

PASSION FOR PIGEONS

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Charles pigeons, along with the pigeons of other Lexington Racing Pigeon Club members, look onwards as they are released by Louisville Racing Pigeon Club member Aaron Jefferson and are about to take flight to begin their race back to their lofts outside of a Holiday Inn in Franklin, Kentucky.

As a boy in high school, now retired Vietnam veteran and Frankin County resident Charlie Thornton was gifted a pair of racing Homers—a breed of pigeon that specializes in long-distance flight and it’s homing ability; While he didn’t race them at the time, Thornton was fascinated by the birds, though he was forced to abandon them when he received a notice that he was being drafted, just a month after turning 19. A little under 50 years later, Thornton’s passion for pigeons was reignited when he spotted pigeon shipping crates in a friend’s garage and old times flooded back into memory.

That friend was Gary Potts, a pigeon racer with decades of experience, and with Pott’s help, Thornton reentered the hobby. “I learned a whole lot from Gary ... I told him I used to have pigeons an’ went and seen the loft he built an’ he gave me some pigeons an’ I started back in it,” Thornton recalled.



Thornton admires “Trenton,” one of his favorite pigeons, outside his loft at his Franklin County, Ky. home. “I’m not gon’ race her this weekend, I don’t want to lose her,” Charlie says with a smile. “You lose pigeons in races, some of them get lost an’ don’t know how to find their way back home, that’s how you weed out the bad ones,” Thornton says. “The ones that come back and everything, those are the good ones. You keep them and breed from them hopin’ to get some more good ones.”



Charlie moves his racing pigeons from his trunk to the garage of Lexington Racing Pigeon Club President David Stephenson's home in Lexington, Ky. Charlie, along with other club members, take their pigeons here to prep them for the next morning's race.

Eight years later, Thornton, 75, has built his own loft, owns over 50 pigeons, and is the Vice President of the Lexington Racing Pigeon Club. Thornton's loft, dubbed "Tuttle Lane Loft," sports a University of Kentucky themed paint job and is where Thornton spends much of his day working with his birds.

Most of the pigeons Thornton owns now were bred by himself, with the hopes of training and racing them, as well as "gettin' some with different colors."

"It's fun to watch 'em start to get their color because you never know how they gon' turn out," Thornton said.

Thornton said he plans to continue breeding and racing pigeons until he no longer is able. "I'll be workin' with the birds as long as I can, as long as my old body will let me," he said.



Two of Charlie's pigeons perch in his loft at his home in Franklin County, Ky. Two bands are seen on their legs; the white band was attached by Charlie for identification purposes and was done at birth; the black bands were attached by Charlie for racing purposes.



A pigeon looks onwards whilst crated outside of Lexington Racing Pigeon Club President David Stephenson's home in Lexington, Ky., ahead of their race the following morning.



Charlie Thornton stands inside his pigeon loft in Franklin County, Ky. "This section here is the first one I built," Thornton explains.

Four pigeons are seen perching in Charlie's Franklin County, Ky., loft.



Fellow Lexington Racing Pigeon Club member Tony Horn helps log the birds before their race the following day in the garage of Lexington Racing Pigeon Club President David Stephenson's Lexington, Ky., home.

Charlie Thornton enters his self-built pigeon loft named "Tuttle Lane Loft" behind his home in Franklin County, Ky. "I built this whole thing by myself, every bit on my own," Thornton said, "started buildin' it in 2014 ... don't seem like it's been that long already ... the work is rewarding."

