

A champion in her field

Schuylkill County canine among the nation's top gun dogs.



The English cocker spaniel, better known as Crickette, is just the fourth English cocker from Pennsylvania ever to earn the American Kennel Club's prestigious Field Champion title. Crickette is owned by Joe DeMarkis of Pottsville. (Christian Berg, Allentown Morning Call / October 17, 2007)

By Christian Berg | Of The Morning Call

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When it comes to picking gun dogs, cocker spaniels don't get a whole lot of respect.

Although traditionally a sporting breed, American cockers have largely fallen out of favor with hunters because so many of them fit the stereotype of overweight lap dog.

Despite that, a growing number of sportsmen are discovering the virtues of the lesser-known English cocker, which can more than hold their own against the better-known retrievers, pointers and setters.



• Dog and master Photo



• Working dog Photo

"These 25-to-35-pound pocket rockets are amazing, close-working hunters that will find, flush and retrieve everything from upland birds to waterfowl with the enthusiasm of a gun dog twice their size," said Joe DeMarkis, a professional dog trainer and breeder from East Norwegian Township, Schuylkill County.

Earlier this year, DeMarkis and his 7-year-old English cocker Crickette earned the American Kennel Club's prestigious field champion title. According to AKC records, Crickette is just the fourth English cocker from Pennsylvania to ever accomplish that, and DeMarkis said she is the only one he knows of that holds both field champion and master hunter titles.

Last October, Crickette was among 56 dogs invited to compete in the English Cocker Spaniel Club of America's national field trial at Haymarsh Hunt Club in Morley, Mich. Crickette was one of just 11 dogs that successfully completed all five stages of the competition, and although she didn't win the event, her performance earned a coveted certificate of merit from trial judges.

"[Crickette] did a nice job," said event judge Janet Christensen, a 40-year field trial veteran from North Plains, Ore. "It's an honor to get a certificate of merit. It means that you were in consideration for a placement."

DeMarkis, 53, said being a part of the national championship was among the most rewarding experiences of his life and the culmination of a lifelong love affair with sporting dogs.

"My passion is dogs, and I love being able to get into their head," DeMarkis said. "When a dog understands what you want them to do, they're more than happy to do it for you."

Teaching dogs, and enjoying their company in the field, are two things DeMarkis has enjoyed since childhood, when he chased rabbits alongside his dad's beagles.

"My father rooted a love for the outdoors and dogs in me," he said. "My version of hunting always involved chasing dogs around, and I migrated in that direction."

Today, DeMarkis owns Rivers Outdoor Adventures in New Ringgold, an outfitting company that offers not only gun dog training clinics, but kayak schools, fly-tying classes and guided fishing trips for trout, salmon and steelhead.

A new challenge

Despite more than 30 years' experience training and competing with his own hunting dogs, virtually all of that was done with springer spaniels that competed in AKC hunt tests. DeMarkis didn't consider owning an English cocker -- or running field trials -- until about seven years ago, when he saw them at an AKC hunt test in

Michigan.

After doing some research, DeMarkis purchased Crickette in the fall of 2000 from Bramblewood Kennels in Michigan, which offers cockers bred from the finest British blood lines. Crickette's father was a national field champion in 1998 and was featured in Purina pet food's national "Chosen by Champions" advertising campaign.

Crickette's official name is "FC Bramblewood's Can't Stop Me JH SH MH". The FC stands for field champion, while the JH, SH and MH represent the junior, senior and master hunter titles she earned by successfully completing a series of AKC-sanctioned hunt tests.

"She comes from a strong line of field champions," DeMarkis said. "This dog, right out of the box, was a hunting machine."

Yet even with Crickette's natural abilities, and DeMarkis' training experience, the transition from springers to cockers and hunt tests to field trials didn't come easily, said fellow field trialer Jim Karlovec, who met DeMarkis when Crickette was a puppy.

"She was young and wild and uncontrollable," recalls Karlovec, owner of Flushing Star Kennels in Ohio. "I could see right off the bat she was a very, very talented dog, but Joe was a bit frustrated, because the first several trials, she was way more than he could handle."

