

# NFC Aikane Hokulani “Lani”

background notes by Paul McGagh

On a trip to Britain in 2000, I picked up three cockers: Kirkstill Dabchick “Cracker”, Norbeck Arfer Mole “Barney” and during a quick detour to Wales visiting with the great cocker man, Keith Erlandson, I purchased a liver bitch named Kilgaro Lady “Fudge”. Keith had been working her as a favor to her owner who was laid up with a broken leg. While I watched “Fudge,” a small athletic bitch go through her paces on a Snowdonian mountain side, it wasn't lost on me that she lacked finesse and polish. When she was on scent, she had a tendency to run straight through a whistle command without even slowing, a response I was later to learn, never much wavered with age. But as Keith pointed out, “She is one of the best I've seen in heavy cover and it's a bit sad the owner didn't give her that early training work to develop some brakes!” I also noticed her retrieves were covered in saliva, which might not be viewed as an attractive end, but when a dog leaves saliva on a dummy or bird you can bet its mouth is good.

Cracker and Barney soon became Field Champions and when bred together, produced Warrener's Western Sandpiper “Ritz”, who in turn was the sire of 2011 National Champion Quailmoor Quinn. Cracker is also the dam of Warrener's Great Crested Flycatcher, “Snickett” who placed in numerous National Championships. Volumes could be written about Barney and his idiosyncrasies. He was a dominant sire and left his mark on the breed, but not always in a good way! But, Smudge was never even entered in a field trial. It's doubtful she would have gotten through a first series!

Smudge was, to say the least, a free spirit. As long as a bitch is sound in all the important departments, I can forgive them. Actually I have a soft spot for little renegades as they often make the best brood bitches. So, I decided to breed Smudge to Tahoia “Tahoe”, a stocky black and white dog. I remember thinking that his comparatively laid back disposition might compliment this fire brand little bitch. The result was five pups born July 2003.

One black bitch from the litter caught the eye of Robert and Dede Griffin and they named her Annie. This was their first spaniel and Robert was going to train her himself. It wasn't until 18 months later that Robert and Annie caught my eye at their inaugural field trial in North Dakota. Annie's style and action was a carbon copy of Smudge, the difference being she possessed, thanks to Robert, a good set of brakes! The pair turned more than a few heads by winning the trial! Annie went on to be “High Point Cocker” for several years. When Robert and Dede decided to breed Annie they brought her to Storm. Annie's subsequent litter was whelped on Dec 1st 2007 and one of those pups, Lani, was sold to two dentists, John Bishop and Susan Takemoto from Colorado. They had actually entered a Cocker in the inaugural 1993 Field Trial in Colorado, so they were no strangers to the game.

Lani grew into a nicely proportioned black and white bitch, heavier boned than her dam “Annie”, more resembling “Storm. She came for training in the summer of 2008.

I like working with pups that have an intense desire to retrieve, not just birds but artificial objects such as tennis balls or dummy's. The ability to “giveth and taketh” away rewards just using the power of a little green ball is an important training tool that cannot be overstated. Lani hunted like a little demon but proved ambivalent about retrieving anything that lacked feathers. She had an endearing personality and like her sire, she tended to be more of an amused observer than an eager participant. On our daily walks with the rest of the kennel, she avoided all contact with the other dogs with what I can only describe as a bemused smile often watching the proceedings from a respectable distance perched on a rock.

I liked the pup, other than the tennis ball issue. One positive trait she possessed was to light up on body scent. This is a must for US Springer trials, but correctly in my view, Cockers are allowed to run the gamut regarding flushing, from "almost" a point to a blazing flush. I hear of the blazing flushers often enough, but in reality I have seen precious few cockers that speed up on body-scent to the level of top US Springers. Lani was an exception to this.

John & Susan took Lani back to Colorado at the end of the summer. John is an avid hunter and fisherman. Both he and Susan are marvelously interesting people with diverse interests in music, cooking and travel. It's always fun to visit and John would tell me snippets of Lani's exploits on blue grouse, quail and pheasants. Apparently, she was also becoming competent on waterfowl. Susan had customized a wildfowling vest so Lani's could stay warm. John maintains Lani's favorite exploit of all was joining him on Colorado's pristine waters to fish. According to John she becomes so intense watching for fish, when one is hooked it's a race to be the first to land it, Lani or the net. For good reason, John no longer invites Lani on those days with fellow fisherman.

