Pigeon racing, how does it work?

Below is a very basic overview of how pigeon racing works, it may vary from place to place, but pretty much from the writers experience the basics are very similar, so if you are interested, have read and at worst, you may have learnt something you did not know before!

When a racing pigeon is about 6 days old and its leg & feet are small the owner (flyer) slides a life ring onto the bird’s leg. This ring has the year, a unique number on it and the federation/association/union that owner intends to compete in.

The young racing pigeon normally in Victoria is bred between October and February and is trained to fly around its loft with the other members of the young race team. Because flying and homing comes naturally to the racing pigeon, the owner has just to do some basic things to make the pigeon come home: Good food, fresh clean water and a safe & secure home away from the wind and predators are the basic ingredients.

After a few months of flying around the loft and getting to know the area in which they live, it is time to start training them to race. The owner/flyer at this stage begins to do training tosses starting at a short distance, building up in some cases to 100 Km. This does a few things, teaches the birds the way home, gets the bird to break from the pack, gives them confidence and gets them fit to race.

(Remembering that the racing pigeon has been bred from the fastest and smartest pigeons, generation after generation, for hundreds of years, which makes them truly the thoroughbreds of the sky)

During this time the owner/flyer (if they have an electronic system) would purchase electronic RIFD rings that clip onto the pigeon’s leg or fits into the life ring. The owner registers the pigeons Life ring number, colour and sex and matches it to the electronic ring by scanning the chip which places the electronic chip number with the life ring number in the pigeon club computer. If the flyer doesn’t have an electronic clock and has an ‘old style’ manual clock they need to fill in the ‘Race entry’ sheet manually with all the bird’s details.

Depending on how long the race is, will determine when the birds need to be taken to the pigeon club for entry into the race (Basketing), this can be Friday night for the shorter races and Thursday (Wednesday nights for the longer and cross the Bass straight races) So the flyer selects out of his/her pigeons which ones to send to the race, by checking the birds feathers, eyes and overall health to ensure they cannot only travel the distance, but fly hard and fast towards home.

Once at the club with their birds for the race, the flyer gives the ‘Clock chairman’ his/her clock and if a manual clock is being used the ‘Race entry’ sheet.

The electronic clock is then plugged into the club race system, each bird to be entered into the race has its RIFD chip scanned into the clock as an entrant for that race. The bird is then placed into the federations/associations/unions transporter basket to be placed onto the transporting vehicle to be taken to the race point. Early races start around 150-200Km and distances can go up to 1000Km. The race entry sheet is then printed out with the master copy being sent to the federation and a copy to the flyer.
If the flyer is using the manual system then a rubber ring is placed around the birds leg using a device called a ‘Ringer’, this rubber ring is individually numbered, this number is noted down next to the birds life ring number on the ‘Race entry’ sheet provided by the flyer. The race entry sheet is in triplicate with the master copy being sent to the federation, one retained by the club and a copy to the flyer. The bird is then placed into the Federation transporter basket to be placed on the transporting vehicle to be taken to the race point. The manual clock also needs to be set and sealed by the ‘Clock chairman’.

In order to race against people from all different locations and distances from each race point, each flyer’s exact pigeon loft location needs to be entered into the race system. By knowing the exact distance and the time that the bird was released and ‘Clocked’ arrives home, a velocity can be calculated. The bird with the fastest velocity wins the race.

So the birds are transported to the race point (Race points are generally decided on a yearly basis) Some federations/associations/unions vary the line of flight each year, with the GMPF as an example; flying West, North West, North and North-East lines on a rotating basis.

The birds are released with the exact time & location noted. A text is sent out or the release time generally put up on the website to advise flyers that the birds have been released.

Distance and prevailing weather conditions will determine the time it takes for the birds to return, races can be 1 hour to 14 hours in duration and sometimes into the next day (Pigeons generally don’t fly at night).

When the birds return home the flyer is normally there calling them in, some by shaking the feed tin and calling out to them, there are varying methods used. (This is a nervous time for both the bird and the flyer) The bird is on edge because it has been sprinting home and the flyer is trying to get the bird to go into the loft and for electronic timing pass over the RIFD scanner to input the arrival time or for manual clock users, catching the bird to remove the rubber ring to put into the clock. The manual clock needs to be manually turned by a special key and the clock stamps the time onto the internal clock paper, which is sealed to prevent tampering with by the flyer.

Different federations/associations/unions have different requirements as to what time the flyer needs to present their clocks at the club after the race, some by a specific time, others by time after the flyer has clocked say 2 hours from the time the bird was clocked.

Once at the club, the flyer hands his/her clock to the ‘Clock chairman’ and electronic clocks are plugged into the electronic ‘Club’ computer system with the time for each bird that has arrived printed out. The club system also automatically calculates if the clock is running fast or slow.

For the manual clocks the process is a bit longer, with the clock time needed to be manually verified by ‘pulling over’ the clock. This is to verify if the clock is running slow or fast, so a time is set and the clock key turned to stamp the clock paper with the exact known time. Once this is done the seal on the clock is checked and then broken to get into the clock paper that has the arrival time of the bird and the newly created ‘pullover’ time, so firstly the time is checked of the ‘pullover’ and slow or fast variance calculated, then the time is checked for the race bird.
The rubber ring from the pigeon’s leg that has been removed and placed in the clock is now removed and matched against the list retained in the safe, once verified the clock paper with the time is passed to the club secretary for inputting into the race system which calculates the velocity that the pigeon has flown. The fastest velocity is the winner!

These days the race information is uploaded into the race system and almost instantaneously the results from all the clubs are known and a full list of all the flyers and their position in the race is known.

Pigeon racing to most people seems a strange and mostly misunderstood pastime, however when compared to other similar sports or hobbies it is the stand out.

If you are into bloodlines and breeding as is the case in thoroughbred horse racing, pigeon racing has it!

If you are into competing and training like greyhounds, horse etc, pigeon racing has it!

You like to keep birds, but would like a little more than just watching them sit in a cage, pigeon racing has it!

You like to have a social aspect to your life, pigeon racing has it!

You would like a sport that gets you and your family involved, pigeon racing has it!

All this from the safety and comfort of your own backyard!

If you are interested in finding out more about pigeon racing and how to get started you can go to www.gmpf.com.au and check out the clubs closest to you in the TAB.