

# A Beginner's Guide To Success In Giant Homers

by GERALD E. HOBBS, Madison, Iowa

How can I raise that bird that will be first in his class or wonder of wonders, the champion of the show? That is the question asked by many beginners and pondered by some of us who have been at it a few years. Well, the answers are a little knowledge, money, labor and luck. Take away any of the first three and you probably won't have much of the last, so let's dwell on them.

The first thing to learn is the American Giant Homer Standard. Not just the words and point allotments, but the image, feel and even skeleton of it. Know in your mind's eye what that bird of balance and beauty look like. I went through a lot of apparently wasted effort a couple of years ago in drawing the three views of the standard. They were not adopted, but the time wasn't wasted either. I learned more trying to put that down on paper than I will from reading and looking at the Standard a hundred times. There are other ways of learning the Standard too, such as listening to the judge and handling the birds as someone explains the feel of the body. Try to judge a small show, often a painful but quick way to learn. Try making a wood carving or clay model of the Standard sketch. Visit the lofts of well known breeders in your area and ask a lot of questions. Their knowledge isn't necessarily yours, but if you put it to work and it gives you results, it is yours. See what they mean by long keel and deep body and get that hard, satin, well muscled feel in your hand and imprinted indelibly upon your mind. See those big handsome heads from all angles and feel the bone in the head and jaw. Make a gauge out of your hand for measuring girth, depths and lengths.

Another area of knowledge that will give you a tremendous advantage is genetics. The book by Wendell Levi, "The Pigeon" has a good chapter that is passed over by a lot of breeders as being hogwash or a bunch of complicated theories. A knowledge of genetics will help you breed the colors you want, determine the sex of squabs, eliminate undesirable characteristics, know the odds of raising specific colors from a pair of birds and open up a whole new field of interest in raising pigeons.

We have many knowledgeable people on genetics in Giant Homers able and willing to share the facts of inheritance with others. It is essential to know that several of the serious faults in Giants are purely recessive

such as pearl eyes, feathered feet, and crests and when two such parents show the same recessive characteristics you can expect all of their young to show it. When one parent shows it and the other carries it hidden, one half of the young will show it and the other half will continue to carry it hidden. When both parents carrying the recessive trait hidden produce young, one quarter will show it, one half will carry it hidden, and one quarter will be genetically free of the trait. So we can see why it is detrimental to use birds showing these recessive faults. Of course if you want to perpetuate a recessive trait that is desirable, these same percentages work to your advantage.

Money is not as important as the other two factors, but it is vital as to where, when and how to invest it. A beginner should not buy a whole loft of high priced birds and immediately expect to go out and win it all. First get some moderate priced birds that are of good quality and are prolific. Learn their habits, how to recognize and treat specific diseases, how to mate to correct certain faults and which faults are the hardest to correct. It is a test period also to see that your loft is dry and free of rats and mice and what type nests and pen arrangement works best for you. Many beginners throw good money and birds away by loss to disease, varmints and ignorance of the basics.

After that learning period, you are ready to start your show line. Prices alone don't guarantee quality, but don't expect to get the best ones for what you paid for your first. Con-

sider the breeder's amount of time and energy put into culling, showing, traveling, studying and upgrading the birds for which you are only paying cash. And don't buy your birds from old Joe Blow just because he lives close and sounds like he knows what he is talking about. Avoid also Dealer Dan who has a big spread of advertising but whose name is never seen in the show reports. Of course, you should now join your American Giant Homer Association, if you haven't already, and carefully check the show reports appearing in their bulletins.

Some things to watch in buying your stock birds that are difficult to overcome are tall, rangy birds. These will show a long thin neck, long thin head and long tarsal bone. Shortness is the keynote here. Pick that bone with short height to the hock and plenty of thickness. The hind toes on some short birds are often unusually short, a subtle thing to be sure but a good indicator. Feel the bone behind the wattle, and if it dips between the eye and wattle in width or height, it isn't the head it appears to be and may not reproduce good heads.

Get the bird with a good frame, i.e., a long, deep keel, funnel shaped rump, no hinge in the tail and good width in the breast. Avoid the thin, sharp-keeled birds. A lot is written on condition, but if you notice, some full bodies are almost always found in the same loft with the bony ones. Pigeons and people are a lot alike in that some have a natural tendency to be thin, some athletic and some obese. It runs in the family. Diet and work make some difference but not as much as it could if they have the desired genetic make-up. Be careful of the bird whose throat goes back as far as the center of the eye.



PEORIA GRAND NATIONAL 1988

Some of the Giant Homer fanciers who won at the 1988 NPA Grand National Show, Peoria, Ill., receiving congratulations from fellow fanciers: (l.-r.) Jerry Thies, St. Louis; Dick Bunkowski, Horkan, Wisc.; Ted Grulke (judge), Oconomowoc, Wisc.; Joe Haas, Milwaukee, Wisc.; Roy Lindert, Oconomowoc, Wisc.; and Bill Gronow, Crystal Lake, Ill.

Assuming they have no common faults mate your two best old birds together. Research shows that two old birds will average about nine young a season. An old bird mated to a young bird of either sex will average seven young. Whereas, two young birds mated produce only an average of three young. Consider these as simply production prediction ratios and adjust to the length of the season and prolificness of your strain.

Invest in the best feed, grit and medicine available, but don't over medicate. Usually individual isolation and treatment will do better and often less harm than flock treatment if you are observant to catch ailments in time. Keep your loft clean but wear a mask when cleaning it. The dust may be bad for your lungs and can cause an allergy. Don't go overboard in cleaning out the nests. Let the droppings accumulate into a bowl shape, and, when they get too full, pick out just the center and put in fresh straw. This will prevent a lot of crooked keels.

Get a good record book to list the pairs, ancestors, when eggs were laid, squabs hatched and general description of the old birds and young. As times goes on you will learn the value of records and will want to make them more detailed but will wish you had done so from the start. Don't try to keep the records in your head or they will get lost especially in the years to come. Records can be reviewed to check the production of a pair, allowing for age as mentioned previously, and the quality of the young to see if they measure up. Don't leave your pairs mated together too long. Three or four clutches are enough.

But, you say, you don't want to break them up because they really "nick". How many more than six or seven from the same pair can you use in your next year's matings? Besides, after the first part of the year, the late hatched young would be too young to show, and this period gives you an opportunity to test each individual parent as to its own strengths and weaknesses. Who knows, one of them may produce even stronger young with a different mate, indicating the cornerstone of your breeding program. These types of matings will give you closely related young to work together, if youngsters out of the three matings appear right for one another.

Re-mating seems to renew the ardor and drive of pairs to make them more prolific, and you also learn much more about the hidden factors of the individual birds by frequent re-matings. I had one out-

standing cock mated on five different hens last year and produced handsome young with each hen. Imagine the potential of a bird used in this switching, and this old Casanova proved he truly is a champion.

Work also at showing your birds as to selecting and preparing them for the show. Pick those feathers off their toes and shanks, bathe them (add a little Lux soap flakes), train them for the show pen, build adequate shipping crates and get the birds in condition.

Don't be stingy. Spread your hobby and your Giant Homers around a little. Get anyone you can, young or old, interested. Invite them to your loft, visit theirs, help them with their matings, even provide the birds if necessary. The hours of companionship and the competition are worth the effort. Yes, competition, because competition is your great asset. It will keep you on your toes, cause you to extend yourself and force you to improve your stock. You will find the effort worthwhile. □