

MY METHOD OF WIDOWHOOD

by Stan Towers

Foreword by "The Plumber"

ON FIRST meeting Stan Towers and finding out his method of racing I was greatly impressed by what he told me. In most of the books written by Widowhood flyers their methods seem to involve extremely hard work. I asked Stan to write this article and if it only helps a few fanciers then I think it well worth while.

BEFORE STARTING this article let me first say that I do not profess to be an expert on the subject. I have always been interested in racing the Widowhood system and having read various books on the subject got the impression that it was rather involved and required a great deal of time. However, in 1968 I decided to try this method and selected Twelve Cocks made up of 10 2-y-o and 2 3-y-o. The following is the method adopted for the first year.

First of all loft arrangement; I had the normal OB loft, 16 ft long by 6 ft deep with 2 drop boards, the drop holes made of dowels which can be latched to the ceiling whilst the birds had an open loft, then lowered to a smaller opening when you called them in. The front of the loft was of 3 ft wire weldmesh and the bottom boarded in. The bottom of loft I altered after reading 'Old Hand's' book on ventilation; this I altered to louvres. (This is not a plug for the 'Gazette' but a simple statement of fact which I felt made sense.) For the top part of the loft I made hardboard panels to fit in when I wanted to darken the loft, this obviously restricted the air flow, hence the ventilation by louvres.

The nestboxes were made up by using the Belgian plastic fronts, 2 ft 8 in long by 16 in deep and were quite open to the light. Darkness only affected by means of the wooden panels. Before leaving the loft arrangement, the loft was divided into 2 sections and the natural racers were in the same loft, separated by means of a hardboard partition. (So much for distraction by the natural birds.)

Pairing the birds took place the 2nd week in February, the widowers allowed to rear a single YB weaned 2 weeks before the first race. The hens had laid their 2nd round of eggs and these were removed to a small loft which I could cover in when the widowers were out exercising.

The cocks continued to sit the eggs 3/4 days. Then the eggs were removed and nestbowls were turned up side down which the cocks used as a perch. Following what I had read, the cocks after morning exercise were locked in their nestboxes and the loft blacked out until 4 p.m., when my wife would remove the front panels, open the nestboxes and let the birds out for exercise for 1 hr. The birds (so my wife told me) did not bunch but scattered all over the sky, and would drop into the loft and out again and strike off individually.

The weekend before the 1st race I took them for a 10-ml training toss. Before basketing the birds I removed the hardboard panels to let the light in and turned each nestbowl the right way up. The cocks started calling in the nestbowls. (Lesson No. 1.) After the birds had been basketed I placed each hen in her respective nestbox. Remember, that the nestfronts pivoted at the centre and thereby made two compartments, the hen being locked in one side to await the cocks. On arrival the cocks did not trap like grease lightning as I thought they might, but once a couple had gone in the others, hearing the noise of calling, soon went in. I allowed the cocks physical contact for about 5 min for this first training toss before removing the hens. The nestbowls then being turned up side down and the loft darkened. The following day they were sent again for a 10-ml toss, the same procedure being adopted (i.e.) nestbowls being turned the right way up before basketing. On arrival the reaction of the cocks was much better, they trapped more like I had hoped. I did not allow physical contact, the cocks just calling the hens through the partition. After 2/3 min the hens were removed, the nestbowls

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turned up side down and the loft darkened. The same procedure was repeated once more on the Wednesday prior to the 1st race on the following Saturday. The result of this toss was very good and the cocks seemed to have really got the idea.

They had been exercised morning and evening and had not seen the hens apart from the Wednesday training toss. During the day the loft had been kept darkened and the cocks locked in their nestboxes. On the Friday prior to the race, the panels were taken down to let in the light and the nestbowls turned the right way up. The cocks were allowed the freedom of the loft and I carefully watched the antics of them for about 5 min before basketing them.

On the Saturday the hens were placed in each nestbox to await the cock. The result of this first race was very pleasing, 1st and 3rd club. The hens were allowed to stay with the cocks until Sunday morning.

The same procedure was adopted over following weeks with one training toss from 10-ml on the Wednesday. After the 5th week my wife said she thought the cocks looked fed up and did not look so keen. The results during those weeks were not so good. It was then decided to let the cocks have the freedom of the loft (i.e.) the loft still being darkened during the day and the panels taken down only when exercising. The cocks were NOT kept locked in the nestboxes. This system was carried on until after the Stonehaven race (Combine race). After this I decided to let them go natural and sit for the last race from Thurso (Combine) 514-ml.

Of the 12 cocks I started with, two were lost, one at Stonehaven 394-ml, and one at Thurso 514-ml. The final results with the widowers only were three times 1st Club, 3rd Club, two 4th Clubs, out of 7 races entered. The Thurso race was won by a natural hen but one of the original widowers, sent natural, was 27th L.N.R.C. (3181 birds).

Season 1969 was started with 16 widowers, made up of 10 from the previous year and six more 2-y-o added.

The only alterations made were instead of using the hardboard panels to darken the loft I bought some curtain wire and got my wife to make me some black curtains. This I found much simpler to operate in that you only had to draw the curtains to let the daylight in when required. Also it did allow a certain amount of air to enter the loft as opposed to the hardboard panels. (The black curtains were also useful when you had a bad race, you could draw the BLACK curtains and really go into mourning.)

