

Superintendent Al Hanson Breeds, Raises and Trains Racing Pigeons

By DAVE KAZMIERCZAK

Golf course superintendents enjoy a wide variety of hobbies when not tending to their respective golf courses. Some hunt, fish or snowmobile while others chase birdies on the courses they care for. For Al Hanson, Superintendent at Viking Meadows in Cedar, Minn. birdie chasing has a completely different meaning.

Hansen breeds, raises and trains racing pigeons. The birds Hansen raises aren't your average pigeons often seen nesting in the nooks of buildings or gathered in a park for a free meal. They are a specific type of pigeon with a keen homing ability that allows them to find their way back to their nests from hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles away.

"They're called homing pigeons. It's not like the ones you see on the railroad tracks," Hanson said. "Those are what we call scrubs. These are homing pigeons and they're bred for it and we pay a lot of money for them."

Man has found these birds very useful over the centuries for a variety of needs,

and many messages throughout history have been delivered via "pigeon mail."

"They were very useful during World War II," Hanson said. "They would release the birds to tell the troops where other people were."

"They still use racing pigeons right now in remote countries to bring blood samples back to hospitals. They bring the pigeons with them, and they always go back to the hospital."

Technology may have made the pigeons' postal value obsolete but a group of individuals have found another way to celebrate the birds' unique ability. They have formed flight clubs that race their pigeons a variety of distances. There are six pigeon clubs in the metro area and many others across the country and the world.

The birds are raced by first banding the birds around their legs. The birds are then brought to a central area on race day and



placed in a module where an electronic scanner is used to identify the bird. The birds are then transported by trailer to a specific location and released all at the same time for each race. Each trailer can hold about 2100 birds. The time it takes the birds to fly back to their individual house or "coop" is recorded by a scanner at the coop and a winner is crowned. The basic measuring tool is yards per minute since every coop is not of equal distance to the release point.

The racing season in Minnesota parallels the golf season. Races are anywhere from 100 miles to 600 miles for the local racing clubs. Some races can go up to 1,000 miles nationally. The season is somewhat divided into old bird races, roughly from early May until July 4 and young bird races that start in early August and last through September. Distance of races varies within the season. Each race can be number specific (five birds entered per person) or open to as many entries as a racer wants to enter.

The races Hansen enters have the possibility of moderate monetary gain or

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Racing Pigeons-

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trophies but some races can command some serious money.

Ron Des Lauriers, greens mower at Mississippi National Golf Club in Red Wing also raises racing pigeons and won one of the 600-mile races worth \$10,000. Des Lauriers said that in the southern part of the country the races are bigger, more involved and worth a lot more money. The biggest is put on by the American Racing Pigeon Union which has a national race. The national was held in Minnesota in 1997 and again this year.

Raising birds might seem elementary to the outside observer but Hanson said a lot of time, effort and money is put into these birds. Pigeons can command anywhere from \$25 to \$1,000 per bird depending on pedigree and race results. A typical racer will have from 50-100 birds in their holdings. The key to a successful program is to continue to build better racing birds.

"It's like horse racing," Hanson said. "You want to genetically breed your bird to what races you want. Some fly for long

distance races, some for sprint races."

Training is also critical for success. The birds are put through practice runs in the spring and in season. They need to be cared for properly, have good living quarters and even be prepared mentally to race.

"You're sending an athlete out there. They have to be trained properly, fed properly and there's ways of psyching the birds up (to race)," Hanson said.

Pigeons mate in pairs. The pair will share a single coop and raise young. Hanson said one of the ways to psych up the birds is to separate the pair a week before the race with the promise of being reunited as a motivating force to fly faster during the race.

Hanson has known of racing pigeons from an early age. It wasn't until early adulthood that he started raising and flying pigeons himself. In a way, Hansen seemed destined to be involved in the sport.

"A neighbor of mine when I was growing up, about 12 years old used to fly. I liked going over there and watching the birds. Then, as fate would have it, the girl I got married to- her dad raced pigeons,"

Hanson said. "I've been flying now since the late 80s"

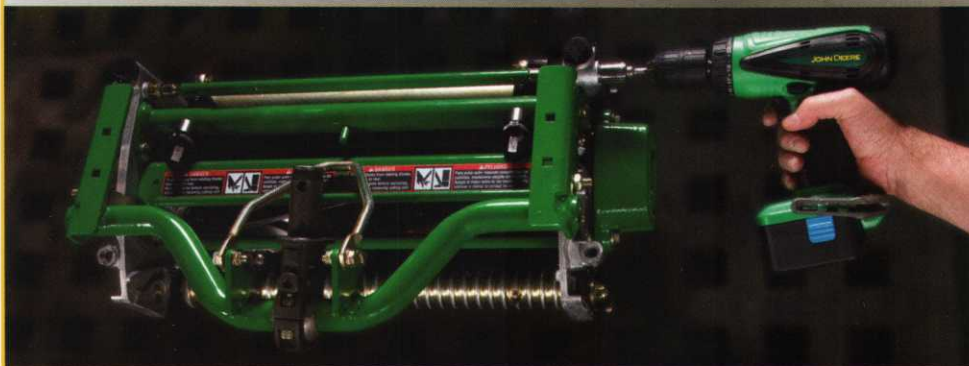
Like most hobbies, pigeon racing isn't cheap. The pigeons need daily care and a specialized coop to protect them from the elements. Those elements include the weather and predators. Des Lauriers was bemoaning the loss of a bird that had won significant races to a fox that had broken into his coop. There is also the possibility that hawks or other natural causes can prevent an expensive, well trained bird from returning on his or her journey.

"Most of the time, they will make it back," Hanson said.

Nearly a quarter century of involvement in pigeon racing hasn't dampened Hanson's desire, but he said he still treats it as a hobby. Hanson won one of the first races he entered for a decent amount of cash but he focuses on the relaxing aspect of having the birds around and watching them come home to roost.

"For me it's tough because it's the busiest time of the year for superintendents, but when I retire I'm really going to get into it. For now, it's just for relaxation," Hanson said.

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