

The English Cocker At Home and Abroad

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It's journey down the centuries as a Spaniel, a Cocker and finally a recognized breed.

Mrs. Dodge (1882 – 1973) was the first Honorary Member of the ECSCA. Before this, however, she had held every office in the Club and was one of its original founders. She can be considered the patron and protector of the breed in the U.S.A. as it was through her efforts and sponsorship of extensive research into pedigrees which convinced the American Kennel Club to grant the English Cocker Spaniel separate breed status in its Stud Book late in 1946 at a time when the American Cocker was at the height of its popularity. She imported many excellent specimens which helped strengthen the breed in this country, and many of her "Giralda" English Cockers served as foundations for other kennels.

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To the neophyte and the casual observer the English Cocker Spaniel has remained something of a mystery. To many of the more seasoned fanciers he may have seemed like an interloper – here comes a Cocker Spaniel nosing his way in where already there is another perfectly good Cocker Spaniel! We might have answered like the man who said "No thank you," he didn't need that book because he had a book. But of course there are different books on the same subject, just as there are different breeds from the same rootstock, and in truth we need them all.

In order to understand whence came the English Cocker, let us go back to the original Spaniel, one of the oldest families of the dog world mainly responsible for the sporting Gundogs of the day. In disposition it is safe to say that all were and still are noted for their intelligence, devotion and desire to please. They are characterized as well by abundant energy, remarkable scenting powers and a natural aptitude for both land and water retrieving.

No description of Spaniel fundamentals would be complete without the word picture left by Gaston de Foix when he wrote about Spaniels in his famous Book of Chase in 1387: "They come from Spain although there are many from other countries. They love well their masters, follow them without losing them through the crowds and in the fields go before them wagging their tails, and raise or start fowl for the falcons, and hares for the greyhounds. When taught to couch they are good to take partridge and quail with the net, and when taught to swim are also good for the river and fowl that dive." As regards to Spaniel character and aptitude, the above is as true today as it was in the 14th century.

Sporting records of the next few hundred years emphasize the usefulness of the Spaniel to the coursers and falconers of that period. However, this was a time of radical change in the hunting methods due largely to the rapid development of firearms from the 15th century on. The invention of the shotgun of course led to the vogue of wing

shooting. So enthusiastic a hunter did the Spaniel become that it seems as if he has been awaiting this epoch to show what he could do. In no time at all, as time is reckoned, he abandoned the 'couch' of netting and learned to point standing up. Where before he had been expected to crouch in mute humility as the nets sailed over to snare the birds, now he was ecstatic at having been actually encouraged to stir something out of hiding and with his eyes to follow the whirl of wings through the air.

Authorities are in practical agreement regarding the different kinds of Spaniels extant throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. For convenience sake they had been classified as Water Spaniels and Land Spaniels, the latter being more exactly described in literature of the period as Land Spaniels or Springers. It is this branch with which we are primarily concerned.

Although essentially Spaniels were appearing within the same litters, yet these Land Spaniels differed in size and color. There seemed not explanation for the sharp divergence between the large and the small, the self colors and roans, the blacks and livers. From the vantage point of today we surmise what was happening, but breeders of 150 years ago could not know that nature was at work evolving, adapting and re-designing the Spaniel for specific types of work. Instinctively, however, they did the right thing when they named and segregated the dogs on a basis of size and color. The larger they called Springer or Springing Spaniels, and the smaller Cocker or Cocking Spaniels. They named the blacks Field or Cocker Spaniels, and they referred to the dwarfs or miniatures in the Marlborough litters as Toy Spaniels.

These were the three classes of Springer-Cocker combinations appearing in the early 1800s in the self same litters, and all were destined to play a prominent part in the master pedigree of modern dog.

The first class we will designate the Springer-Cocker division where, within litters, it was common to find puppies which varied in size at maturity from 20 to 45 pounds, and which included a preponderance of clear-ground parti-colors featuring red, liver, black and tan, as well as a goodly percentage of roans. Three breeds developed from this combination: the largest Springers became the English Springer Spaniels, weighing around 45 pounds, and liver and white or black and white in color. The red and whites which weighed from 30-40 pounds, became the Welsh Springer Spaniels, while the smallest of all, the "little Cockers" as they were called became to probably greater degree than any other England's own Cocker Spaniel and withal the most efficient hunter of the three, being fast on their feet and notably rugged in constitution. As far as can be learned, these Cockers weighed around 25 pounds at the time. They were chiefly parti-colors or roan and ticked pattern, the self colors were in the minority.

We will designate the second class as the Field or Cocker division because that is exactly what such litters were called; not Field and Cockers, but Field or Cockers. Size difference here was almost as striking as in the Springer-Cocker litters, and the solid colors predominated. The early Field Spaniels came in lemon, liver and tan, with or without white, as well as in all black. It was not long before black became the preferred

Field Spaniel color although the true deep liver color was not unusual. The lighter shades, especially the golden livers may have been segregated for incorporation in the Sussex. The blacks, weighing over 25 pounds, kept the name Field Spaniel and flourished for a time, but finally their slow pace and dark color combined to send them into an almost total eclipse. The under 25 pounders became the self colored Cockers similar to those of American type that held sway in the U.S.A. for a long time. It may prove of interest to record here that the link between Field Spaniel and Cocker Spaniel held until 1905 at least. Previously, the American Kennel Club had listed them together under the designation Field or Cocker Spaniels.

