



WIN, LOSE OR DRAW

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The hawking season 2019-20 was full of excitement and promise developing “Two Moons”, a wild-hacked Peale’s falcon from Pete Widener. She was my third female from Pete and a standout from the beginning. A wonderfully strapping and extremely athletic falcon who had a lot of fly in her and the level speed to match that of a gyrkin. She whizzed through initial training, entered quickly on wild game and subsequently did very well early in the season.



She was the first juvenile peregrine I've flown in 40 years that could succeed on big water flights with hundreds of waterfowl in her first season. She managed to catch many ducks in the fall and became very proficient on them. Her innate intelligence and speed facilitated her catching ducks spectacularly in ways even a seasoned game hawk might not.

When it started freezing up in the late fall, I switched to grouse hawking as is my annual custom. In the first week of December on day one, Two Moons struck and grounded the first sage grouse she saw. She wrestled with it in the tall grass on the shore of a small frozen pond, but it managed to slip from her grip. Intimidated, the grouse flew low a short distance and put into a large sagebrush. Despite being clearly demoralized, the grouse survived,

thanks in part to the falcon's naiveté and a relentless raven that mobbed and distracted Two Moons. The grouse, never losing its wits totally, made good of the opportunity and rocketed away while the falcon was otherwise engaged.

On December 10th she was flying a large pond of about 3 acres that appeared to host a couple hundred waterfowl, both ducks and geese. I was joined by a friend, Jim Younk and we watched her mount. Just as the falcon was reaching her pitch, a Golden eagle suddenly appeared and slid across the sky from the west then swung up to her. They appeared to touch, just for a second, then separate. The eagle continued to slide eastward and joined up with another smaller eagle. Jim and I stood there, slack jawed in utter astonishment, as the falcon kept flying and appeared

unharmful! It was a long flight where she had four big stoops and remounts but was ultimately unsuccessful.

Two Moons appeared totally well on the pick-up, without sign of a wound or any blood on her. She took a full crop before being hooded and placed back on the cage. She spent the next two hours riding along without any apparent discomfort as we drove around to find a slip for Jim's peregrine, "Dragon". Likewise, she appeared well that evening upon returning home and when I checked on her in the mews just before bed she looked positively blissful sitting on her perch, with a bulging crop, relaxed and loose feathered with a foot tucked up. I thought we/she dodged the bullet. The next morning however, I could smell a sour crop through the door of her mews and when I opened it she was

lying down on the shelf perch panting with a still full crop. She wouldn't stand and as I was trying to untie her and carry her into the house, she died in my hands.

The spring of 2020 brought a welcome salve in the form of number five Peale's from Pete, a large Aleutian tiercel I named "Pedro" as well as my first home-bred Anatum, also a tiercel named "Rojo". The three of us had quite the adventure throughout the summer performing the Four Week Window (4WW) tame-hack here at our place in Mayfield. In 40 years of falconry this 4WW tame-hack was one of the highlights. Pedro and Rojo were out 12-13 hours every day and there was very little stress and no major mishaps.

I was in constant contact via

telephone and email with Lynn Oliphant the creator and author of the Four Week Window the entire time. He was particularly helpful in the beginning, and thanks to him we pulled off a successful hack. Initially, I did

fore I began. To my mind it is best to think of the 4WW as a "trained-hack" vs tame-hack, particularly for those who have experience tame-hacking imprint falcons. The young falcons in the 4WW need to be full-



not fully understand the full conceptual scope of the 4WW hack despite reading the book twice and very nearly failed be-

ly geared up and trained to the basic falconry routine before fledging. The young falcons must be jessed and accustomed to stepping to the glove, coming to, and eating off the lure and accepting the hood, all before they can fly. This happens quite easily and quickly in a matter of 3-4 days, but it is paramount to complete this step prior to the young learning to fly so they can safely and reliably be recovered each afternoon. There is little time between 35 days old and fledging with a peregrine to accomplish this. Therefore, it is critical to not be too casual about the process and get the



daily handling routine well established quickly. By contrast, wild-hacked and passage hawks for that matter, there is no urgency to this phase of becoming acclimated to life as a falconry bird. Wild-hacked and passage falcons of course learn all these things after they have been trapped up and their adolescent flying is over. In the case of imprints at tame-hack, the daily routine and the mechanics of husbandry occur gradually throughout the rearing process, and again without urgency or a definitive timeline. Within a couple of intense days of handling my tiercels were jessed up and fitted with transmitter attachments, taught to step to the glove from a perch and off the lure, made to the hood, and became accustomed to feeding off the lure and from the glove. It was remarkable how quickly they picked it all up.

