



Catch the pigeon



BELOW: THEO VAN LIER IN FRONT OF HIS LOFT.

People have raced pigeons at least since Roman times and in Auckland a group of diehard fanciers are still competing. Simon Farrell-Green follows a race.

When nurseryman Theo Van Lier handles his pigeons it is with a deft firmness. In the green loft behind his house in Massey, he steps into a cage, stops for a moment then eyeballs his birds. He selects 2207 and with a calm yet swift reach of the arm takes it by the legs and holds it on its side. When he does so, the pigeon goes quite still.

He takes it outside, gently splaying the feathers of the wings to make sure it's healthy and then puts it in a wooden box with dowelling top and sides. He ducks each pigeon through a hole and into the box, where they strut around, constantly on the move, cooing insistently.

Van Lier is in his 40s, with an outdoorsy face and bottlebrush grey hair. He has been racing pigeons, on and off, since he was a boy and his older brother, Freddy, used to wander past the Henderson Racing Pigeon Club, then based near the Henderson Railway Station for easy rail-freighting of pigeons down the line. Freddy got

involved, and took his younger brother along.

Today, he's selecting a few birds to take to the club, where they'll be trucked to Otaki, a 435km race. Number 2207 is his best bet: after being raced "pretty hard" as a young bird, he's just coming back into his own. 2207 is sturdy looking, with a round barrel chest and a proud blush of green stretching down from his neck and he struts around in the cage.

Van Lier's pigeons don't look like common pigeons, which are darker and more furtive in their behaviour. These ones are a soft, bluey grey; some have sturdy chests but many are slender, with long necks and watchful eyes.

He breeds his own birds: they're good on medium to long distance races of 400-800km. A few years ago, he bought a bird from Australia at an auction that was descended from a famous line bred by a family in Holland, the Janssens. It cost about \$700. "I think it's left me a better pigeon." He gets a few more birds out of the loft and fills up a second box. "That'll do me," he says.

THE HENDERSON RACING Pigeon Club is quartered in what used to be the tote at the Avondale Racecourse. It's a small, cream, slightly dingy building. Van Lier gets there around 6.30pm, the first to arrive. The racecourse's car park is filling up for housie, which is popular with the local Pacific Island community.

Van Lier unlocks the door. Inside, it's dim. The walls are unpainted and the wooden booths where the bet-takers used to sit are still there; behind each wooden shutter is an ancient set of instructions for the punters and on one someone has scrawled "Kentucky Fried Pigeon". In one corner is a big, white and red sign: "*RACING PIGEONS a fascinating and educational hobby.*"

Down one side, stacked on a bench, are the metal boxes that the club use to transport the pigeons. Behind the main room, there's a comfortable lounge, with a velvet painting of a comely maiden, a bar, some couches and a picture of A.B. Beverage, president 1961.

The club has about 15 flying members left — well down on the 40 or so it numbered in its heyday, when it was a real workingman's sport. As Van Lier lines one of the boxes with fresh newspaper, he asks if I have any hobbies. Er, no, not really, I say. "That's one of the things that modern-day society has created," he says, in a voice that tells you he has said this many times before. "We just don't spend any time together. Hobbies [are] going shopping on the weekend."

One also suspects neighbours are also more likely to call the council. Infilling in Auckland has driven some pigeon racers to seek lifestyle blocks, "where they've got a lot of room and they're not going to antagonise a little old lady who hangs her washing out and then pffft!" says Van Lier. "You know."

Tonight isn't a major race. The weekend before, the club raced to Christchurch and consequently, many of the members are resting their birds. It's also November, nearing the end of the "old bird" season so the birds are getting tired. (The "new bird" season, using young birds



TOP: THEO (LEFT) AND FREDDY VAN LIER (RIGHT) AT THE HENDERSON RACING PIGEON CLUB.

hatched the previous spring, runs in early winter.) “There won’t be many birds tonight,” he says. Still, there’s a steady trickle as members come in, and jocularly. “Where’s Billington?” asks one member. “Probably off making money,” replies another.

