

# Vision, Future, Revolution

by Mark Lyford



## A Bit About Me

I was 12 years old. I became hooked by racing pigeons. Properly hooked! I found it so amazing that a little yearling hen flew 512 miles from Lerwick back to her loft to me. Wow! Nothing could describe the feeling. 32 years on ... although I'm not keeping any birds at the moment, I am still hooked and I hope to be starting in the sport again soon. I plan to get a good stock loft together and compete in one loft races. I bought and sold pigeons from the age of 14, and it was through them that I made the journey to entrepreneurship. Since then I have made and lost millions in pounds in various businesses but all through these years pigeons have remained my passion.

## An Introduction

Although I haven't kept birds for a few years, I still have my magazine via subscriptions which I look forward to reading each week and I keep an eye on social media and know what's going on. On 17th March 2019 I saw history happen: the sale of Armando for over £1,000,000. I have said since 1988 that one day we would see a million pound pigeon and it finally happened. I then saw people commenting about the sale. It all then started and my Facebook has gone a little mad since. I have since put two videos out and together they have had nearly 4,000 views as I write this. Many people have agreed with me about much of what I am writing about. As a result of the last week's events and combined with my passion for these amazing birds I have decided that I'm going to do all I can to help this great sport. Some people already agree with many of my thoughts, yet I am equally sure many more won't agree. Everyone has their own opinion and they are within their rights to have them, however I think we have some major issues with the sport, specifically here in the UK. I want to use my skills, experience and determination to succeed and do as much as I can to see some big changes take place. So, here we have it: a manifesto if you will and perhaps one that someone may actually stick to; unlike the many political manifestos we're all familiar with. These are my thoughts and my plan for the vision, future and revolution that needs to happen for this sport to not just survive, but to thrive.

## What's Wrong?

So, what's wrong with this sport? Well, the numbers don't lie and within the UK, the numbers are actually dire. In 1989 there were over 60,000 registered RPRA members, now, there are just 21,000. Two thirds less people now are in the sport than there were 30 years ago. It doesn't take a genius to figure out if we have another 10 years with numbers going down by an average of 5% a year (as they did last year) we will soon run out of members. And any membership is a number's game; at some point it becomes an unrealistic option to continue. Who wants to see that? I know I don't. With these numbers our sport could be all but dead within 20 years. I'm 44 now and I don't want to hit my 60s with that as a reality. We need change. We need forward thinking. We need more vision. We need to embrace technology. We need to stop thinking in the past ('the good old days' were not as good as you may think they were).

## Stigma

Like it or not, our great sport of pigeon racing has a stigma. Unfortunately, if you say you're racing pigeons to a member of the public, they still think of flat caps and your grandad with his whipper at the side of him. In my teens people would regularly think it funny that I kept racing pigeons. Nothing about that stereotype has really changed for 30 years. The issue has to be addressed. People need to realise we are racing the equivalent of thoroughbred racing horses they just fly instead of gallop. They are athletes. And nothing whatsoever to do with the hordes of street peckers they see in public places. It's like comparing race horses to donkeys. They also need to know this: the general public and media over a long period of time have stigmatised our sport and our great birds. What can we do to change it? Well, I think there is a lot we can do. But more on this later on.

## Trends

10-20 years ago the sport of darts was nearly as stigmatised as the sport of pigeon racing. That has all changed now. Darts gets more mainstream media focus than many other sports and, more importantly, it gets members of the public who have never thrown a dart in their lives watching darts on TV with many thousands of people going to live events year on year. What changed? One thing changed the sport of darts: Money. Well, money and marketing/promotion. All things in a commercial sense have trends and there are many sports that never

used to be trendy but which now are. Horse racing has always had a massive following but more and more nowadays you see people going to the races for a day out. Golf is the same: some would say watching golf on TV is very boring, but it gets millions of people watching it at any one time.

Why can't we make pigeon racing have a trendy image? Well, I think over a realistic period of time, with the right things in place, with some big changes and with a lot of work we can make pigeon racing something members of the public see as a great thing to get involved with and something that will see many new people getting interested.