The next wrinkle in our hack experiment was a significant delay in the actual fledging. Lynn says peregrines should fledge between 37 and 42 days old and my two tiercels fledged at 44 and 45 days old. The Anatum, Rojo, fledged first from the third rung of a ladder placed out for that sole purpose and promptly spent his first night out in the top of a neighbor's Cottonwood tree. I put his GPS transmitter to sleep for

the night but did not sleep too soundly myself! The tree has a line of sight to the roof of my house so the following morning I put Pedro the Peale's on the eaves of the roof, and he scrambled to the peak in short order. As suspected, this quickly drew the attention of Rojo who soon came flying in to land beside his hack-mate. When Rojo made his next flight, he took Pedro with him, and thus they both were fledged.

Lynn was initially perplexed by the late fledging but soon worked it out and shared his insight. In the wild, peregrines fledge from cliffs and need only step off the porch as it were, to be airborne. Likewise, from Lynn's deck and roof of his home some 30-40 feet above the ground the young falcons have the advantage of height, and like wild peregrines his hawks can take the leap at a much earlier stage. With the assistance of height, they then can develop enough airspeed to create lift and fledge at a younger and perhaps more natural stage. Alternatively, Rojo fledged from near ground level and Pedro from a height of about 16 feet. By the time they did take to the air they were quite a bit more developed and never looked clumsy in the air. Lynn and I discussed this phenomenon without really coming to any conclusions – a good

topic for future investigation and discussion I think.

Pedro and Rojo's daily routine during the hack was as follows. I would get up between 6:30 and 7:00 and go out to the mews where the two had spent the night tethered to their shelf perches. They were usually eager to start their day and leaning forward to step to the glove for a large tidbit, typically a whole quail leg as a little breakfast. They were then hooded, weighed and fitted with both a leg mounted UHF and GPS transmitter. I then walked the short distance from the barn to the center of our back lawn where they were put out each day. Initially, especially prior to fledging I simply stepped them off the glove onto the hack table. Later, when they had been flying a few days I would stand in the center of the lawn, unhood them and after 30 seconds or less they would either launch or I would cast them off with a preparatory "ok let's go". This latter step is recommended by Lynn in The 4WW and like many of his recommendations, has proved to be very handy when it came to formal training and hawking. After the hack they both spent little time on the fist once the hood was removed, and if they were cast-off, they mounted directly and never landed.

The tiercels would fly around the house and over the desert in the back and through the neighborhood for 30 or so minutes then find a place to sit and preen and perform other self-care. Quite naturally and on their own, they found places to stand out of the wind and shady spots out of the heat and direct sunlight during the day. While they were most active in the morning and for about an hour or so in the early evening, I would occasionally find them active in the middle of the day, particularly on windy days and during the last week of hack. I would put their GPS transmitters to sleep after initializing them in the morning before release, then check on them every 2-3 hours turning on the UHF receiver and making sure I had a strong signal. As a re-

assurance to myself, a couple of times each day I would look for the tiercels to get a visual.

In the last week of the hack, it was all at once alarming and exciting to check on Pedro and Rojo several times, finding them with the GPS very far away and very high in the sky. The first time linking up with the GPS transmitter, Pedro was 1.4 miles to the southeast, 1600 feet above me! To my relief, he was back on the roof within the next half of an hour. There were several instances in this last week of the hack where I watched them on the GPS screen up to 2.2 miles away and 2700 feet above me zooming across the sky.

Based on conventional UHF and VHF telemetry data and

visual observation alone, one might have concluded they did not really fly that much during the hack and may question its utility. You hear this a lot from those who are not proponents of a hack of any kind. Here, thanks to Marshall GPS telemetry, we have evidence they can, and do fly a lot more than can be easily observed. Having documented them flying great distances and heights from the hack site even with sporadic monitoring has provided good evidence these young falcons did a lot more than "sit around all day".

The theoretical case for superior development in young hacked falcons has been made by several, including Lynn Oliphant, Ed Pitcher, Pete Widener, and others. I agree with them in



most instances. In addition to theoretical argument however, I can offer this GPS telemetry data as empiric evidence as to why these 4WW hacked tiercels have been two of the most successful and well-adjusted young falcons I've known in 40 years of falconry. For what it's worth, I would say I now prefer the 4WW to wild-hacked eyasses primarily because of the lack of stress to the young hawks and the decreased risk of loss or predation while at hack. Further, I

four having been wild-hacked at Pete's.

