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Wonder Wings

by *Weldell Phillips*
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Since the beginning of time, man's desire to control his own destiny has been responsible for many ingenious methods of long distance communication.

Tireless marathon runners, throbbing drums and intricate smoke signals indicate the age-old desperate human desire for rapidly received news. The Pharaohs of Egypt relied on the swiftest of dependable creatures, the homing pigeon, whose ability to unerringly fly hundreds of miles to their homes, helped them build a highly cultured civilization.

The earliest record of homing pigeons, in a domesticated state, is found in a painting done in the fifth Egyptian dynasty. Thirty centuries before the birth of Christ, the People of the Nile depicted pigeons being released to the North, South, East and West to apprise the far-flung populace of a new King's ascendancy to the throne. These tidings were written on a tiny slip of papyrus which was carried in a goose-quill capsule tied to the bird's leg.

The Caliph of Bagdad established the first real 'pigeon-post' in the year 1146 A.D. Regular schedules were maintained as the birds brought news to the ruler and carried his commands back to his underlings. Even Baron Nathan de Rothchild found homing pigeons invaluable as he laid the foundation for enormously wealthy House of Rothchild. By winged messenger he received the facts which enabled him to out-think his ill-informed competitors.

In World War I homing pigeons were used when other forms of communication were impossible to establish. The 77th Division, famed 'Lost Battalion of Argonne,' was saved from total destruction by Cher Ami, last of the sticken group's seven homers. The doomed men were being unintentionally pounded to pieces by their own artillery. In desperation, Cher Ami was released into the metal-strewn sky. Although grievously wounded in flight, the valiant bird finally fluttered down to the roof of his home loft at Rampont. German bullets had pierced his wing and had nearly severed his leg which supported the aluminum capsule. He recovered to become famous as the savior of hundreds of men whose message had read, "For God's sake, lift the fire."

Though still used as messengers in some parts of the world, the modern homing pigeon is better known in the world of sport. Pigeon racing grows more popular each year as hundreds of Americans take an active part in importing European birds. Pedigreed breeding has reached an all time high, with blood lines as pure and accurately cataloged as those of pure-bred race horses.

Pigeon racing is the national sport of Belgium and the 'Belgium racing-homer' stand for intelligent, fast and dependable birds of a very special type, due to the meticulous care given during hundreds of years of breeding and training. Most popular of all strains today are the Belgium



Vicent Odierna holds "My Good Red", the trans-oceanic traveler.

photo by Bob Stoddard



photo by Bob Stoddard

Odierna checks for 'fret marks' which show as discolorations about one inch long on the tips of the wing feathers.

Bastins, Belgium Stassards and a French homer developed by the Sion Family. Blood lines of these great fliers can be traced to champions of past centuries.

Pedigreed pigeons may be purchased from reliable dealers for as little as fifty dollars per pair, but in many cases prices have been known to soar as high as twelve hundred dollars. Outstanding among racing pigeons in the United States are the descendants of those imported from Belgium in the early 1920's by Louis F. Curtis who spared no expense in developing the breed and is considered to be the father of the sport in this country.

One of America's most devoted enthusiasts is Vincent Odierna of Azusa, California, whose thirty-two years of pigeon-racing experience makes him a fount of information. The pigeon breeder, he explains, finds the mated pair quite prolific, with the hen producing two eggs

each month in her pine-needle nest. After a nineteen day incubation period the fertile eggs hatch and at the age of nine days the squab is provided with a seamless aluminum leg band which bears its own exclusive number and the initials of the club to which the owner belongs. Numbers are never duplicated, nor are they re-issued after death. When three weeks old, the youngster is isolated in the loft and weaned while it gains enough weight and strength to begin preliminary flight training. Odierna allows the young bird its freedom as it first tries its wings. The maiden flight from loft to limb or roof-top is naturally a shakey one. Only for a moment is the fledgling permitted to rest. Odierna carefully forces it from its perch by tossing a tennis ball near-by until the bird is convinced that the only place it can alight unannoyed is at the platform of the loft.

First training flights are of short duration and are usually limited to the immediate loft area. Distances are increased regularly until the bird is homing from as far as five to fifty miles. At the discretion of the trainer, as he judges physical condition and homing ability, the bird is entered in distance races ranging from 100 to 1,000 miles.

Odierna, formerly of Connecticut, where his birds raced regularly, explained the actual race procedure. Since homing-racers will return only to their own loft, it is necessary that the distance from the release point to each breeder's loft be calculated carefully in exact miles and yards. For instance, the distance from a certain release point in Wilmington, Delaware to Odierna's former loft in Stamford, Connecticut is precisely 141.13 miles. Owners assemble at club headquarters and turn their entries over to

racing officials who provided each bird with a numbered rubber leg-band. Next, each owner submits his unique and expensive time clock for inspection and sealing. These clocks, imported from Belgium and Germany, range near eighty dollars in retail price and are peculiar to the sport of pigeon racing.

