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The Balancing Act

*from a lecture by Carl Slavin
at the 1987 AFA National Convention
Seattle, Washington*

My paper is titled "The Balancing Act" and, contrary to popular conception, I am not here to demonstrate a collection of budgies sitting perched on the end of a judging stick.

"The balancing act" is the toughest test facing our hobby at this time. I am referring to the loss of new members after having them raise birds and then exhibit those birds. Suddenly they quit the hobby! Why? I feel that they simply lose track of why they joined us in the first place. We put too much pressure on all exhibitors to win, place, and show and it is at the expense of their families and employers. We need to assist them to get their priorities in order and, in so doing, balance the needs of their families, their careers and, of course, our hobby.

We are always attracting newcomers to the hobby but we are not always keeping them interested and with the loss of these people and natural erosion we are experiencing a decline in the numbers of three- and four-year members. I feel once we have an individual passed five years in exhibiting then we usually have a sincere hobbyist who will survive a few bad seasons.

My goal is to offer a rather simplified method of looking after all of one's priorities and in doing so I hope to save one or two of the members we may otherwise lose.

I am as good an example of the type of person we attract, get, and subsequently lose, as you will find. I was able to purchase my first budgie at age eight and my family always had a pet in the house. When I was old enough to have my own place I met an avid aviculturist and shortly

thereafter I was breeding birds for exhibition.

I was soon building cages, making nests, mixing foods, adding vitamins, selling pets, attending every show, buying new stock, culling old stock, visiting other breeders and driving myself crazy trying to get others to catch the wave. After all, didn't everyone want to raise birds? Now if any of this sounds familiar, don't be surprised. I'm sure everyone has felt that way at some time in their life.

Does any of this sound familiar? I ask you, were you not like this at one time and, if not, then I'll guess that you are just starting out.

My work started to suffer; it's hard to concentrate when the hen in nest number four is about to hatch her first chick ever and you don't have a spare feeder set up and you may have to hand feed and why does the boss want to see you and why does he think you don't have your mind on your work and why are the kids making comments like, "I wish I were a bird, too!" The best moment of all comes when you sit down to a plate of soft food, water, and canary seed. Suddenly you realize that this is your hobby and not your employer's or your family's.

The day that this sinks in is the day you should set out to put your perspectives on the perch. This day seems to arrive all too soon for many of our people. For some the day arrives the day that the bird they paid a fortune for just took the head off her only chick or how about the day the judge placed your best bird last in a class of ten all of whom you beat the week previous except this time it's the big show of the year and you

can't get out of novice and nobody will sell you anything but junk or six-year-old virgin hens and cocks that eat eggs.

This seems to be the same day that we start to lose members. Let's hope that this little talk will take some of the mystery out of making it to Champion and keep you in the hobby once you get there and find out it's tougher to stay on top than to get there.

There are four steps to take and I hope to be able to walk you through all four easily. You have to take the first step realizing that it was those little birds that got you there in the first place and it will be your love of those little birds that will make an aviculturist out of you.

Step Number One

Automate everything — yourself first. To begin with, you always have your family; they are put there by God to help you through the hard times, they are not there to do the work for you. We all tend to ask too much of those around us, and we tend to forget they need us for their own problems; breeders seem to always have problems and it's hard to listen to others' problems when you

can't get your mind off of nest number four.

My best advice here is to love and appreciate your family, put their needs first, ask them to tolerate your eccentricities, and above all don't ever forget just who's hobby this is.

In order to achieve this most basic goal you will have to adopt a specific timetable and not veer from the concept. For instance, if you come home from work and want to use this time to check and feed your birds and your family wants to use this time to greet you with the news of the day, then you will have to set a pattern that all around you can understand. I personally have established a pattern and, while it is far from perfect, all involved seem to function with it.

As soon as I am home I spend about half to one hour listening to the family until the initial flurry of relating the day's events is over; I then excuse myself and run to the aviary where I just look and unwind from the day's business stresses.

This "look only" time can take any form you wish. I use it to remind the birds that some intrusion will be taking place. I return after dinner to feed and inspect the flock.

