

MOMENTS TO REMEMBER (Part 2)

By John Hofman

Part 1 “A Golden Era in Pigeon Racing” dealt with my memories of pigeon racing in our days as junior flyers between 1959 and 1963. Part 2 will cover the period from 1964 to 1968 when I flew in senior competition in the Henley & Grange club and the SAHPA Inc.

My brother Greg had lost interest with the pigeons by the end of 1963 so in future years of competition it simply became J. Hofman. My decision to compete in the Henley & Grange club caused a bit of dismay within the senior official ranks of the Riverside Junior club as naturally they would expect their junior members to graduate to their senior club when the time arrived. It didn't worry me at the time what they thought but sitting back and looking at it years later I could see their point and now I can sympathize with them. I guess I was in a bit of a dilemma at the time. Around this time Harry Dunning and his wife Doreen had moved from Birkenhead back to Seaton, just five minutes walk from our place. Not that I could remember, but Harry raced pigeons from Seaton in the early 1950's before moving to Birkenhead. His backyard was one of three backyards which bordered our northern side fence. Just digressing for a moment but another of these backyards belonged to Jack & Shirley Foley, the parents of Mark & Kevin, yes the same Kevin Foley who was the Deputy Premier and Treasurer of South Australia.

Anyway, back to Harry. Harry wanted to fly in the Henley and Grange club and asked me if I would like to join him as a partner and race the pigeons from his premises. It sounded OK to me but unfortunately the application from Dunning & Hofman was rejected by the Henley & Grange club, mainly because, I believe, we were outside the clubs boundaries. However, word came back from the club that an application from me flying from my place would be looked upon favourably. This seemed rather hypercritical as I was also just outside their boundary but not quite as far as was Harry. I believe as far as Harry was concerned issues went a little deeper within the club than being a couple of hundred yards outside the boundary. I think the word “personality” came into play, a factor that has

eventually led to the demise of many pigeon clubs, world wide. Harry never ever flew pigeons again and he died on New Years Day 2000 at around 98 years of age, but at the time he encouraged me to apply to fly on my own with the Henley & Grange club.

My dilemma was should I join the incredibly strong Riverside club and perhaps have to wait many years, like so many others, to win my first club race at senior level, or should I join the Henley & Grange club which was much smaller in terms of membership, hence my chances of winning a race or two should be better. The other factor was should I compete in the strongest overall competition, the S.A.H.P. Association Inc., of which the Henley & Grange club was associated or the smaller S.A.H.P. Combine with which the Riverside club & Port Adelaide Association were associated. My final decision was to join the smaller club in the stronger overall competition. My application to the Henley & Grange club went through smoothly.

I didn't have to wait very long for my first win at senior level, just seven weeks into the 1964 season, a 220 mile race from Dimboola (Vic). I can remember that day very vividly. It was a beautiful sunny day, a clear blue cloudless sky, with a light westerly breeze, a gem of a day in the middle of winter. Our winner, Blue Chequer hen SAA 62 16533 bred for us by Harry Dunning flew the race in just over six hours averaging 1041.65 yards per minute, narrowly beating Don Hawke's Black hen SA 63 3195 on 1040.27 ypm and Bill Verco's Blue Chequer hen SA 63 21064 averaging 1039.03 ypm.

Look at that winning velocity, 1041.65 ypm or 35.5 miles per hour. How slow that seems today, given the perfect conditions that prevailed for that race. Nowadays the pigeons would fly that race at least 6 miles per hour faster. The peculiar thing is back in those days, although the racing was slower, the returns generally were significantly better. Did this slower speed allow the more uncertain birds to keep up with the leaders, or at least keep them in sight, until they were a safe distance from where they were able to negotiate their own way home? The birds seemed to arrive home in much larger batches than is the case today. Is it now a matter of every bird for itself as they head off for home at top speed, leaving the less certain birds in their wake very early in the race, leaving them to their own devices to find their own way home hours later or to become completely lost?

