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Ian Openshaw called me from the U. K. regarding a younger brother of his prolific springer, Clarburgh Art, which may be available for sale. Clarburgh Art is currently the top producing sire of field trial champions in UK history. Ian indicated that the young dog was inclined to give "a little noise" when worked up. This, an eliminating fault in British competition, is too often overlooked in American trials.

I soon cured Taff of this trait. It was caused by his pure intensity. Taff would lock on my eyes, anticipating being cast off. I simply stopped casting him off. I would take a step forward, not looking at the dog, his momentum would take him forward, and I would then cast him when he was already in motion.

The other time Taff would sometimes emit a noise was when his name was called on a retrieve. To circumvent this, when he was locked on to a retrieve, I would instead of sending him, release a homing pigeon from my vest. This act would take away Taff's intensity on his prospective retrieve. I would let him watch the departing bird for a few moments, then command him to "mark." When his attention was again on his retrieve, he would complete it in silence. At the time I was solely training and running cockers, which I'd done since their inception in 1993.

I had entered a few springer trials a couple of years earlier, without any success, approaching them from a British stance with significantly tighter running dogs. I enjoyed good camaraderie, but it was not a winning recipe for American springer trials, tantamount to taking a soccer ball to an NFL game. Regardless, I recalled good folks and good times and I was pretty sure that if I ventured into us springer trials a second time, I now knew what shape ball would be required.

As is his wont, Ian described the young Taff to a tee. He had been owned by a successful young trainer, Steve Jones. It was evident Steve had put a solid foundation on Taff.

Taff was an interesting study, a stunning combination of speed and power, tempered by a very sensitive nature. With an emphasis on very. I have witnessed the darker side of dog training on both sides of the Atlantic. The beatings, choking, kicking biting; I cringe at some of the methods I personally employed in the past. It would be disingenuous to state otherwise. While some revere the tougher dogs of the "good ol days", I personally feel the softer natured modern springers have contributed more to an enlightened approach to contemporary spaniel training methods than any other factor. Today, I would say, without any concern of contradiction from thinking people, only a mental midget is still physically chastising spaniels in the name of "training".

Vicky loves to travel and has dragged me to some interesting locations in Asia, Europe, the America's, Africa, New Zealand and Australia. When traveling the best "icebreaker", for me is soccer, specifically English Premier League soccer. Further still, it's the four top teams of Liverpool, Manchester United, Chelsea, and Arsenal. These teams are the standard bearers for a league that boasts a reported 650 million worldwide following. They feature a multinational cadre of players that have name recognition across the globe the perfect segue into a conversation with a complete stranger, regardless of country or continent.

My "icebreaker" with Taff, as with subsequent young springers from the UK, was the tennis ball. Tennis balls, although frowned upon by many Americans for training aides, are universal fare in Britain and have been for a long time. It may be a while since a Brit has won Wimbledon, but many a dog that has left London airports to vantage points across the globe, have done so with a through initial grounding on tennis balls.

I would sit next to Taff and offer him a ball. In slow motion and with the greatest of ease, he would take the ball from my hand. His eyes would close and his body would go limp, leaning into me in one fluid motion. The sense of security Taff drew from a tennis ball crossed the Atlantic with him, and proved a bridge to build upon.

Initially if Taff was confused by any issue, he would freeze, nothing would budge him. I have seen this crop up in his offspring, a daughter we call Violet, who carries the very same trait.

An unlikely antidote presented itself for Taff's insecurities, a tonic for him to lighten up his inhibitions. Late summer in North Dakota, hundreds of barn, cliff, and tree swallows (as well as martins) congregate prior to their migration south. I have an affinity for swallows. Our garage in England had a pair that year after year would fledge three broods before heading to their wintering grounds in Africa. We have a pair of tenants swallows in our North Dakota garage; two broods seem more of a norm for these migrants.

The cliff swallow colony nesting beneath the eaves of our outbuildings don't possess the level of security of our garage swallows. They annually undergo systematic attacks from a bevy of house sparrows. The diminutive villain sparrow waits until the colony of swallows complete their beautiful gourd shaped mud nests, biding their time until the swallow eggs are laid and even chicks are hatched. Then the sparrows systematically raid the nests, evicting the rightful occupants, refurbishing the exquisitely crafted interiors with wayward bits of straw and chicken feathers, indicative of any common squatter, announcing to the world that they are the rightful occupants in this kingdom.

Occasionally on a late summer morning, a perfect storm occurs high on the prairie. On a cool damp morning, the insect life the soon departing swallows are dependent on, don't move. On my morning walks, the "to-ing and fro-ing" of thirty plus dogs, stimulates the insects into the air. It is a spectacular like no other I have experienced. It's a privilege to be the sole observer of a pack of spaniels, in the middle of nowhere, twisting and turning on their own axes in a futile endeavor to catch the birds hunting within inches of their heads. The birds follow the pack with the singular conviction of a flock of albatross mirroring a fishing vessel.

Taff, understandably showing more decorum than the irrefutable cockers in his midst who chase until they are prostrate with exhaustion only to grab a second wind, needed encouragement to let his hair down. Once he started on the swallows, I saw for the first time precisely what he was. He was quite something. His burst of speed, combined with his pure dexterity leveled on the aerial acrobats swarming around him was truly spectacular.

Taff matured into a quality field trial contender. He won eleven open stakes and remained competitive into his tenth year. He was the US Open High Point dog for 2006. Although not bred anywhere near the times of his prolific brother, he has sired some first class progeny, including one National Championship winner to date.