

THE AUSTRALIAN PIGEON PUNT FINAL REPORT

The 2011 Australian Pigeon Punt was to say the least a rather testing time for one and all. Against the background of a Paramyxovirus outbreak here in Victoria the Race has been run and won by the partnership of R. & M. Reid from Maroubra , New South Wales.

As most people reading this would know the training of the Punt birds was not without mishap. Even the original breaking in and settling of the birds back in January and February was made difficult as a Pigeon Pox outbreak occurred across various states and consequently appeared in the Punt Loft.

At the time of the first toss there were 613 birds in the loft and after 10 tosses that number was down to 605. The eleventh toss



is a re-occurring nightmare for me – from 50 klms. I managed to lose 100 birds for no obvious reason. This was followed by two more poor tosses from 130 klms. and 180 klms. By this stage the loft had 350 birds left in it. A few more were lost in the last few weeks which left 340 birds on Basketing night. Those three bad tosses did however force a lot of the birds to have 4 – 10 hours or more on the wing and consequently put muscle on them.

Basketing night was a rather weird experience and I need to tell all of the story for you readers to understand the term “weird experience”. As the Paramyxovirus outbreak had forced the cancellation of all Federation racing in Victoria, it was never a sure thing that the Australian Pigeon Punt Race would be able to go ahead as planned. By Sunday night the 11th September all sorts of rumours were being whispered. The truth is that a single racing loft had been identified as having a bird with Paramyxovirus in it. This loft was if nothing else a victim of misfortune as the single bird , which has since died , was infected while being treated for an injury while in a veterinarian’s premises and somehow contracted the disease from two Fancy birds which were being diagnosed for some unknown illness at the time. Having heard that a racing bird was diagnosed with Paramyxovirus I assumed that all racing of all sorts would be banned. Bear in mind that this is on Sunday the 11th September, five days before Basketing.

Having had a sleepless night, I decided to approach the Department of Primary Industries directly myself to find out where I stood. I had to make a decision on Monday morning as to whether or not to cancel the Marquee, the caterers, the portable loos and even to warn people coming from interstate. After an anxious four hours I received from the Department of Primary Industries the following advice: We recommend you lock up your birds, but there is no legal impediment to stop your Race.

Again I need to remind all you readers that the Punt birds are obviously all housed in the one loft and are always trained independently and are transported in their own unit so no mixing of birds. THE RACE WAS ON.

So for the rest of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday everything was good and I must have had 30-40 telephone calls checking that the Race was still on. On Thursday night at 6 p.m.

I received a telephone call from the Department of Primary Industries telling me that they would like to send out two vets to swab and check the birds. I did not object as I was 100% confident that the birds were spot on.

On Friday morning, the day of Basketing, two vets arrived and began dressing themselves as if as though they were going to enter a nuclear disaster zone: full protective overalls, boots, latex gloves, respirators and goggles.

When they were fully attired we proceeded to the Punt loft with me dressed as per normal – jeans, check shirt and cap. I hoped no fanciers were driving by my home at the time to see this occurring.

Upon entering the Loft they asked me to catch four or five birds in various pens at random and they took cloacal swabs (cotton bud up the rear end). Before they started the testing I boldly informed the vets that I wanted a duplicate of every swab they took. They agreed and I have these in storage in a freezer. When they finished and had left I began to worry – why would they come out so late (Basketing day)? I knew that the test for Paramyxovirus takes two days to get a result.

I had been talking to Dr. R. Marshall of Sydney earlier in the week, and so I rang him and asked if he could possibly come to Basketing and if he could suggest anything which would be wise in regards to Basketing.

Without hesitation Dr. Marshall said that he would fly to Melbourne to attend the Basketing and to run his eye over the birds. He suggested that I have full cotton overalls for the designated handlers to wear and that any fancier who wished to handle his birds prior to going into the unit should wash their hands with an antiseptic wash.

