

## **Budgie Greats – Dr Alf Robertson – Durban, South Africa**

We tend to think of Budgie-Greats as those from the UK and the rest of the world but there were also some from outside the UK and over the world.

Our own Reinhardt Molkenntin falls in this category but I am going to concentrate on Doc Robertson as he was affectionately known.

Dr Alf Robertson from Durban in South Africa was just one of the great breeders of my time.

He qualified as a medical doctor at the University of Cape Town and ran a general practice in a town called Kroonstad in the Free State, one of the nine provinces in the Republic of South Africa.

“Doc” as he was affectively known, moved from Kroonstad to Durban joining a group of four medical practitioners and was allocated amongst others, the medical care of sailors from ships that docked in the Durban harbour.

On a number of occasions and at all hours, day and night, he would often be flown out by helicopter to attend to a sick sailor at sea.

Doc started with budgies in 1936 when he joined the Kroonstad Budgie club and later moved to Durban joining the Durban Budgerigar Society.

He judged his first National show in 1942 and again at the 1992 National show exactly 50 years later.

His successes with budgerigars are well documented – he was a top exhibitor and regularly took most of the major awards at Provincial and National shows.

He was a confirmed “in-breeder” and he was known for his views on pairing pedigree birds together to produce his quality stud.

Up until the end of the 1980s, it was Doc who everyone in South Africa turned to for breeding stock.

He was a popular fancier and always keen to offer help and advice but getting top birds out of him was never easy (his favourite line was: “I will put your name and request in my book” - but the book did not really exist!).

It was not just his “in-breeding” techniques that were well known, it was his ability to pair two super but flecked birds together to produce clear-headed youngsters.

He knew his birds, and knew exactly how and what they could reproduce. The truth is that they were characteristic of a real stud – they all looked alike!

It was during the mid-1950s that he purchased birds from Ken Farmer from Bedfordshire in the UK who was widely considered as **THE** man who developed budgies into what they have been in the last number of decades.

One of those birds bought from Ken Farmer was a normal split opaline cock and he produced lots of opalines for Doc which is why he decided to really concentrate on these opalines and improve them.

Eventually he introduced these opalines into his yellow faces and the opalines with the thumb print on the wings were greatly admired and of tremendous quality.

Doc dominated the show bench for the next 20 years and more, winning best bird on show with a grey green cock spilt for opaline 33 years after joining the BSSA.

This was no easy task as for many of those years there was an import ban and budgies could not be brought into South Africa.

In later years his stud was still known for its quality and clean opalines.

Despite the quality opalines, Doc became known as a bit of a grey green man as his many wins confirm.

One of these grey green cocks took the award for best young bird and best in show at a National show during the 1980's when the then editor of Cage & Aviary Birds, Brian Byles was judging at the National show in South Africa.

Brian loved the Grey green cock that won best in show and was so taken by in by its quality that Doc gave the bird and two relatives to Brian on the understanding he showed them at the London & Southern Counties show.

The bird, with the other two were quarantined and exported into the UK.

At the London & Southern Counties show, the Doc Robertson grey green cock won the best in show award.

It was Doc's way of judging his birds against the best in the UK – he knew he was breeding birds of the right standard and quality.

I met Fred Wright and Ron Pearce on one of Fred's trips to South Africa and our first pit stop was at Doc's home in Morningside, Durban.

Both stayed a few days with Doc and lots of bird talk must have been the order of the day.

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I remember arriving at his home late on the first evening after I had fetched Fred and Ron from the airport.

I left early but Fred told me that Doc sat them down in his large kitchen with a good bottle of red wine and said he wanted to talk to them.

Doc had fired questions at them for hours and they talked budgies – he wanted to know all about the fancy in the UK and abroad.

He had been invited to speak at seminars and judge shows abroad, but he declined because he was not one for the “lime light” and always said that the show bench sorted the men from the boys.

He was a regular subscriber to Cage & Aviary Birds together with the BS magazine so he was well informed. It was a fantastic experience for Ron Pearce, a judge from the UK and one time partner of Fred Wright to visit Doc.

The next day Fred told me that Ron quickly realised that he was in the company of one of the greats as he talked to a breeder with such insight around the life of show budgies.

On another night I just sat and listened as the three of them spoke in depth about all aspects of budgies because Fred and Ron also knew budgies very well and kept a super stud of birds back home.

Some years later I was judging in Durban when Doc had retired.

His wife had passed on and he retired from being a medical doctor.

He sold his large home, sold his stud to Peter Needham and two other breeders and he moved into a flat.

I often sat with him the day before a show and we talked and talked about budgies.

It was always a special outing for him when I fetched him from his flat to spend some time with me in my bird room.

I had taken some photos of the winning birds from the UK and Europe, together with a set of photos of the modern Mannes birds.

He loved the Mannes birds and could instantly see how budgies had been taken forward by Jo Mannes with a very different head conformation and directional feather.

After the show Ron Pearce and I fetched him at his flat and took him to the show hall on the Sunday morning. The show was held in a lovely hall inside the grounds of the Westville prison on the outskirts of Durban.

Doc loved seeing the birds again and chatting to some of the old faces and friends. They asked him to present a couple of the awards. It was the last budgie show he visited.

To me, Doc was very special. I have visited and talked budgies with greats over the years when I had travelled abroad.

He had been successful and was really able to explain why he had done certain things.

My most memorable chat with him was in the flat in Durban when he no longer had birds. I asked him why he used to sell many of his top winning birds at a show and never take them home – but still managed to breed the winners again the following year.

He looked at me and smiled – he said, “You know I am known as an “in-breeder” and I am, but the bit of the story I have never told is that you get the benefit of in-breeding when you outcross. The outcross seems to give the youngsters that vigour – extra feather and extra quality in the first generation. The best seem to be like a flower fully opening! It’s the best in shows that come out of that outcross.”

I asked him why he did not keep these birds – he told me, “well, if you are an in-breeder, you don’t want those birds bred from the outcross – they are mongrels.”

Lots of things fell into place for me.

When I had spoken to many budgie breeders in the past they all told me that their best in show bird was the result of an outcross. Now we know why!

When Doc gave up the birds he was a Gold Medal Champion with 3473 Area (Provincial) show points and 1175 National points.

I will never forget the many oxtail meals he made for us at his flat – every Tuesday was a special visit and meals day because the service worker could wash the dishes the next day!

**Yes – Doc was one of the greats – a humble, gentle giant and a super budgie man with a brilliant medical brain too!**

George Norval