

Melbourne Magic

By Len Vanderlinde March 2006

Pigeon racing is a declining sport, but for those of us who participate, it is a very passionate hobby. It is time consuming and quite expensive, and therefore it is important to get the most out of it. One of its greatest pleasures is getting together with your fellow fanciers and discussing pigeons and racing.

An acquaintance of mine once said to me that one day the birds will be clocked-in automatically and the time transferred electronically to the clock reading centre (and I guess that time has already arrived in some overseas countries). He went on to say that we will no longer need to come down to the clubhouse at the end of a race. My answer was, that will be the day that I will give up pigeon racing, but why? he exclaimed! Well, I said, if I cannot enjoy the company of my fellow fanciers, congratulate the winner or receive congratulations if I was lucky enough to score. Have a drink or two and discuss pigeons with others, who understand what it is all about, then for me all the pleasure has gone. Competition from my fellow fanciers is what it is all about, lose that and it is all over.

Recently a group of fanciers from Brisbane and Sydney got together and organised a trip to Melbourne to meet and discuss pigeons with fanciers from that area. It was a great trip with plenty of laughs, good company and some great discussions with some of the best pigeon fanciers that race in the VHA. It is the kind of trip that binds friends together and enhances enthusiasm for pigeon racing.



The Group

Joe Caruana and myself caught a Virgin flight out of Brisbane and linked up with another Virgin flight from Sydney that carried our friends, Syd Gard, Chris Fernandos, Ray Reid, Graham Aston and George Rappis to Melbourne. We all plied into a 7 seat hire car at the Melbourne airport and made our way into Lygon St, one of Melbourne's café streets, where we had several rooms booked for the night. With our bags dumped in the rooms we headed out to the nearest pub for a refreshing ale or two. The Melbourneans don't have much of a selection when it comes to beer; VB or Carlton draft is about it. Still, on a hot day and it was 33 degrees that day.

anything thing cold goes down well.

Later that evening we set out to find a restaurant for a meal; those who know Lygon St can vouch for the number of restaurants that are available to choose from and the number of people that assemble in the area to eat. Apparently it was a quiet night by Lygon St standards but you could have fooled me, as we pushed our way through the crowds standing and sitting at the many tables along the footpaths on both sides of the road.

"Sprukers' were outside every establishment trying to entice us to eat at their place. I think the best offer Syd could get for us was 7 free Crown lagers and coffees all round if ate there. For some reason we couldn't get consensus on what we wanted to eat and so we walked the length of the street, had a beer in any pub we could find and ended up in Chinatown. One of us wouldn't eat Chinese, I am not going to say who but you know, don't you George! So we trudged back up Lygon St and finally settled on a small Italian place where the food was just ordinary and no free drinks.

We decided that package beer was a priority for the road trip over the next couple of days and so we managed to find an outlet that sold Melbourne bitter, which is easily the best beer in Victoria. The local Safeway store sold us a couple of insulated 'cold' bags to hold the beer and ice but we found out later that they leak badly when the ice melts.



At Keith Saggars

The next day we packed up and headed off to Cranbourne where we had booked into the Fourth Furlongs Motel opposite the Cranbourne racetrack for the next two nights. From here it was a short drive down to Keith Saggars Hillcrest Stud. We had arranged to meet Keith on that morning but while the dogs were barking loudly on our arrival there was no sign of their master. Fortunately Keith did finally make an appearance, apparently he hadn't got to bed to 3am that morning. He settled the dogs down, let the pony out from next to the breeding pens and proceeded to show us around.

Keith has some wonderful birds breeding at his stud and we got to handle many of them. The Smeulders Janssens, which have been the backbone of many Fed winners. The Silver Shadow Van Loons, the Gaby Vandenabeeles, one of the new rising stars. The Flor Engels, which Keith reckons will be the next big name in the winners circle along with Houbens and of course the Staff Van Reets, which continue to win all around Australia. As well as the import bloodlines Keith also has the Wickhams, Dordins and Jurions. All in all a large number of top class birds that are housed in numerous lofts that enclose the entire backyard. A very enjoyable visit ended about midday when Keith had to leave to pursue his pastime of clay pigeon shooting, a sport which he is very good at (we later heard that he won the shoot that day with a perfect score of 50 hits out of a possible 50). After Keith departed we hung around his front yard and enjoyed a couple of cold ones while



Deciding our next move

discussing the setup we had just inspected; it is thirsty work handling pigeons, apparently!

A big storm blew up outside while we enjoyed lunch at the fantastic club that overlooks the Cranbourne racetrack. This delayed our next visit to John Van Beers, so we had a couple of more drinks until it abated. Needless to say we took several wrong turns and ended up lost on what should have been a short drive to John's home. A quick call to John and he had us back on track and arriving at his place later than we planned. The rain kept up which did dampen the start but once inside John's lofts it was all good. Many people probably live in a lot smaller houses than John's loft. Stock birds are housed in the front section but are bred in individual pens located in another loft behind the main loft. The race birds are



John van Beers - Race Loft at dusk

housed in the back section of the high -pitched roof of the main loft where it is quiet and they cannot see out. The darkening system is used for the young bird team, which apparently is also used by all the best of the young bird fanciers in Melbourne. John was of the opinion that the darkening system sped up the body moult and at the same time stopped the birds moulting the main wing flights. It also keeps the birds very quiet and restful which appears to improve their body condition.