For me the period 1964 to 1968 was a very busy one and pigeons were often put into the back ground as there were so many other things to do. Work for one, from 08:00 to 17:00

and occasionally to 23:00 hours. Study one evening per week for a couple of years, Citizens Military Forces (Army Reserve) one night per week, one weekend per month & a two week annual camp (right at the start of each racing season) for nearly 6 years, footy training one night per week (it should have been twice per week but one night clashed with the CMF) and of course playing footy on Saturday afternoons. Dad used to clock the pigeons in for me as most Saturdays I would not be home when the birds arrived. Throw in courting as well and I now wonder how I ever found time to race pigeons at all during that time. No wonder the results were few and far between. 1964 & 1965 produced reasonable results with the win from Dimboola, a second in the Marree YBC, a second in a Marree Open & a third from The Pines (near Pimba) in 1964, a first & second in the Maryborough Derby, a second in a Maryborough Open (19th SAHPA) a second from Benalla and a third in a Tarcoola YBC in 1965.

I can remember the circumstances of the 1965 Maryborough (Vic) Young Bird Derby. My brother Greg & I had to attend a weekend CMF bivouac at Mount Crawford, one of the coldest locations in South Australia. Saturday turned out to be dreadful and it rained all day. The rain cleared at Mt. Crawford around 8.00pm, the clouds disappeared and the remainder of the night was freezing cold. We woke up the next morning to find all the puddles had turned to ice. The birds were held over on the Saturday and released on the Sunday into perfect blue skies & Dad was at the home end to clock in. The birds came home in droves. When I got home that Sunday evening Dad was disappointed that he had a bad trap and lost, as he put it, the best part of five minutes on the trapping. I took the clock & the two birds he timed in to SAHPA Headquarters at Mile End for a reading (back in those days, all birds to be read had to be presented and checked on the night). Well the good news was that we had taken first & second places in the club but the bad news was despite being just on five minutes away from winning the Association event, we finished just outside the first 60 positions. Had a good trap been experienced maybe an Association win or at least a position well inside the top ten would have been obtained.

Back in those days only the first twenty positions at Association level were awarded certificates (presently 30) and as soon as all the Assoc., pools were all taken the race was immediately closed.

Little success was had between 1966 and 1968 and due to many of the previously mentioned commitments, I never raced anywhere a full program in at least two of those years. 1966 was an exceptionally difficult year on the south east route and due to heavy losses I gave that line a miss after the middle distance races. Many top notch flyers were struggling to find enough birds to complete that route that year and I remember Fin Fraser, who had moved to the North West club by then to compete in the SAHPA, making a remark as to just how difficult a season that one was. A number of club certificates from those years have been lost as I can only find a second place from Carrieton in 1966 and a second place from Keith in 1968 and nothing for 1967. I know I did win one club race in 1967 from Maryborough because I have an SAHPA certificate for 20th place but there was nothing special about it as it doesn't stick in my memory. It was a fairly quick race, 6 hours 8 minutes 49 seconds for the 328 miles, over 53 mph so they must have had a fair tail wind.

But it was a school of hard knocks because as stated above, once the first 20 owners had clocked taking all the points on offer and all the pools taken, the race was closed off, and at club level as well. I will give a couple of examples.

I can remember flying a hard race from Marree in 1964 and by nightfall we had nothing home. We forlornly drove to the Henley Beach Road Mile End headquarters of the SAHPA Inc., hoping against hope that there were no birds home and we still had a chance. No such luck. There were birds home just before dark. I'm not sure how many but no more than 30 or so and I think 3 in the club. We turned around and went back home only to find a Blue Chequer cock sitting on the landing board next to the traps. I picked him up, put his rubber in the clock, put him in a basket, put both in the car and raced back to Mile End. **"Sorry son, you don't get a reading, all the places are taken and all the pools are gone. The race is closed"**. We thought we were hard done by so we named that game cock bird "Hard Days Night" after the current Beatles hit song at that time.