The third division was known as the Marlborough Spaniels since they were fostered chiefly by the duke of that name. In these litters also appeared without rhyme or reason the large and the small, together with divergence in head properties more striking than had ever been noticed in Spaniel Litters. The larger specimens, which they named Springers had the longer foreface of the keen-nosed gundogs, also an ear leather not particularly long. The smaller specimens, usually red, or red and white, occasionally with black or tan, were rounder in top-head, long in ear and feathering, short in nose; the entire head approximating a globular contour foreign to the sporting dog skull. These little fellows, called Toy Spaniels, were used with the Field Spaniel to create the under 25 pound Cocker, principal forerunner to the American Cocker.

The miniature Cockers, or English Toy Spaniels as they were eventually named, by the way, did not die out as a few experts prognosticated. What the Toys lacked in vigor they must have made up in grit or the will to live, for they survived and developed into four varieties – the King Charles, the Prince Charles, Blenheim and Ruby Spaniels. History tells how one of the devoted little dogs walked under the skirts of Mary Queen of Scots up the scaffold, to be left disconsolate when she died.

The foregoing touches briefly upon the evolution of the Cocker from Land or Springer Spaniel stock, first as a mere incident in litters of the larger gundogs, later as a unique and highly regarded hunter of feathered game. We see the Cocker emerge, take shape and progress in three, and then finally in two directions.

By 1892 when the Cocker was recognized as a breed in England, we had the fair-sized specimens of roan, ticked and parti-color patterns that were destined to serve as the nucleus of America's English Cocker Spaniel. We had also the solid color, under-25-pound cocker of Field Spaniel heritage which, crossed with the solids reds and red and whites, and the black and tans from Marlborough litters, served as the nucleus of America's American Cocker Spaniel. Bear in mind, though, that the names English and American as descriptive adjectives had no significance in Cocker parlance at the beginning of the twentieth century – all were call Cocker Spaniels.

Canada, which shortly thereafter became an enthusiastic center of Cocker Spaniel breeding, imported the major portion of her stock directly from England. Fanciers of the U.S.A., on the other hand, continued to breed largely from the Field-Marlborough descendants already within our borders. A few far sighted Americans had been importing

consistently from both Canada and England throughout this period and much of the stock they brought in can be credited with preserving the finest qualities of both valuable lines of descent.

British breeders, noting the phenomenal success of the Cocker in the U.S.A., thought it to their advantage to incorporate in their English stock some of the finer qualities and beguiling graces of the American variety. Between 1896 and 1928 only five of the Cockers, which had been taken from Canada and the United States into England and there mated with pure English-bred specimens, could be accounted for. There may have been others that went over from time to time. But due to the English custom of registering only a small proportion of their dogs, they cannot be traced nor their progeny authenticated.

In the years that followed, the five above mentioned produced some 300 dogs and bitches whose descendants could be traced abroad, and only 62 of these sent progeny back to America. The interbred lines of descent dwindled rapidly as was expected by those conversant with the two types; they did not combine with advantage to either. As a matter of fact, some heritable qualities in the two kinds of Cockers appeared so antagonistic to each other, as it were, that it was years before even Britain's largest and most experienced breeders were able to fix in their stock certain of the American Cocker's refinements which constituted their chief objective in making the cross. By 1941 there remained only six specimens over here even remotely liable to the influence of those American Cockers abroad, and the youngest of the six was then seven years of age. Thus was established the purity of the English cocker emanating from England.

English Cocker fanciers in this country, who formed a club in 1935, knew that it would prove a still greater task to establish the purity of the English variety in the United States because of the interbreeding between the two varieties. Gradually, however, a combination of education by the sponsoring club, and cooperation and good sportsmanship on the part of all interested cockerites kept the two varieties in large measure separate for several years until finally in 1946 the AKC granted breed status to the English Cocker Spaniel.

The foregoing historical sketch cannot fail to impress fanciers with the real significance behind those size and weight differences which mark the English Cocker, the English Springer, the Welsh Springer and the American Cocker. Long years of patient endeavor were required to separate Springer and Cocker; eternal vigilance is the price of keeping them distinct, lest they become little Springers, or Big Cockers, or both. The two breeds are yet subject to the influence of the combined inheritance out of which they grew, and only slight laxity of fanciers' part would be sufficient to beckon them right back where they came from. Nothing less than the utmost care in selection thenceforth can make the English Cocker conform consistently to the directives of its official Standard; and this holds true likewise for the English Springer for the two trace to an identical source.

Moderation distinguishes today's English Cocker which occupies a place midway between its two closest relatives, the English Springer and the American Cocker. It is a rather close-coupled dog of medium station, with angulation correct for its work. Properly developed, the breed bids fair to excel in the field, for together with an ideal temperament goes a type of courage that is not headstrong. In head properties, the English Cocker differs from the other two, while in coat and feathering it probably represents the happy medium between the abundance of the American Cocker and the scantier allotment of the Springer.