

The man with million-euro pigeon

Ingelmunster, Belgium

Belgian pigeon breeder Joel Verschoot could probably have settled down to a comfortable retirement in March after he sold the world's most expensive racer.

Armando the pigeon won worldwide headlines and netted Verschoot 1.25-million euros (\$1.4-million) when he won over Chinese buyers in an online auction.

Now the famous bird toils for a Beijing public works magnate, fathering what his new owner must hope will be a new generation of feathered champions.

But 64-year-old retired abattoir worker Verschoot is not done yet. He still consecrates up to 10 hours a day tending for and racing his charges.

Before Armando set the online pigeon auction world alight earlier this year, the Flemish fancier's most expensive protegee was 400,000-euro Nadine.

Now Verschoot wants to better his record. He has hidden away two of Armando's heirs -- "a son and a daughter" -- in the hope they mate and raise a brood.

Standing in his garden in Ingelmunster, a small town near Kortrijk in West Flanders, Verschoot still remembers the "incredible" record-setting auction.

When Armando's sale came up, two Chinese buyers went head to head, raising each other by 100,000 euros a time until one was forced to retire from the field.

"We never

thought it could go up like that," he told AFP, recalling how his then 50-year-old father introduced him to pigeon fancying at a young age.

Joel was the only one of the elder Verschoot's nine children to take an interest in training his father's 50-strong racing flock.

Now he has 300 birds of his own, and fame in the sport.

Since retiring from the abattoir in 2015, Verschoot has turned a hobby into an international business, fuelled by the rise of Chinese interest.

Belgian birds have a global reputation as racers and Nikolaas Gyselbrecht, CEO of the online site Pigeon Paradise, says China accounts for 40 percent of sales.

Verschoot's -- and later Armando's -- reputation was built in middle-distance races of 500 to 700 kilometres (300 to 400 miles).

Best in Europe

As a trainer, he explains, his speciality was keeping apart male and female pairs for two weeks before the day-long race.

The lovesick birds, he reckons, are all the more determined to return to each others' bosom at speeds of up to 80 kph after this enforced celibacy.

"Quick, quick, quick, back to the house and the women!" he chants.

Armando was not merely randy,

however, he was also "crafty", his trainer explains: expert at dodging power cables and airborne atoms.

He came second in a race in Limoges, France in 2017 and 2018, and won last year's meet at nearby Angouleme.

At the start of this year things got serious at the race in Poznan, Poland, that acts as a kind of pigeon Champions League for the best birds in Europe.

He won. And now his champion's DNA is much sought after.

The Chinese buyer is thought to have kept Armando in a training loft in Belgium, the equivalent of the stud at a thoroughbred racing stable.

"Soon Armando will have grandchildren which will go on the market, for more and more," Verschoot beams.

Some purists are less excited by the arrival of big money deals in their traditional sport.

"Ordinary fanciers would never be interested in a pigeon for his sperm," complains Bernard Ancia, of specialist weekly La Colombephilie Belge.

"That's not what's going to promote our sport."

Maybe Belgium's pigeon racing scene has room for a variety of approaches, after all between 18,000 and 20,000 Belgians are licensed breeders.

But Ancia is pessimistic. "You have to give up a lot of your time, and it's rare that a breeder is followed into the hobby by his wife or kids," he said.

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Joel Verschoot

Monkey business: Macaque island draws tourists -- and criticism

Nha Trang, Vietnam

Menacing macaques snatch bags of crisps, water bottles, cookies and crackers from uneasy tourists on Vietnam's Monkey Island, a popular attraction decried as cruel by activists calling for an end to animal tourism in Southeast Asia.

Tourists are encouraged to show the monkeys their empty hands if they don't want to be accosted by the aggressive macaques, who routinely steal

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"They grabbed my biscuits and climbed on my body," Dinh Thi Hoa told AFP on the small island in Nha Phu bay in south-central Vietnam.

"I didn't even have time to open my bag, the monkey took it from me and opened it!" she said, smiling, after a gang of macaques rifled through her rucksack.

It is one of countless animal tourism sites across Vietnam where for just a few dollars visitors can ride elephants or ostriches, or see costumed bears and tigers perform at circuses.

Over on Monkey Island, macaques ride motorbikes, lift weights and shoot basketballs in their own packed circus performance that ends with a monkey in a frilly skirt collecting tips from the audience.

Elsewhere on the island, vis-

itors eagerly place bets on a monkey swimming race to close out a morning of animal entertainment.

It's cruel work, according to some.

"Monkeys don't choose to walk on their hind legs, ride bikes, or perform other meaningless and humiliating tricks -- they've simply learned to fear what will happen if they don't," said Jason Baker, animal rights group PETA's vice president of international campaigns.

"Travel companies and tourists must stop buying tickets to cruel exhibits like Monkey Island," he added.

There are about 1,200 macaques on the small island, where vaccine experiments were once carried out by Soviet scientists before it was transformed into a tourist attraction in the 1990s.

Monkey Island manager Truong Nguyen Phuoc An says the animals are never beaten, and are well looked after thanks to tourist dollars.

"We can have money to maintain the island and buy more food for the monkeys," he said, as tourists boarded boats under a searing midday sun.

Throng of visitors stream though every week, mostly Vietnamese, Chinese and Russians who jet across the bay from the beach resort hotspot Nha Trang.

Many are happy to see the monkeys, brushing aside claims the animals should be left alone.

"I think they are well-fed and happy, it's perfect," said Kirill, a 19-year-old visitor from Russia.