Another similar instance was in 1967 from Finke, a distance of 690 miles north of Adelaide. The birds were released early on Saturday morning 21/10/1967 and it was a very warm weekend. On the Sunday in Adelaide alone, if my memory serves me correctly, the temperature rose to the mid 90's (Fahrenheit). Darkness fell on Sunday

night, the sun disappearing in the west like a large fiery orange ball, and I had none of the five cocks home that I had sent. Later that evening I established that there didn't seem to be any birds home in the club but there were reports of a few home in the Association from 5.00pm onwards. Very few but I couldn't find out exactly how many, without going down to the Mile End Headquarters. Consequently I rose early the next morning thinking the race would still be open, particularly at club level and just a couple of minutes after sunrise this cock came in from the east and lobbed on the board. Yes, it was a cock from Finke. I promptly clocked him hoping to at least win the club. He was indeed the first bird home in the club but later that morning, after contacting a club official I was told **“Sorry son, all the Association places were filled last night and all the pools taken. The Association race is closed, hence the club race is closed”**.

Well there we are, hard done by again I thought. Lou Weikert who lived nearby, also clocked one in the club about half an hour after me and Merv Hatch got the third bird home in the club clocking around 1.00 pm on that Monday afternoon. I got another one home on the following Wednesday making it only four birds reported home in the club up until that time. I believe there were about 35 birds home in the association on the Sunday night and for my fellow to be so early the next morning he must have arrived with other birds in the eastern suburbs that actually got placed that evening.

It would have been interesting to know how many cock birds were placed in that race, not many, if any at all. Fanciers on the western side of Adelaide put most of their cock birds on the north line because it is most difficult to score in the Association on this route due to prevailing winds and geographic features. They are the long markers on the south east line so most of their best hens were allocated in this direction with Association results in mind. I think all of the birds that made it home on the Sunday night were homed to lofts situated to the north, east and inner southern suburbs.

It was that same year, 1967, when I allocated just eleven cocks to fly the north line. They weren't very fast, in fact in the early races they were downright slow, but they all homed well. By the time we got to the first Oodnadatta, (540 miles) I had lost only three and that was after eight races ranging from 160 to 370 miles. I sent all eight to that race and got the lot, seven within an hour of my clocking. The leading pigeons which were on the eastern side of town were in around 6.30 am on the Sunday morning, I clocked at 7.30

am. They still weren't quite fast enough though as nearby club member Lou Weikert timed in at 7.20 am to win the club and take an Association position just inside the top twenty. I finished 4th in the club and missed out in the Assoc. I thought it was too soon to send any of them back to the second race from Oodnadatta which was a fortnight later so I gave that race a miss and picked five of them for the above mentioned race from Finke. I ended up getting 3 of the 5 home, the first two as previously mentioned and the third one the following weekend. That left me with six left out of eleven at the end of the north line program, all flown at least 540 miles and three flown 690 miles. This would be just about impossible to do today.

There were a number of funny incidents concerning my girlfriend (wife to be), and the pigeons in those years. When first going out with Bev, in the early part of 1965, on one occasion she asked me if I would go out with her to some particular function one night. I declined, saying I had to go to a pigeon club meeting. That was OK and nothing more was said. Then weeks later when the racing started, the number of meetings per week increased considerably, i.e., basketing night, clock setting night and clock reading night. The number of nights to take her out somewhat decreased and she wondered why.

"I've got to go to the pigeon club" I said. "Pigeon club?" she remarked, "I thought you said the fishing club. If I had known it was the pigeon club I may not have gone out with you again".

As mentioned earlier in the story, clocked birds had to be presented in order to get a reading in an Association race. As most clock reading nights were on a Saturday night it clashed with my social life. More often than not we went to a Drive In movie theatre so the usual ritual was to grab the bird(s) clocked in the race that day & the pigeon clock, put them in the boot of the car, drive from Seaton to Queenstown to pick Bev up around 7.00 pm, then drive to the Mile End headquarters of the Association to be there in time for an 8.00 pm fire off (while Bev waited patiently in the car), get my birds presented and clock read as soon as possible and then dash off to a Drive In and generally get there about half way through the first of the two movies. On numerous occasions, particularly if I had more than one pigeon in the boot, a cooing from the pigeons would be coming from the boot during the middle of a movie.

