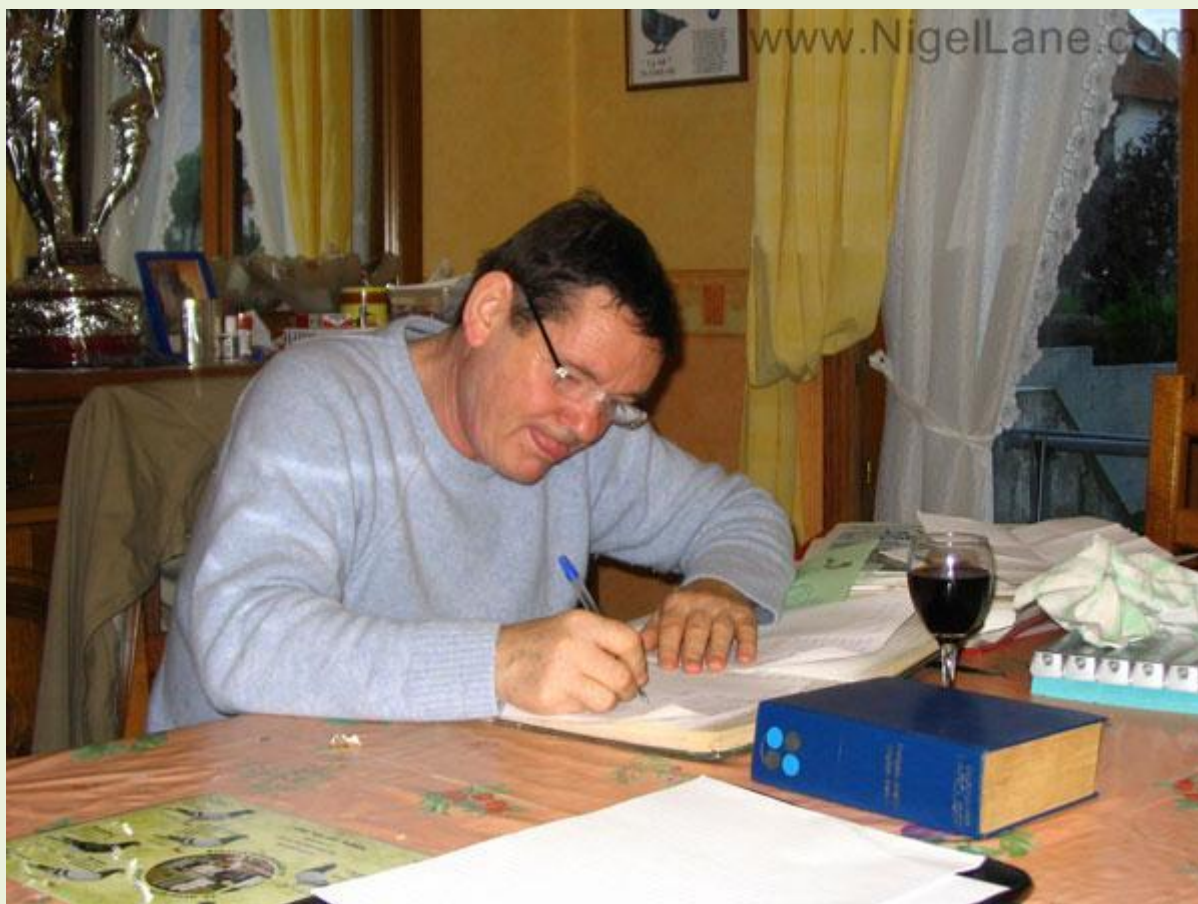


## Robert Ben, Calais, France.

Lately, many voices have bemoaned the tale that money has ruined the sport. How many of those voices would, I wonder, when a man arrived at their door offering a suitcase full of cash for their best pigeon politely send him away with the message they do not sell pigeons. And how many of those would, when their daughter pointed out that it was a great deal of money and the pigeon may die the next day, simply suggest to her that if she wants she should call and ask him to return. And how many of those would, when the deal was completed, give that money to their children. Of course all this pre supposes that they have a pigeon worth a suitcase full of cash, and there are not many of those around, but "SUPER BEN" the now famous "048" was just such a pigeon and Robert Ben just such a man.



