

**Kevin and Amanda MURTAGH**  
**The Pigeon Racing Federation of Western Australia [Inc.]**  
**Flyer of the Year 2022**



Kevin and his wife Amanda are members of the Amalgamated Melville Pigeon Racing Club, and winners of the prestigious 2022 Flyer of the Year award. This year they also won the Invitation Sprint 1 and Sprint 2 Consistency, the Middle Distance Consistency and the Consistency for Federation Races. Interestingly K & A Murtagh also ran third in the Long-Distance Series, they were in everything, the partnership of K & A Murtagh were well amongst the results across the whole season.

Kevin was born in Dublin Ireland where he later met his wife, Amanda. They married in Dublin, in 1986. They first migrated to Australia in 1995 but returned to Ireland. In 2007 they returned to Australia where they settled in Fremantle, WA. Kevin, now retired, was a wall and ceiling gyprocker for some 30 years and now he and wife Amanda devote a lot of their time to racing their pigeons

As a young lad Kevin played soccer and hurling. He will always remember the Australian Rugby team who, while visiting Ireland, were invited to experience a hurling match. A member of the rugby team described hurling as, "30 men, 15 per side, running around furiously with wooden hatchets, [similar to hockey sticks] with a ball thrown in to make it legal."

Kevin first became interested in pigeons as a boy when he trapped pigeons that roosted in and around Jameson Whisky Distillery. He later met local pigeon flyer Jim Donnelly who gifted him four pigeons. At the young age of 15 years he joined the Rialto and Districts RPC where on one particular occasion, it was a smash race, he won 1st prize in his club and ran 15<sup>th</sup> open Federation. It was a classic smash race with about 4000 birds entered. His club winner was a red hen gifted to him by Jim Donnelly the previous year, he clocked the same red hen the following week to run 3<sup>rd</sup> club. He only flew one season, work and other things distracted him.

Kevin met and later married Amanda in Dublin in 1986 and after settling down, got the urge to race pigeons again. Kevin later met Billy Parkes, of Killyleagh Northern Ireland, who probably had the greatest positive influence on him relative to pigeon racing. He visited Billy Parkes several times to buy birds. On one occasion he invited Kevin to pick whatever babies he like from his young bird team. Billy had what was considered to be the best Busschaert pigeons in all of Northern Ireland. He didn't reveal all his secrets but did talk to Kevin on the importance of preparing pigeons for racing. In 1987 he became a member of the Tallaght & Districts Pigeon Racing Club and raced the young bird season of 10 races. Tallaght and District was a strong club back then with up to 1200 young birds competing weekly. His Parkes Busschaerts won four races for him that season.

In 1989 Kevin and Amanda moved south to County Kildare where they joined the Newbridge Pigeon Racing Club where they flew the North Road. Kevin and Amanda found racing the North Road very different in that the pigeons were required to fly into predominantly headwinds most weeks. Kevin soon discovered his Busschaerts didn't cope well flying the North Road. Fortunately, Kevin met Tony O'Toole of Dublin and bought some late bred, in particular two blue peds. The following season Tony gifted the mother of the blue peds to Kevin. Those pigeons formed the foundation of Kevin and Amanda's team. In two and a half seasons Kevin bred 30 first prize winners out of the blue pied hen including 2 X 1st and 2 x 2nd with the North Road National Flying Club. The blue pied hen was a Stichelbaut. Kevin only flew the young bird season in 1991 and a full season in 1992 and 1993. In 1992 and 1993 he won Flyer of the Year in the North Road National Flying Club. It was after winning Flyer of the Year that Kevin retired from pigeon racing to concentrate on his family.

In 2007 Kevin and Amanda migrated to Western Australia with their children and settled into Fremantle where their house is situated on a 600 square metre block right on the outskirts of the Fremantle CBD and near the old Fremantle Prison, which is situated on several hectares of land surrounded by huge limestone walls which provide an ideal landmark.