The same would happen for the club races but instead of parking the car at Mile End, it would be parked near the Henley & Grange clubrooms. The club rooms were originally on the western side of the Grange Oval, just off Military Road, but after the 1964 season the club was forced to shift due to a redevelopment of the oval & facilities, an upgrade required due to the vast development of adjacent swamplands & sand dunes into the prestige suburb of West Lakes. The club was moved a couple of kilometers south to Henley Beach and the clubrooms were built on some spare land adjacent to a reserve which I believe now is the site of the Western Community Hospital. Anyway, I used to park the car on the side of the road next to a long narrow paddock, which has now been developed into a sort of large median strip between two parallel roads. But back in those days it was nothing but a rough undeveloped long & narrow paddock so I used to pull up alongside the barbed wire fence, and walk down a small lane on the other side of the road, to the clubrooms. Bev would wait in the car while I was at the club. One night while waiting for me to return she had a strange feeling that she was being watched. She looked to her left through the passenger's side window and saw this face looking through the window at her. It frightened the daylights out of her. It was a cow which had made its way over to the car and was almost muzzling its nose up against the window. From then on I always parked on the other side of the road, in front of a neighboring house.

We were married on Saturday 21st September 1968, towards the end of the 1968 racing season. Why we chose that date I just cannot remember but it coincided with the Benalla No 1 race that weekend. I couldn't see why our wedding should stop me racing that day even though it was scheduled for a 5.00 pm start, just about the time to start looking for the birds. My wife to be threatened me not to race that weekend but I had already arranged for Harry Dunning to come over and clock in for me. It was on the Thursday before the race when my job in the Port took me across the river to the Birkenhead wharves. There I bumped into Ron Shiell, a Harbours Board sweeper and fellow pigeon fancier. "How many did you send last night John?" he inquired. "Last night?" I said. Then it suddenly hit me. I had missed out. For the previous ten weeks basketing night was on a Thursday night but as the distance had increased from middle to long distance, basketing naturally was done a night earlier, and I had completely forgotten. I must have

had something else on my mind. Anyway, it turned out for the better. At least I was able to proudly say that I put our wedding ahead of the pigeons (even if it was by accident).

Bev's uncle, top SAHPA & Hampstead club flyer, Harold Webber was invited to the wedding and he and his wife Hillary accepted on the understanding that they may be late, depending upon the time the pigeons arrived home. They didn't make the Wedding ceremony but I saw them at the reception and I remember Harold telling me he timed in around 5.25 pm but he thought he was a little late to figure prominently in the results.

It was in this 1964 to 1968 period that pigeon racing changed from rail transport to road. I can't say with exact certainty but I am pretty sure it was 1965. We had these large steel baskets made of heavy gauge mesh. They were 4 feet wide and about 6 feet long and held 60 birds and were as heavy as hell, even when they were empty. Being these dimensions they would sit side by side on an 8 feet wide semi trailer and 6 baskets length wise as 36 feet was the standard length of a semi in those days. This would give 12 baskets on the base of the trailer and would be built up to six or seven tiers high, depending upon the number of birds sent. I can remember the cold and wet nights loading the birds underneath the Bakewell Bridge at Mile End, just a hundred metres or so from the SAHPA Headquarters on Henley Beach Road. The square mesh on these baskets was large enough for a pigeon to put its head through in order to feed and drink through the sides but occasionally while loading, one would pop its head up through the top. The baskets were supposed to be lifted and put down carefully on top of a lower basket when loading but they were so heavy it was not uncommon to see the loaders sliding them across the tops of the baskets below them. On more than one occasion a pigeon would pop its head up, just as a basket was being slid across into position, to have its head completely taken off.

Ah, the Old Bakewell Bridge. Numerous trucks, particularly since the advent of containerization right at the end of the 1960's, have been stuck underneath that bridge, their drivers either miscalculating or unaware of the actual height of their loads, forcing continuous closures and repairs upon the bridge. The old 8 foot high containers fitted underneath the bridge with just inches to spare, but a few years later when 8 foot 6 inch containers and later 9 foot containers came into service, I guess their drivers, unless they were told or were particularly observant, didn't realize they were carrying a higher box.

