

Joe Caruana

1994 QRPF Champion Flyer

By Len Vanderlinde P.O.

Joe Caruana won the title of 1994 Champion Flyer of the 360 member strong Queensland Racing Pigeon Federation with some outstanding and rarely achieved results from all types of pigeon racing, short and long races, fast or slow Joe was always up there. Joe flies with the Pathfinder club, one of 6 clubs in the West Section and one of the 32 clubs which go to form the QRPF. In all Joe won 3 Open Federation races and 8 Section Federation races and finished second Section in another two races. Joe's top placings for the year were as follows:

1st Section, 2nd Open	Jackson	354 klms	(1299mpm)
1st Section, 22nd Open	Roma	436 klms	(1419mpm)
1st section, 1st Open	Morven	603 klms	(975mpm) clocked after dark
2nd Section, 7th Open	Quilpie	877 klms	(1059mpm)
1st Section, 3rd Open	Roma	436 klms	(1028mpm)
1st Section, 14th Open	Charleville	687 klms	(1674mpm)
2nd Section, 13th Open	Charleville Nat	687 klms	(1672mpm)
1st Section, 5th Open	Quilpie	877 klms	(1676mpm)
1st Section, 1st Open	Windorah	1062 klms	(896mpm)
1st Section, 1st Open	Morney	1170 klms	(831mpm)

Coming into the last two long races of the year Joe was leading the open Fed points score, but several other flyers were well within reach of his points total. He needed to clock a couple of good ones in these two races to clinch the title and what a remarkable result he managed to pull off, not only clocking the winning pigeon late on the second morning from the hard 660 mile Windorah race, but he then followed that up with two birds on the drop at about 3pm on the second day, from the very hard 730 mile Morney race, to once again top the Fed. What a way to finish the season, 1st Open Fed from both the 600 & 700 mile races, and the title of QRPF 1994 Champion Flyer!

One of Joe's birds really stood out during the year, this remarkable hen (QPF-93-911 blue bar pied) won the title of QRPF "Bird of the Year" by winning 1st Section, 14th Open Charleville 687 klms, 1st Section, 5th Open Quilpie 877 klms and then her crowning glory 1st Section, 1st Open Windorah 1062 klms. 911 covered 2,626 klms in just 4 weeks flying the above three races, a truly remarkable effort, but it does not finish there. This hen showed right from the start she was something very special, but unfortunately a fright early in her life resulted in her being reluctant to enter the loft, invariably she would be the last to enter after training, and when racing started she showed her class by arriving home early many times but was always reluctant to trap. As it was she won two 1st prizes club racing during the 1st series and could have won more if only she would enter the loft on arrival. Joe decided to send her as a "trainer" (released half hour after mass) that way he could avoid the frustration of her arriving home first only to sit out on the loft or fly off and only return when another bird would arrive.

Joe Caruana is a committed family man, along with his wife Anita they have three children, all girls, Samantha, Jodie and Sherrie. Joe met Anita at the midget speed cars being introduced by Anita's stepfather, at first sight Anita knew she just had to have Joe, *he had a great body and buns you could crack nuts with* were her comments.

Of their three girls, Jodie takes the most interest in the pigeons, helping her father with the management of the birds. One bird in particular has become Jodie's favourite, though it started out as a love/hate relationship, because at first, the bird, named Missy Jane would pick at Jodie, which prompted Jodie to call her a "bitch", but

something about the bird attracted Jodie and a friendship between the two has developed. "Missy Jane" assured her place in the stock loft by breeding their one-bird winner from Roma 300mls in 1994 (Joe also won the two bird race on the same day, showing his great selection prowess.)

When deciding to start up in pigeon racing, after having kept them as a boy, Joe went down to the local club (Pathfinders) and asked who the best flyer was, he was introduced to Geoff Cowen and promptly asked for some birds, only to be told to "go to hell", but later Geoff rang and asked Joe for some rings and bred him 6 or so youngsters, which started Joe racing in 1983.

Joe spotted a grizzle youngster on the floor of Geoff's loft which he took a liking to, Anita reared this bird for Joe feeding it on their bedroom dresser every two hours until big enough to fend for itself. During his first year racing (1983) Geoff advised Joe not to enter his birds in the 540 mile Goulburn Open Fed race; living well off the line of flight and being inexperienced it did seem he would have little chance of success competing at the highest level, so Joe flew club only, he clocked the grizzle youngster very early the second morning to win the club and would have finished 6th open Fed, this was one the few times Geoff got it wrong. That same year Joe won Kempsey (250 miles) by a very big margin, it was a sign of things to come.

After giving Joe his first birds Geoff set about teaching him how to race them. Five years later, with Joe still asking a lot of questions, Geoff suddenly said the apprenticeship is over "you are on your own". This was not a new experience for Joe who had suffered the same fate earlier in his life when his first boss sacked him the moment he finished his apprenticeship, "you're on your own", was the boss's comment, "but come back in 4 years and I will make you foreman"; both men knew Joe had to be able to make it on his own to succeed. *"Geoff's a hard nut, but with a heart of gold"* was Joe's summary of their friendship, he has a great deal of respect for Geoff Cowen.

During the 1993 breeding season Geoff asked Joe for a couple of Fed Futurity rings, Geoff gave one of the rings back to Joe with a bird attached, none other then 911, the QRPF 1994 Bird of the Year. Joe has got another two from Geoff the same way bred to race this year, and like 911 both are peds, a full brother is also in stock as well, so the bloodlines will continue to dominate the opposition in the future. It should be added that one of the two birds Joe clocked together at 3pm on the second day from the very hard Morney 730 mile race was also bred by Geoff.