Not long after arriving in WA Kevin made inquiries as to the whereabouts of the local pigeon racing club. It was as a result of those inquiries that he met George Azar who invited him to meet members of Amalgamated Melville Racing Pigeon Club, who are affiliated with The Pigeon Racing Federation of WA [Inc.]. One such member suggested he make contact with Des Sippets of the Riverton Club. Des was renowned

for importing top class racing pigeons into Australia. As an act of good will Des gifted Kevin several pigeons including Catrysse, Hofkens and a Staff Van Reet hen. The Staff Van Reet Des gifted Kevin was out of his 8074 hen and produced winners for Kevin and Amanda straight away. The following year he purchased two more youngsters out of the 8074 while in the nest. They turned out to be pencil pieds with bull eyes. Kevin told me he didn't like them at all, but he was committed. As luck would have it one was a cock, he went on to breed numerous winners, in fact to this day his progeny goes right through their loft.

Kevin and Amanda only raced 5 races with Amalgamated Club in their first season in 2008 due to unfamiliarity with the different conditions and their inability to get the birds to work. George Azar visited Kevin and Amanda and after handling their pigeons declared that they were too fat. They were feeding the same diet as they fed their pigeons in Ireland which, according to Kevin, doesn't work in Western Australia. However, in their first five races they won 3 X 1<sup>st</sup>, 1 X 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1 X 4<sup>th</sup>, which included 2 X 1<sup>st</sup> Federation and 1 X 3<sup>rd</sup> Federation, 1 x 6<sup>th</sup> Federation and 1 x 9<sup>th</sup> Federation. One of those pigeons, a Staff Van Reet hen, was 1<sup>st</sup> Federation on two occasions into a headwind from Wannoo, a distance of 600 kilometres.

In season 2022 Kevin and Amanda discovered that their Staff Van Reets had the capacity to win and place from all distances. Over the years they have run 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Federation Young Bird Derby on four occasions with 3 on the drop. It was the same again this season when he again had 3 on the drop, two cocks and a hen. Next start the hen went on to place 3<sup>rd</sup> Federation from Gascoyne Junction north boundary, a distance of 800 kilometres, in very trying conditions with very few flyers homing pigeons on the second day. Kevin and Amanda could write a book on their success in pigeon racing but prefer to let the pigeons do their talking.

The Murtagh partnership house their pigeons in an insulated loft measuring 8 metres long by 3 metres deep. The exterior is clad with Hardie Board while the inside is lined with plywood. The loft floor is constructed of plywood. It's divided into 4 sections. Humidity in their loft very rarely goes above 70%, in fact when the humidity reaches 70%, they mix citric acid in the drinking water to ensure the pigeons maintain good health. "Loft design is everything, an open loft allows too much humidity into the loft. I have an enclosed loft with 4 whirly bird type extraction fans on the roof. We have tried electronic extraction fans but found them to be of limited benefit."

Their stock loft is small by comparison, measuring 3 metres by 2 metres with a small aviary for the hens, measuring 2.5 metres X 2.5 metres. They mainly house Staff van Reets and Houbens in the stock loft, however Liam and Bill Burke from Celtic Lofts gifted them some Gaby Van Denabeele X Hermans which flew extremely well for them this past season, in fact we topped the Federation 3 times with Liam and Bill's pigeons.

They prefer to lock the race team down between seasons and concentrate on the breeding and educating the babies. During the off season the race team are fed just

under an ounce a day just to ensure they don't get too fat. The breeders are fed wheat, barley, pellets and peas while feeding their young. They don't use small seeds, they keep it simple.

As for how they manage their race team, cocks, hens and young birds are separated. Young birds are trained on their own. Young birds and old birds are trained separately. The young birds must learn to orientate on their own and not become followers.

The Murtaghs like to get the babbies up and ranging for about 2 weeks, let them go through the body molt, they pull their last two flights then lock them up for 4 weeks. After the young birds have gone through the molt they start working them again.

From Kevin's observations of local flyers, they appear to work their birds too hard and race them too often. Kevin and Amanda give their young bird team at least 20 short training tosses before the season starts. As previously mentioned, they train the young birds on their own. The Murtagh's never race a mature aged pigeon more than 6 races and race their young birds sparingly. The bigger cocks are stopped halfway through the season then put aside for next season. Kevin prefers to toss their pigeons on their own, however he might put his youngsters on the Federation truck once or twice to teach them to break.

