

## **“Success for the 2010 season begins when the 2009 season ends! ”**

How often have we heard this said and still it is true. Now, at the end of the racing season our thoughts must immediately turn to next year.

“Why”, you ask, “when next year’s racing season is still some seven months away?” (I am now at an age where time flies so quickly that its ONLY seven months away!!!) The answer to that is pretty obvious. We all know that perfect health lies at the basis of successful racing and that without perfect health successful racing is not possible.

“But”, I can already hear you say, “ We’ll breed a loftful of youngsters, allow them to moult, cull the weak, vaccinate the rest and give them all the required routine treatments that will clear up malaria, worms, canker, respiratory or any other sleazy health-robbing disease and ‘Bob’s your Uncle’ we’ll be ready to beat the best! Time enough till then. It’s summer now (here in South Africa), let’s forget the birds for a while and enjoy the sun!”

Aha, therein lies the rub. We said **perfect health** and please do not think that you can achieve it in this way. To neglect your charges, allow disease to rule for six months and hope to remedy half a year’s illnesses in a few weeks with the contents of a bottle, is just not on. Not even the strongest muti can achieve that! No my friends, that’s not how it works.

So next you’ll ask me what medicines to give the birds in the off-season that they may remain healthy. Will you be surprised if I say, “DO NOT GIVE THEM ANYTHING”? No, not surprised? Good for you! May I repeat, you must **give them nothing!** “What”, you say, “No medicines, no muti’s?” That’s right. Nothing. “But then how can they stay healthy?” The answer in short? By doing the correct things (there’s much to be done) and by not doing the wrong ones. So, eventually it all boils down to what must be done and what not. Let’s look at what is important.

First of all we assume that all the stock birds were dewormed before breeding began (and do it if necessary!). We also assume that all the dud racers from 2003 have been eliminated and that only the pigeons capable of performing well in 2004 have been kept. If there is any doubt rather cull the bird. At this time loft space is at a premium and we do not have space (air) for passengers.

Why ‘at this time’? My friends, please listen well! The single biggest mistake South African fanciers make (and this is probably true wherever pigeons are kept) is overpopulation. Or crowding. Or overcrowding. Call it what you will. Too many pigeons per loft. “OK, OK. We know all that” You complain, “but why at this time?” At this point a little bit of senior school science will help; we are entering summer and the air is heating up. Heated air contains less oxygen than cooler air – the warmer the air, the more scarce the oxygen. Result? Insufficient oxygen leads to stress and increased susceptibility to disease. And from there it’s but a small step to sickly pigeons! And it’s not good enough if the birds are outside and have fresh air during daytime only. Because if they are crowded at night, they are crowded for about half of the 24 hours. Which is bad. A daytime aviary is good therefore but not good enough.

The total number we keep, is therefore very serious. In addition to the pigeons kept over from the past season, a whole flock of new youngsters are bred. We then purchase a few here and there and are given a couple more by well-meaning friends. End result? Too many pigeons for the loft! And this in summertime when the oxygen in the air is at it’s lowest concentration.

**Lesson;** Always but ALWAYS keep the numbers to the absolute minimum. Two pigeons per cubic metre loftspace – that’s all that should be allowed. (Having measured

their lofts and done the calculation, most fanciers will be shocked at the small number they should keep!) Keep fewer birds but keep quality. Quality, quality, quality. It must always be our password! Remember that only ONE bird can win the race.

What must be done in the off season? Keep to the principles on which good management is based and you'll be safe. If the management is OK, the rest will follow.

1. Never overpopulate – as we discussed above
2. Closely tied-up with this – ensure good loft ventilation
3. Efficient vaccination of pox and paramyxo
4. Strict worm control
5. Strict control of pigeon flies

“But”, you may say, “if I give my birds all the necessary medications against pseudo-malaria (we'll return to this further on), canker, coccidiosis, bacteria (which require antibiotics) etc., they will surely be super healthy and perfectly prepared to begin the new season next year?”

The answer is; Yes and No.

In response to that you'll probably think – but hopefully not say - “What, is this fellow crazy or can he not give a straight answer?”

Well I hope I'm not crazy and the reply can be explained; Yes, if you give your pigeons all the necessary medicines to control canker, coccidiosis and the bacterial diseases etc., they will be healthy. No doubt.

“Then why do you recommend that no treatment be given?”

