

Quick start guide to Racing pigeons

This is an attempt to highlight the most important factors that should be taken into consideration when starting with racing pigeons. It's only our opinion and you are more than welcome to adapt it to suit your unique circumstances. We are in no way claiming to be experts on the subject.

Dates and time lines mentioned are applicable to South Africa and our conditions.

Website: <http://www.grovelofts.co.za>

Email: hannes@grovelofts.co.za

1. What is the fuss about?

Racing pigeons have been around for many years. Belgium is seen as one of the countries where the sport originated. Carrier pigeons were even used during wars – an interesting documentary on this can be seen on YouTube :

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZfjbf5SXM>

The sport progressed from a simple hobby to a professional sport today. Millions of rand are spent yearly on pigeons and pigeon related products.

For us it's still just a hobby. And a very satisfying hobby! It doesn't matter why you're interested in racing pigeons - it stays a very rewarding sport and pastime.

The basic concept remains: Pigeons are bred for racing purposes and trained (homed) to return to their lofts. There are then competitions held in which the fanciers compete against each other. The pigeon returning home in the shortest time (highest velocity) wins the race. Accurate distances to each loft are measured so that a velocity can be calculated. So if you're closer than a competitor, you must give him "overflight". That means that he can clock his bird after yours and still beat you because his bird had to fly further than yours. The velocity at which the bird flies is also taken into account when the overflight is calculated. The SA racing season is during the winter and normally runs from June to October. During this time there are races each weekend. The parent organisation decides on the race points to be flown and it often changes from year to year. Races normally start from short distances and gradually increase to longer distances. Anything from 150km to 1000km can be flown during the same season.

Pigeons are basketed on Friday evenings for the short races whilst longer races are basketed on the Thursday. Release of the birds happens on the Saturday. The wind and weather can adversely affect the pigeons whilst on their way home. If the wind blows from behind them, they can record velocities of 120km/h +. On tough days with a headwind the velocity can drop to 60km/h and less.

I can assure you that there is a massive adrenalin rush when the first birds arrive back home and you need to get them into the loft ASAP! Every second counts!

2. Membership

Pigeon racing in South Africa is governed by an organisation called SANPO. Check out their website at <http://www.sanpo.co.za>. All members competing in pigeon racing should be a member of SANPO. The hierarchy normally follows this path: member > club > union/federation > SANPO. Start by finding a club near you. You will have to apply for membership and they will be able to explain all the rules and regulations that they enforce.

3. Identity rings

Identity rings are used to identify your pigeons. In order to compete professionally your pigeons must be rung with legal rings obtained from your club or organisation. Enquire from your local club – they should be able to supply you with rings as soon as you are a member.

4. Lofts



Your pigeon loft will be one of the most important accessories that you will need before starting with racing pigeons. There are as many opinions on the “correct” loft as there are fanciers. You will have to make up your own mind on what type and design of loft you want to build. Some core concepts to keep in mind when building any pigeon loft:

Good ventilation – Pigeons have a very sensitive respiratory system and lofts without proper ventilation will contribute to all kinds of respiratory diseases. Care should be taken to ensure that there are no draughts blowing on the pigeons.

Dry lofts – lofts that allow rain to enter it will be lofts that struggle with keeping the pigeons healthy.

Enough space – Please do not fall into the trap of overcrowding your loft. Rather have too much space available than allowing overcrowding. The health of your pigeons will be affected negatively by overcrowding the loft.

Easy cleaning – Keep this factor in mind when building your loft. Regular cleaning and the ease of doing it is very important. Loft hygiene should be maintained if you want to be successful in pigeon racing.

Loft position – Pigeons need sunlight. It's a very important source of Vitamin D and you should build your lofts to allow sunlight to enter it freely. Also position your loft in such a manner that it gets maximum exposure to the sun during winter. Fanciers in SA normally position the loft to face towards a North-Easterly direction. Some are even more East facing than North.