The race team consists of 40 old birds and 60 babies. Late bred birds are trained separately and are not raced until the following season, which often pays dividends. One of their late bred birds went on to top the Federation 3 times from its first 3 races. Kevin does not over train his pigeons, 30 to 40 minutes around the loft is plenty, but never more than 50 minutes to an hour. They feed 1.25 ounces [35 grams] per day early in the week then increases the feed to 2 ounces [56 grams] towards the end of the week, they don't race to the food tin. They have tried widowhood since arriving in Australia but found it didn't achieve any better results than flying to the perch. In Ireland they race during the breeding season so they would occasionally fly to youngsters in the nest, but don't practice that here.

The Murtagh's maintain they feed according to the conditions and the distance, for example, if the forecast is for head winds at a distance of 600 kilometres for example, they include fatty seeds in the diet. The same principles apply for distance races. Once the season starts the race team receive one 40 kilometre training toss per week, sometimes two, depending on circumstances. After every race, including short races, the race team that raced are locked down all day the day following their return. After a particularly tough race or a long distance race they are locked down for two days. As for medication they use Turbosole to treat canker and use Triple Vet for respiratory but only use it, if the birds have not been well up in the results for a couple of weeks running.

On the subject of European imports versus the old Australian families, Kevin is a firm believer in the European imports. He has tried some of the very best of the old Australian pigeons without any luck.

When asked why we lose so many pigeons these days, Kevin, like the rest of us, couldn't rationalise why we are suffering so many losses at the moment. "It's an Australia wide phenomenon, we don't understand the factors at play. Does he subscribe to the theory that perhaps losses may be attributable to solar activity. Perhaps there may be something in that." Kevin reminds us that you must look after your young bird team and recommends that we should allow them to mature. When they flew pigeons in Ireland the longest young bird race was about 400 kilometres, but They flew an old bird and a young bird season.

According to Kevin none of his children have shown any interest in pigeon racing, apart from supporting their parent's endeavours, however they are very capable and more than happy to assist when he and wife Amanda travel.

The Murtagh's rate the 2022 season very highly in terms of the overall performances of their pigeons. Most seasons they don't fly out to the distance preferring to preserve their pigeons. In season 2022 the Murtagh's scored 12 Top Ten Federation places 8 of which were in the top 5. All Federation places were achieved from 250 kilometres out to 800 kilometres. In 2010 they finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Flyer of the Year competition, it was a tough year, the last race of the season was Coral Bay a distance of 1000 kilometres and they unfortunately didn't home a pigeon.

When asked to recall his most memorable win Kevin recounted. "One of my most memorable races was back in Ireland when we clocked a yearling from the Old Bird National from Thurso. [northern tip of Scotland]. The birds flew through rain all afternoon and evening and we clocked about 7.30pm on the day, only 4 birds made it home to Ireland on the day and we only sent 1 bird. Another was the Young Bird National when I couldn't be home and Amanda got four together, she clocked the four birds putting the first 2 in the one thimble and she took the first 4 places in the Fed and 13<sup>th</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> National. Our best week here in Fremantle was a sprint race when we got 11 out of 12 on the drop to run 1<sup>st</sup> club 2<sup>nd</sup> Fed. "

When asked the perennial question "*How do we attract new members into pigeon racing*", Kevin's response was. "Maybe advertise in your local Men's Shed." Pigeon racing is very expensive these days, first a person must be attracted to the hobby, I don't believe we can recruit members off the street. Young people have big mortgages, and many other distractions. Having said that, if we come across anybody who shows some interest, we should cultivate them and invite them around to visit your loft, invite them to your local club or introduce them to their local club. Should they indicate that they are keen to race pigeons, give them a head start, arrange for members to give them a few decent pigeons, then mentor them on loft design, according to their means, and the finer points of pigeon racing.

Kevin spoke of his visit to the Blackpool Show in 2010. He travelled with Des Sippets and Michael Clark. While they had a wonderful trip, Kevin noticed the incredible



decline in the number of exhibitors, the exhibitors had declined some 60% since he last visited the show in the 1990s.

Kevin said "When it comes to racing pigeons I've always been lucky with the flyers I've met, the birds I've been gifted and the support and help I get from my wife Amanda." Kevin added that an old flyer once said to him. "If you fell into the river, you would come out with a salmon in your mouth."

I wish to thank Kevin and Amanda for a very interesting chat and for generously giving of their time. In closing I suggest the Murtagh's would be competitive anywhere, in the world of pigeon racing. I wish them all the very best for season 2023.