## Fanciers

We are 'pigeon fanciers' right? Well, we shouldn't be. It is an outdated terminology. Controversial maybe, but a very real problem in my opinion. I have a 15 year old son who at the age of 12 went to his first Blackpool Show and brought his first birds. He was hooked, just like I was. But there is no way he would ever call himself a 'pigeon fancier'. If anyone ever asked him he would say he kept racing pigeons. The word 'fancy' has a very different meaning to most people of any age, especially people under 30. It says you like a human being in a sexual sense. Not that you keep pigeons. We need to change this terminology. We are pigeon keepers, breeders, trainers, owners. This is what we need to be calling ourselves. In the last week of massive publicity our sport has got in almost all publications I have seen talk about the pigeon fancier. Not cool. Not good. Not the right terminology. It needs to change.

## Re-Framing

We need to re-frame our entire sport. Especially in the UK. Pigeon keepers and breeders in European countries don't have as much of the stigma we do here in the UK. It's more respected, it's more accepted and in countries like Belgium and Holland it's almost revered in some areas. We need to re-frame our sport both internally within our community and to the outside world. There are lots of things wrong with the sport at the moment. But there are lots of great things about it too. Every single one of us needs to think slightly differently. How can we promote what we love doing in a positive manner? How can we drag it into the current century? We all need to help re-frame our thinking.

## Big Money Birds

The sale of big money birds like Armando are gold to our sport. They are a great thing. Plain and simple. There isn't a single negative thing about it. Big money bird sales give the sport more promotion than it could ever wish to have. The mainstream media all over the UK and in many parts of the world have been covering the €1,250,000 sale of a bird in the last few weeks. You can't buy publicity like that. It creates an interest second to none. The key to this is however momentum. We need to keep the momentum going. People will remember the sale of a £1,000,000 pigeon for years to come. They will remember it until the world record is next broken. Having big money birds doesn't mean people who can't afford thousand on birds can't compete though. That's a ridiculous theory in my opinion. And I'll explain why. First of all, big money birds is about supply and demand. It was also in this case. It was about two Chinese people fighting out between themselves. Even the auctioneers didn't expect to see a seven figure sale price. Two people valued that bird at one million pounds. That doesn't mean that a £100 bird (or offspring from the £100 bird) could not compete with Armando's offspring. How many times have you seen a low cost horse, an outsider, beating seven figure horses in races? The same applies in pigeon racing. Big money birds ultimately are a business. But it doesn't mean the hobby disappears because there is a league of big money birds. There will still be many birds being sold every year in the BHW that with the right environment, training and care can compete against any big money birds' offsprings. The more big money birds get sold, the more publicity and marketing we get. We need to make sure any sale of big money birds is well publicised. Bring on the big money bird sales I say!

## What's Wrong With Money?

For years, certain people in the sport seem to have a problem with money. I have no idea why. Most people need money to live and have a life. People work for a living, for money, not normally for the love of it. There seems to be a major anti-capitalism sector of pigeon people out there. I have no idea why. Money and business is good for pigeon racing. We need more of it. We need more money, we need more business, we need more entrepreneurs in the game. And before anyone says money spoils the sport or hobby I will refer back to football. We

have the premier league with big money players and yet at the same time we have hundreds if not thousands of Sunday league games where the players are playing for nothing more than the love of the game, nothing to do with money. The same should be applied to our sport. Maybe we need different racing leagues some would say? I think that succeeding at our sport there is far more to it than just money thrown at birds.

#### **Hobby/Sport vs. Business**

It is true, nowadays there are professional flyers. Good I say. When I get back to flying in one loft races I will make it my goal to beat the pro flyers birds. Competition makes me want to beat others. If I'm beaten in any area of my life I will just work out a way to make sure I don't get beaten and level up or beat the people that used to beat me. The same mentality should be adopted for a healthy mindset when it comes to anything really. Some people keeping pigeons will never have an interest in getting money from it, and that's fine. Some people will. Some people will be driven by doing the best with their birds and as a bonus will be financially rewarded for it. Both types of people are great for our sport and they can co-exist together. Why is it a problem that we have businesses, sportsmen and hobby flyers all together? I don't think there should be a problem.