However, as stated, the system was conducted as the previous year, the birds were not locked in their nestboxes and the loft was kept darkened all day, except when exercising. The hens were removed 2 weeks before the 1st race and the eggs removed after 3/4 days. The nestbowls turned upside down. I would like to emphasise the sequence of pre-basketing the birds for training or racing. First, the curtains were drawn back to let the light in, secondly the nestbowls were turned the right way up. This was a set procedure in that it was intended to drill into the birds, and trigger off their emotions, that the drawing of the curtains, the turning of the nestbowls the right way up, and the basketing was to remind them that the hens would be waiting on their return. I suggest that you could get good results by racing the cocks to the nestbowl ONLY. The reaction of the cocks when the nestbowl was turned was a revelation, and the actions of each individual bird should be carefully watched. Similarly, when you place the hens in the nestbox you will see them sweeping and calling in the nestbowl. I can well believe that the system could be worked in reverse and the hens raced instead.

The procedure on the day of the race was the same and the hens were left after the race with the cocks until the Sunday morning and were allowed out together to have a bath before separating them. I have separated them after an hour or so after the race, but cannot say that I have noticed any difference in the performance.

After the 5th race I decided to take no chances of them going stale, as happened in the previous year, so before basketing for the Morpeth race, 268-ml, I turned the nestbowls up the right way and let the cocks out: Whilst they were flying I put the hens in the nestboxes. I might add that I had to move about lively as the cocks were in before I had all the hens in the boxes! This was the first time I had shown the cocks the hens on the night of basketing before the race. Whether I was right, or wrong, I cannot prove but I was 1st, 2nd, 3rd Club in this race.

I think the Berwick race really convinced me that the system can be made to work, I give the following to illustrate my meaning. One of the widowers, a Blue Cock, when let out for exercise would keep flying to the natural loft, on to a ledge not more than 4 in wide. He had apparently taken a fancy to a hen in there and would drop out of the sky straight on to this ledge. In the Berwick (Combine) remember that the birds were basketed on the Thursday night! On the Saturday, this blue cock was 1 min behind my first bird but he came out of the sky, straight on to this ledge. This was after flying 312-ml, flying time 8 hr, and yet this pigeon, after being away 48 hr, must have had it fixed in his mind just were he was going to drop! I think that this repudiates the theory that widowers wont race after being in the basket for a day.

I paired the birds up before Thurso and should you wonder why, you must appreciate that I was feeling my way. Last year's Thurso race did not prove whether I was right or wrong to pair them up; that race was a 4/5 day hold over and also a fast race, and was not to my idea a really good classic 500-ml. This year again was disappointing because it turned out to be an erratic race and again did not prove anything to me, whether to pair them, or leave them as widowers.

I give the results of the 16 widowers for interest and would add that I lost three, one at Berwick and two at Thurso.

| Club | Position | Birds |
|------|------------------|---------------------|
| | 1st/8th | 434 birds |
| | 1st | 366 birds |
| | 3rd/4th | 305 birds |
| | *1st/2nd/3rd | 203 birds |
| | 2nd/3rd/5th/10th | 228 birds |
| | 1st London C.C. | 2 bird club Berwick |
| | 5th | 291 |
| | 1st/5th | 158 |
| | 1st London C.C. | Stonehaven |

| Federation | Birds |
|-------------|------------|
| 1st | 2461 birds |
| 5th | 2267 birds |
| 9th | ? |
| 1st/2nd/4th | 1175 birds |

| Miles | Velocity |
|-------|----------|
| 84 | 1038 |
| 168 | 983 |
| 210 | 1143 |
| 268 | 1035 |
| 312 | 1129 |
| 168 | 1148 |
| 394 | 970 |

29th/35th L.N.R. Combine 6884 birds
8th/27th L.N.R. Combine 5656 birds

The above positions were won with the widowers only. I give this not only to let you see the results of the system, but also the

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distance, and the velocity. I have heard it said that widowers must have sun, and not too hard and not too far. My experience so far has been the reverse. Are these statements made in ignorance, or perhaps to deter anyone else from trying the system? Also, one hears 'If the birds don't make it on the day or early next morning you don't see them again.' This, again I have not found to be correct.

However, to analyse the 2 yr findings I would say *for the system*. The cocks always look well, trapping is no problem, you cannot make the excuse that the bird would not go in. From an interest point of view, I found it extremely interesting and really enjoyed watching the birds, and it also does make you realise how much each bird is an individual.

Against the system, the temptation is to keep on sending them every week. This is because they look so well and this, in turn, makes you tend to overlook your natural birds and a good hen, I think, wants some beating over the longer races.

Most important of all, you must to my mind not get too carried away with the system and neglect your hens. You must, I feel, have some hens to race, to ensure that they are kept up to standard.

In 1970 it is my intention to race the widowers through to Thurso and see what happens.

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★ (Right) B/C hen, winner of 2nd Sect. 2nd Open North of England N.F.C. YB race from Chichester, 228 miles. Blue Cock, winner of 1st Sect 1st Open North of England N.F.C. Chichester YB race, beating loft mate by 19 Y.P.M. and next loft by 46 Y.P.M. Both bred and raced by G. W. Waud of Flamborough, Yorks. (G.791)