There have been many rumours about Robert Ben one of which, probably the most accurate, maintained he was a one pigeon man. Well if Robert Ben is or was a one pigeon man how is it that in the year after he sold that "One" pigeon he managed to win 3<sup>rd</sup> International Dax with another pigeon and 1<sup>st</sup> International Hens from Pau with yet another. These, amongst many other top positions, put him into 5<sup>th</sup> Place in the 2005 IATP rankings for International racing and that 5<sup>th</sup> place made Robert Ben one of only two people who have managed to achieve the top 20 positions in the IATP ranking in each of the three years it has now been running. Over those three years Roberts ranking positions add up to 27 against that other mans total of 39, and this alone stakes for Robert Ben a reasonable claim to be The Most Outstanding International Pigeon Flyer of recent times.

### **The real Super Ben.**

Robert is the second eldest of ten children. He was born during the years following the second war and was brought up, during those austere times, in humble but happy circumstances within a large and close family living in Calais. Calais, to the English, means the first step into France whether by Ferry from Dover or tunnel from Folkestone and for many years has been synonymous with cheap fags and even cheaper booze. Calais is of course much more than this, although it has shown itself very adept at providing appealing shopping for visitors whether they are just making a day trip or starting out on a much longer journey. The ferries and harbour are an important element of the towns business and the enlarged EU has enormously boosted the British/Continental trade much, if not most of which travels via Calais. If you have an evening to spare you could do worse than book a table at the "Au Cote d'Argent" situated right out on the sea front alongside the harbour entrance where, while enjoying some excellent food, you can monitor the wide array of ferries that constantly traffic back and forth making this one of the worlds busiest ferry ports. Fish and fishing have had an

historical importance to Calais and there still is a small fishing fleet but its near neighbour, Boulogne, has always boasted a larger trade and modern patterns of fishing have only served to consolidate that position. Calais over the centuries has attracted many industries from lace to telecommunications and it is in telecommunications that Robert spent most of his working life. Though his first job was in the building trade he quickly moved to spend many years at the large Alcatel factory in Calais. He retired from that employment a couple of years ago, whilst in his mid 50's, under yet another excellent French government scheme which encourages people to retire early in order to provide employment opportunities for younger people.



**At some lofts it is a Mercedes.**

He is now enjoying that retirement and although his income is not great Robert displays a healthy lack of concern for wealth that only those who possess little can afford. Robert's wealth lies within his family and primarily with his mother, who he both lives with and cares for, and his two daughters together with their children. The rest of the family is both large and close and if you are visiting it is not long before one or more of his six brothers or five sisters comes calling. The other large part of his life is of course pigeons, which we will come to shortly, but while they have a great importance for him it is surprising how much of a back seat at times they must take. If he is up during the night with his mother for instance, which because of her age and frailty he often is, then the next morning the pigeons will have to wait until he is ready to give them the attention they need. Part of the secret of his success lies here, I believe, because in all of this you will see no sign of brusque, rigid regularity but instead the gentle, caring hand of intimate friendship which is as sure as it is sincere.

### **Early years.**

Robert was brought up within an animal caring family. His father kept pigeons and so Robert had an early introduction to the sport and while one of his brothers, Rene, is also currently a pigeon fancier, whose name you may well see in the international results, another keeps canaries and yet another dogs. Robert himself began racing when he was 14 years of age and in those early days was mainly concerned with shorter races. Over the years he became more and more proficient and established himself as one of the best flyers in his area.

The thought of long distance was always nagging at his mind though and especially the draw and appeal that only Barcelona can produce. So about 20 years ago he made the decision to change and race the Internationals. He needed new pigeons of course and being the man he is set out on a totally new course with care and consideration. Robert doesn't rush into anything and when it comes to buying new pigeons he does so with great deliberation. His method, modified by time and