Special trucks, equipped with fast-release cages are used to transport the birds to the pre-determined release point. All entries are released at the same instant to insure a fair start. Back at the home loft, the owners scan the skies as they await the arrival of their birds. As the tired competitor swoops into the loft, the owner rapidly retrieves the rubber leg-band, places it in a capsule, and inserts it into the time-clock which accurately notes the time to the second. Later, club officials open the sealed clocks and the winner is determined by comparing the time consumed against the distance flown.

Every state in the Union is represented by several well organized clubs. California alone claims 13,000 club members, however the sport is more extensively established in the Eastern United States.

According to Odierna, distance, humidity, wind and heat all have a direct bearing on the speed made by the racing homer. A day of high humidity and head

winds will, of course, make for slower returns than a day of dry weather and helpful tail winds. On a calm day the birds will average 40 to 60 miles per hour. Oddly enough, these skillful navigators, who seldom fly at a height of more than 300 feet, do not believe that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. They follow the topography of the earth, seeming to prefer canyons and valleys to more direct routes over the mountains. During extremely long races, the birds come to roost as twilight approaches, giving themselves a chance to forage for food and water. This enforced night away from home seems to worry them as is evidenced by the 'fret marks' which are always found near the tips of the feathers of all over-night racers. Seldom do they fly at night unless badly frightened or specially trained for nocturnal duty. Pathfinder, a homer racing for the Charleston, South Carolina Racing Club, won a competitive night race on August 6, 1944 by covering 187 miles in 6 hours, 23 minutes at the world's record speed of 813.81 yards per minute. Other successful night flights have been demonstrated by birds of the American armed forces. Since many homers are lost to predatory night birds and unseen physical obstructions, night flying is very costly and impractical.

When scores of birds are released simultaneously, they tend to travel in a flock, a fact which makes them easy prey for fast diving hawks who can hardly miss a kill as they smash through the group at 120 miles per hour. In straight-away flight the pigeon can out-distance his fierce enemy. High tension lines, television antennas and similar hazards kill and injure many birds, especially on windy days when they are apt to be blown into these danger areas.

Odierna, who donated many of his homers to the Signal corps during World War II, notes that birds, when imported to the United States or moved to a strange climate, fail to show winning style until they have had time to familiarize themselves with the countryside. Usually, second generation offspring prove to be better racers than their forcefully migrated parents.

Just how closely attached the homer can become to his birth-loft is demonstrated by the fact that one of Odierna's birds returned to home after a ten year absence. To cure his homesickness, Odierna held the bird's head under water for several seconds thereby convincing him that he was no longer welcome.

During three decades of racing competition, Odierna has recorded many unique experiences, the most unusual of which

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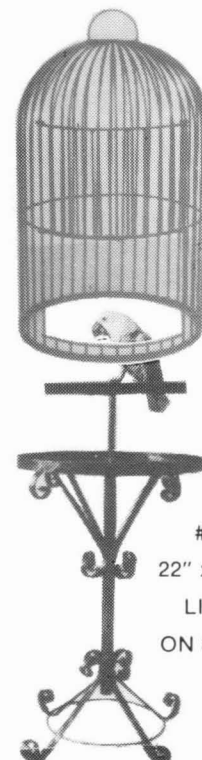


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concerned one of his outstanding homers, My Good Red, a descendant of the great Belgium Stassart champion, Baladin.

My Good Red was one of several birds competing in a training flight from Rahway, New Jersey to Stamford, Connecticut. **He finally wound up in Italy!**

Odierna had considered the bird lost or killed until Luigi Spira, Captain of the Italian steamship Saturnia, arrived in New York City with a strange story.

As Captain Spira related the facts, he told Odierna that My Good Red, exhausted and hungry, had alighted on the deck of the Italian vessel when the ship was two days and 600 miles out of the port of New York. The sailors had cared for him and through the ever-present identification leg-band, had traced him to Odierna on their return to the United States. The valiant little 14 ounce flier had flown a total of thirty continuous hours, fighting fatigue, hunger and wind in order to reach the only haven he could see, the ship's running lights.

"In two years of flying he never made a mistake," said Odierna. "I can't understand it. He's my best bird."

Later, he determined that as My Good Red crossed the Hudson River near the Washington Bridge, he must have been chased out to sea by hawks which are known to nest in the bridge's upper reaches. Safe again at home, the trans-oceanic traveler lived to sire many winners for his owner.

The remarkable homing ability of these spectacular birds has never been satisfactorily explained despite exhaustive tests by breeders and elaborate theories from scientists.

Clouding the issue even more is the authenticated report from the former President of the American Racing Pigeon Union, who found that one of his birds, **totally blind**, returned to his loft after a deliberate release some miles away during an experiment designed to test homing instinct. The blind pigeon circled above his home loft and capped his remarkable demonstration by faithfully coming to the loft platform, guided only by Dr. Priewe's continuous whistling.

Strange? Mystifying? Unbelievable? True?

YES! But who can explain it? ■

One of Odierna's younger birds just returned from a practice race.



photo by Bob Stoddard