After inspecting the main loft it was out back to the breeding lofts with their individual pens and also a special loft that houses his Janssens. John races the old SA families from Bob Marchant and Alan Goodger with a Janssen cross. These birds have seen John win 18 Open Federation races, the most of any member in the VHA and therefore make him one of their very best flyers. We finished the visit to John's loft with a nice coffee and cake prepared by John's wife inside their very comfortable home. John is a very informative person with a great memory and some very good stories to tell. He learnt his trade by helping some of the best fanciers of yesteryear with their loft chores and has some great memories to share from these times.

Leaving John's we headed back to our motel and off to the RSL club for dinner and yeah a couple of beers as well. The local barmaid was very friendly and tried to get some of the lads to get up and dance with a couple of local lasses that wanted to move to the singer who was performing at the joint, but no chance with this lot of lead-foots.

Sunday morning and we headed over to Les Fentons', another of the VHA's best flyers, particularly with young birds. Les also uses the darkening system with young birds and showed us through his setup. The young birds, bred in December were through the body moult but still holding their flights and in very good condition, nice and rounded with clear skin on the breast. Even though it was only late February training had started and the birds had already completed about a dozen tosses in preparation for the start of young bird

racing on the 11 March, with 6 races leading up to the Derby from Jerilderie (320 klms) on the 22 April.



With Les Fenton

basis with good hot food always available. In fact so popular is the place they are having some trouble controlling the number of visitors from other clubs who drop in for a feed and chat from time to time. On clock reading nights the members gather around the PC screen to watch the live action as each VHA centre inputs their race results. I could just picture the cheers and boos as new velocities are added to the result, which either keeps their name up the top of the list or pushes them down the winner's list on the night.

All too soon it was time to leave but with 7 blokes to get into the car it was not easy to drag them away from the place. From that centre we followed young Jesse Egan, an up and coming flyer, over to Andrew Spiliopoulos' property. What a setup this man has, a builder by trade, all the buildings on his acreage are setup in the same theme with very high-pitched red colourbond roofs. The main race lofts looks for all the world like someone's house and I am sure many

would be happy to have a house like it. A large team of race birds is housed in the race lofts with the young bird team in the centre section, which can of course be darkened by dropping down panels at the side and the top. The main race team is kept on a deep litter system that Andrew has found works best for him.

From Les's place we headed over to the new 'Morning Mist' basketing centre. I went with Duncan McGreggorin his 'new' 4WD that is fitted with a special device that he blows in before the ignition will start. It made us a little late but we certainly enjoyed a great BBQ put on by the members of the two clubs who basket at that VHA centre. It really is well set-up and a real credit to the enthusiasm of the members who have completely refurbished and extended what use to be an old council toilet block on some land at the back of tennis courts. The centre is very popular with its members who meet there on a regular



Morning Mist



Andrew's Loft

Andrew also operates a racing pigeon stud under the name of Surrey Lofts (www.surreylofts.com) and houses a number of import bloodlines on the property. The stock loft consists of a number of separate pens inside a large building, which again has a high-pitched roof. Each pens has its own automatic watering system that is fed by a system of pipe work that automatically flushes a couple of times a day. After inspecting the wonderful setup we retired to the gazebo situated on a rise overlooking the property in all directions and with views out to the ocean away in the distance. A cold breeze strung up in the afternoon and it was easy to

imagine how cold it could be on a mid winters day with the wind coming in from across Bass Strait. A nice afternoon tea was served with a sausage sizzle to follow that went down well given how much we already eaten for lunch.

That was the end of our loft visits and with our flights heading home the next day we retired to the racetrack club (never did record what it was actually called) for a final debriefing over a light snack and of course a couple of obligatory ales. After a couple of hours we decided to call it a night and so with half eaten plates of food everywhere, that place has just got to learn what a light snack is, we headed back to the motel.

Early next morning a couple of us headed back down to Keith Saggars to pick-up a couple of youngsters that couldn't be resisted and then it was off to the airport. Which is a considerable drive away and yes, we missed the turn off to the freeway and spent a considerable amount of time stuck in traffic, which frustrated us all and had everyone jumping in with advice to poor old Syd who was driving at the time. Even when we did finally reach the airport we took a wrong turn on someone's advice and ended up in a car parking centre, where you need to pay a fee to get back out. When we did manage to escape the carpark but again missed the turn and so decided an illegal turn was necessary to correct the problem, which upset some local driver who went to the trouble of getting out of his car to tell us what he thought of our driving. Luckily Syd is a Garbologist by trade and after a mouthful of garage in return, we eventually did reach the airport in time, only to be told that the birds could not come into the airport. They had to be lodged down at a freight centre some distance from the main airport and at a cost of additional \$97.00. Seems dogs and cats can travel with you has personal luggage but birds cannot.

If you every get the chance to travel on one of these 'pigeon tours' don't miss the opportunity, they are well worth while and a great benefit to everyone involved, for they build a lot of relationships and good will. Air travel is so cheap these days, our Brisbane/Melbourne flights cost just \$89 each way, which means any destination in Australia is cost effective, look out Perth, here we come!!