

## Thoughts on Helmet Breeding

By Mike Crawford and Bob Bollinger

The conventional wisdom for pigeon breeding is; “mate the best to the best”! This is a great rule if you have a loft full of champions and proven breeders. Unfortunately, most of us don’t have a loft full of perfect birds. We will try to share our more practical experience with breeding helmets.

The basic ideas that we want to share in this article are:

1. You should only breed with your better birds.
2. Sometimes your best breeders are not the show winners.
3. Balancing features is the key.
4. Some faults should never be bred from.

Ideally we would always breed the best to the best birds. However, “Best” is not always defined by show results. Moreover, experience has shown that some of our most productive pairs have been two stock birds. You must take all the features of the bird into account when planning your matings. Some of the birds that aren’t good in the show pen can be very useful in the breeding pen. Typically people refer to those less than perfect birds as stock birds. Stock birds are maintained because they have one or two great features that we want to use to enhance another bird. This is where balance comes in. As we mate our pairs we try to ensure that each bird has features that improve the other or compensates for a defect. Listed below are a number of features we have found can be balanced in matings: (in no particular order)

- Color
- Weak Rosettes to Deep Drilled Rosettes
- Long to Short (birds and feather length in general)
- Tall to Short
- Cap / Markings (over marked to under marked, mis-marked to very cleanly marked)
- Beak length (short to long, stout to weak)
- Beak setting (beak setting can be improved, but if a bird is very down set, don’t breed it)
- Feather quality (long and loose to tight and hard)

As much as balance is good, you always need to remember to breed with only you better birds. Mediocre birds typically breed mediocre birds and bad birds rarely make anything useful. We try to sort out a group of our better birds (show and stock birds) and use them for breeding. We typically try to keep similar birds together and only improve one or two features at a time. Putting very dissimilar birds together can have unpredictable results.

We have also found that some faults are very hereditary and should never be bred from. It is often difficult to pass over a bird with a bunch of stellar features. However, if you

don't eliminate these faults from your breeding program they can come back to haunt you. Faults to avoid:

- Pinched heads (when viewing the bird from the front the sides of the face come to wattle at an angle versus straight down)
- Wing Droopers / Shallow Backs (these often go together)
- 13 tail feathers
- Cross beaks
- Bull eyes
- Severely Cracked Eyes / Bad Eyes
- Excessive eye brows (where the features protrude out over the eye from the side of the head)

The above lists are not all inclusive but provide some general guidelines that we use in the breeding pen. Remember that balance is key and try not to do too much at one time. If a mating doesn't work out, break up the pair and balance them against other birds. Many National Champions have come out of stock pairs, with minor imperfections, that have balanced well and produced great youngsters.