Undaunted by those early failures, DeMarkis devoted considerable time to studying the training methods used by top English cocker handlers and doubled his efforts to implement them. Karlovec said that hard work showed up in competition.

"He was very persistent at it," Karlovec said. "He's developed into a very capable handler with a very nice dog."

Tests vs. trials

Earning the field champion title is the pinnacle of achievement for a gun dog, because the animal not only has to be able to do everything -- but also do it better than its peers.



Crickette Photo



Dog and master Photo



Working dog Photo

In AKC hunt tests, dogs are judged against an official standard. Every dog entered in a test can pass as long as they make the required flushes and retrieves in an acceptable manner. Sporting dogs receive the title of junior and senior hunter after successfully completing four test events, and the title of master hunter after successfully completing five test events.

As the titles imply, the tasks required to earn hunting titles become more difficult as a dog advances. For example, in a junior spaniel hunting test a dog simply has to find, flush and retrieve two birds on land and retrieve one bird from water.

But by the time a dog reaches the master level, it is required not only to flush and retrieve birds, but also to locate dead birds hidden in the field and make "blind" retrieves of birds it did not see killed solely by following the commands of its handler.

In field trials, required tasks are very similar to those in master hunt tests. However, instead of being judged against a standard, dogs are judged against one another, with only the top four dogs in each trial receiving points toward a field championship. So, even if every dog in the trial completes each stage flawlessly, judges are required to choose the best based on style points such as speed, smarts and enthusiasm.

Field trial dogs receive five points for a first-place finish, three for second, two for third and one for fourth. To become a field champion, a dog must accumulate at least 10 field trial points, including at least one first-place finish.

"The hunt tests show the real ability of a hunting companion," DeMarkis said. "The field trials are the great proving ground of the stallions -- those animals that are very performance oriented."

Weekend warriors

Even with a dog that has the requisite talent, it takes a commitment of several thousand dollars and several thousand hours to turn it into a field champion.

Fortunately for the average sportsman, a far less rigid training regimen is needed to transform an average dog into a solid hunting companion.

"People need to realize competition and hunting are two different things," DeMarkis said. "Every dog you train for competition can come out and be a fabulous hunter. Not every dog trained just for hunting can come out and compete."

Hunters who purchase a puppy should be able to turn them into reliable gun dogs in about two years with limited training, about 90 percent of which can be accomplished in your back yard, DeMarkis said.

As with any type of training, preparing a dog to hunt starts with a foundation of basic obedience.

"By 5 months old, you want the dog to be sitting, you want them retrieving something to hand and you want them to know their name," DeMarkis said.

At six or seven months, owners should gently introduce their dogs to the lead (a long rope leash used in field training), gunfire and game. However, DeMarkis said many hunters make the mistake of showing their dogs too many birds too soon, which creates an unrealistic expectation of what they will find during actual hunting outings.

When a dog is about 1 year old, DeMarkis said, it's time for owners to begin the "steadyng" process.

"It's the most pressure you'll put on a dog," DeMarkis said. "You're asking a dog to flush a bird aggressively into the air and then sit down and wait for the command to either retrieve the bird or no bird [if it's missed]."

The final phase of gun dog training involves teaching retrieving commands such as "over" and "back," which allow you to literally steer your dog to downed birds in the field using voice and whistle commands.

Although the training process can be challenging, DeMarkis said dog owners should keep in mind that most of the time, when their dog fails, it's because the owner failed somewhere in the training process.

"They are little blank computers. You've got to program them," DeMarkis said. "The real deal to training a dog yourself is you need to have a foundation. Do not go to Point B until Point A is complete. One hundred percent of mistakes are made that way -- pushing dogs past where they should be, because they weren't prepared properly."

Because of that, DeMarkis said, dog owners should be cautious about disciplining their dogs and hand out correction only when you are absolutely certain the dog is willfully disobedient and not simply confused.

Joe DeMarkis offers two-day gun dog training clinics with both classroom and field work for \$195, plus the cost of birds. He also offers private lessons at a rate of \$90 per three-hour session. For more information, call Rivers Outdoor Adventures in New Ringgold at 570-943-3151 or e-mail info@riversflyfishing.com.