experience, is simple but requires thorough, sound preparation as well as judgement and it has certainly brought success. Robert likes to examine the race results, particularly Barcelona, over several years, three at least, to find somebody that he feels is achieving success but who is on the way up rather than necessarily at the top of the pile, then he will go and try to acquire stock. It was this systematic approach that took him to Holland in 1989 and to Peter van den Eijnden of Deurne who at that time was the hottest property in International racing. Roberts first approach was to write letters to Holland but these brought no useful reply so off he set with a dictionary and a sound idea of what he was looking for and returned with four van den Eijnden pigeons. One of these was a blue chequer hen, NL1737311/89, full of the breeding that was making Peter van den Eijnden famous. She was bred from two pigeons not old enough at that time to have proved themselves in International Racing but their parents were from the cream. On her fathers side her grandsire was NL967148/83 **"Geschelpte 48 van het Bang"**, a pigeon that Peter van den Eijnden at that time regarded as one of his best stock cocks being a son of the famous **"Het Bang"** who was herself a daughter of the legendary **"DE 55"**, while her grand dam was NL371326/82 **"Geschelpte 26"** the only pigeon remaining at the van Eijnden loft of a group of 42 young birds bought from Adrianus v d Wegen, but one who can be seen running through the pedigrees of the racing team of that time. On the mothers side the grandparents are yet another grandson of **"De 55"** paired to a grand daughter of the **"Spin Aarden 1"**, so you might hope that a hen with this lineage would produce the goods and of course she did because apart from breeding some excellent racers she is the grandmother of the greatest racer of them all the 048, **"Super Ben"** ([Pedigree](#)).

### **The "048".**

Roberts approach to buying pigeons is deliberate but as you will see luck has her part to play. So while the "SUPER BEN" was bred by design both good and bad luck preceded his arrival. Robert went to Peter van den Eijnden in 1989 and bought his first four pigeons. His plans at that time

spread over several years because he was aware that you cannot throw anything into the International races and expect success. So he chose the blood lines he wanted with care and he knew it would take several years for the young to mature into racers that would be competitive.

*"Super Ben"*

1. Nat. Barcelona '04	1.933 d.
5. Internat.	24.914 d.
2. Nat. Barcelona '03	1.835 d.
20. Internat.	20.204 d.
3. Nat. Perpignan '03	1.515 d.
3. Internat.	16.800 d.
3. Nat. Barcelona '01	1.590 d.
44. Internat.	25.760 d.
3. Nat. Perpignan '00	1.765 d.
119. Internat.	18.246 d.
6. Nat. Perpignan '04	1.598 d.
21. Internat.	18.192 d.



F.98-361048

© Foto: Peter van Raamsdonk.

www.NigelLane.com

Racer: Robert Ben  
Calais France  
Owner: Hiroshi Kijima  
Tokyo Japan

He has made several more trips to Holland over the years since and notably in 1991 bought 21 youngsters from the loft of Mevr. Sprenkels. In 1993, just as he was about to launch into his first long races disaster struck when his lofts were attacked and most of his pigeons stolen. To this day he does not know who was responsible but believes that it may well have been some local ne're-do-well who took them for their meat. In any event he was left with about 20 yearlings and so it was not until 1996 that Robert actually entered the International arena. Even this late entry date proves interesting because John Clements, the UK's

expert on International racing who is primarily interested in the top 2%, states

that he first noticed Robert Ben in 1997, so to come to notice within a year is quite some achievement and this a year before the "048" was even hatched. But then the "048" was noticed just as quickly because in 1998, as a young bird, he was placed 283<sup>rd</sup> from 1,996 pigeons in a race from Le Mans, 347 km (216 miles) and then 1,894<sup>th</sup> from 21,652 pigeons from Poitiers, 497km ( 309 miles). As a yearling, in 1999, he was placed 111<sup>th</sup> from 2,028 pigeons from St.Vincent, 841km ( 523 miles), and this preparation set him up to make his International debut in the 2000 season and below you can see just how he performed:-

**Distances: Barcelona** 1,064 km 661 miles    **Perpignan** 920 km 572 miles

<u>Race</u>	<u>Nat. Position</u>	<u>Nat. Birds</u>	<u>Int. Position</u>	<u>Int. Birds</u>
<b>Barcelona 2000</b>	164th	1,731	3,372nd	26,597
<b>Perpignan 2000</b>	3rd	1,765	119th	18,246
<b>Barcelona 2001</b>	3rd	1,590	44th	25,760
<b>Perpignan 2001</b>	21st	1,646	206th	20,859
<b>Barcelona 2002</b>	85th	1,901	2,792nd	26,928
<b>Perpignan 2002</b>	34th	1,664	667th	18,264
<b>Barcelona 2003</b>	2nd	1,835	20th	20,204
<b>Perpignan 2003</b>	3rd	1,515	3rd	16,800
<b>Barcelona 2004</b>	1st	1,933	5th	24,900
<b>Perpignan 2004</b>	6th	1,598	21st	18,192

