

FC Warrener's Mistle Thrush "Porter"

Porter, the third littermate of Cinders and Gypsy was raised in Los Angeles by Vicky, and then shipped to Virginia for me to train. His inclination to stray had prompted her decision to ship him east. He was a carbon copy of his litter-mates in both structure and temperament. Initially he was difficult for me to warm up to; he just felt too laid back.

During this period my dogs were exclusively fed groundhogs and raw chicken necks. I hunted the groundhogs with working terriers. They were a strain of small Jack Russell types bred in the coal mining regions of Pennsylvania and developed to hunt primarily groundhogs in the summer and red and grey foxes in the winter. Long before the breed came in vogue with the Westminster types the spaniels would waste nothing of the groundhog, eating everything other than the contents of the stomach and the large incisors. Every other part of the groundhog, including fur and bones was utilized.

The local foxhound pack called "The Blue Ridge," fed their hounds on chicken necks. The English huntsman, Chris Howe, graciously allowed me to add on to their meat order. During this period, between the groundhogs and the chicken necks I would say my dogs were the fittest they have ever been.

Spaniel training can be synthesized down to good breeding and establishing a great relationship. Porter had the first; I worked on forming the later. I am better at creating a bond now than I was back then. I would spend a significant amount of "one on one" time, initially showering the dog with affection in an attempt to solidify a bond. Today, I take the newcomer out with my other dogs and pretty much ignore him. I will focus all my energy on the established dogs. I now insist the new dog seek my approval, work for it, rather than the alternative.

Porter really didn't give his trust freely. We did, however, gradually warm up to each other. For a dog seemingly processing no frenetic energy and no overt drive, he was deceptively tricky to steady to wing and shot. He had a really strong prey drive. At the time I was steadying Porter, I would do some guiding at a hunt club in West Virginia. This was handy for getting him on game scent when needed. It was quickly evident Porter had a knack for tracking pheasants. Indeed the tracking proved quite natural, the stopping however did not!

In retrospect, I put him on game scent too early without first building a solid foundation. If a young cocker is encouraged to enjoy artificial training aids before switching on to game scent, it pays dividends. Exposing them to scent first is like putting the cart before the horse. It just makes work more difficult if everything revolves around game. Porter had little interest in dummies.

As difficult he was to stop on pheasants, he proved pretty straight forward to steady on rabbits. I took him completely away from pheasants until he was totally reliable on rabbits, then I reintroduced him to a couple of planted pheasants in a completely controlled situation. The penny dropped and he proved to be a reliable and steady dog throughout his lifetime.