

HALF A CENTURY WITH BUDGIES

A number of friends have often urged me to put pen to paper and write an article of my life and the path that I have walked breeding, judging and showing budgies.

To this end I have finally decided to do an article on the show budgerigar and fanciers whom I have known and still admire to date.

I was born in a town called Potchefstroom in the North West province after the world war in 1947.

My father was a descendant from one of the three Scottish brothers who came to South Africa from Scotland and established the ferry at Norval's pont which is still in operation today.

Those years there were only two work opportunities – the Railways or the Defence Force.

My dad worked at the flour mill in Potchefstroom as a platelayer with the railways – mother was an Afrikaans house wife.

I still remember how my mother had boiled the blue ribbon flour bags to make our clothes – poor but happy.

By nature of his work, my dad often moved from railway station to railway station replacing railway lines.

At every railway house an aviary was erected and wild birds caught and placed in the aviary with pet budgies.

Golden breasted buntings, robins, peach canaries and a host of other wild birds made up an impressive collection of wild birds.

After every move the wild birds were set free only to repeat the process at the next station.

We were the only whites amongst the local population and my father's workers.

My days were care free and many happy days were spent with the youngsters of the local community.

We ate gum from blue gum trees, swam in the river, and robbed honey from bee's nests – got stung a few times and played war with a stick and mud called a kleilat.

In 1960 my dad moved to Hilton station outside Pietermaritzburg and I travelled by train to the Technical High School in Pietermaritzburg.

That year my dad at the age of 39 was killed in a railway accident.

The railways had a policy that a railway man's family could stay in the railway house and ultimately buy it.

During this time a family friend gave me two show budgies.

They were so big and had been rung.

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I got rid of all the pet budgies and joined the Pietermaritzburg Budgie Club.

The chairman was Norman Sydenham, father of Lionel Sydenham.

Norman Sydenham's brother, Ernie Sydenham, was the secretary.

Amongst the other members were Frans Brand – dominant piers, Henry Pretorius – red eyes and Dough Robertson (not Dr Alf Robertson) – light greens and few others – all giving birds helping a beginner on his way.

There was so much to learn especially the different colours and mutations.

This happened quite quickly because one learns so much from exhibiting and being a steward.

In 1964 I met Haddon Phipson from Durban at a show in Pietermaritzburg where he had done extremely well winning best bird on show with a cinnamon light green cock – I fell in love with the cinnamon variety with its smooth silk like feather.

“Phippy” as he was affectionately known gladly shared advice and asked me why I looked so dejected.

I replied that I had once failed to even get a third ticket with my show team.

He asked me to show him my birds which I did.

He looked at me and said that I would never achieve anything with the type and quality of birds I had – he advised me to sell the lot and to call him in Durban and pay him a visit.

I did call him the next week and took the train from Pietermaritzburg to Berea Road station in Durban.

I walked down to his house with my travel cage not knowing what to expect.

I arrived at his house and was cordially invited in.

After a chat and a cool drink we moved into the bird room.

I was lost because I had never imagined seeing so many magnificent budgies in one stud.

The birds were in tip top condition and he explained his feeding system, breeding system and record keeping and a host of other important factors to keep and maintain a quality stud.

Eventually we got down to business.

In a training cage in his bird room, in beautiful condition and spots plucked, were four pairs of birds.

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He asked me how much money I had and I took out the money I had from my pocket. I nervously gave it to him thinking that the money saved as an apprentice and sale of the pet budgies would be an insult to such a wonderful man.

He smiled and sold the birds to me.

I was lost for words at this kind gesture.

On top of that he gave me an outstanding cinnamon light green cock.

What could I say but be grateful to this humane gesture?

He took me back after a really good lunch to the Berea Road railway station and I was on my way back to my home in Pietermaritzburg.

The next day he phoned me and asked how the birds were.

I replied that I wrapped them in cotton wool because they were so precious.

He then told me that he had given me the wrong cinnamon light green cock – he meant to give me his brother and that the one he had given me was the one with which he had won best in show when I had met him in Pietermaritzburg.

He wanted to know if I would lend the cock back to him after I had bred from him – how could I refuse?

I bred some super birds from the birds he had sold to me by mating them as he had suggested.