You can see from this why some mistakenly thought Robert a one pigeon man, after all with performances like that how many pigeons do you need, but at the same time this is very much a one man pigeon, a Robert Ben pigeon. I invite you to speculate how many races "Super Ben" would have been allowed to compete in after those early performances in any other hands. I have no doubt that had it been anyone but Robert Ben this pigeon would have been wrapped in the security of an intensive breeding programme many years ago. Instead, because Robert loves his pigeons and racing so much the "048" went on to achieve probably the greatest set of International racing results that have or are ever likely to be seen.



### **The lofts.**

So how was this wonder pigeon bred. On the Dam's side he is a direct result of Roberts stock selection methods as his mother is a first



generation product of his initial purchases from Peter van den Eijnden and Sprenkels. On the sires side there is just the same quality of blood stemming directly from the loft of Chris van de Velden, whose own record in International races has been incredibly high and consistent over many years. While Chris van de Velden has cultured his own very successful long distance family he has also experimented with the best Holland can produce in this instance drawing on a blend from the best of Chris v.d. Heuvel, the famous "De Witbuik" of Bass Battenburg, A. Kooy's "De Pau" and a touch more Peter v.d.Eijnden via A.P. Overwater, yet another of today's top International racing lofts.



**Racing is often a waiting game.**

It seems no wonder that this pigeon did so well when you look at the quality of his ancestry. The v.d. Velden pigeon though came with just a touch of the luck referred to earlier because Robert did not set out to buy this pigeon but obtained it from a friend who already owned it. So after a truly phenomenal racing career the "048" is now hopefully enjoying his retirement with his new owner Mr Hiroshi Kijima of Tokyo, Japan.

### **The young bloods.**

The 2005 season could well have been an antic climax following the departure of the "048" but when I visited Robert in May I found him happy, confident and eager for the real racing to begin. He pointed out a pigeon that he said I should look out for, "Not the "048", but a very good pigeon nevertheless." he said. His word proved true as it was this pigeon, F2000-681271 a medium sized dark chequer pied cock that came racing home to take 3rd International Dax from 11,898 pigeons as well as 1<sup>st</sup> National from 1,411 pigeons. While Robert says he is not the "048" many might think him a worthy successor as just three weeks before he had taken 213<sup>th</sup> International Pau from 8,438 pigeons as well as 60<sup>th</sup> National from 1,606 pigeons and then three weeks after Dax he was back to Perpignan where he was positioned 2,656<sup>th</sup> International from 17,653 pigeons and 179<sup>th</sup> National from 1,940 pigeons. His full International career began at Dax in 2002, while he was still only a two year old, where he took 345<sup>th</sup> National from 1,396 pigeons then in 2003 he was 11<sup>th</sup> National Dax from 1,336 pigeons and 31<sup>st</sup> National Perpignan from 1,514 pigeons and in 2004 he was 96<sup>th</sup> National Pau from 1,335 pigeons, 35<sup>th</sup> National Dax from 1,714 pigeons and 353<sup>rd</sup> National Perpignan from 1,598 pigeons. You will have no doubt noticed that he has improved year by year into his fifth year. What does his sixth year hold I wonder? Again the breeding of this pigeon contains the elements of deliberation and luck we have seen before. His sire, F98-361057, is a pigeon who himself gained several good positions from Barcelona and

Perpignan and was bred from NL 91-2393715, one of the original Sprenkels purchases and grandfather of the "048", when paired to a hen from a van de Eijnden - Sprenkels cross, all part of Roberts plan. His mother was not part of that plan however but as luck would have it she fitted in perfectly.