For all out there who are early risers, a morning wake-up call to the aviary is an excellent time of the day to intrude in their world and is preferentially the best time of the day to feed the stock. In addition, this is the ideal time to visit your hobby without taking time away from your family unless they, too, are early risers and then that makes this a great time to spend with them and arrange some other time for the hobby.

The important message here is to arrange your time to suit all around you first and whatever arrangements you make you must maintain them at the expense of the birds. That way on those special days when you just have to have some time alone, everyone will understand that is the exception and since you have not been abusing the privilege then they will grant you your wish and the stress level for all will drop away.

Now that we have automated you and your family we can get on with the job of automating other facets of the hobby so that you will have control of your time.

An important automated item can be your lighting system. I feel this is a must. The proper control of artificial

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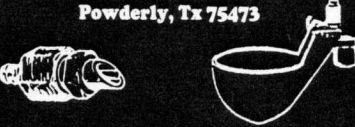
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Vacuum thoroughly once a week. Clean out unused cages and then you are always prepared for emergencies. Most aviculturists can use some criticism of their cleanliness; with cleanliness comes a decrease in the incidence of sick birds.

If you say that you can't get around to doing all this as often as I recommend then the odds are it takes too long and that is a clear sign that you have too many birds! Remember, too many birds are too much work; sell some and cut back on the work.

Step Number Two

Routine — more routine. The birds must have a very specific *routine*, the more exact the *routine* is, the better the results. There is just no way that you can check nest boxes five and six times a day and not pay a price for that kind of intrusion. One must always be aware that we are visitors in our birds' world, sort of gatekeepers who must provide the essentials but who are not allowed into the inner sanctum.

I personally check every nest box daily regardless of whether there are birds breeding, eggs layed, or chicks hatched. The birds all know the routine and they expect it so the only time they are upset is when it doesn't happen. I try to keep these occurrences down to a minimum, even when we are on holidays. We take our holidays every year in the middle of our breeding season. I arrange with the person who will tend the flock to maintain the *routine*. Incidentally, the records are usually kept better when I am away, and the troubles seem to be fewer. Anyone who tells you that they cannot leave their birds is heading for leaving the hobby themselves. This is the first sign that they have their priorities wrong (and selfish people will not make our hobby grow.)

In doing this *routine* inspection of nest boxes it is of paramount impor-

tance that the exact same sequence of events takes place night after night. I start with the top left and move downward row after row. I usually can't wait to get to my best nest of chicks and there I dawdle. But I always complete the entire sequence of nest inspections in order.

Next *routine* should be the feeding program. Inexpensive and simple is a good place to start. Most of our new breeders are changing feeding patterns too often. The established breeders have a specific pattern and will usually stick to it or a variation thereof year after year. The feeding program I am about to share with you takes less time to prepare than any I have ever used, takes less time to teach to the holiday flocktender and, most important, costs less too.

Item number one, purchase a good quality finch mix and add to that a little of every other kind of seed you can find. I like to add small sunflower, safflower, red millet, alfalfa, lettuce and other items but no wheats, oats, milos or other large items. When you have your mix ready then start a sprouting routine, using one cup of mix in a one-quart canning jar. This routine takes up five minutes each day and should be done as follows: one jar should have seed and water in it for twelve hours, the other two jars should be set up in twenty-four hour intervals, a fourth jar should be resting for a day just to air it out. Every twelve hours the jars full of seed should be rinsed with water. This is best accomplished if you have a screen on the top of the jar, preferably made of plastic. I use the type that is used for screen doors and is in most hardware stores. This water rinse is very important in that you must really rinse the seed well and then set it to dry at an angle so that an air flow into the jar can occur.

In two days the seed is ready to feed and what you have is a marvelous collection of fresh greens from all over the continent. These greens are full of energy because the starch in the seed itself has changed to sugar in this sprouting process. I can tell the seed is right to eat when it smells fresh after rinsing and most of the sprouts are about a quarter of an inch to an inch long.

Second item in the feeding program is oat groats. I use this item to provide the flock with milk products. I achieve this goal by mixing the groats with powdered milk, adding water and letting it sit overnight in the

fridge. I use a cupful of groats to a quarter cupful of milk powder to a quart jar of water. This entire program takes less than five minutes and that includes rinsing the soaked groats in hot water, drying them in a strainer and mixing them with the sprouted seeds.