Trapping space – Your pigeons should be able to trap as quickly as possible. Trees, fences and wires in front or close to your lofts might affect trapping negatively. Seconds count if you want to win the race so the more open the area around your loft the easier your pigeons will trap.

Municipal regulations – Please keep this in mind before just building your loft. There might be very specific rules in your area that you need to adhere to.

5. Pigeons



- **Where do I get the “right” pigeons?**

The building blocks of successful pigeon racing are made up of a few factors. Excellent quality pigeons are the most important factor for me. There is no point and pleasure in trying your utmost best and doing all you can but your pigeons simply cannot keep up. You must get some excellent genetics. But how?? Even if you can afford to spend the cash, how do you still know that you are getting the “right” pigeons?

Get yourself a mentor. Someone that you can trust and from who you can learn. He must obviously be someone that also had success with racing pigeons. This might be simple on paper but it's not always easy to gain the trust of senior pigeon fanciers. Keep on trying until you succeed! There are a lot of people out there that are willing to help beginners.

You should try to get pigeons from fanciers that fly under the same conditions as you are going to. That way you know that the pigeons will not struggle to adapt and will be able to be competitive from the start. So if you are going to toss every day there is no point getting pigeons from someone that only tosses his birds once a week!

If I had to start over now, I'd get some youngsters from reputable fanciers. Test these and keep the best ones. Breed a few babies out of them and also acquire some of the same from your source. Build your own family. Excellent quality stock pigeons are also available for sale in the market today. Check out the internet for pigeon auction sites. Just be very careful before buying left, right and centre! Ensure that the quality of pigeon you are buying is what you are paying for. Ask some advice from your mentor if unsure. I also prefer to keep the minimum number of strains. That way you can build around the good genes and inbreed, line breed and cross breed them.

- **Old birds**

Old birds are the pigeons that have raced a season or more. They are two year old and older pigeons and compete against each other in the old bird competitions. Because of their age advantage they have more experience and are not allowed to compete against the young birds.

- **Young birds**

Young birds or year old birds are the pigeons bred the year before racing them. They are normally around 1 year old and compete against their peers in the youngbird competitions. Young birds may also be basketed for the old bird competitions because they are seen to be at a disadvantage against the older pigeons.

6. Hygiene

Good hygiene in and around the lofts should be maintained. Some people clean their lofts once a day. We clean the lofts at least once a week. Also keep water bowls, food containers and other accessories like baskets as clean as possible. Disinfect the items as often as possible to ensure that nasty germs do not put your success potential at risk.

7. Feeding

Feeding of pigeons is a very controversial topic and much has been written about it before. Do some research on the topic. Your feeding must be right in order to achieve success. I cannot give you advice here because feeding depends a lot on your individual circumstances like loft temperature, training regime and the genetics of your pigeons. One thing I do know is that just the right amount of food will ensure that you clock winning times on Saturdays. Please give this topic the attention it deserves.

8. Seasons

- **Off-season**

This is the season when there are no competitions running. In South Africa it normally starts in October and runs until June.

- **Moult**

Moult is when the pigeons shed their old feathers and grow new ones. Moult peaks in February/March. Pigeons are at their ugliest this time of year. They need the right food and enough rest during this period. Watch out for ekto parasites like pigeon flies and lice during this period. They can cause permanent damage to the newly grown feathers.

- **Breeding season**

Some fanciers start breeding early in the year just after the moult is done. This normally happens from April until December. Depending on your circumstances and whether you have enough space to wean your babies in, you can start breeding when it suits you. We do not have a separate youngbird loft and only start breeding at the end of the racing season i.e. October.

- **Racing season**

Racing normally starts in June and ends in October. This depends on your organisation and is normally communicated to members a few months in advance.

9. Clock

This is the device that you will need to time your pigeons with. It is a requirement that all competing members have a device that will accurately capture the time at which the pigeon arrived. This device is called a clock. There are basically two types of technologies available.