**F2000-681271 1st National, 3rd International Dax 2005**

In 1996 a stray came into Roberts loft from Holland. He tucked a note through the ring and released the pigeon when fit and as a result the owner, Mr Groenleer, sent Robert a letter of thanks. Later, when Mr Groenleer was on his way to England, he called at Roberts home and took him six pigeons. These birds were all bred down from Jac Steketee stock and one of them, NL96-2351283, is the mother of Roberts latest Dax champion. Unfortunately there is no pedigree of this pigeon available and although Mr Groenleer has searched, whilst in the middle of moving home, he cannot trace the exact parentage. Jac Steketee of course is a very familiar name on the International scene and is responsible for a long succession of high achieving pigeons both raced

by himself and many others. He has established over many years a close knit family which not only produce winners themselves but seem to blend well with many of the other long distance families of the moment and Steketee blood can be found in many of the Dutch champions.



**F99-268713 1st International (Hens) Pau 2005**

The other principal performance of 2005 came from F99-268713, a small to medium blue chequer pied hen, when she won 1st International Hens Pau from 1,665 pigeons, 21<sup>st</sup> open International from 8,438 pigeons and 18<sup>th</sup> National (which includes 5 pigeons flying too short a distance to be recognised in the International) from 1,696 pigeons. On her previous excursion to the Pau International, in 2004, she had been placed 90<sup>th</sup> National from 1,335 pigeons, so on this occasion a pigeon still improving in her sixth year. This hen results straight from Roberts planning. Her father, NL96-1202172, is a one of four pigeons Robert bought on another of his trips to Holland when he went to Lei Kurvers of Hulsberg in 1996. This cock was paired to a hen, F98-361085, that Robert bred from the same Sprenkels cock mentioned above, NL91-2393715, and

another product of Eijnden/Sprenkels, F92-810434, a pairing which has produced a stream of pigeons to put in multiple performances at Barcelona like F99.268719 for instance.



**F99-268719 3rd National, 170th International Barcelona 2005**

In the 2005 International Barcelona race this compact little dark chequer cock was 170<sup>th</sup> International from 25,815 pigeons and 3<sup>rd</sup> National from 1,920 pigeons. This is the second time he has achieved 3<sup>rd</sup> National from Barcelona, the previous occasion being 2003 when he was also 54<sup>th</sup> International from 20,204 pigeons finishing just behind his loft mate the "048" himself who was 20<sup>th</sup> International. In all this cock has flown Barcelona on four occasions, getting into the prizes on each occasion, and also has 10<sup>th</sup> /1,598 and 39<sup>th</sup> /1,514 National to his credit in the 2004 and 2003 International Perpignan races respectively.

### **Methods.**

I know that many would like to hear that by giving two drops from this bottle and one from that each day for a fortnight you will produce an

International champion, but that is not the story that comes from Robert Ben. It is actually very difficult to define what it is that makes Robert such a successful champion. Much of what he does seems to defy most accepted teachings. He doesn't have a strict routine and if you listen to his daughter, Virginie, she will tell you that he is quite disorganised so much so that on occasions he forgets there is no food left and the pigeons have to go without for a day or more until she is able to fetch some. Robert cannot drive and does not have a car so he is dependent on friends and family to ferry him about, the only independent means of transport he uses, apart from "shanks pony", is his bicycle. Consequently he has no real training schedule and the pigeons actually get very little training at all. Then there are the lofts. Robert keeps what some would consider quite a lot of pigeons as he likes to send a team of 30-40 cocks to Barcelona. The lofts are hardly big enough for the number of pigeons he wants to keep, because if you want a team of 30-40 for Barcelona you have to keep a lot through the earlier stages of their lives just to qualify on age let alone performance. Much of the available space he has is devoted to these racing cocks limiting the space available for yearlings and two year olds who do not get a nest box, are not paired and lucky if they ever get to see a hen in those years. The young birds, which in some years are raced but in others not, are kept amongst the breeding pairs for most of their first year while the widowhood hens are confined to a space beneath the house, which is only just adequate for their needs. As for food, well the birds are fed but when I asked if the food was measured out Virginie nearly collapsed with laughter, seemingly begging the question - could her father be that organised, so no they are fed in hoppers with food before them most of the time. Please do not draw the wrong impression from this because you cannot cultivate a loft full of International champions or bring up such a charming and talented daughter as Virginie if you are completely disorganised. Robert loves his pigeons very much and cares for them extremely well just as Virginie loves her father very much and is only able to speak of him in this way out of a close, familiar respect. She is well aware, as am I, that his easy going appearance stems from the very high level of competence and confidence he has. Like many great men in their field he is so comfortable within his environment that little seems to worry or hurry him. He may well temporarily forget where he has put something, and don't we all, but in the back of his mind he knows full well what it is and what its value is. As far as pigeons are concerned Robert is very well organised and maintains a detailed ledger containing all the details of his pigeons, their breeding, their

performances, and any other information he sees fit. Most of this information he also holds in his head and he can reel off pages of detail which all bears up well to scrutiny against the written record.