One younger racer, John Stabert, wearing workman’s shorts and a polo shirt with the logo of his copper roofing business on it, had a call earlier in the day from a woman near Cape Reinga to tell him that his pigeon had been found up there. There’s only one thing for it: he’ll have to drive north to get it. The last time this happened, they had it freighted down “and it cost 40 bucks or something!” He gets a lot of ribbing for this.

“Too far!” says Laurie Hill, an older bloke in grey

slacks and a blue polo shirt, face leathered from the sun. “They should have turned left at Auckland!”

As the men come in, they find a spot around the tote and then begin to prepare their birds. Some use an electronic system to register their birds, in which each bird has a leg-band with a number, which is passed across a pad at the club, and entered into your clock, which is synched up with a GPS timepiece for accuracy. When the bird arrives back at the loft, it passes across another pad, which gives time to the millisecond.

The old way is more charming. The birds are taken out of the box, and their leg is passed through a spring-loaded clamp which drops a small, green rubber band on their leg. The race number is entered by hand on a

club sheet against the pigeon’s number. An old-fashioned lock-up clock, sealed with tin wire and a copper sheath — “the old post office system” as Hill calls it — is synchronised using the “peeps” that play on the hour on National Radio. This is known as “striking in” and the clock starts ticking, locked until the birds arrive at the other end.

Then, you take off the rubber band, drop it into the timepiece, and “strike” the bird in. The time is recorded on a piece of paper inside. When you open it, the piece of paper tears, stopping the clock. The winning of races is calculated by velocity: the average speed over a given distance, which allows for the different distances between lofts. Even so, some races are good and some bad: in a westerly, it’s hard for the Henderson club, whose birds have to fight the wind across Auckland, while racers in the south and east are home.

Back in the early days of New Zealand pigeon racing, it was based on rail. Clubs were usually found close to railway stations and pigeons were carted around the country on trains. Even today, the clubs still fly down the old trunk line to Te Kuiti, Otaki, Otorohanga and further. It’s partly history, partly pragmatism: pigeon fanciers have found that they lose more birds on the East Coast, speculating that they get confused by the Urewera Ranges or follow the Coromandel Peninsula, winding up at Great Barrier Island.

When fanciers train birds, they take them further and further down that line. Research has shown that pigeons fly in straight lines but with waypoints on the journey. Smart little buggers, but easily manipulated: racers have techniques to make birds fly faster. Sometimes, they’ll send out a pigeon that is sitting on an egg, which makes it anxious to get home.

Other times, they use the “widow” technique, which involves taking the ladies away from the blokes and returning them when the blokes are back from training. “Once they get the idea they do try and get home quicker,” says Van Lier, who still believes a good pigeon is born with the instinct, but needs honing. “You can see them when they come in and go straight into the loft.”

As the men get ready, there’s a companionable, easy familiarity and you know they’ve been doing it for a long time. Standing at a bench, passing his birds across the time pad, Theo van Lier then hands his birds to a man in green Stubbies, who puts them into the metal boxes, hens in one and cocks in another. “Cock or hen?” he asks. He strokes the pigeon from the top of the head and down to the tail. “Ohhh,” he says admiringly. “They’re not in bad nick.” He puts it in the metal box, picks up a piece of chalk and makes a stroke on the front so they know how many are there.

By a little past seven, the boxes are filling up and Eric Billington, who drives a pristine black Jaguar XJS and carries his birds about in a cane carrier, rolls in. “Here we are!” Stubbies cries. “I was getting worried about you!”

“Shut your face,” Billington replies amiably.

Van Lier starts to register Billington’s birds. A little later, I ask him if he gets nervous. “Oh, nah!” he says. “The funny thing is, when a pigeon’s on form, you can see it. They look sharper. Sharper-eyed. A bit tighter in



CLUB MEMBERS CHECK A PIGEON'S LEG BAND FOR ITS IDENTITY NUMBER.

the body. The feathers have a bit more shine to them.”

