



Contestant Ali al-Dahoum sizes up a pigeon before placing the bird into a race pannier.



Esther Bultman is put in the picture by Henk Jurriens, both contestants in the race.



A pigeon is gently placed in a race pannier before being transported to the release point.

Pigeon pie or highflyers is million dollar poser

SHAUN SMILLIE

ABOVE the skies of the North Cape an unusual duel might just take place today when the Queen of England and Mike Tyson go toe-to-toe.

For months, they've been squaring off and they'll find out if their nose for selecting blood lines, understanding genetics and simple gut instinct, has produced a winning pigeon that will claim the \$200 000 (R2.66 million) prize.

If the weather plays its part, about 2 500 birds will be released in Colesberg and begin their flight to Heron Banks on the Vaal River.

It's the first time that the South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race is being held at the Heron Banks Golf and River Estate.

It's a race that's expected to last about eight hours and an assortment of pigeon fanciers from about 30 countries will be waiting for the birds' return.

Among the participants are the newbies to the sport, the Kuwaitis, the powerhouses of pigeon racing, the Belgians and Dutch, and a number of South Africans thrown in for good measure.

Queen Elizabeth II has sent birds from her lofts on the Sandringham Estate, in Norfolk, England, and the talk is former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson, has entered, but under a pseudonym.

Anticipation for the weekend's showdown has been building for eight months. The birds have been kept at Heron Banks since June preparing for the race.

"You need to get them used to the hedges, and herons. Imagine seeing that big noisy bird for the first time. It is scary," says race spokesperson Joan Holt.

"They have been here so long that now they even understand Afrikaans."

The birds arrived when they were about 3-months-old. They are electronically tagged, but this is taped up so their handlers can't identify them and give preferential treatment to any bird.

Auditors make sure everything is done by the book. As with other sports, there is a criminal side to pigeon racing. Some owners have been known to dope their birds.

There's lots more at stake than just the birds as Queen and Tyson go toe-to-toe in South Africa's big sky country



Contestants in the 21st Million Dollar Pigeon Race keep watch on their pigeons in their panniers at the Emerald Resort & Casino.

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"The problem they have is that often the birds are so wired they just fly above the loft and don't come down," says Michael Holt, one of the organisers.

All birds are treated equally at the Heron Banks lofts – they eat the same food, sleep together and are given the same training.

This is called road training, where the birds are released at increasingly longer

distances from the loft. What homing instinct drives these birds back to the loft from a point hundreds of kilometres away is still a mystery to scientists.

It's the road training that provides their owners a glimpse of just how the birds might perform on the big day. Kuwaiti Ali al-Dahoum is quick to pull out his tablet and show a collection of graphs that plot just how well his

“Often the birds are so wired, they just don't come down”

pigeon, Bent AlFakheer, has been performing.

The pigeon has won a race, come in second twice and

snatched a fourth place.

"Her mother was the first ace pigeon in Kuwait," he says.

But blue bloods aren't enough to ensure a win. As with human athletes, big match temperament plays a part on race day, and of course luck has her say, too.

"In the past, all the best pigeons didn't do so great in these smaller races. They perform but you need luck on

the day," says Dutchman Henk Jurriens, whose pigeon, Untamed Desert, won in 2013.

It's not just prize money the top birds will collect this weekend. Tomorrow there's an auction of the top pigeons, and here's where the big money is made.

Recently one pigeon went for R600 000 and the owner sold six of the chicks for R500 000 each.

After the race many of the

birds will be retired and will spend the remainder of their lives producing the next generation of aspirant high-flyers. But today everybody is expecting a tough race.

Jurriens suspects the birds will have to battle an exhausting headwind which will reduce the pigeons' speeds to a sluggish 60km/h.

And who knows what other obstacles the birds might face on their route. There are num-

erous past horrorstories. Jurriens recalls one time when the race was still at Sun City and a pigeon coming in the top 10 was plucked from the sky by a bird of prey just 100m from the finish.

There will be other temptations, too, explains Joan Holt. "They might just look down and spot those big maize silos in the Free State and say 'hmm that looks like a nice meal.'"