This was to protect the birds from possible contamination from people's hands etc. This is where the term "weird experience" comes from. We had six people wearing protective clothing handling the birds and every few minutes you could see different fanciers washing their hands with the antiseptic wash.

Basketing went off without a hitch: no birds were rejected and 50 of the 51 spares were activated meaning that the Prize Pool had grown to \$159,200.

The convoyers left early Saturday morning and I went home to bed. Saturday morning I woke and proceeded with my normal chores. At 11 a.m. my mobile rang: The Department of Primary Industries again wanting to know what Dr. Marshall thought and how had the birds travelled etc.

I told the caller everything was good. At this point in the conversation they requested the convoyer's telephone number. Now I was really starting to worry. I told them to go jump and if they wished to talk to anyone in relation to the Australian Pigeon Punt they would only be able to talk to me – end of telephone conversation.

At 2 p.m. Saturday afternoon the mobile rings again: another caller from the Department of Primary Industries. If I was worried before you can imagine how I felt now. A brief conversation ensued saying that one of the 20 swabs had a positive reading for Paramyxovirus.

My reaction was one word "Bullshit". I was trying to think at a thousand miles a minute, not easy when you are sweating profusely. I thought that they would say NO RACE, you can not liberate, but it did not happen.

After a few moments of clear thinking I asked the caller what strain of Paramyxo did the bird test positive to. He could not tell me. I then asked if you test one thousand pigeons what percentage would test positive to Paramyxo? Again he could not say (there is more than one strain). He did tell me that no healthy flocks of pigeons had ever been tested for Paramyxo.

I spoke with the convoyers regarding how the birds had travelled, eaten etc. and drank and all was as should be. I went to bed Saturday night worrying that the next morning the pigeon unit would have tape wrapped around it saying "Quarantined". It never happened. In fact I never heard from the Department of Primary Industries again until 20 minutes before writing this report, Thursday September 22nd. The caller from the Department rang to say that they re-tested the positive swab and this time it came out negative. I never shared this saga with anyone but Dr. Marshall up until now and I have written it exactly as it occurred : The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. No need for any rumours.

Back to the liberation: that did not go as planned either. At 7 a.m. the unit was in position ready to release. Everything was perfect: blue sky, a light S/SW wind. I had decided to release the birds at 8 a.m. At 7.30 a.m. everything was still good, at 7.45 a.m. a thick fog rolled in with no warning, "Shit Happens". Telephone calls were made to see if the fog was widely spread, YES.

No choice but to wait and see if it cleared. I was ringing the convoyer every 15 minutes and had told him to liberate as soon as he could. 8 a.m. fog, 8.15 fog, 8.30 fog, 8.45 fog. At 8.50 a.m. the fog disappeared as quickly as it arrived.

I rang at 9 a.m. again sweating profusely as every minute of daylight was slowly slipping away. Before I could ask about the fog the convoyer said that the birds were up at 8.55 a.m..

My first words to the convoyer were should I be happy or unhappy in regards to how they left. His answer was HAPPY: out of sight in two minutes going the right way. That was the first time in 2 ½ days that I relaxed. I went and had a shower and a change of clothes.

During the rest of the morning I spoke to the convoyer on his way back for weather reports and it was consistent all the way: a light south to southwest wind (head shoulder). Earlier in the morning a fancier who was travelling from Mildura to the Punt loft had told me that he went through thick fog at Ouyen

which is approximately 100 klms. south of Yelta, our Race Point, so it was just as well we did not move at 7.45 a.m.

Back at the loft the caterers had arrived and started cooking and by 11 a.m. fanciers and guests had started to arrive. By 2 p.m. there were approximately 200 people here and my neighbour's yard resembled a shopping centre carpark. It was a really beautiful day: sunny enough to sit outside without getting burnt or cold. As per usual everyone is talking about what time the first arrivals would appear and I heard 7 ½ to 9 hours being mentioned.