The Cinnamon light Green's chicks were outstanding and much to the dismay of my club members who had often given a young beginner birds which really was just a way of cleaning out unwanted poor birds.

I lent the cock to him and he bred one chick from it and the cock died.

He offered to replace it but I refused thanking him for placing me on the path to success.

In 1965 I met Hennie Nagel who had become interested in budgie keeping and breeding.

A long and happy friendship developed more so because I was due for Military service in Pretoria commencing in July 1966 and the birds had to be kept somewhere.

All the birds that were not breeding went to Hennie's aviary and the rest stayed in my aviary.

Hennie travelled every day to see to the birds and rung the chicks for himself as agreed.

We agreed that I would breed early in 1966 and Hennie would carry on when I went for military service.

I matriculated at the end of 1965 and became an apprentice electrician on the railways in Pietermaritzburg.

The Railways changed their housing policy – my mother, my adopted brother who was in standard eight and I could not afford to buy the house so we moved to a municipal property at a rent that we could afford.

At the National in Durban, “Phippy” won best bird on show with a cinnamon light green cock, the only chick from the cock he gave me which I returned to him for breeding purposes.

Hennie did very well with the chicks bred and we shared good moments with “Phippy” at the show.

Later that year “Phippy” unexpectedly passed on.

I was in the military in Pretoria and we did not know what happened to the birds.

After completing my military service I returned to Pietermaritzburg and carried on with my apprenticeship qualifying as an electrician with a wireman’s license in July 1967.

Now it was full steam ahead with the remarkable and colourful budgies from which many hours and sometimes heart ache followed when a promising chick was slaughtered by the parents.

I progressed rapidly through the ranks and once I was in the champion section, did my judges test in 1975 under the watchful eye of Pastor du Plessis from Springs.

After I had completed my judge’s test he gave me a very good yellow face opaline grey cock.

I left the railways and started teaching at the Pietermaritzburg Technical High School in Pietermaritzburg which later became Linpark High School coaching rugby, basketball, cricket and athletics.

Hennie and I were now breeding good birds and we decided to breed different varieties.

The spangle was introduced to South African fanciers by Brian Byles the Editor of Cage & Aviary Birds in the UK.

He was a good friend of Doc Robertson and judged two of our Nationals.

At the National in Boksburg Doc won 5 out of the 6 major awards with grey greens all split for opaline.

All in all he won nine Nationals with grey green cocks all split for opaline!

Doc’s farmer friend from the Cape imported some Brian Byles spangles and I swapped him for a spangle cock – I sent him a lutino cock.

Hennie bred the top half of the colours and I took on the red eyes and yellows.

I left teaching at the end of 1980 to start work as a field electrical engineer at Sasol three in Secunda.

The birds stayed with Hennie until I could move some birds to Meyerton a small town on the way to Vereeniging.

Hennie packed up in this period of time and I kept his birds at my son in laws place in Durban.

After I had spent sometime gaining experience at Sasol three in Secunda, I moved to Meyerton Municipality outside Vereeniging.

I moved the birds to Meyerton where I bought a house and as usual the aviary was in place.

In 1982 my daughter was born in the Vereeniging hospital.

In 1982 I also met Malcolm Taylor who stayed in Vereeniging and we became very good friends.

I recall giving his wife a pair of Lutinos and the next year he won his first points as a Novice when his Lutino cock won a challenge certificate.

At the end of 1993 I moved to a Technical College in Durban and bought property in Glenwood.

Once again an aviary was put up and the birds settled in well.

I imported thirty birds from Fred Wright and Roy Aplin.

I left the Technical College sector at the end of October 1996 and started my own college in August 1998.

During this time I met Pierre Swart an enthusiastic young man in the police force stationed at Cradock in the Eastern Cape.

Pierre kept precise records and bred big feathered birds.

He judged at the KZN provincial and introduced himself to me.

He wanted to buy a Cinnamon Light Green cock but I gave him the cock that had run second in his class bred from my Roy Aplin imports.

He was surprised and said that no one had ever given him a bird.

The following year Pierre once again judged the KZN Provincial Championship show and I gave him a very good Lacewing cock.

A number of birds travelled between Cradock and Durban including Yellows, Lutinos, Albinos and some spangles.

