Phases of Poultry Work: Caponizing and Capons

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PHASES OF POULTRY WORK
(Caponising and Capons)

by

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CAPONIZING

No farmer in South Dakota would think of keeping all male animals for breeding purposes unless he had an opportunity to sell them to other breeders, for he would realize that the price on the open market would be much less than for castrated animals.

It is a well known fact that castration changes the male animal so that it is easily handled, less nervous and excitable, and more easily fattened. Therefore, all male sheep, hogs, cattle and horses not needed for breeding purposes are subjected to this operation while young.

In the eastern states a similar operation called caponizing is quite commonly performed on young cockerels not needed for breeding stock. If the operation is properly done the capon will sell if ever, crow or fight, and may even be induced to brood either hen hatched or incubator chicks. However a capon is worth more than a pound on the market than a hen so it is not advisable to keep it for that purpose unless one has a scarcity of hens.

The amount and quality of the flesh is as pronounced as in animals for a capon of the general purpose breed will grow ten pounds on practically the same amount of feed that it takes to grow an eight pound cockerel and on the open market there is from twelve to twenty cents difference in the prices per pound. The flesh is as soft and tender as that of a spring fry, and when once used the producer is convinced that it pays to caponize at least for home use if no market is available.

At the present time only about one person in ten thousand has seen a capon, and fewer people have ever tasted one, so the market especially in South Dakota is as yet undeveloped.

If April hatched chicks are caponized they should be ready for the January market. July hatched chicks should be ready for the March market.

Capon weighing seven pounds or over bring from six to nine cents more per pound liveweight than those weighing less than seven pounds.

The past year 6 chicks weighing from 5/8 to 1 1/4 lbs. making an average of 1 lb. each were caponized on August 11 and 12 in regular demonstration work with two people learning on each chick. This was hard on them for beginners are usually slow, and often destroy more tissue than necessary. The chicks were put on range with a small feed of grain in the morning and evening. In November they were put into a small house with cockerels where they were left until the middle of March. The cockerels kept them on the roosts most of the time as the capons had no inclination to defend themselves. For two weeks they were in a house with hens and pullets where they were permitted to eat at will. There was one slip among the six which was not afraid of the cockerels. He weighed 6 1/4 lbs. dressed when sold. He brought 15¢ a lb. liveweight or $1.05. Two capons weighing 15 3/4 lbs. dressed were dry picked on April 1 and two weighed 15 1/4 lbs dressed were dry picked on April 7.
One man caponized 115 with a loss of two, but the coyotes took 65. He dressed the remaining 48 shipped to Chicago and received 35 cents or 3 cents per pound above the quotations for that day. They averaged eight pounds netting $2.38 each. They were extra fine. A woman who caponized the cockerels received 38 cents per pound from special customers. One man received 26 cents per pound but even at that price said he had received good wages for the time spent as well as a good price for feed.

**RANGE:** Capons do well on Alfalfa, Clover, or any green feed during the summer and fall, needing only a light feed of grain to keep them growing. If fed too much grain they put on fat before they are fully developed. They do best when away from the cockerels.

**LENGTH OF TIME FOR DEVELOPMENT:** Unless one can keep them until they are from 8 to 10 months old they will not prove satisfactory as they require a longer time to develop than cockerels. When being fattened they should be separated from the rest of the flock.

**COCKERELS:** If cockerels can be sold at a good price when they weigh from 1½ to 2 pounds it does not pay under the usual conditions, to caponize. It is not the intention to try to induce each and every poultry producer to caponize all of the cockerels, but it is the intention to show that caponizing can be made profitable in South Dakota.

**SKILL REQUIRED:** Caponizing is not a difficult operation, nor does it require a great deal of skill. Any person who is reasonably careful can easily learn to do it. Boys and girls from 10 to 18 learn as quickly and many times are more successful than grown folks.

**LOSS:** The loss from the operation is not great if attention is paid to the proper preparation.

**TIME TO CAPONIZE:** It is difficult to state the exact age at which the operation should be performed as it varies somewhat with the breeds and with the experience of the operator.

It is best for the new beginner to go by weight until experience teaches him to select the bird by its appearance. The Rock, Wyandottes, Orpingtons, and Rhode Island should be caponized when the weight is from 1 to 1½ pounds or just before the comb begins to develop, when the organs are about the size of a large grain of wheat or a small navy bean. The size of the shank and the difference in the voice helps to distinguish the males when small.

