

BICC the future of national distance racing in Ireland.

By Jonathan Bailie

On Saturday 9th February 2018, I accompanied my good friend Paul Swindell, to the BICC annual prize presentation and dinner dance, held in the Queens hotel Bournemouth.

The crowd assembled, were the great and good of distance racing into the UK and now Northern Ireland. For me the superbly organised event was an eye opener as to what is missing in Irish distance racing. Here we had people from all over the UK and Ireland with a shared love of pigeons and distance racing in particular. Winners from all sections were afforded the same opportunity to collect their section trophies along with national winners. Each recipient was played to the stage by accompanying music much the same as the dart player entering the arena. The highlight being when the superb Carol Francis announced Mark Gilbert as the 2018 Barcelona winner to the refrain of the Freddy Mercury and Montserrat Caballe epic Barcelona. A fun evening when everyone was treated with respect. Paul represented the Irish distance fancier, as he had become the 1st fancier to clock a pigeon into Ireland, in the 40 year history of the BICC. He clocked a dark chequer yearling hen on Sunday 8th July from BICC Le Mans 1, a distance of 516 miles.

His rewards were a nice diploma, a beautiful trophy and a place in history. Most importantly it did as stated by BICC president John Tyreman during the presentation of the trophies, prove that racing with the BICC into Ireland could be done successfully and that Paul had opened the door for others to follow.



Paul Swindell receiving his Irish section trophy for BICC Le Mans 1 from Les Parkinson & Carol Francis

Most people reading this piece, will appreciate the qualities of birds required to race across the English channel into the south of England. Just imagine the difficulty faced by the fancier to breed and prepare birds to cross the English Channel, the Bristol channel and then the Irish sea. For years this has been the ultimate test for pigeon fanciers in Ireland. Recent years, have shown a gradual decline in numbers entered in the 3 traditional national races from France into Ireland. (Yes that's right, 3 races, restricted to 3 concurrent weekends, last weekend in June to 2nd weekend in July, then old bird season is over). Preparation has to be perfect as if anything goes wrong the opportunity has gone to race the bird. A lot has been written in the press about the terrible results that the Irish national races have suffered over the last few years with returns of 5% and less becoming the norm rather than the exception.

3 races, terrible returns and no alternative. I believe this can all change. The BICC offer the Irish distance fancier an extensive calendar with potentially 3 nationals (Poitiers, Le Mans 1 and Le Mans 2) and the 7 Internationals. The earliest it is practical for any Irish bird to face a race with the BICC is the Poitiers national on the 8th June. The reason behind this thinking is that the first time Irish distance birds will have had the chance to fly the Irish sea is on the 25th May when organisations will fly from Talbenny the shortest of the Irish sea race points. This gives a distance season from 1st weekend in June until the 1st weekend in August a total of 10 weekends of distance racing.

Progressive thinkers in Irish distance racing have been proposing changing the race-points of the French races for several years. Le Mans following Pauls success in 2018 has gained a following as a potential race-point for the Kings Cup grand national. This is logical. When we decided to race with the BICC in 2018 we thought long and hard about where to fly from. The old adage "pick your fight" came to mind. Choose a race-point that gives you a chance. The logical choice for us was Le Mans. Drawing a line from Le Mans to Pauls Loft gave us a route which came very close to Talbenny. It also provided us a greater amount of land to fly over should we get a head wind.

Fanciers flying to the North of England or Scotland from France have the opportunity for their birds to rest at the end of the 1st day should they get a headwind. Birds out over the sea have no such choice. Pick a route that gives your birds a chance. The old attitude of we have always flown these routes surely has no place in the modern world. Everyone knows that distance racing into Ireland is in trouble, too few races to justify the time and investment. The BICC gives an alternative. Instead of 3 races there are potentially 13. The BICC offers an alternative. That is a simple statement, how does an Irish fancier make the BICC work for him. I can only speak of the experience of Paul Swindell, as he is the only one to have made the BICC races work for him.