With the death of Ken Scott, a stalwart of the Durban Budgie Club, more of the then lesser colours found their way to Cradock.

As I was driving back to the airport in Port Elizabeth after the 2007 National which I judged with three overseas judges, I decided that I would give up judging and concentrate on my Technical College which was rapidly expanding.

Sometimes I regret giving up judging but that was a decision I took on the spur of the moment – yet life and the birds went on to make up for not having thought the decision through carefully.

I had gone to England a few times having befriended Fred Wright years before at a show in South Africa that he judged.

My first imports as I have mentioned were from Fred Wright which also included three beautiful lutinos from Margery Kirby Mason who was the “queen” of Lutinos having won the BS and London & Southern Counties Lutino trophy a record number of times.

My second imports of thirty birds came once again from Fred Wright and Roy Aplin and included a very good lutino and yellow cock from a friend of Fred Wright Ian Fordham.

The following year I won best opposite sex and best breeder on show with a cinnamon light green hen bred from the Roy Aplin and his Joe Mannes bloodline at the Transvaal championship show.

Trying to breed too many different colours was not a good idea and Doc Robertson urged me to concentrate on a good top half of the table so that I could improve the bottom half should I carry on with the Red Eyes.

A third lot of imports arrived mainly from Fred Wright but also included a lutino cock from Steve Cox.

It produced super chicks mated back to the Kirby Mason line.

Due to space and a rapid expanding Technical College, I swapped Reinhart Molkenntin all the lutinos for some Normals.

The Steve Cox bred lutinos blended in well with his Steve Cox family – the Kirby Mason Lutinos he sold off.

This journey would not be complete without mentioned Pat de Beer and Jenny Huber from Cape Town.

Pat was always the front runner and breeder of top quality birds winning many best in shows.

She was good judge and when her husband Gerald retired, she became the president of the BSSA.

There was also a lady fancier In Cape Town by the name of Jenny Huber who knew exactly what she wanted in terms of birds and went to great lengths to get the bird/s she wanted.

There was no love lost between Pat de Beer and Jenny Huber.

The calming factor was Pat's husband Gerald de Beer – a gentle giant.

He was an excellent show secretary – then they sold the stud and retired.

I have been fortunate to know and associate with a number of great fanciers in South Africa.

First and foremost was Doc Alf Robertson.

I spent many hours in the Doc Robertson aviary.

Not only was he my doctor by also a father figure and a very special friend.

The gentle giant with his wealth of knowledge remained my friend until he moved on at the age of 88 years.

His stud went to Peter Needham and two other fanciers in Johannesburg and so an era came to an end.

John van Niekerk had an Engineering business In Springs.

I used to travel past Springsto Sasol three at Secunda to play cricket at the Meyerton Cricket Club and often spent some time at John van Niekerk's home and aviary whilst on my way back to Sasol three at Secunda.

On a number of occasions John would return to the management of the BSSA salvaging and orchestrating peace amongst council members.

He regularly imported birds and bred some super Light Greens and Sky Blues.

Jock Pearson who lived in Pinetown was a Scotchman with a dry sense of humour.

He bred quality Albinos, Violets, Greys and Mauves possibly all split red eye to improve his Albinos.

Bill Willcocks and his two sons Ronnie and Alan, who was a chemist, Chris and Stella Kuhn were the main players in the Durban Budgerigar Society.

Alan was married to Doc Robertson's youngest daughter.

The constant infighting between the Robertson and the Willcocks families led to the establishment of the Durban Budgerigar Breeders Club (DBBC).

Roy Paterson was the first chairman and I took on the secretary's job.

During the Club's existence we ran three Provincial Championship Shows.

We made one fatal mistake and that was to allow dual membership of both DBC and DBBC.

Ultimately the two clubs became one with Roy van Rooyen as the chairman and Joyce Playford the secretary.

I joined the Wesrand Budgerigar Club of which Tom Lynch was the chairman.

Eventually the troublemakers left the hobby and I rejoined DBC.

After a run in with the chairman at the 2005 National in Durban, I rejoined Wesrand Budgerigar Club.

With not much activity in the club, I joined JSBS where I am very happy.

Jimmy Runkel was a staunch member of the Kroonstad Budgerigar Club although he stayed in Durban.

