

Mark Gilbert has just had one of the most amazing old bird seasons in the British International Championship Club. Of the seven International races, with distances between 550 and 700 miles. He has won five of them and came second in the remaining two, an outstanding demonstration of skilful breeding and racing which will surely receive the applause of us all. The winning pigeon in the last of the International race series from Perpignan is the very pinnacle of the two disciplines combined.



To achieve his goal of competing in the Barcelona International Mark has steadily been building a team containing bloodlines from the very best lofts in Europe. One of those visited was the Jelle Jellema loft in North Holland, because his long-distance marathon results were outstanding, and he learned that Jelle would send his yearlings to two International races of 600 and 700 miles. Then as two year olds they would be expected to compete in three International races and after making all his breeding selections based on this criteria he built up a family of extreme endurance birds. Mark obtained two pairs and in 2016 he had just five of them in his young bird race team, one of which was "Southfield Iron Man", a late bred who only competed in one race that year but as a yearling, he was sent to Tarbes 568 miles with the NFC and achieved 135th Open, followed by the Perpignan International race of 634 miles where he finished 15th Open British International Championship Club. He had passed his yearling test with flying colours and Mark had high hopes for his future.

This season, after the usual training races with the club and Federation early in the year, he was entered into the British Barcelona Club race from Palamos on June the 22nd, which was a distance of 685 miles and achieved 2nd section D 7th Open and then on the 20th of July he went to Marseille International, a distance of 653 miles when he was 1st Sect 2nd Open BICC. That would have been enough for most fanciers, but Mark said he looked very fresh when he dropped from Marseille and the next day went out for two 45-minute exercise periods with the other pigeons.

Mark had no intention of racing him again this season but after three days he was still flying when the others had dropped, so Mark knew he was very fit and was blossoming after the miles he had already flown in the tough conditions experienced this year. He gave due consideration to the fact that the Jellema bloodlines were selected via hard working conditions, so just nine days later he was entered once again into the Perpignan International, a distance of 634 miles, and even though there were near record temperatures in central France, with yet another north east wind, he came through on the second day to win the British International Championship Club in one of the most difficult races for years. Shorter flyers of around 400 miles

did not manage to get a pigeon on the day of the release and many top lofts in Europe recognised it as the most difficult International race for years, so "Southfield Iron Man" truly earned his name that day.



Mark sat waiting from early morning on the second day, he was confident he was going to come and was first on his list, which meant he held the pool money and he had a young bird race on the Saturday which gave him something to watch whilst he waited, but the thrill he got when he saw him race to the loft at 7:55pm was very special he said "He really tried hard and came like he meant it".

He is a small pigeon, as are all Jellema pigeons and was paired up early in the season to rear two youngsters but was not allowed to sit the second nest. That, coupled with the workload over the racing season meant he had held his flights well into August having only just thrown his third flight and is now earmarked for Barcelona next season. I suggested to Mark that nearly all other fanciers would now put him to stock, but he said they were the very pigeons he needed to win the Barcelona International, "if I can get ten of those type of pigeons to send I'm in with a chance" he said. He needs him in the race team although he has taken the opportunity to breed a couple of late youngsters having been paired to "Southfield Dark Star" which won 1st Open BICC St Vincent, one of which will be donated to the BICC young bird sale due to be held later this year. The Jellema bloodlines are based around a Jan Aarden pigeon called "Zwarte Gold," which is the father of his loft and a pigeon called "O2" owned by a good middle distance fancier nearby. This was used to add a little more speed with the races to aid selection. The first season Jelle had 80 yearlings that were sent to one International and got just three, but he bred around them to produce a family that now can and does dominate the Dutch Extreme Marathon races along with a few choice introductions from the top lofts. Now he raises a team of 60-80 youngsters, confident to send them three hundred miles and retain nearly all of them after many years of breeding through tough selection.

The father of "Southfield Iron Man" is "Orion" the best racing son of "Zwarte Gold" when coupled to "Silvie" who has 3rd International Barcelona as her best results of the three times she flew Barcelona. His mother which is owned by Mark, won 15th International Barcelona when Jelle was 1st and 2nd International Barcelona. The story goes that in another loft that was racing in the same race from Barcelona with Jellema bloodlines, the loft manager went to the loft at 4am to find two hens on the loft which were 15th and 17th International Barcelona. Subsequently, Mark bought those two hens to add to his breeding plan so the mother of "Southfield Iron Man" has actually flown Barcelona, taking high honours herself.

There are lots of great flyers in Northern Holland at the extreme marathon races and although Jelle is considered one of the best, there are others which also have great pigeons and are accessible to most if a little effort in research is put in. Mark knows the news headlines are the big prices achieved but says extreme marathon pigeons can be purchased at reasonable cost to compete in the Internationals and it is possible on a budget, if anyone wants to get real marathon pigeons. But they themselves have to be just as tough as the pigeons, to continue after the setbacks which will no doubt be experienced during the selection process knowing that if it was easy, it would not be worth doing.

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