

# LANI

Additional notes by Paul McGagh

John's recollections on Lani's ambivalence towards retrieving anything artificial made me chuckle. Unlike fine wine or good cheese, this didn't improve with age. As an eight year old veteran, Lani no longer had intentions of masking her apathy. The day before the commencement of the 2015 Cocker National, we had secured a corner of a field in rural Michigan courtesy of George Kittle. Ron and Donna Hall had joined Mike Delany, Scott Bina, Vicky Thomas and me for an afternoon of preparation and fellowship.

The collective of cockers gathered were Brody, TY, Kase, Johnny, Cotton, Kona, True, Shiva, and bringing up the rear, the two old veterans, Beau and Lani.

Beau and Lani were studies in opposites. Fire a dummy launcher a hundred times for Beau and all he's looking for is the hundred and first! Lani, on the other hand, sees the contraption pulled out and fakes an interest in a mouse hole, a vulture soaring overhead, an errant chipmunk scurrying down the trunk of an old fir tree; anything other than fetching the dreaded canvas.

Training cockers is all about creating a balancing act, on one hand allowing them to grow into who they are and at the same time, keep them on track and pointed in the right direction.

There were 89 dogs entered in the 2015 National Cocker Championship. This represented more entrants than entered in the US Amateur Springer National, the Canadian Open National and the Canadian Amateur National. Only the US Springer Open National with 99 dogs would surpass it. Who would have ever thought the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest National would be for Cockers? We've come a long way.

Lani started the National well, as marking proved very difficult during the first day for many dogs, including some of mine. Under Judge Danny Lussen, Lani had a good find that was shot down the field, she collected it quickly. Her second bird was felled at an angle behind the line down wind. She pulled short on her first quest to the fall, then showing the intelligences of years of wild bird hunting, she took a huge downwind loop around where she thought the bird landed and quickly came back with it. I have great respect for how Judge Lussen runs his own dogs, free but with little whistle. Lani runs with almost no whistle. I felt she'd left a good first impression.

The next series was under the discerning eye of Judge George Kittle, and Lani had the ability to showcase her impressive nose with a headwind beat. Two class finds resulted in two flushes but no retrieves. I remember looking down and catching her eye, "OK, Lani that was good too." She looked up, gave me that quirky smile, and I concluded she concurred.

The third series took us from the open fields to the woodlands. Switching from pheasants to chukars hidden behind logs and in bramble patches beneath the old hardwoods can reveal a lot about the dog in front of you.

Many dogs want to keep running big, taking in too much ground for the conditions. The top ones adapt seamlessly. I think Spaniels, both springers and cockers often look their very best in the woods. They can hunt like a mink or weasel, popping in and out of this bush, through a brush pile, seeking out objectives to quest for game. They are a true gun dog, less of a "gun to gun" dog.

At a National event, it's a really a good feeling to have a dog that you trust in front of you. I mean one you really trust. It's probably not too different than a golfer so skilled he's neither worried about his short nor long game. He just enjoys the moment and seeing where the chips fall. That's how I felt that day about Lani. I knew she was acutely "tuned" into where I was and adjusted her range accordingly. I didn't need to remind her with a whistle. It's a bold statement but I knew she wasn't going to break. I knew she probably wasn't going to pass a bird. Now, her aging eyesight could confuse the location of a fallen bird in the cascade of leaves that showered down after every shot, but there's nothing I could do about that. At these rare times, I become more of an observer than an active participant. It doesn't happen much at a National but when it does, it's as good as it gets.

I felt she was in her element in the woods exposing her as the efficient old hunting dog she was. She was tested on a particularly good shot by gun and old friend, John Leininger, who felled a bird that rose above the canopy and arced back behind us. I held my breath on that retrieve, but she made it in short order.

With the fourth series completed, I still had four dogs in the game out of 19 called back to the fifth series. Johnny, a quality youngster owned by Mike and Rumi Schroeder, "Kona and Shiva", the two sisters and Lani. The fifth was also a wooded series held on fresh grounds across the road, this time on pheasants. I lost Johnny on an easy bird that was wing tipped along the edge of the wood then hit a path and made a brisk escape making it impossible to track. The three bitches finished the fifth series and then completed the water series. When the dust had settled, there were 15 dogs still in contention out of the original 89.

There followed a short drive to the "Addison Gun Club" where the placements would be given. Pulling up to the Gun Club entrance, memories began to flood back. Some 17 years ago, in 1998, this was the headquarters for the first Cocker National to be held in 35 years! I entered the building to wait for the awards and looking around, I reflected on the 17 years that had come and gone from the last time I was here. So much water had by now run under the bridge, complete with both highs and lows. I glanced around the room at the remaining participants gathered waiting for the judges to arrive with the results. Happily, there were still a few of the original 1998 crowd: Vicky, Mike Delaney, Rumi Schroeder, Jim Karlovec, George Kiddle but many were now absent. Sadly several had passed on including the 1998 Steward of the Beat, the irreplaceable Bill Zipp who worked tirelessly with Vicky, the Chairman, to pull it off.

I took a moment to walk down to the lake to reflect on the last time I was here. I'd be lying if I said I didn't remember the disappointment as I wanted so much to win that first National. I had trained and trained for it and when those placements were given and I heard I had taken fourth with FC Griffins Pride Rocky "Rocky" and then second place with FC Darag Caol Shraid Marshen "Freckles", I felt crest fallen.

Yes, I recognize that in the seventeen intervening years I've had more luck than any man could possibly wish for and I am grateful for the dogs that have given me their all. I've loved the out of the way places we've visited, the people whose paths we've crossed and the great privilege it's been to handle so many splendid dogs. I soon realized our current 2015 representatives: Lani, Johnny, Cotton, Shiva, Kona, Beau, Ty, True and Kase were direct decedents of those 1998 qualifiers I ran: Rocky, Freckles, Natchez, Cinders, Porter, Brit, and Lucy. These top animals, and dear friends, perhaps gone in body but not genes, were just as present now at the 2015 National as they were in 1998. I've heard time and again, how the dogs of today, are so superior to yesterdays' dogs. Nonsense! Perhaps the level of handling has improved, but the cockers are one and the same.

So, as time softens the harsh edges of disappointment and imparts knowledge, I re-entered the building. So, here I was once again inside the Addison Gun Club, watching the judges make their announcements of their placements. Fourth place honors went to "Kona." Third place to "Breeze" handled by Jordan Horak, a young up and coming handler. Second place to "Sonny" handled by Ralph Botti, a successful springer trialer who has been getting more invested in cockers. And, then they paused before George Kiddle announced, "The 2015 National Cocker Champion is ..... LANI"

I stole a glance at the path to the lake I had dejectedly walked with Rocky and Freckles all those years ago. Rocky's Great Granddaughter had just been crowned National Champion. And he and his sister Freckle's Great, Great Granddaughter, Kona, had taken Fourth for good measure. I suppose the thing is, nobody had let Lani know that she was too old to compete, that she had no chance against a field of 89 "mostly" young upstarts, or that she had cheated death and needed to be taking life easy.

As I led her in to the Addison Gun Club for photographs, she glanced up with her perpetual smirk, the one she'd inherited from her sire, "Storm." It's the one where she appears to be lamenting her own private joke, simply too good to share.