#### **The Past**

Listen, we all do it sometimes, we all think the past was better. "When I was your age", oh the good old days and all that. When actually, the reality was we probably over glamourise how good the past was. Either way, this sport needs to stop living in the past. It needs to move forward, it has to move forward. No ifs, no buts. It simply has to make sure things get better for all and for long term sustainability.

I hear the phrase 'working men' a lot. I have, for the last 30 years within this sport. True working men are in this sport and yes, it ultimately gets more expensive to keep birds but the working men argument can only go so far. It's almost like if you're not selling birds, products or services for 'working men' you are bad and a capitalist horrible person. It comes back to this resistance of money things I talked about earlier.

If you are a normal 'working man' you can do your best, train your birds, give them the best you can and still compete with more higher level money flyers. Can't you? If you say no, why not? Like I say, big money birds do not mean anything other than the value someone has placed on them. Why can't you be the normal flyer who beats and competes with the big money guys and show them what you are made of? (Then you can turn around and sell them your big money birds). Imagine how good that would feel. :)

#### **Governance**

During my mini social media storm of last week I was contacted by Ian Evans (CEO of the RPRA for any of you who don't know). We had an interesting chat. I was struck by how much this man wants to make changes and see this sport turn around. One of the big things that came out of this call for me after was the that governance of the sport (specifically in the UK and Ireland) is all screwed up. There is no other way of describing it. There should be one person, one vote. Whereas at the moment a club may send a representative to the regional meetings (a lot don't) and then those regions report to the 22 people on the board of the RPRA. Then the board votes on things only twice a year. How screwed up is that? How can an organisational structure like that expect to be proactive and make things happen? They will just end up being reactive many months too late. This has to change. From speaking to Ian however I'm not sure how it can change. People seem to be saying one thing and doing something else. Why would that be? Maybe people are worried about losing positions within this total mess of a structure? After thinking about it, my opinion is that it should be one member one vote system, everyone is encouraged to vote with a slimmed down board of 6-10 people sitting on it. Those board members are elected every three years. At the moment we have a heavy, slow governance structure. Change needs to happen. Change has to happen.

I'm someone who likes to get things done. I have a lot of respect for what I see Ian Evans trying to do; some would say he's fighting a losing battle. But he is fighting. And I don't see him giving up until he starts to make progress. He has already started implementing some good things and I for one think he is a great guy to do this.

#### **Club Rules?**

I have been amazed by some of the stories people have relayed to me over the last week or so about major issues at club level. The level of perfectly decent people being denied membership of a club is astounding. How can this be allowed to happen? Unless a person is proven to have cheated or committed a fraudulent offence, all clubs should allow that person in (in my opinion). Mentality needs to change. It has to happen from the top down. Lead by example.

#### **Looking Forward**

Ok, so enough of all the negative stuff I hear you say. So, let's talk about the future and the positive things that can be done as part of this manifesto of mine. Here it goes.

#### **Sport Recognition**

I have a very nice call from Derek Walsh in Ireland on Saturday. I had never spoken to Derek before and only just made Facebook friends with him the day before. Derek brought up a good point. Our sport needs to be officially recognised as a sport. If we can make this happen, big things become a lot easier to do. He suggested a group of six people should be put together to put a good case to the relevant government

organisation in the UK and Ireland that pigeon racing should be recognised as a sport. I agree. It should happen. After all, horse racing is a recognised sport, greyhound racing is too, so why not pigeon racing? With a good fact based case study an agreement can be put to demonstrate our sport should be recognised as a sport. It would open up a world of possibilities and I think it's something we should be working on to make happen.