I recall a magnificent Cinnamon Sky Blue hen that he showed at a Provincial in Durban.

Arthur Windell known as “oom” Arthur worked selfishly for his club and the BSSA in General.

Fred Sherman who moved from Rhodesia to South Africa and retired in Johannesburg had a really good stud of birds.

Normals, Cinnamons and Dominant Pieds stood out amongst other varieties of good quality birds.

Fred was a fierce competitor and credit must go to him in the way he had chaired BSSA and the sound financial position of our Society is in today.

Fred moved to George where he eventually passed on.

“Oom” Chris Oberholzer was one of the longest serving administrator’s of the BSSA and a lifelong friend of Walter Bingham.

The two of them worked in the drawing office of the railways in Durban.

Walter Bingham’s Sky Blues and Dark Greens were really good and “oom” Chris kept good birds as well.

“Oom,” Chris was always ready to lend a helping hand and when he won at the Gauteng Provincial Championship show with a Cinnamon Sky Blue cock, no one would have begrudged him that moment of glory.

“Oom” Chris is now happily retired trying to catch fish somewhere in the Western Cape.

Heino Artus bred really good Light Greens but became so engrossed in Recessive Pieds that the Light Greens took a back seat.

I believe he is on his way back.

Doc Aron was a dentist until he retired.

All ways the dark horse, his well known for his Skyblues and Cobalts, he won many shows when no one really expected it.

Last but not least, Reinhardt Molkentin.

Reinhardt joined the Northern Transvaal Budgie Club when he came to South Africa where Gideon and Marie Taljaard were the back bone of the club.

I met Reinhardt at the 1999 National in Boksburg when he won Best Bird on Show with a Light Green cock – the quality was outstanding and no one except the late Doc Robertson could have competed.

I accepted an invitation to visit Reinhardt on his small holding where the family lived in a small asbestos house while he was busy building the house and establishing most of what we see today.

Many more visits followed and birds were bought and brought into my stud.

The hospitality from this family was unfamiliar to most South African fanciers.

The many hours spent discussing in broken English all aspects of keeping and breeding budgies is never forgotten.

Traditional German food was always served with liquid refreshments and much budgie talk.

When something had to be explained, Reinhardt's son, Holger, would explain in German and the conversation continued.

It was not always possible to get away on the time that you wanted to and many times I slept in one of the guest houses on the way to Durban when travelling, the food and the liquid refreshments starting taking its toll.

Needless to say I recapped the day's conversation and pictured the birds I had bought thinking of how I would introduce the bought birds into my stud.

To this day the hospitality and friendship has not changed and one always feels at home.

It is sad that South African fanciers do not give this man the credit he deserves.

Let's be honest, no one had done as much for the fancy as Reinhart Molkentin in South Africa and all over the world.

To this end I salute you my friend.

Finally I am also going to pen my likes and dislikes.

I intensely dislike cheating, dishonesty and the back biting that still forms part of our great hobby.

When you buy a bird and you pay the price that the owner wants, don't go behind his back and run him/her down – after all you chose the bird and thought that the price was fair.

Slating judges by those who have been in the fancy for a long time and those who have recently joined leaves a bad taste in one's mouth.

Fanciers who tell you that it is only their bloodlines when you know that they have brought in birds from other fanciers.

The likes far outweigh the dislikes.

Meeting old friends at shows or visiting them when you are in or passing their home town is always something to look forward to.

Currently friends like Heino Artus, Steve Botoulas, Brian Springer, Albert Olivier, the Molkentins, Enul Warrington, Sharon Tomlinson and Essa Hassim form the core of my closest budgie breeding friends.

Lastly, I am extremely worried about the fancy in South Africa.

Down to just over two hundred members, not many youngsters are joining the society unless they are part of family that breeds budgies.

On the other hand youngsters of today as I often see at my College have so many other interests of which cell phones, earphones and social media play a major role.

My one remaining desire is to breed that really good one and win best bird on show – maybe someday!

I thank the true budgerigar friends for the many pleasant times over the years talking and breeding budgies.

My plea to established fanciers are that you would please look after Essa, Ryan, Rynier, and Christo – they are the future of the fancy in South Africa – help the novices were you can.

George Norval