

Breeding Fantails for Over Fifty Years

by Eugene Altpeter

This is my 52nd year breeding Fantails and as I look back I wonder where the time has gone. My initial start was a pair given to me by my Mother as a Christmas gift about 1909. They were the old Major Gilbert strain who was recognized as the top breeder until T. H. Havemeyer came along. Havemeyer had the best stud of Fantails in the world and his name in the winner's column in the old Crystal Palace can be seen in the English Fantail book in England. Later on it was between Hanson and Havemeyer for first place in all colors and Saddles in the winner's column at Madison Square Garden, New York. There were more breeders in the early years as restrictions on pigeons and poultry were non-existent. Good pigeons in all varieties came over from England and Germany.

My first exhibition in the big time was in Chicago in 1913. There was no Fantail Club in the Mid-West then, but there were a lot of Fantail breeders and 228 Fantails at that show. That old pro, Wm. Plaehn, the best all-around judge of that era, placed the awards. His long beard and deep loud voice set him off at each show.

We later became fast friends and it was quite a thrill in later years when he visited the Chicago shows and would inquire in his loud fog-horn voice for Altpeter or Kelly. I sent four birds to the first show and not one placed, but it was the beginning of a long Fantail career. I was only 19 at that time but through that show I met one of the finest fanciers that ever lived. His name was Thomas H. Kelly of Oak Park, Ill. We came to be good friends and he gave me some of his best birds. Later, we imported Fantails

from the best breeders in England, Frank Jarvis, his brother Cyril Jarvis, Thurston See, and last but not least Wm. Stevenson of Beith, Scotland. Until his death we showed as "Kelly and Altpeter" and prizes and trophies won probably will not be equaled again in my time. The importance of this is to convey to the novice and others to visit the shows and make comparisons with other fanciers. Much can be learned by the novice and the professional as well, as we are all apt to overlook something living in our own little world. After the death of Thomas Kelly, we took up with his son, J.B. Kelly, who was the image of his father, as far as Fantails were concerned, and it was like old times with him. J.B. is now residing in Saint Petersburg, Florida and while we do not see each other often, we still correspond and keep each other informed.

To anyone breeding Fantails, the foundation is most important. It's 50 percent good stock, 25 percent management and 25 percent luck. No matter how good your stock is, without proper management, you cannot do a thing. As with everything else, you must have the eye for it, and put two birds together that will nick. This is why I say luck, because they do not always do it. But those who persevere and stick with it will produce a winner. The spoils don't go to the swift.

A Fantail should have a good tail. This is where it derives its name. There are all kinds of tails and it should be as large as possible with plenty of good long wide hard feathers. Shoeing is most important to give a circular effect. Also of great importance is

plenty of top tail. The part that sticks out that sticks out far above the chest. The body must be round from any angle. Look down over the back for a ball-like effect, not long-sided or cylinder effect. The chest must be broad, yet round; legs well apart, not too long or too short. A bird too short in leg has too much flight on the ground. Last but not least is to get the head in the right place, not too high up on its tail, but centered in base of cushion. You can look at a good bird for hours and it will fascinate you to no end.

The importance of management is like everything else. You cannot neglect birds and still be successful in the breeding loft or the show, as condition of the bird is most important. Keep the floor dry. A good litter of shavings on the floor helps to keep their flights and feet clean. They should be kept on the floor and not encouraged to fly and perch on anything. Nest boxes can be put on the floor, well apart from each other to keep a minimum of fighting a board four inches high nailed in front of nest box will prevent young from coming out and getting scalped by others. A tablespoon of laundry bleach such as Clorox in the bath pan will keep down lice. The chlorine smell seems to be distasteful to lice. We did not have to dust a single bird for lice since using it. It also kills bacteria, and won't hurt birds if they drink it.

Fantails sometimes get a corn like growth on their feet. This is a parasite that eats on the skin of the bird's feet. After many years, my son found a cure in sulphur ointment, which heals feet permanently. The ointment is sold in drugstores for parasitic skin infections.

One half teaspoon of Enheptin to each gallon of drinking water for one week will

eliminate canker until you bring in a new bird that carries the germ. We never had one since we used it several years ago. Give the birds all the fresh air they can get. We take all the windows out from spring until the snow flies so they get direct rays of the sun, and fresh air. In winter one window is left open near the top.

We separate the sexes in July and get them rested for the moult. Late breeding causes a late moult and then the weather is too cold to develop sound tail feathers. They will come out in spikes and won't open. Get them to moult during the warmer weather and sunshine.

Since being retired we have more time to observe the birds and find often when cocks fail to fill, the hens are unsteady and seem to resent the cock. Changing matings has helped and the birds had fertile eggs as soon as they were remated.

My best wishes to all breeders of Fantails for a very successful season.