My own estimate was 4.30 p.m. By 3 p.m. most people were starting to look skywards and at one stage a dozen pigeons appeared and did half a circle around the loft up high and headed off south, not Punt birds fortunately as they would have been too early. At 3.45 p.m. my mobile rang and a fancier who was out walking his dog 50 klms. north west of the Punt loft in other words, almost on the birds' line of flight, saw 3 birds go over.

This bloke knows pigeons and he said to me that they are race birds...no ifs or buts! At the same time a local flyer who lives 15 klms. north of me told me that he tossed 170 birds from 185 klms. that morning and after 3 ½ hours he had 32 drop together and no more birds in the next hour.

His birds were only doing 880 m.p.m. and if the 3 birds that were seen at 3.45 p.m. were Punt birds they would have been doing 1150 m.p.m. I took both lots of information in and just crossed my fingers and waited. 4.30 p.m. came and went and I was still confident that they would come. The 3 disastrous tosses put hours on the wing: the day was good, they left well and they should come. At 4.39 p.m.

I was still looking dead on line and I saw a small group of birds in the distance, sparrows or starlings possibly. Within another 2-3 seconds I knew: Pigeons, you little rippers! Six came together, on line going hard. Four dropped and two did an extra lap.

A fancier had once warned me about not pushing in birds ahead of others and that advice kicked in as soon as I saw the six. I stood back and allowed the birds to trap on their own and when looking at the Print-Out you can see that it took 62 seconds for all six to trap – not too bad considering 200-220 people were standing 100 metres away. Obviously all six birds are equal but some trapped better than others and the Rule at the A.P.P. is: first over the electronic pad wins. Flying time for first was 7 hours 44 minutes 39 seconds, 1129 m.p.m., a great result. Within 26 minutes 22 birds had been clocked and the \$159,200 was gone. It was dark by 6.30 p.m. and there were 49 birds home in the loft.....a result I personally am happy with.

The next morning birds were dropping in regularly and by 12.00 noon there were 135 birds home and at the time of writing this report there are over 150 birds home. As far as One Loft Racing goes it is a pretty good result.

The prizes were very well spread with birds from Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide, La Trobe Valley, and Lismore all taking positions. Nobody dominated and no one took two positions.

For me personally the Race result was as good as it gets. 17 of the prizes were won by people who had supported the Race from its inception, and the result also shows that there are good birds spread all around Australia, although I must also concede that Maroubra flyers might just have the edge on the rest of us as they have won Australia's biggest prize money race twice in four years.

You would think that they would make me an honorary life member of their club in gratitude (my humour)!

My usual thanks go out to the caterers – lovely people, efficient and pleasant,

My neighbours, Graham and Dawn for the use of their land

Steve Letch for his work on the website

Ian McKay for his photography

John Mallia for his tossing of the birds

Ian & Debbie Osman, the convoyers – always reliable

My wife, Irene for all her work on the day of the Race and receiving and sending emails etc

Frederick Basch, Proprietor of Mega Clock Systems. Frederick is the only person or company who has not been paid for his services. The clocking system was given free of charge for the duration of the Race. My thanks.

And also I should thank the V.H.A. for use of the rooms for Basketing.

My biggest thanks goes out to all the fanciers who entrusted their birds to me over the four years, without birds there is no Race.

And finally I have to say that over the four years that I ran the A.P.P.Race the knockers slowly went quiet when they saw the Prizemoney being paid out. And for every entrant who gave me a hard time when I lost their birds there were 100 supportive fanciers who took things in their stride and encouraged me. I am grateful and I do not forget.

I would like to think that the Punt race has been a success. When this year's Prize money is paid out I will have written out cheques totalling \$600,000. This sort of money was not even dreamt of in Australia four years ago.

As most readers would know there will not be a Punt race in 2012. I am personally a little worn out but I have shown that we can race for good money here in Australia. It just took a little bit of a Punt to get it up and running.

John van Beers