#### **Charity & Non Profit Organisations**

The sport of pigeon racing and pigeon people do a massive amount of work for charities every year. I don't think this is publicised enough. The media should know about this. It needs to be put out there what good people we have in this sport who care about others. Also I think there is a good argument to create a non-profit organisation within our sport with the sole goal of raising money to be kept within our sport and to have two main objectives: The first being the raising of awareness of our sport and promote it. The second is to fund new members to get involved.

#### **Vision**

We need a new vision. I have a new vision. I need other people to have the same vision. Already I have a group of people who agree with most of what I say and who have already pledged their support for some of the ideas I have. No more looking back, always looking forward. We need a vision that means our sport and great hobby not only survives but thrives for years to come. Who wants to just survive? I know I don't. Surviving is boring, horrible and no fun. Thriving is what makes people get excited about life and whatever they're doing. We need to collectively get a vision for this great thing to make big things happen. And without delay. I have a vision. I can help, but I need as many people with me to help make it a reality. We already have some visionaries within our sport. Some of them however seem to get put back by the bloodsucking haters and trolls around who suck all the energy out of them until they just decide to give up. Don't give up! As we all know it, if it were easy, everybody would do it. The brothers who own pipa.be in Belgium are visionaries. They have single handedly made changes to the sport and business of pigeon racing forever. They are great marketers and have grown a great business out of promoting the birds out there. I don't look at those guys thinking 'damn capitalists'! I look at them and think well done both of you. Keep it going, it's helping us all at different levels. They are people I would like to get involved in our vision of how things can change in the UK and Ireland. I'm positive that over a realistic period of time we can be producing birds in the UK and Ireland that are sought after world wide. We have some of the best racing birds in the world, birds that have tough races to compete in, birds that some would argue are better for stamina than any European birds. We need to market these birds and our best breeders ad flyers and make the world know about them. That's part of the vision that needs to happen. Let's put the UK on the world-wide maps. The UK and Ireland have for years taken a back seat to European countries like Belgium and Holland. It's time the tide turned and we get the great birds, flyers and breeders recognised for what they are. Great birds and great people that deserve to be snapped up just like Armando was last week.

#### **Social Media, China & The EU Divide**

It's very obvious that there is a thriving community of racing pigeon people on Facebook these days, something when I was a 14 year old lad we could never think about. I now have people from all of the world that have a common interest the same as me. Think about that for a minute, how cool is that? I had 1,200 people on my Facebook pigeon profile a week ago. I now have over 3,100 people! In a week! Mainly because I've been connecting with people and the two videos I put out have been shared a great deal. How cool is that? We are so lucky to live a world of social media and technology. But, it's not all great and I will tell you why. We have a major divide still. And although here in the UK we may end up having a big divide of our own at some point with our EU counterparts, our social media community will live on no matter what happens with Brexit. The fact is that China is the biggest market for racing pigeons in the world. Hands down, more young people are coming into the sport than ever before in China and more money is bet and spent on birds than ever before. The two bidders who bid Armando up to seven figures were both Chinese. Now here is a big problem, which a lot of people don't know. Twitter and Facebook are banned in China. Yes, banned. If you are in China, you cannot access these networks legitimately. That creates a massive divide for us and our sport. Both on a personal level but also commercially. I'm not aware of what pigeon based publications they have in China, maybe someone can tell me, but I know there is a big divide created because of some of these restrictions.

This got me thinking. Why is there not a Facebook-type social network just for pigeon racing? More on that later. We need to narrow the divide and truly globalise our position in the UK, Ireland and the EU.

#### **Technology**

We are living in the most exciting technological age in the history of our world. I constantly still get excited by the technology we have available to use and the new technology coming out all the time. It helps that I live and breathe a lot of this technology within my business life but I am seriously blown away by some of the technology that is out there and being developed. We as a sport and community need to be embracing all the technology that is available to us. I remember when ETS system first came out. The backlash and trash talking about these

systems was immense. "It's not far, it's not pigeon racing" people used to say. Now fast forward many years, they are pretty much mainstream and accepted. Times do change. Technology changes things and technology keeps getting better. I see Benzing doing some big things with online live results. This is the future guys. This is what we need to be developing and integrating into our sport.