A few years ago, John called saying that during a hunt, Lani had picked up a seed awn that lodged in her lungs. This is heartbreaking news, seemingly an ever increasing problem, usually resulting in death. Lani's chest was opened and the vet did his best to clean out her cavity and find the offending foreign body. Still freshly stapled, Lani was allowed to recover at home. On the ride home, John thought Lani was sedately sitting on the passenger seat while he weighed his decision against what the future held for her. After all, she might not ever recover more than to sit on the couch. Would that have been fair? Lani apparently decided to answer his question by launching through the open car window after a prairie dog. John thought, "Maybe the surgery was the right choice!"

In the spring of 2014 John and Susan purchased an additional pup from Sheila and John Courts of Lockeridge Kennels in Minnesota they named Kona. John called about doing some preliminary training on "Kona" while he and Susan were on vacation in Europe. John added as a caveat, "Well as I'm coming over anyway, maybe I could bring "Lani" along and drop her off for a brush up." I was skeptical about Lani. I hadn't seen her for six years, she had almost died with a prothorax and regardless, she had lived the life of a rough old hunting dog. What was the point?

Lani was stockier than I remembered and I could trace the battle scars from tangles with barbwire fences and the long unmistakable one running the length of her chest from the seedawn, but that same quizzical smirk remained unchanged on her face! What also struck me was the way she still worked the wind, not the fastest, well, she really was never built for speed, but a great bird finder. She was real quality, tempered with almost perfect control. I was shocked as it just isn't what you find with seven year old hunting dogs. Lani was an unbelievable testament to John and Susan plus their Colorado training group.

She had picked up one quirk that needed work. When a bird was shot she would take her eyes off the fall and cast them back on me waiting to be released for the retrieve. This, more often than not, resulted in a slight mismatch. Often, dogs from Britain, do this too. To fix this, I sat Lani on a box behind me, with my back to her, and had an assistant throw birds out front. The trick was never giving her eye contact on these retrieves before sending her. Once she realized she wouldn't get any help, her marking started to improve.

Over the summer I talked to John about entering his seven year old trial "rookie" in the September 2014 North Dakota Field Trial, just for the heck of it. As impressed as I was with Lani, expecting success seemed a long shot as she would be running head to head against 39 young quality cockers that were specifically trained for this competition. North Dakota always seems to be a catalyst for large competitive

trials and I remember it as a brutally hot day. Under Judges Tom Radde and Linda Simon, Lani wasn't particularly fast or flashy, but she found and blew her birds out! I'm sure I shared a similar smirk to Lani, when the old girl was awarded the Blue ribbon that day. With a win under her belt, was it unthinkable that the old hunting bitch could become a Field Champion? It was a long shot, but nevertheless a fun idea! The following month she took a second and a third in consecutive days at the Minnesota Hunting Spaniel Association trials.

We next attended the 2014 Pennsylvania National Cocker Championship, a grueling four days alternating between the fields and mountain woods of this bucolic state. When the placements were announced I was proud to hear Lani's name in fourth place! I couldn't help but feel intense admiration for this old warrior. Two more points!

I sent Lani home, where she joined John and now new dog Kona for a long hard hunting season. John decided to travel to a couple of spring 2015 trials in Texas. On Feb 21st and 22nd, John phoned to tell me Lani took a third and a fourth with him as her handler! Realizing she had passed her water test at the National, she had, at age 7, earned her Field Championship in less than a year! It was fitting John had accomplished this and I was so proud of both of them, a rewarding end to an improbable chapter.

That summer, Kona came back and she was flourishing. The retired FC Lani stayed home in Boulder content not to miss a single trout rise on the river. The summer flew by and John and Susan came again to North Dakota for a visit. While with us, Mike Delaney, Glencoe General Manager, called to tell us "The Northern Lights can be seen!" We all ran out onto the deck and John was heard saying "Which direction are they?" We all stopped and looked at him before we burst out laughing! "Try North!" someone answered. Anyway, John ran Kona in the North Dakota Field Trial against 56 dogs and Kona won it giving John the last laugh!

With two dogs qualified for the 2015 Cocker National, John had an issue as he'd previously arranged a fly fishing trip to Cuba that conflicted with his running the dogs. He's a competitive fellow, and I know he was torn leaving the dogs with me as he would have loved to run Kona. "Seeing as you are going to the National and taking Kona, do you want to take Lani too?" John posed the question.

We were talking about an eight year old dog that I hadn't run in a trial since the previous National Championship. Her lungs were dodgy and according to all reports, she preferred fishing to hunting. "Sure, I'll take her" I answered instantaneously!

And she won. But, who would have "thunk it"? On reflection, I recalled what Keith Erlandson had said to me about her grandmother. Maybe he knew all the time.