

HOW TO BEAT THE UNBEATABLES

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I get asked all sorts of questions about bird keeping, some predictable, others less so. The other day it was on the subject of winning at shows. How do we stop so-and-so from winning? "Have you tried running over him with a ten-ton truck?" I responded. It wasn't a Yorkie fancier, so it didn't matter anyway! Seriously, it started me thinking about why I took up my hobby, and the enjoyment I get from it.

In my case bird keeping was in my blood, although I did not know this when I started out as a nine years old boy, as it skipped a generation - my grandfather was a birdman, but my father did not take up the hobby himself.

Boyhood enjoyment

As a youngster, I enjoyed caring for my stock, and the excitements around breeding time, as the new chicks emerged from their shells and eventually fledged, before molting out into mature birds. I enjoyed joining a CBS club, and attending the monthly meetings where I was able to meet other, like-minded people, all of whom lived locally, and whom I could visit if invited.

I enjoyed the exhibition side of the hobby too, and at all levels. Starting as a junior, I later graduated to the Novice ranks, before attaining Champion status. Over a period of time, I showed my birds throughout the country, and made many new friends.

I enjoyed a solid induction into bird keeping that was not centered around the 'must win' philosophy that seems to be prevalent today. It was more important that I continued to make solid progress, whether that was on the exhibition bench, or in the breeding room.

It was not until later that I began to notice how certain fanciers seemed to be more successful on the show bench than others. At Novice levels, I knew of one fancier (now deceased) who regularly withdrew certain birds from his show team, saying they were off color, so he was taking them home. That was in the days when fanciers benched birds on the evening before the show, affording the chance of a 'pre-show' preview. I later learned that particular fancier was extremely successful as a Novice - and had been for more than 40 years. He was just one win from being forced to turn Champion and so was protecting himself, by withdrawing any birds he expected could cost him his final 'life'. "He doesn't think he's ready yet" chuckled my companion, "but I don't know what the other Novices think."

To win at any cost

I noticed that other fanciers would have a different show team out each week. How can they keep so many birds? I wondered, before realizing they were buying in birds specifically to win at the shows. Hollow victories, I thought, especially when I learned of certain fanciers who were 'borrowing' entire show teams to exhibit throughout the season, before returning them to their

rightful owners in time for next year's breeding season to commence. Cheating, just so they can beat me, I smiled, thinking how sad they were.

Then of course, there were the fanciers who paid kings ransoms for birds, exhibiting them and breeding with them, as they improved their studs. As a youngster, I could not afford that, and my dad thought four pounds was a bit steep for a canary, even though he paid that princely sum for my Christmas present one year in the 1960's. There is nothing wrong with buying the best you can afford, and of course that is good advice in all walks of life, for example, housing, cars, etc. We all make choices, and we all have to live by the results.

Overall, the more competitive shows taught me an important lesson. It was to take enjoyment from what you have, and your hobby in general, without the pressures of winning. Shows are generally over in a day, but bird keeping goes on all year round.

I learned that by helping at the various clubs, I gained even more enjoyment, although there were some weekends when I would see very little of the show, or how my own team had fared, because I was busy in the administrative side of my hobby. Overall, it put me in touch with more fanciers, and increased the pleasure I gained from my hobby.

Back to the original question though - just how do you stop somebody winning? By beating them at their own game, is the answer.

If individuals are dominating the show scene, then study their show teams and see why they are so much better than the competition. The odds are that they win because of three things, firstly preparation - clean healthy exhibits displayed to perfection in exquisite cages. Secondly, the exhibits will have a 'touch of class' about them, glowing plumage, a jaunty action, or peerless position for example, and each bird will be thoroughly at home in the show hall, as it goes through its paces. Thirdly, each bird will resemble its brothers and sisters throughout the owners show team, as they will all be closely related, and bred for the job. Each will resemble or some would say, exceed the ideal model, and whilst some will be better than others, overall, they will each have similar characteristics. It does not matter what the variety is, these components all go towards making the ideal show bird, and if a good showman gets it right with one bird, the chances are that he will also get it right throughout his entire show team.

So, rather than ask how do we beat him, it is more important to ask yourself, what have his birds got that does not exist in your own stock - then work hard to improve. You need to work harder than he does - he already has all the elements to continue his or her success, whilst you have to try to obtain the missing X factor - and then have to blend it successfully into your own stock in order to beat the opposition. The 'king' only needs to repeat the same and similar pairings to maintain his progress, so you can see that success will not be easily come by, and it will not be quick.

ambition, drive, and the businesslike pursuit of a hobby in a non-amateurish manner. Most importantly, to be able to recognize, and therefore to set trends at an early stage, means that the leading fanciers are working hard to stay that one jump ahead. In short, they are developing their favorite breeds, and backing their own judgement by leading from the front. And to get past them, in the first instance you need to grab onto their coat-tails.

So, make time to discuss birds with the leading fanciers of your favorite breed. In particular, ask them to discuss your own birds, rather than theirs, and suggest what is missing, and how to improve. You will learn a great deal, but the truth may hurt. Listen to what they say, then make your own judgements. If they have a bird that may help you, ask to see it, or at least get onto their list for next year. And look around the show hall. Excepting the dedicated workers, the people not paying any attention to the birds are there to be beaten, whilst those only interested in their own birds are the ones to avoid: they can see their own stock any day, and unless they already have the best birds in the show, they are missing the point that others too have some- thing worthwhile to contribute.

Of course, there is an element of luck.

Keep on going at the top

It is always harder to judge an early show than it is to judge at a show later in the season. This is because all the birds are unknown, some are perhaps not properly trained, whilst others have not quite finished their molts. Nevertheless, a winning bird at an early show will often continue to win at later events throughout the season. Why? Firstly, because it has been 'recognized' by other judges, who may subconsciously be tempted to give it the benefit of the doubt against other unknown birds, and secondly and more importantly, because it has 'been there before', and knows exactly how to behave whilst the crucial judging process is going on. That is down to show temperament, and that too, needs to be bred into your stock, as much as any other quality.

Again, the proven winner has it, and the 'wannabee' does not.

So how do we finally beat the unbeatable? With great patience, and a lot of luck. Meanwhile, why not admire their birds, and enjoy their company and your hobby - that is what you are in it for, after all.