Geoff Cowen made many trips to Sydney in his younger days getting to know many of the top southern flyers. Good racing pigeons could not be obtained here in Brisbane at that time, those that had them just would not release them to local flyers, so with Geoff's uncanny ability to pick a "good bird" just by its appearance, he set about obtaining his base stock birds from the top Sydney fanciers. Geoff's great talent at selecting top stock birds saw him selecting birds from the lofts of top flyers like Eric Gassman and Billy Holden. This resulted in the Booth Barkers and Van Cutsem bloodlines being brought to Brisbane and blended with the local Balfe Harrisons to form the family which is still raced today by both Geoff and Joe. Geoff feels he does not need any more birds to improve this family of pigeons, and particularly dislikes the latest "imports". These birds, he feels, are too many generations away from winners, and he does not trust the breeding details. In his opinion Australia is fast becoming a dumping ground for these birds.

Joe still races with the old Cowen bloodlines, and trains them the old way that Geoff showed him, but he has fine tuned his methods and tried a few new ideas which are working well for him. The ability to observe and interpret what the birds are feeling is the key to Joe's success. *"You can't get it right all the time but with close observation and correct interpretation of what you are observing you'll win more then you lose"*, This is the secret to Joe's success.

Approximately 120 youngsters are bred each year, and along with about 40 x 2 year olds go to make up the race team. Yearling cocks are raced, and raced very well, but he does not like older cocks as these are too difficult to handle with the limited time available to him. So most 2 year olds in the loft will be hens. Both the hens and the cocks are kept together all the time and raced that way, nesting is not encouraged but the occasional eggy hen is encountered, these are not sent until after the eggs are layed and some good results have come from these

birds. Given more time Joe would like to try racing more older cocks, as he feels given the right training, good results could be obtained with these birds, particularly in sprint racing.

The birds are line-bred to the old family, but any bird which takes Joe's fancy will be given a try as an outcross, if they "click" with his established family they stay, if not, out they go. A preferred type of bird is bred to, this being a slightly "keelly" bird, with a balanced tail, strong back or rump and good confirmation. Eye sign within the family is looked for, because from experience Joe knows when certain eye colours, such as a strong gold eye, pops up, the bird is likely to be carrying the right gene combination to be a good racer, additionally he likes to see a step between the secondary and primary wing flights of his birds, and the last three flights to be the same length and well ventilated, so much so that you can see the gap between the flights when the birds are flying. This family of birds are the same as he has raced for the past 12 years, and his breeding methods are designed to keep them strong, as they have proved their worth on the race track time and time again.

Before the start of the season the birds usually are given a good number of short tosses to educate them, but before the 1994 season, due to the large number of falcon attacks on the birds, Joe decided to limit the number of tosses and go straight out to 20 miles and then jump to 60 miles, which worked very well for him. During the race season they will be given a good 60 mile toss on the Sunday and a short mid week toss if required. Observation is the key, in 1994 once the birds reached the 420 mile stage Joe decided to stop tossing his birds, as he felt they were jaded and didn't need any more tossing, so he left them alone with an open loft, and they responded by winning the last three long distance races (see above).

The race birds are housed in a 40 ft long race loft, well ventilated but with the flow of air controlled, Joe does not like to see too much air movement within the loft. Sand is on the floor, with specially designed stainless steel plate under the perches at an angle, to catch the droppings and allow them be pushed outside where they can easily be scraped up. The front of the loft is open but the openings at the back are small to limit the air flow. The loft, which is divided into four compartments to help with the management of the race team, is cleaned once per week.

Very little medication is given to the birds as they have a very strong resistance to disease, which is shown by the fact he rarely sees any canker in the loft and never flocks treats for it. An occasional bird will come down with wet canker during the race season, these can be detected by close observation and treated individually or culled if they do not respond quickly to treatment. All race birds are given a course of antibiotics before the start of the season, but after this no further flock medications are given, other then 2 treatments for worms during the year. Multi-vitamins are given during the week if he feels the birds require them.

All birds are raced according to their response to his training methods, birds are not sent to the race unless they are in good condition, and he will not hesitate to hold a bird back and continue to condition it at home before jumping it into a race. Each week he will try to have a balanced team of birds, some from one week back, some from two weeks back, and some from up to 4 weeks back. If a bird shows good form it goes to the race each week if necessary, but if the form is not there, they are kept at home and conditioned until they are right.

The quality of the feed for the race birds is considered very important, and Joe will not hesitate to dump a bag of feed if he does not think it is good enough. A variety of grains are fed, with a heavy maize ration used, though the quantity of maize is adjusted according to the type of racing being experienced. The birds are given all they want to eat, but the feed is not left in front of them. In the early short races he will stop feeding them after about 20 or so birds have stopped eating and gone for a drink, other times the birds can eat all they want but the feed trays are removed after they finish eating.

In summary Joe proved to be first class pupil, responding well to the teachings of the old master, Geoff Cowen, however he has now moved on to become a first class flyer in his own right, as Geoff expected him to do. His advice to anyone starting out in this sport is to go to the best flyer in your area, but go there at the end of the racing season when you are more likely to obtain some top birds, pick a training system and stick to it, avoid to many changes and learn to observe your birds, they will tell you what to do if you learn to observe and interpret their behaviour.

Joe would like to see changes to the sport here in Brisbane, he feels the QRPF boundaries are too big, it is impossible for some flyers to win from certain directions, this is not a theory but a fact. Separate releases for the Fed Section's birds to educate them, in the short races, to fly a straighter line home is favoured, but he concedes the falcon and mountain problem around Brisbane makes this a risky business.