#### **Data**

We live in a data driven world. Facebook isn't a social media company really, it's a data and advertising company. The social media offering it gives us all is just the tool. It's used to generate the data it wants and the subsequent advertising revenue it gets (Reportedly over \$200 Million USD a day now). We need to embrace data and seriously think how we can use it to our advantage.

I hear from Ian Evans that the RPRA is going to be rolling out a new database which will be cloud-based on the internet. This is a great move. I also hear that finally you will soon be able to make transfers online too. These are great steps in embracing technology that is out there. But we can do more. Far more.

You may not have heard of something called Blockchain. It's the same technology that powers Bitcoin. Maybe you have heard of that. Imagine this: Imagine that every result at club, federation and national level around the world could be put easily onto a database ledger and that data be accessible to everyone anywhere in the world. To take it a step further: every bird, every piece of information about the birds, its ancestry, combined with its race results or its breeding results (and even its DNA) could be embedded on this Blockchain system. Without getting too technical, grids could be digitalised in this system and even tokenised. If you own the data on your computer or phone, you essentially own the bird. The sky is the limit with this stuff. I know a lot about this technology I have been in the Bitcoin, Crypto Currency and Blockchain space for over six years now and the potential to do so many things within pigeon racing using this (and other technology) is mind blowing.

#### **The World**

There are reportedly one million pigeon flyers/breeders in the world. That's a good number of people to try and connect together. Facebook did it for the world. We can (and should) be doing it for our own pigeon world. I think with hard work, smart thinking and the right people that one million world-wide community could be 3-4 million within 10 years.

#### **One Loft Races**

As I have already said, I won't be flying and racing birds myself. When I start again, I will breed birds to put into one loft races. I simply don't have the time to race myself and I think I am typical of a lot of people. I'm sure there's a lot of members of the public who may over time like the idea of owning some birds but not having to care for them.

I was lucky enough to visit the South African Million Dollar race lofts in its first year of existence; back then this was revolutionary. I also visited the San Diego Classic One Loft Race and one in Las Vegas. These really were the only three One Loft races in the world at the time. I knew it was a winning formula back then but it took years and years for people to come round to the idea. Fast forward and we now have new One-Loft Races launching every year.

I think One-Loft Races are great for this sport. They level the playing field for people so location and differences in stances and conditions are no longer a factor. Now I know one loft racing is not for everyone and each to their own, that's fine. I think there is a major potential to attract non pigeon people to get involved in one loft races. People have syndicates in horses. Why not pigeons? Why can't someone own a breeding pair of birds and all their young birds be interested into one loft races? The member of the public don't have to keep birds and don't have to worry about the care of them. Instead lofts are kept to house birds owned by other people. Just the same as some horse racing stables do. There are some issues with one loft races as a spectator sport. After all the race isn't over in 5-10 minutes like horse racing but I think there are things that can be done to make it better. Races could have short warm up races until the big event or even happening while the main event birds are flying. There are lots that can be done. There are some new people that would like to keep birds but couldn't spend the time to train them. One loft races are great for this type of person. There is so much good about these types of races. I actually planned to set up a one loft race in the Bahamas when I was 19 years old. It never happened but I did have a meeting with Sir Freddie Laker to discuss it and him getting involved. He was up for supporting it at the time. Such a nice guy.

The Bahamas is a favourite place of mine, I used to live there. I still like the idea of having a One-Loft Race there one day. Maybe one day I will make it happen.

I'm now waiting for the first One Loft Race to offer \$1 million 1st prize. It will happen. I don't know when, but it will happen. Can you imagine the publicity you could get to the mainstream media when the first prize for winning a pigeon race could make you a millionaire?