**Inside a widowers section.**

## **The system**

So how does he do it? There is no doubt that a principal feature lies in stock selection. Robert obtains the best blood he can from the highest achieving International lofts. He then breeds from this stock often crossing new introductions with his more established lines and then tests and proves the progeny over their first two years of life by sending them to a number of races. While they are sent to several races in this time they are not strained nor are they expected to turn in great performances because this is also a period when he allows them to grow and develop. Robert primarily races widowhood but in these first years the cocks are not given the extra stress of pairing, mating and rearing but are allowed to develop with plenty of food and exercise within that friendly, competitive environment found in any group of young males. During this time they are not sent to any great distance and while they are not expected to turn in great performances he keeps a careful eye on them nevertheless, and the good generally start to show.



**Widowers section.**



As three years old they will be paired for the first time but they do not rear. The racers are paired at the end of March, and sometimes when he was working this would be delayed until early April, they are then allowed to sit the eggs for 10 days before being separated and put onto widowhood for racing. As three year olds they will be expected to perform, although not necessarily to the highest level, because as the performances above show these pigeons mature with age and experience and are likely to improve through their fourth, fifth and even sixth years.

As part of the International team, the main part of which is geared to the Barcelona-Perpignan combination, they would be expected to fly several preparation races. In 2004 for instance this consisted of Breteuil 150km (94 miles) on 11th April, Montesson 225km (141 miles) on 18<sup>th</sup> April and Chateaudun 320km (200 miles) on 2<sup>nd</sup> May before going onto a two weekly cycle of Bourges 430km (269 miles), Limoges 570km (356 miles) and finishing with Tulle 630km (393 miles) on 12<sup>th</sup> June. This left a two week rest before Pau and three weeks before Barcelona. In 2005 he refined this slightly by starting one week later and taking out the Limoges race. While the Pau team went to Bourges on 21<sup>st</sup> May with a three week gap before Tulle on 11<sup>th</sup> June the Barcelona team instead went to St. Junien 570km (356 miles) on 28<sup>th</sup> May before Tulle. This means that the pigeons are flying some 2,325km (1,453 miles) in training races before their International programme. The actual racing team consists of one section of 25 widowhood cocks, a second section of 20 widowhood cocks and a third section of eight widowhood cocks, all three year and older pigeons that race the full programme. There is then a section of 10 single hens, which again are older pigeons, who race the programme and finally a section of 40 younger cocks, yearlings and two year olds, which are kept single and race the preparation races to put themselves in contention for a nest box in the widower sections in their third year. The pigeons are flown around the loft for an hour twice each day but as he says they do not fly all of that time and he does not keep them flying with a flag or any other device. Instead they have a period of unfettered freedom when they can take off and land as they wish.

Feeding is simplicity in itself as they have a normal commercial mixture to which very little is added and they eat as they wish. Grit and mineral blocks are available at all times. The theme really is one of contentment and familiarity, plenty of food, good exercise and relaxation which all engenders a love of home and no doubt a strong desire to return to it.

### **The future.**

If he could Robert would like more space both to provide more room for the pigeons he has and to expand slightly the number he keeps. He has no great ambition to have wildly expansive lofts but just feels that with a slightly larger team he could better participate in the whole International programme. He does incredibly well as it is though and I think the one thing we can all take away from his experience is that you do not have to be have vast wealth or the latest and most expensive equipment, or assistants, loft managers, use drugs or excessively expensive additives, but you do need good pigeons. Robert has established himself as one of the very best International flyers in Europe and I am sure he will have many more happy years sitting out on the steps by his backdoor smoking furiously and timing in pigeon after pigeon after pigeon as his team returns triumphant yet again from Barcelona, Perpignan or anywhere really that he cares to send them.

Nigel Lane 11th October 2005