Third and last item in this exotic program is a dry formula nesting additive. We have many types available. My personal choice is Gro-vite, but I am presently using Cede product and I have had similar results with Petamine and a host of others over the years. If you read the label and it is meant to suit breeding requirements, then add a little to the mix. I add a couple of tablespoons worth to the mixture of sprouted seeds and soaked groats. I believe most powdered vitamin supplements to be of additional purpose in that they take the moisture out of the rest of the mix. The portion that is left uneaten just dries out and does not go bad. This uneaten soft food just adds to the litter in the deep litter method I use and is very easy to remove in the "all wire" cages many other breeders use.

That's it for feeding supplements. I use no others and the flock continues to reproduce and grow. This entire program is designed to take up less time than any other I have tried. I use the extra time to clean out nest boxes and exchange them for fresh ones. I try to change them at least twice per round and have been doing that since 1969. I am pleased to report that I have had less than ten French molt birds in that time and the last ones were in 1980, when I deliberately set out to produce them by leaving a hen on her third set of chicks in the same untidy nest. That makes this a very important *routine*.

Another important routine item is to daily clean the feet and bands of the young chicks. Handle these youngsters at every opportunity, these early moments mean much in raising steady exhibition stock. If you now respond by saying that you don't have enough time to do that, then again I'll tell you that you have too many nests or birds to properly maintain and you should cut back and do a good job with what you can easily handle.

Step Number Three

Simplify — and keep it simple. I'll spend one moment on a very important topic that could be the subject of

many lectures. I am referring to the addition of vitamin supplements into the water supply of our breeding stock. I feel that it is unreasonable to add vitamins to the water of a bird that consumes fifty times and more water during breeding season than during normal times. In addition, each pair's intake varies at each stage of the breeding cycle. If anyone out there can take the time to accurately calculate the amount consumed and then tell the rest of us that this is the ideal amount required, then that person will have only satisfied one aspect of the breeding plan. In the meantime, if the rest of us just not add vitamins to the water supply at breeding season then we'll have less likelihood of harming some chicks or parents with our usual mismanagement techniques.

I have been trying to get across to all breeders that a simple, effective, time-saving program will make the birds enjoyable for yourself and your family and this will also ensure that having control of them you should be as relaxed as you wished this hobby would make you, and that will only make you a better employee.

Step Number Four

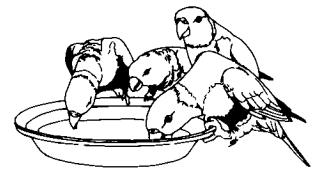
Stop — look — and enjoy. To add some other helpful hints I offer the following list that will contribute to keeping you in the hobby by saving you time and allowing you to spend your time where it matters most and that is looking and enjoying.

1. Too many birds is too much work; sell them and cut back.
2. Sell five of your birds and use that money to buy seed.
3. Sell five more and use that money to buy a better bird.
4. Don't hesitate to buy a good bird should the opportunity arise.
5. Keep one bird for every six inches of perch space.
6. Keep one foot of perch space for every square foot of flight.
7. Always keep twice as many hens as cocks.
8. Fertility is the key; get rid of the rest.
9. Remove any bird that looks unwell; put it by itself.
10. Good, healthy birds breed well; success follows hard work.

In summary, please try to keep it *automatic, routine, simple*, and take the time to *stop, look* and, most of all, *enjoy* this hobby. It can be the source of a lifetime of friendship and relaxation. ●

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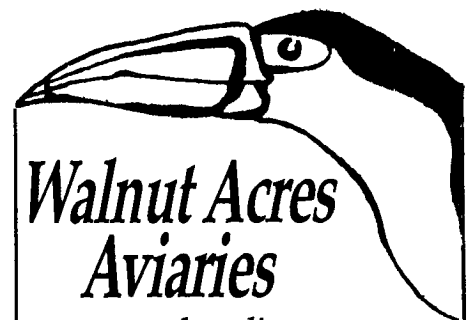
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