

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

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I need to preface everything that follows with the fact that I have been away from the sport of racing pigeons for 30 years so I realize that the views stated in this article may be flawed somewhat by the ravages of time (sort of like my memory, eyesight and a few other things we won't mention here!). I have only been back in the sport for two years but in that short time I have noticed some things about the sport that trouble me. I know that there are certainly many exceptions, but it seems that we are, at least to some degree, guilty of partaking in activities that seem counterproductive to our long term goals.

I think we all realize that our sport is on the decline and yet our actions seem to feed this trend. On the one hand we bemoan the sad state of our sport with its declining numbers and lack of growth, yet on the other hand, we often do little to encourage the opposite. We are quick to note the lack of interest of young people today in anything other than X-Box and Nintendo, yet do little to actively change these attitudes. As a 20+ year educator, I truly believe that today's youth varies little, at its core, from the youth of our childhood. They just have a much greater and immediate access to things which stimulate them. This doesn't make them inherently different than we were as kids. It just means that our job as educators presents more challenges than it used to.

Another area that puzzles me is the fact that our sport seems to attract people who are either by nature cynical or have become that way through their activity in the sport. It seems to me that many of us are initially skeptical of anything new or that we see as a challenge to long held beliefs. I guess this grows out of the competitiveness of the activity but it is often seen as a turn-off to people interested in joining our ranks. We present potential new flyers with club meetings that are often weighed down with bickering and back biting. Why would someone choose to become involved in an activity which seems to bring out the worst in people? This is especially true for young people. A parent is certainly not going to support their child in an activity which seems to be so heavily burdened by such negativity.

Now, before you throw down this magazine in disgust and start cursing me as a stirrer up of ill will, hear me out. This article is not one of negative disgust at the current state of affairs within our ranks but one of positive encouragement. Allow me to share with you a story that unfolded over the last few months and got me thinking about what can be achieved if we just start thinking beyond the bounds of what is comfortable.

I am a member of a new club in the Atlanta, Georgia area. Like every club we are scraping for every penny we can get to support our fledgling activities. We decided to have an auction to help raise these much needed funds. All of the members were encouraged to contact breeders and flyers they knew that might be willing to donate birds in support of our efforts.

One of our members, (O.K., I admit it, it was me--you probably would have figured it out eventually anyway!) contacted a good friend to see if they would be interested in helping out. His name is Warren Smith of Smith Family Lofts in York, Pennsylvania. Warren has become somewhat of a household name of late with his success in the Flamingo International Challenge in Florida over the last couple of years. He was equal first in last year's 300 and first outright in this year's 350. My initial contact with him was disappointing in that he expressed that his young bird output this year was not as high as he had hoped and he really didn't have any

extra birds he could spare. I could tell in his voice that he was genuinely upset that he could not help us out but I thanked him anyway and I thought that was that.

A couple of days later he e-mailed me with a hair brained proposition that he said might work out or might be an absolute flop, but he was willing to give it a try if we were. This is what he proposed. He was planning on sending a team of birds to the AU Convention Race this year and had already committed to this. He proposed that instead of shipping the birds directly to the convention race, he send them to us. We could then put them in our auction with the understanding that immediately following the auction they would go on to the convention race. The birds would then fly as his team just like any other birds would, with one big exception. Warren agreed to split any winnings these birds might earn 50/50 with the winning bidder and at the end of the race they would be shipped back the winning bidder in Georgia.

Now, stop for a second and realize what he has done. He is paying all of the entry fees for these birds; he is paying all the shipping involved and on top of that splitting any winnings! Sounds like a pretty good deal, doesn't it?! Well, there is a catch. The AU convention race rules state that the top 25 birds must go to auction at the convention. Well, to help with this little snag, Warren agreed to commit up to 110% of the winnings that bird or birds won to buy them back to insure they get back to the winning bidder here in Georgia. Now, that is his own money, and he agreed to this in writing in the form of a contract that he signed.

Now, how did all this work out? Well, the convention race isn't until the fall but I can tell you how it went in our auction. Warren sent his three bird team as promised and they were saved for the end of the auction. These three birds each brought more than twice what any other bird in the auction went for. They were easily the highest priced birds in the auction. So, from a club point of view, this hair brained idea was a huge success. Will the birds do well in the convention race? Only time will tell. My point here is that it took someone thinking outside the box to make this happen.

I wish that we all could be as resourceful and creative as Warren proved to be in this instance. Perhaps if we all strived to find innovative ways of making things work, those club meetings full of argument and negativity could be turned into meetings of camaraderie and support. Those people being turned off to our sport due to negativity and cynicism could be welcomed with encouragement and enthusiasm. Those awkward conversations trying to justify our sport to a skeptical public could be turned into genuine, proactive information being shared to an inquisitive, yet ignorant neighbor. The amount of impact each one of us can have on the future well being of pigeon racing is limitless. We just have to be willing to gently, patiently tear down the barriers that have held us back for all these years. The time of keeping to ourselves and coveting our little secret, that is pigeon racing, is at an end. It is time to be proactive. It is time share the wonderful world pigeons with a public that has been left to draw its own conclusions based on its own limited and flawed perceptions. In short, it is time to start thinking outside the box.

If we don't, who will?