- **Hand clock (Old technology)**



These systems were used for many years. It was however replaced by the ETS systems mentioned below. This clock worked on the concept of attaching a rubber ring with a unique number onto your pigeon's leg during basketing. The number would then be recorded onto an entry sheet which is kept in the club. Your pigeon be liberated and return with the rubber ring attached to its leg. The fancier remove the rubber ring from the pigeon's leg and "clock" it by pushing it into a hole in the clock and turning a handle that would "swallow" the rubber ring. The exact time would be stamped onto a sheet of paper inside the clock. Hand clocks have a limit on the number of pigeons that can be timed. There are a preset number of holes into which the rubber rings can be deposited. The number of holes differs between brand and can be anything from 6 up to 32. Be careful before buying a hand clock – this technology is being phased out and clubs might not support it anymore. Hand clocks are freely available second hand and are inexpensive.

- **Electronic timing systems (ETS)**



This is the latest technology used to time racing pigeons. No rubber rings are used but rather a plastic ring that is attached to your pigeons leg for the whole season. The ring contains a chip that is allocated to your specific pigeon on your ETS clock. You also install pads to your loft that will register the chip inside the ring. On basketing night you simply take your pigeons to the club and scan them for the race. Your ETS clock must then be connected to the pads at your lofts in order to clock the pigeons. As soon as the pigeon passes over the pad it will register the time and bird detail electronically on the clock. There is no limit on the number of pigeons that can be clocked – all basketed pigeons will be scanned on arrival. These systems have many advantages over hand clocks. There are disadvantages as well like cost and dependency on reliable electricity supply. Lots of different brands with their unique features are available. Remember to confirm with your club before buying a brand to ensure that it is supported by them. Also be careful for old discontinued systems and rings that are available in the market.

10. Training

Racing pigeons don't just know from the start how things work. Even though they have a very strong orientation ability, they still need some training. The sooner you start with teaching them the basics the better. We prefer not to tape the wings of babies after weaning them. The babies are weaned at about 28 – 30 days age and moved to the racing loft. They are kept closed for a day or two and then allowed outside the loft. At this age they are still too weak to fly away and losses are minimal. They adapt very quickly and will gain confidence at an astonishing rate. Flying will start as soon as they are confident enough.

Road training the birds is done at age of about 100 days. They should be flying well around the loft and “range”. “Range” is when they disappear for a period of time (anything from 30 minutes onwards) only to come back to the loft at high speed. Start close by (3-5km) and then gradually increase the distance until about 60km. Never increase the distance if the birds struggled from a release point. Allow them to gain confidence first. This basic training will ensure that they are developed and ready for the racing season. Due to the fact that we start breeding late we normally do this training in December/January.

Race training is done in the same manner. We start 6 weeks before the first race and increase the liberation distance to about 200km.

11. Vaccination

Legislation requires pigeon fanciers to vaccinate their birds against pigeon pox and the Paramyxovirus. You can get a range of vaccinations from your local pigeon product supplier. Do these vaccinations before the race season and save you a lot of trouble. Pigeons that get pox in the race season simply ruin a promising season. Paramyxovirus is also a nasty disease and normally ends with a lot of birds being culled because they have permanent nerve damage. Rather be safe than sorry.

12. Cost

Cost of keeping pigeons has increased in recent years. Take the following into account when deciding whether it's for you or not:

- Fixed cost like lofts, clock, baskets etc.
- Acquiring quality pigeons
- Food and medication
- Petrol costs when training the pigeons
- Membership and transport costs
- Schemes and competitions

13. General

Some additional accessories that you will/might need:

Grit containers – pigeons need grit for minerals and other nutrients not found in the food. We keep grit available in the loft for 365 days a year. Refresh the grit often.

Food containers – These are the troughs that you feed your pigeons in. We do not use food troughs but rather feed them by throwing the food on the ground. Does not sound very hygienic but it works for us.

Water bowls – Use glass bowls if possible and try to avoid self-feeding water containers. Glass is much more hygienic and easy to clean. Also try to attach the water bowls to the outside of the loft and not on the floor of the loft – there is always wetness under the bowls if on the floor and that causes a breeding area for bacteria.