#### **Betting**

Betting is a massive business. In sport it's the biggest. Horse racing have it, greyhound racing have it. Why not pigeon racing? It should (and can be) done. Practically the technology is there to do it, with the right licensing it could be done. I think betting should become a reality in our sport. Imagine the Betfair of one loft races. Or the Ladbrokes of National

racers. Or the National Lottery of races? Like I said earlier, money attracts people; lots of people and a legalised betting system for our sport could revolutionise it over night. I know the technology and people to make it happen. Should it happen? Can it happen?

#### **Young People & Communities**

As with any sport, young people are the key to growth. We need more young people coming into it. Speaking to Ian Evans, he was telling me about the school program the RPRA do. As a result of this program, they have seen 12 new young people start to keep birds. We need more of that. We need to roll that out at a much bigger scale. It helps young people a great deal. It gives them something to do and it helps focus their minds on something else other than school related study. We also have a great opportunity to create more communities and help more isolated people through our great sport. There are thousands of socially isolated people in the UK and Ireland and they want something to give them a sense of community. Pigeon racing can do that. Ian was telling me that there is a doctor's surgery in the Midlands looking to use pigeon racing to help people with mental health issues. As someone who has suffered in the past from mental health and depression, I know that being around my birds (when I had them and in the future when I have them again) will help me a great deal. We can use our great animals to help others. Imagine community lofts where a group of people jointly run a loft. Imagine people with mental health and young people getting involved. This sport and hobby can do so much for people. We just need to make it happen and expand on the great work already being done in this area. The idea of a non profit organisation I mentioned earlier could help expand these efforts a lot more and quicker too.

#### **Marketing & PR**

Life is marketing. We are bombarded with advertising online and on TV every waking minute. All of this has one objective. To make us want to desire something. It wants us to invoke a feeling of belonging or wanting something. We need to market our sport more. I'm aware the RPRA has a great publicity company on board now doing great things. I think we should all look to see how we can help and expand to market our sport more. Get it out there, publicising about our sport, showing people how they can get involved.

#### **My Offer**

Here is my offer to any association organisation in the UK, Ireland and any other around the world: I will offer my consultancy services for free to help make this happen. I will work with whoever wants to work with me to make my vision and their collective progression of our sport. I'm putting my money where my mouth is. I want nothing for it. I just want simple, easy solutions to be implemented without all the political and nonsense that sometimes can happen. If any organisation wants to take me up on my offer, I am here to help.

#### **What Are You Going To Do About It?**

So after reading this, I hope you have liked at least some of the things I have said. But the main thing with all of this is that actions speak louder than words. So here is what I am personally going to do to start the vision I have set out:

1. We need our own social media Facebook-type social network for racing pigeons. A place that is free to join, worldwide and promoting community amongst its members. I am going to set that up. I have already started preliminary work on it and it will be ready to go within two weeks. This network will be available to anyone, any organisation anywhere in the world to use and build their community.
2. I am going to look to put a group of people together to try and get pigeon racing officially recognised as a sport. This is a longer term objective that will take work but I will start asap.
3. I am serious about working with any organisation or association that wants to talk to me to help them out. My contact details are below.
4. I seriously think there should be worldwide free magazine and news outlet for our sport. This magazine would be digital and free for everyone. Its goal would be to unite the world of people racing. It would be translated into multiple languages to bring the barriers down even more. It would work with existing publications if they wanted and we would co ordinate a win win situation for all. The magazine would need to be not just be aimed at pigeon keepers it would need to be created to also publicise our sport to non pigeon people in mainstream society. I am going to look into the viability of this and see if with help from others I can get it up and running.

#### **Revolution**

It's time for a radical change. We need it. We need a revolution. Are you up for being part of it and helping? I hope so.

I see a massive potential, I see big things to be done, I see a great community of people and most importantly I still have a passion for our amazing birds after 30 years. More people need to know about our great creature and we need to up our game. The time is now.

I would love to hear feedback from you (good or bad, I can handle criticism as much as I love positive feedback).

My contact details are below and I welcome any and all of you to get in touch with your thoughts.

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