Just last evening (November 28th 2006) I was passing through that area and, as an Irish man would say, “there’s the bridge, gone.” Yes it has finally been removed, demolished to make way for a new bridge and a new four lane under pass which will complete a western bypass route around the CBD of the city of Adelaide. And no more trucks stopped dead in their tracks by hitting the top of the bridge with their loads. Another old landmark gone forever, changing significantly the landscape of this area, hopefully for the better.

Back to the pigeons. Although the change was made to road, the rail wasn’t completely dispensed with on the north route as roads north of Port Augusta were all unsealed and in terrible condition. The first race point, Carrieton, was accessible by sealed road but for all other points such as Pimba, Marree, Tarcoola, William Creek, Oodnadatta, Cook, Finke and Forrest, the truck & trailer were loaded onto a flat top rail wagon at Port Augusta. All the old railway race points on the south east route such as Keith, Dimboola, Maryborough, Benalla & Junee, were continued with by road transport as they were all accessible by sealed roads. I don’t think it dawned on pigeon administrators at the time that they didn’t really have to be tied down to going to these race points anymore. They could now go to other, perhaps better race points, which was not possible before due to there being no rail service. It wasn’t until about seven years later in 1971 that someone must have wondered just why we were still going to all these old rail race points now that we are transporting by road. In 1971 Bill Walford and a couple of other administrators introduced the East Line into Adelaide with such points as Pinnaroo, Mittyack, Booroorban, Morundah, Temora, Young, and later on, Bathurst.

Everybody at the time was pretty excited about changing from rail to road and it seemed the right thing to do at the time. It didn’t have to happen just when it did though as I believe the railways were prepared to make specialized rolling stock to accommodate the birds being taken to races. It probably involved a higher freight charge so it was decided to build a road transporter and hire the Prime Mover. But looking back on things, just how good it was back then on the rail. The cost of sending away a 42 lb race hamper to a race was ridiculously cheap and the empty baskets were returned free of charge. And the same applied for training. Very few birds were lost on the training tosses back then. If you lost a bird from Bowmans (50 miles north of Adelaide) then it must have been a

complete duffer. Now-a-days, the equivalent road tossing point is Port Wakefield, just a few miles to the west of Bowmans. It is not uncommon, as it has been for many years now, to hear of fanciers losing 20's, 30's, 40's and even more on a single toss from there. With road transport, you not only have to pay to get them there but you have to pay to get the empty truck back.

I guess it was inevitable that we had to go to road transport but maybe we went too soon. Granted, with today's privatized rail system, cost would probably be prohibitive and many of the old race points would no longer be accessible or serviced.

But there is no doubt that road transport has led to a large increase in bird losses. Why? Well there a quite a number of factors but at this stage I will only touch on one.

Entry fees were kept low to encourage flyers to send more birds to the races. The theory being that it costs no more to send a full unit than a half empty one and the more birds that were sent then the more the Association or Federation would make in transport profit. So flyers began to send more birds. To send more birds you have to keep a larger race team, so you have to breed more birds. To breed more birds, more stock birds need to be kept, or you breed from all & sundry left over at the end of the season. A top loft back then would have only two or three really good producing pairs at best so extra stock was being kept just to breed numbers. This soon results in the overall standard dropping, thus an increase in losses. So, rather than being caught short of numbers towards the end of the next season, the flyer will mate a few more up, eventually calling on anything to mate up in order to breed a few more youngsters. And above all it increases the flyers cost to compete in the sport due to extra feed, medicines, training & race fees etc. This has been going on for many years now with the result being an overall lowering of the standard of birds being bred for racing, thus more losses and pigeons being treated as numbers rather than individuals. Although the overall standard has been lowered in this way, the quality and number of top birds today has probably increased. But at the same time it has nowhere near matched the numbers of poorly bred and poorly trained birds being raised and sent to races to make up the numbers. So in this regard I see road transport in a negative light but it is the only option we have now so we must be looking to improve our transporters by upgrading to the latest in European standards, no matter what the cost, other wise the sport will continue to diminish.

Well they were my happy but somewhat unproductive, result wise, days with the Henley and Grange Pigeon Club.

In Part 3, I will cover the years 1969 to 1975; my years with the Peterhead, Osborne & Le Fevre Peninsula clubs.