Freddy Van Lier, Theo's older brother, arrives with his partner and young son. The son has carrot-orange hair and red gumboots, and runs about the place with a red plastic pistol. “Give me a drink,” he cries, “or I'll shoot you!” Freddy, the others joke, is the most disorganised member of the club. He bustles about, getting ready. His birds are brown with white speckles.

About 7.30, the men take a scaffold out into the carpark and begin to put it together. Then, the Auckland Racing Pigeon Federation truck arrives. It's a single-bodied truck, with a white cab and a flat deck on which there are tall metal racks into which the metal pigeon boxes slide. A bar with spikes on it holds the boxes in place when you fold it up. Tonight, the

club's sending nine boxes of birds down the line. Hand over hand, they pass the cooing boxes out of one of the tote windows — specially widened for this purpose — and out to the scaffolding and on to the truck. In no time, the truck has driven off, watched by bemused smokers on the racecourses balconies taking a break from housie.

The pigeon racers adjourn for beer in the lounge. Hill's been racing since 1945. He gave it away for a time when he married: his wife grew up above a shop in Papatoetoe and the grocer next door had pigeons that he used to talk to. “She thought everyone who had pigeons was mad.” After a few years, he wanted to get back into it so he built a loft at his nursery in Papatoetoe and then installed it in the backyard when

she was out. “You're not having pigeons!” she told him. “It's them or me!”

“Well, where are you going to go?” he replied. She gave him a month. The pigeons stayed.

At 8 o'clock, Hill counts down with National Radio's beeps. “5, 4, 3, 2, 1... Strike!” There are several rapid turns of the wrist as the clocks are turned on. They turn off the radio and people start to wage their bets for the coming race. As they drift out, Billington tells me that pigeons have a bad rep. “They're called the rats of the sky,” he says. “But look what they've done for mankind!” Since the Romans used them in battle for communication they've been used for transporting messages — Freddy Van Lier used to run the Great Barrier Pigeon Post — and the Chinese still put red whistles in the tail feathers of white pigeons for entertainment. (Billington plans to import some whistles and breed some white pigeons for hire.)

He also tells me about the slightly less palatable end of pigeon racing. Pigeons race for just three or four years, but live until they're 15 or 16. Er, what do you do with them then, I ask, conscious that if you simply let them go they'd just come back. If you keep them, you get too many pigeons, and poor quality from uncontrolled breeding. “There's too many pigeons out there,” says Billington. But, “as soon as you mention disposing of pigeons, then you've got a problem.”

In fact, most pigeons are put to sleep although good fliers with good lineage will be kept as breeding birds. Some fanciers use a needle, others do it with a snap of the wrist. Billington prefers to put two sacks with a couple of pigeons in the bottom over the exhaust pipe of the Jag. “It's pretty quick. There's no brutality.”

THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY, I show up at Van Lier's to watch the pigeons come in. He calculated earlier in the week that they'd be in by 1pm and then rang on Saturday morning to say they'd been liberated earlier. I arrive at midday, and we sit at a table outside in the sun, staring at the loft. Every time a bird flies over, even if it's just a starling, our heads snap around.

At 12.20, Van Lier's mate Hank from Drury rings to say that his birds are in and Van Lier calculates that there's about 20 minutes before his birds get in. The wind is mainly in the west, with a bit of a southerly.

At 12.50, Van Lier's birds still aren't in. “Oh, they're a bit late,” he says. At 1.15, he says, “Well this is not good.” Then, in comes one bird, approaching from the west over the loft, gracefully riding the wind currents downward in a series of fluid yet rapid and powerful turns. “She must have worked hard,” he says.

The pigeon sits on the top of the loft for a bit; Van Lier whistles, and then the bird goes through the hole and there's a beep as it passes the pad. It's not 2207: rather, it's 438, a young bird. Later, it will turn out Van Lier has come “dead last” in the club. “Probably my worst performance in 10 years.”

Van Lier goes up to the loft and puts some food on the ground. There is a great kerfuffle as the birds feed; they use their wings to muscle in over each other. He returns to his chair and a cup of tea, and waits for the next bird.