If the operation is not performed before the comb begins to enlarge the birds become staggy and are designated as "slips" by the market man. They must then be sold at cockerel prices.
INSTRUMENTS:

A set of instruments including all that is necessary—knife, spreaders, extractor; probe, and strings—may be purchased at $3.50 to $4.50 per set. It is not difficult to make a set of instruments if one is at all ingenious. A knife, such as farmers use for similar operation on young animals, or a safety razor blade may be used instead of the knife that comes with a caponising set. Two small pieces of wire bent to hold a piece of twine serves for tying the bird. A good probe and needle may be made from an old rat tail file and the spreaders and extractor from a good piece of wire. A barrel stood on end makes a good operating table and is easily moved. One ingenious woman in the state used a safety razor blade for a knife, a curling iron for a spreader, and a pair of tweezers for an extractor. This of course made the work more difficult but she did not lose a single bird from the operation.

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INSTRUCTIONS:

General instructions are sent with each set of instruments but if those are mislaid the following have proved very satisfactory.

PREPARATION:

1. Birds to be caponized should be left without food or water for 24 to 36 hours so that the intestines may be empty. Otherwise they crowd toward the incision and make the operation difficult as well as dangerous as one is more apt to cut a blood vessel or pierce the intestines.

2. Place the upturned barrel or table in the direct sunlight unless an artificial light such as a flash or electric bulb is to be used.
3. Place layers of newspaper on the barrel so that a clean surface may be kept.

4. Remove the soiled paper after each operation.

5. Fasten the bird by looping the string (with a half brick or weight sufficient to hold the bird) around the legs.

6. Lay the bird on its side and fasten another string (with weight) around the wings so that the body will be extended at full length.

7. Locate the last rib just in front of the hip, pull out enough feathers to make room for the incision.

8. Wet the surrounding feathers and the skin with a solution of lysol (enough to make the water look milky)

OPERATION:

1. Place the bird with head toward right hand of operator.

2. With the left hand draw the skin toward the hip, then with knife make a half inch incision thru the skin and the body wall between the last two ribs. DO NOT CUT TOO DEEP. Keep the skin stretched until the spreaders are inserted.

3. Insert the spreaders (with the right hand) in the cut and open them up slowly, enlarging the incision with the knife until the operator can insert the extractor.

4. With the needle or probe break the membrane lining the body cavity, taking care to pull upward thus avoiding the possibility of pricking the intestines.

5. With the flat end of the probe push the intestines away from the backbone toward the abdomen.

6. The upper testicle should now be easily seen near the backbone -- a creamy or deep yellow body about the size of a large grain of wheat or a small navy bean.
7. Insert the extractor lengthwise in the incision, turn crosswise, open, grasp the testicle firmly, pull upward gently to be sure the blood vessel is not pinched. Then if free pull gently until the testicle is free from the body. Bring it outside.

8. Twist the cord off or cut the knife.

9. Be sure that the cord drops back into the body cavity or the bird will bleed to death.

10. Without removing the weights and strings, turn the bird over and repeat the operation to remove the testicle from the other side.

DANGER! Many people perform the operation from one side only, but there is more loss resulting unless one has become quite expert. The greatest danger comes from cutting the veins that supply the kidneys with blood.

11. IF THE OPERATION IS PERFORMED FROM ONE SIDE ONLY, remove the lower testicle first, then the upper one. Otherwise the blood from the upper will make it difficult to find the lower one.

CAUTION! One must be careful in either case to grasp the testicle cleanly for if a part is left the operation is not successful -- that is instead of a capon, a "slip" is the result.

CARE: If a small yard is available, the chicks may be kept in for a few days so that one may watch for wind puffs. The skin sometimes puffs up around the wound, which if left makes the chicks look like toy balloons. If a puff appears, prick the skin to let the air out. Sometimes this needs to be done two or three times. The skin may be cut with a sharp knife or razor blade.

FEEDING: Chicks should be given water at once and mash may be given soon after the operation. It is wise to mark the caponized chicks by cutting off the nail of the back toe, punching a hole in the web between the toes, or clipping the web to where the toes join because one cannot notice an immediate change in appearance, the scar disappears and they may be killed or sold as fries.