Because it is essential that the pigeons build up some degree of natural immunity to the diseases mentioned. To achieve this they must have some exposure to the germs and what better time than in the offseason? At this time they are not under the severe stress of training and racing and should be capable of resisting attacks from these germs. At the same time they are being exposed to the germs and can build immunity to them. Any bird that is not capable of remaining healthy in the offseason whilst all its loftmates are fine, is not worth keeping anyway. Pigeons must always undergo various rounds of strict selection and the selection on health is just one method. So no, to give any form of medication in the off-season is not a good idea.

“OK then, but what about the virus diseases like pox, paramyxo, herpes, adeno, circo etc.?”

It is imperative that one vaccinates annually against pox and paramyxo (two shots are necessary!). Properly vaccinated birds should not become ill. It is advisable to do the first paramyxo vaccination as soon as possible after the babies have been weaned. In practice one should wait till you have a batch of twenty or so and then do them together. (Do not wait till the pre-race preparation period because by then the birds may have already contracted the paramyxo and will suffer a severe setback!) The second paramyxo shot MUST be done four to six weeks after the first. Another vaccination (that would be the third) may be given two weeks prior to the first race. Against the other pigeon viruses, there is no vaccine and one must adopt normal preventative measures and then hope for the best! These measures are; good food with lots of protein, weekly vitamins, no antibiotics, weekly probiotics (apple cider vinegar or yoghurt is also effective), no strange bird introductions, two kinds of grit, a dry loft with good ventilation and no overcrowding etc. Should you be forced to introduce strange birds into the loft, they must first be quarantined and vaccinated. One could also give the strangers JIK (one tsp/5lit) for a few days before introduction into the main loft.

So far I have not mentioned paratyphoid; infection with *Salmonella typhimurium*. This is the scourge of pigeon-keeping everywhere, though we are fortunate in that in South Africa it does not seem to be such a big problem as in Europe or America. There are paratyphoid vaccines available and one may use them a few weeks prior to the racing season. But should you have a confirmed problem with paratyphoid in the loft, vaccination is essential. Treatment against the *Salmonella* germ is always hazardous as the possibility of creating the carrier condition always exists even though it is claimed Baytril prevents this from happening. Baytril is special. As a drug, Baytril is the number one choice against paratyphoid and because it is so valuable for combating this disease it should not be used for any other purpose. It is irresponsible to use Baytril against any other infections but paratyphoid, as for instance a non-specific treatment to enhance racing performance! The chances of losing the drug's effectiveness through improper use is always present and it would be calamitous for the pigeon sport if we lost Baytril for use against paratyphoid.

**Pseudo-malaria or malaria**, as it is commonly but incorrectly referred to, requires a slightly different approach. Firstly it looks as if our pigeons do not form an immunity to *Haemoproteus* – the causative organism of pseudo-malaria. Considering that, we must ensure that all birds kept at the end of the racing season are clear of the disease. (To determine that, a blood slide, specially stained, has to be examined by a veterinarian or qualified laboratory). Next we must ensure that neither the stock birds nor the racers ever get 'jockeys' i.e. pigeon flies on them. The pigeon fly transmits *Haemoproteus* that causes the disease, so if at any time we see pigeon flies on the birds we may assume that the birds probably have pseudo-malaria. These blood parasites are extremely difficult to clear so be very strict about this – NO pigeon flies on the birds!!! (In America it is believed that one can only suppress the disease with treatment, not clear it and that regular monthly treatment is necessary).

"How to keep pigeon flies out of the loft?" That is actually very easy but requires a little effort. Using a solution of permethrin (insecticide) the loft is washed once or twice a year. Spraying the loft with the solution is not effective as the normal powder (bloom) from the pigeons coats the walls, causing run-off which prevents penetration and thorough wetting. Washing with a cloth or brush is, however, effective, as permethrin has a lasting effect and will keep pigeon flies away for an extended period. In case you are wondering how it works; the insecticide is a contact poison, being absorbed by the flies when they rest on the loft walls or floor. This explains why it is so necessary to do ALL the loft structures – even the closed nestboxes for that is where the flies love to breed - in a quiet darkened area.

Permethrin is contained in Ambush (now off the market in SA), Coopex, Biokill, Permex etc. Permethrin powder is also available in some countries. The products containing permethrin may also be used directly on the pigeons. Solutions that contain related products, like flumethrin, cypermethrin, deltamethrin (popular in SA), cyfluthrin, cyalothrin etc must not be used directly on the pigeons as they can cause extreme irritation. They can however be used in the loft wash. ***(This highlights another principle of good management – always read the label and above all, make sure of the active ingredient)***

So go to it. Do not medicate in the off-season (It is different of course if you should have a disease outbreak – although the chances of that are slim) and you will stand surprised at the sparkle of your pigeons when they begin the new racing season.