles, in Grumpy's first year.

Racing was a little different 70 years ago. Grumpy first flew with the Cornwood Club. The club did not use clocks so when a bird returned Grumpy had to hop on his bicycle and peddle two miles with his pigeon to the home of the club President. It would seem that this would have bestowed no small advantage to the President concerned and, if reintroduced today, might make finding office bearers a little easier at pigeon racing club annual general meetings!

Grumpy's first race win was typical of the man and his ability to "think outside the square". On a particularly foggy day (and Devon is renowned for the thickness of its fogs!) he clocked a pigeon several hours before anyone else. How did he do it? He used to toss his pigeons late in the evening and during fog.

After four or five years the Cornwood club folded and Grumpy joined the Plympton Invitation Club. Unlike Cornwood, this club did use clocks. They were called "Tin Lizzies". The fanciers of today would have a great deal of difficulty recognising them from the modern electronic clocking systems currently in use. Many of Grumpy's winning pigeons from this time were from a pair of "Champion Major" squeakers bred for him by a grateful fancier to whom he had

returned a stray race bird. In those days the longest race was from Thurso, some 570 miles, in northern Scotland but Grumpy was never fortunate enough to get a bird on the day from this race point.

In 1965 Grumpy and his family moved to Australia and soon thereafter started racing pigeons in Canberra. Pigeon racing in Australia is a little different to racing in Europe. One of the major differences is the presence of an abundance of aerial predators including hawks, falcons and eagles. Anyone who has witnessed a pair of falcons ripping a flock of pigeons to shreds will understand the threat that such birds can pose. Of course, this is nothing more than Nature's way and as with all sports the trick is to adapt to the situation. Grumpy always trained his birds to head straight for home without circling the release point ... no predator can match a pigeon for straight line speed!

Grumpy was a great believer in developing a family of pigeons. He said that he owed a lot of his early success to one of the great Melbourne fanciers, Wally Stock. It is through Wally that Grumpy was able to develop a family of pigeons based on the famous Van Cutsem bloodlines. One year in the late 1970s in which Grumpy started racing with 13 pigeons, he clocked five out of six birds from St George on the day, a distance of a little over 500 miles.

In 1980 Grumpy and his Van Cutsems moved to the Christchurch region in New Zealand. Flying conditions were much more like the ones he had experienced in England and the Van Cutsem blood produced its fair share of winners, particularly at middle distance and longer races. Grumpy had a special regard for a pigeon that flew East Cape for him on the day, a

distance of 500 miles. A Christchurch fancier who had an important influence on Grumpy's methods at this time was M. Van Ekeris.

In the early 1990s Grumpy retired to live on the beautiful Whangaparaoa peninsula, just north of Auckland. Of course the pigeons went with him. Before long an important change took place with Grumpy's family of pigeons. Birds from two of Auckland's strongest fanciers, Trevor Martin and Jim Howarth, were introduced. The consequence of this was improving the overall race performance of the family, particularly at extreme distances, culminating in Grumpy clocking a bird from **800 miles and on the day!**

RACE FACT FILE	
Release point:	Invercargill, New Zealand
Release time & date:	6:30 am; 15 December 2009
Winds:	Southerly
Flyer:	Norman Coker; Whangaparaoa, New Zealand
Distance:	802 miles (1290.478 kilometres)
Bird:	Blue Bar Cock, Harb 05 6255
Time clocked:	21:15:48
Time on the wing:	14 hours, 45 minutes and 49 seconds
Velocity:	1456.82 mpm
Sun set:	20:36
Moon set:	19:36

Doing the Distance

The problem with pigeon racing is that there are so many variables. Horse racing probably has at least as many complexities and nuances as most sports, but horses don't have to find their way home and they certainly don't have to worry about predators as they race!

Grumpy would talk about keeping things simple. And he was all about doing the simple things exceptionally well. To fly the distance he focused on five key things:

1. **A strong family of pigeons.** The emphasis is on the word "family". Grumpy said that he owed a great deal to the development of his family of pigeons to master flyers such as Wally Stock, M. Van Ekeris, Trevor Martin and Jim Howarth.
2. **The birds must be happy and healthy.** Sounds simple but Grumpy said that this was the single biggest factor that differentiated the performance of flyers and their birds. Grumpy maintained that too many pigeon fanciers don't spend enough quality time with their birds ... he said you have to know each bird like a cow knows her calf.
3. **The birds must be fit.** Training tosses are important but it is not helpful to over-train with too many long tosses. Similarly, a well scheduled build up of races is important but it is counter productive to over-race a pigeon, particularly a yearling.
4. **The birds need to be able break quickly from the release point.** The only way pigeons can do this is if they can confidently and individually work out the direction they need to fly to get home. Grumpy believed that pigeons use several mechanisms for navigation, including visual cues from the landscape, the sun, and the earth's magnetic field.
5. **You need an 'X Factor'.** Grumpy would only fly older birds at serious distances. He was a strong believer in the Natural System, particularly cock birds flying to 10-day old youngsters.

Grumpy's Top 10 Tips for Novice Flyers

1. You need good birds but you don't need to spend big money. Old hands, if you are genuine, will almost always help you out in ways such as providing a couple of good stock birds or a couple of well-bred squeakers. Remember, good fliers have good birds, good distance fliers especially. They don't keep dross.
2. Good birds will not perform if you are not prepared to put the time into them. The key is regular contact and consistent behaviour from you. Always keep in mind that pigeons are a creature of habit.
3. Good birds cannot be expected to perform if they are not kept in the very best of health. Things to look out for include:
 - The loft – it must be dry; airy without being draughty; and free from vermin and predators.
 - The feed – must be free from dust and chemicals and nutritionally balanced. A small amount of an oily seed such as rapeseed or linseed promotes good health.
 - Grit and trace elements – must be clean and readily available. Pink minerals (a powdered calcium supplement with vitamins and minerals) and an occasional cuttlefish “bone” are valuable sources of calcium, vitamins and important trace elements.
 - The water – must be clean and free from contaminants. Ensure that water cannot be polluted by sparrows and the like. An occasional teaspoon of vinegar or a clove of garlic can be beneficial.
 - Medication – regular worming is recommended.
4. Don't try to race too many. You are better off racing a small team that you can afford and manage well rather than trying to be a “mob flyer”.
5. Before racing make sure the birds get plenty of short tossing ... the type of tossing that promotes very fast breaking from the release point.
6. Don't over-race yearlings. Six races are ideal in a pigeon's first year. Older pigeons are needed to perform consistently at the distance.
7. Keep good breeding, training and race records of every bird. Electronic clocking systems make capturing training and racing information really easy so if you have such a system there is no excuse.
8. Don't blame the pigeons if they are not performing. The problem is almost certainly you and what you are doing so identify the problem and fix it.
9. Take an active role around the club. Remember if you don't give you don't get.
10. Following on from the last point, get a mentor. Old hands have a lot of knowledge and most are prepared to share if asked.