Paul Swindell prepares his birds every year for just 3 races. Each year he does not fit ETS rings to his team until they have flown Talbenny twice and then Bude. All must fly 3 times across the Irish sea. He then sets them for the 3 French races. When he decided to race with the BICC he asked many respected BICC national winners what to do. All were very glad to offer advice, however one thing was apparent, most of these men had birds that had been across the channel multiple times each year

including international races. The logistics to do this into Ireland just didn't exist. Also racing to Ireland usually added 250+ miles to the distances these fanciers are flying. Paul had to develop his own method.

The first point to acknowledge is that racing with the BICC you are not racing to win the race. The challenge is the truest test, getting birds home. Paul entered 24 birds in the BICC Le Mans 1 national from these he clocked 3 on the 2nd day at a distance of 516 miles. This gave him a 12.5% return. On the same weekend the INFC in the Kings cup sent 2,827 birds and clocked 72 in 3 days a return of 2.5%. However he had the reward of a handsome Irish section trophy. Every-time an Irish fancier races with the BICC they are racing to be the best in Ireland. All achieved into a headwind and without a convoy.

[Paul Swindells](#) [3 Le Mans birds](#)

With the BICC there are no limits on the numbers of birds you can enter. If you have a big team that are in form and ready at the right time you can send them all, rather than having to select your 20 best. This will encourage fanciers to breed teams of distance pigeons to compete in more races.

You must have the right birds, this may seem like an obvious statement, but I have learnt over the last few years, things are seldom clear and obvious in pigeon

racing. The abundance of sprint based bloodlines that are predominant now are not suited for racing across the Irish sea and further. Sure in perfect conditions with a tail wind you will get the odd Walt Disney winner, to achieve longevity in distance racing it is essential to build a family of birds fit for purpose. Usain Bolt never ran marathons, please dont ask your sprint birds to race marathons especially across the sea.

When building your family source bloodlines that have consistently performed. Birds that have got back into England from 800 miles after 10 or 12 days will struggle to get into Ireland across the sea, this is simply because when the bird is tired after several days it still has to face the open sea. It takes a very brave bird when tired to face the sea and survive. Always give your birds a chance. We get enough negative press.

Paul has spent the last 10 years moulding his own family of birds to be able to consistently clock from French national races into Ireland. Birds of a particular size and type with stamina, guts, determination and speed in their DNA. Unique birds for a unique challenge. When we were basketing the birds for Le Mans Paul put a star beside a dark chequer hen. He knows his birds she went on to be the 1st bird home in 40 years with the BICC in race-time. Good stockmanship is essential to succeed with the BICC into Ireland.

Be patient, pick your fight. I watch the weather forecasting websites for Paul from 4 weeks out from potential race dates. We must put our birds in a position to succeed. This is a lesson Paul learnt when he sent to Pau International in 2017. He sent 8 birds 3 of which were national winners from St. Malo 2016. The local weather in Pau meant the race was held over and moved to Mont De Marsan. Closer analysis of the potential for this happening would have meant he would not have sent and held back for later in the year. Lesson learnt, with the BICC there is always another race to have a go from.

Dont be in a hurry to fly Barcelona, if Paul has learnt one thing over the past few years it is baby steps, baby steps. **To fly Barcelona into Ireland hasn't been done in 50 years.** The simple reason, it is bloody difficult, perhaps according to some impossible with modern pigeons. Pick your race-points, plan your year, watch for the S E wind and be adaptable. Agen or St. Vincent are probably the most likely internationals from which a bird will be clocked into Ireland.

The only downside to racing with the BICC is the Irish sea, obvious yes for the pigeons but also for the fancier getting their birds to the race. The addition of the marking station at Chirk was a great bonus for the entrants from Ireland. The more members the BICC gets from Ireland the closer we can work together and make sending with the BICC more economical.

Instead of just standing still and stagnating, while pigeon racing in the rest of Europe moves forward, join the BICC and participate. The excitement, the camaraderie and the craic are worth it. For the true specialist Irish distance racer, the BICC will become the future home of distance racing into Ireland.

