

Gene Lussier And Tony Patti

By DAN PEARSON

Day Arts Writer

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Who: Gene Lussier, 62, of Griswold, and Tony Patti, 59, of Preston, champion pigeon breeders.

Why you should know them: This weekend, the eyes of the pigeon world will focus on the Hartford Civic Center, which hosts the National Pigeon Association's 81st annual Grand National. This is the first time that the event, which Lussier calls "the Super Bowl" of pigeon shows, has been held in New England. Lussier and Patti are two of Connecticut's best chances to win a major prize. The event will feature more than 5,000 pigeons and 400 breeders competing in a variety of categories involving racing, flying, homing and exhibition.

Flying High: Between them, Patti and Lussier have 100 years of pigeon training and breeding experience. They helped found the Eastern Connecticut Pigeon Breeders Association. Patti, who formerly served on the board of directors of the National Pigeon Association, operates New England Pigeon Supply in Preston, which sells bands, feed and breeding information. The NPA granted Patti the title of Master Breeder in 1989. Lussier keeps approximately 75 pigeons in a heated coop in Jewett City. Patti keeps about 400 birds in Preston.

Birds of a Different Feather: Patti and Lussier breed show pigeons, more refined than the wild pigeons seen loitering in urban parks. Patti breeds three varieties of the Helmet pigeon, including the turbit, mookie and nun. Lussier breeds tumblers. The birds have been bred, generation after generation, to score high in competitions. Master judges grade on a point system, which awards birds for a variety of characteristics, including the quality of their beak, rosette, and head, how they walk, their body size and markings and their general health, which includes ocular clarity and feather condition.

A Wing and a Prayer: Champion breeders can profit by selling their birds to other breeders or to pigeon enthusiasts, including boxer Mike Tyson, another Connecticut resident fascinated by the pursuit. "There's joy in receiving recognition as a breeder. (A championship) makes your flock's bloodline more valuable," says Patti. "You have to have a sixth sense about breeding. Gene and I like to joke that we have pigeon blood in our veins." A champion bird can fetch as much as \$1,000. According to Lussier, the average pigeon breeds eight times a year and lays between 12 and 24 eggs.

Flights of Fancy: "I used to work a pretty stressful job, but an hour (in the coop) always unwound me," says Lussier, who is retired from the state court system. "It's like you're watching a small community just like our own community. You see child rearing, courtships, fights, cruelty, friendship and everything in between."

Flock to It: The Grand National concludes from 7 a.m.-4 p.m., today. Admission is free. Call (860) 525-4500. For more information on pigeons, consult the NPA at www.npaua.com, or Pigeon Debut magazine, the national authority. Patti's 1999 book, "So You Want to Raise Pigeons," is considered by the NPA to be the best introduction to the pursuit. New England Pigeon Supply can be visited, by appointment, at 95 River Road, Preston. Call 889-0497. — *Dan Pearson* ■



Gene Lussier, left, and Tony Patti at Lussier's pigeon coop in Griswold.

Sean D. Elliot / The Day