

Parkbreck Moorhen

In 1991, I was living outside of Richmond Virginia working at a shooting club. I had always fancied trying to train a cocker, but where to go for one? I knew absolutely no one in America who had any cockers I was interested in. The only cocker guy in England that I knew a little from when I lived there was Paul Raper. So I contacted Paul and made a trip over.

I have always been a fan of Keith Erlandson's writing. On the cover of one of his books, he unceremoniously holds a brace of cocker pups by their scruffs. I liked the image. It resonated possibility. I had springers in my life for a long time, but I reasoned if a springer man with the pedigree of Erlandson would tolerate a cocker, then they couldn't be all bad, could they?

Paul was a good sport. I dropped my luggage at my mum and dad's and went looking at dogs with him. For one reason or another, nothing came to pass. I was careful not to mention America. I still had a pretty strong northern English accent, so it wasn't hard to do. Many Brits feel the Yanks don't know much about standards when it comes to English breeds or for that matter care much, so dogs with questionable mouths and temperaments are shipped with a clear conscience. If a questioning phone call comes down the road, the all-in-composing answer "He was great when he left here mate", would clear the matter up. There are some very clear exceptions to that rule. I have imported six young springers from Ian Openshaw; all are US field champions, good ones. He outlined the dog's idiosyncrasies, both good and bad, almost to a fine art, before I ever set eyes on them.

None of the older dogs I looked at resonated with me. It was clear they were for sale for a multiple of reasons, none of them good. I was getting a little desperate; our last call was to Carl Colclough's in Suffolk. I recall it was raining profusely. Carl had no older dogs available but he showed me a litter of pups. At this point I had given up on older dogs anyway.

The pups were out of Burnhill Megan and Maesydderwyn Griffin. An exuberant black bitch caught my eye. "That one is spoken for," commented Carl. Bloody figures, I thought.

I immediately liked Carl. He was so passionate about his dogs. We took a break from his pups, and went into his rabbit pen to watch him put the great cockers "Jade of Livermore" and "Jasper of Parkbreck" as well as the springer "Badgercourt Moss" through their paces. He also brought out a raw young dog, the father of the pups I was looking at, "Bran". Bran was a real thoroughbred, dazzling.

There was a liver bitch pup available, more compact than the black one, but with just as much exuberance. She had perhaps the widest, brightest, most inviting eyes of any dog I have ever gazed into. When they finally flickered to a close, sixteen years later in Los Angeles, it signaled the closing of an important chapter in my life. I called her Lucy.

Carl had made an interesting comment in relation to approaching cockers compared to springers. He simply said "Train 'em backwards." Over the twenty years I've spent messing with cockers, I would say that is the clearest most concise advice I have ever heard.

When I finally got Lucy back to Richmond, she would have been about eight weeks old. If she would have been average, I doubt I would have bothered with another cocker. There is an old saying "Why

mess with a cocker when you can have a springer". However she was anything but average.

Almost every really good cocker I've had in my hands has been an extrovert from the get go. Almost. Every really good springer has been somewhat of an introvert. Lucy was no exception. She thought the world and the people in it were there for her personal enjoyment.

What was apparent was that her immense talent needed harnessing from day one. She was a very natural retriever, loving tennis balls, which she could hardly fit in her mouth. She would race around with a recklessness that was hilarious. I started her on the whistle from the moment she came home. What I was looking for was that beautiful, almost natural response when the whistle is blown and the pup drops to the ground immediately, spinning back on her axis with a focus that denotes teamwork. Everything revolves around that and we had it in spades.

She was one of those dogs that I couldn't wait to work with each day. Before I let her anywhere near a bird I had her quite well trained to whistle, sitting and staying and competent on pretty basic handling. I have found it really difficult to teach a cocker to handle on blinds after it has had birds shot over it; much more so than the generally more compliant springer.

I would like to think I have evolved a little in my approach since the time Lucy was a pup, but my philosophy is basically the same. I believe one has a short window to make a significant impression. This starts from the moment you get the pup home and changes when the adult teeth are fully developed, at around six to seven months. I feel the shedding of the puppy teeth is a significant time in a dogs' life. It signifies the time when a pup ventures from the protective umbrella of the mother, who effectively is the owner, and switches to a time in its life when it would, in nature, start to hunt and kill for its self. This is also the time when bitches usually come in season for the first time and dogs reach sexual maturity.

I equate my role in the first six months, of say, a coyote bitch or a red fox vixen. If it's a first year mother, who doesn't provide well for them, or teach them how to react to danger, the survival rate of her litter will be significantly different than a three or four year old veteran who has learned to protect and teach her pups through trial and error.

By the time Lucy had grown her adult teeth, even though she had previously had zero exposure to game of any kind, which I feel is the best way with a precocious pup, she was very well schooled in "The Basics." At that time there were no trials or any notion of trials, at least as far as I knew. She progressed well in the field, and was a most endearing companion. I had started introducing her to game when her adult teeth were in, shooting the odd rabbit, and planted pigeon.

Sometime early in her second year, I read an article in the old "Spaniels in the Field", advertising the first licensed cocker trial in thirty years in Fort Collins, Colorado. My friend Mark Merhige and I packed up Lucy and flew to Denver. It was my first trip to Colorado and Lucy was twenty two months old at the time. The trial fielded about twenty five dogs. On one end of the spectrum, there were a handful of imported field champions from the UK. On the other end, there were a few dogs that were a little rough round the edges. Lucy won the event.

She was bred a couple of times during her long life, producing four good field champions. None, in my opinion, were quite as good as she, which in my experience is not unusual. It pleases me to see. Her

wonderful traits trickle down though the generations, her great grandson Quinn, is the 2011 US National Champion.