Both tiercels did well in their training, transitioning near seamlessly from the hack to formal training. Before I ended the hack, they were "entered" to both live pigeons and the drone, so the switch to focused training for waiting-on was simply a matter of changing locations.

Despite the two being a day apart in age, and having the

two subspecies. In my opinion their differences were primarily individualistic and have little or nothing to do with their subspecies or gender. They were similar in aloofness, though the Anatum was a little more standoffish initially. I suspect their wary attitudes was somewhat a result of my handling (or lack thereof) as much as anything else. I was very concerned about over-socializing them, resulting in unwanted behaviors such as vocalizing and covering, etc. Therefore, the time I spent handling and manning them was kept to an absolute bare minimum to allow pick-up in the evening. In a nutshell then, their surprising differences are as follows.

Essentially, Rojo the Anatum was not nearly as aerial and took much more effort to pick up his lessons from the beginning. In particular, he was reluctant to stoop the lure and grab it in the air, chase the drone, etc. He got there eventually but it took two or three attempts more than Pedro. Conversely, Pedro the Peale's was naturally aerial, enthusiastic about learning and generally a bright, quick study. For example, after the first introduction to the lure pole and stooping to it, Pedro would leap from the roof and start ringing upon seeing me walk out from the barn with the lure pole in



am of the opinion with just the right amount of handling and socialization, the 4WW hacked hawks are just as independent and aloof as the wild-hacked hawk. I will go one step farther by saying this 4WW Widener Peale's was the most tractable of the five I've had, the other

same exposures and experiences, their differences were immense. Of course, I'm comparing Peale's and Anatoms, but the differences between these two tiercels were not archetypal, and do not mirror what one would expect with what we (think) we know about the



my hand. Several times while I was stooping both of them to the lure, Pedro would swing around behind me and "steal" it while I had my eyes on Rojo preparing to pull him through a pass.

Rojo started to really shine with the introduction of bagged quarry. From the first, he came

ripping in to pound the first sealed pigeon given and showed a lust for a high-speed strike. To this day, he seems to relish recklessly hitting his quarry. Pedro on the other hand, despite his pealei heritage and aerial flight style, had no interest in slamming into targets, and always put on the brakes

to tap or cautiously bind to any offering, even sealed pigeons. Though somewhat frustrating for me, it ultimately led to his demise.

Pedro was killed by a haggard red-tail on what was to be his last training flight in the first week of October. I had been flying one tiercel every other day on alternate days. They both were flying consistently well and had been given bagged mallards and pheasants. Where Rojo was slashing and ripping, Pedro would tap and chase and eventually bind to his, then struggle to control it on the ground. To build Pedro's confidence, I switched back to using sealed pigeons and let him sit and extra day. On his last flight, I gave him a sealed homing pigeon from a great pitch. He made a blistering



stoop but as usual tapped the pigeon, followed by a towering throw-up with great panache, then tapped the pigeon twice more unsealing it. The two then raced to the North right down to the deck then started climbing out. As they faded from vision, I watched the action on my phone. At a mile away they were at 1200 feet, then started dropping rapidly. The flight ended 50 feet above me and 1.2 miles away in a stand of pines. I drove directly to him and arrived in less than 15 minutes. Pulling up, I saw the red-tail flapping in the top of one of the pines. I thought to myself, it was lucky I got there so quickly, not realizing it was already too late. I found

Pedro dead, lying on his belly, and already partially eaten. I was flabbergasted how quickly this all transpired. The recording of the flight revealed a total duration of just 26 minutes. I assume the red-tail had roosted in the stand of trees the night before and not yet set off on her morning foray when she was served breakfast in bed. Pedro was a well-built peregrine with a beautifully black-capped and pleasantly rounded head, a broad back, large feet, and muscular physique. He had a curious and insightful young mind and was naturally aerial. I'm confident he would've developed into a great gamehawk as his confidence improved given a bit more time.

Like Two Moons, the falcon Pedro ostensibly replaced, the loss was hard to take, but this is the price we pay to be able to see and experience the things we do living this way of life. After some time for reflection, we heal, and move on. If we are honest with ourselves the risk of catastrophe, juxtaposed with the potential of seeing things few humans get to, has a lot to do with the allure of the lifestyle. In addition to the bond most of us form with our hawks, I suspect for many of us, this all or nothing wager is why we do it. Win, lose or draw, we acquiesce to the seduction, place our chips on the table, and embrace the uncertainty.



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