

The new cult of the cocker

Happy dogs with an enthusiastic work drive and a multitude of coat colours, **David Tomlinson** explains the recent surge in popularity of the cocker spaniel



Surprising though it may seem for such a traditional sport, there's a lot of fashion in the shooting world, and when it comes to gundogs, the current trend is for cockers rather than English springer spaniels. Equally remarkable is that increasing numbers of cockers can be seen working as peg dogs, even replacing Labradors. It's clear why they have become so popular: not only are they engagingly happy characters, but they are also hugely enthusiastic workers, as well as being small enough to be easy to live with. Add the fact that their coats come in a wide variety of colours and their popularity makes sense.

However, 40 years ago there were many in the gundog world who were prepared to write the cocker's obituary. The breed's current popularity owes a great deal to a small number of dedicated breeders who concentrated on breeding puppies from the best lines to produce the workers we see today. Many people believe that it took a touch of springer blood to liven up the cocker stock, and this cross-breeding certainly wasn't approved by the Kennel Club (KC). If an infusion of springer

◀ **Cocker spaniels are now the second most popular breed in the country after Labradors**

blood is partly responsible for the current success of the working cocker, then it was no bad thing.

A lifelong enthusiasm

My very first dog was a cocker spaniel, an eye-catching blue roan-and-tan, of show breeding. He was, alas, a dismal failure as a shooting dog, so it was ironic that his demise was due to tetanus, an infection he picked up during a pigeon shooting excursion with me. However, though he may have been a failure as a sporting companion, he did instil in me a lifelong enthusiasm for spaniels.

Though today a wealth of information is available from the Internet at the click of a mouse, when I was a teenager I had

Many people believe that it took a touch of springer blood to liven up the cocker stock

to feed my hunger for knowledge about spaniels in general and cockers in particular from numerous visits to the library, borrowing any books that might just contain a gem of information I hadn't unearthed before.

I discovered that spaniels are one of the oldest breeds of sporting dog, while their name almost certainly indicates that they originated in Spain. The first spaniels reached these shores in the late 16th or early 17th century, and soon became divided into two types: land spaniels and water spaniels. The cocker is derived from the former, and in the



The Cocker Spaniel.

Spaniels are sporting dogs, they are good retrievers and are fond of the water. They are intelligent, affectionate, and faithful, and altogether very pleasant companions. The Cocker Spaniel is the smallest of the sporting spaniels.



Race COCKER NOIR (petit épagneul cocker)
TED-OBO, à M. JAMES FARROW.

▲ In Victorian times, only the land spaniels that weighed less than 25lb were deemed to be cockers

In the Victorian era it could only be distinguished from the field spaniel by its weight — if a dog weighed more than 25lb it was deemed a field spaniel; if it was less than 25lb, then it was a cocker.

This meant that it was possible to breed a mixed litter of cockers and field spaniels, while the weight division also caused confusion in the show ring — a dog could be shown as a cocker one week, but a few days later, after a good dinner or two, it could move up into the field division.

Between 1875 and 1885 there was no separate entry for cockers in the Kennel Club Stud Book, and they were simply entered under the heading "Field Spaniels (other than liver-coloured over 25lb and cockers under 25lb)". It wasn't until 1893 that the KC relented and cockers at last gained their place in the Stud Book as a separate breed. The Cocker Spaniel Club, which still flourishes today, was formed in the summer of 1902.

A variety of colours

In the early days, the majority of cockers were black, but there were also some black-and-tans and varying shades of liver. Today's breed standard allows for black, red, golden, liver (chocolate), black-and-tan and liver-and-tan in solid colours, plus black, white and tan; liver, white and tan; along with blue roan, orange roan, lemon roan, liver roan, blue roan-and-tan, and liver roan-and-tan. No other breed of gundog comes in such a variety of colours, and you can see almost all of them in the shooting field, though black remains the favoured colour for working dogs.

As with the English springer, the division between working and show-bred cockers is such that they now look

like two entirely different breeds. Working-bred cockers invariably have shorter ears, a less domed head, less feathering and an altogether more functional look about them.

The breed in general has become the second most popular in the country — according to the most recent KC figures, 23,258 cockers were registered in 2011, compared with 39,964 Labradors and 12,883 English springers. Frustratingly, the KC registrations don't differentiate between working and show strains, but the cocker has undergone a marked increase in popularity in recent years as both a pet and a show dog, in addition to as a worker.

Impressive retrievers

As its name suggests, the cocker was originally bred as a small spaniel that was ideal for hunting woodcock. Retrieving a woodcock is also well within the cocker's scope, but these little dogs are remarkably strong, and most won't hesitate to pick-up and retrieve a cock pheasant. I have seen a cocker bitch put out of a trial for failing to retrieve a hare — it gave up after struggling in deep, soft plough. Such elimination seemed somewhat unfair, however, as the hare probably weighed around 8lb, while the cocker itself can have been no more than 20lb.

The trend with working cockers is to breed small dogs. The breed standard gives a weight of between 28lb and 32lb, but most workers weigh less than this, and the majority are probably under the Victorian 25lb limit. The late Keith Erlandson was one of the prominent breeders who helped shape the current working cocker, and in an article he wrote for *Shooting Times* (10 June, 1999) he noted that these spaniels *should be close-coupled to engender the true cocker action, with brisk steps rather than the raking gallop of the English setter and many springer* ▶

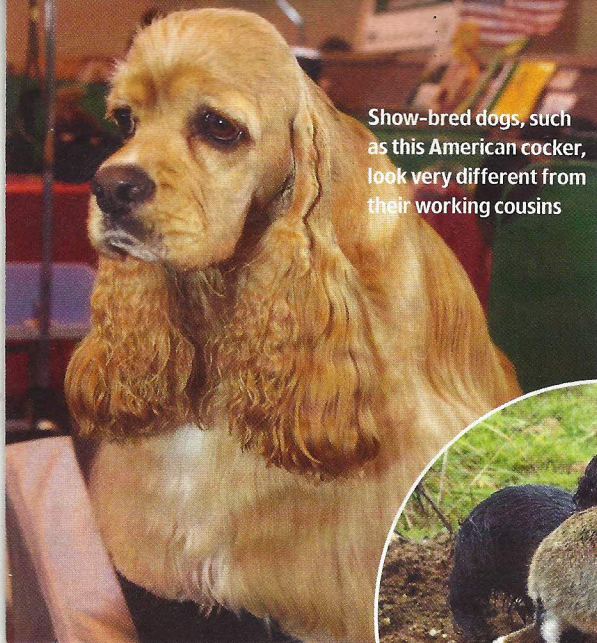


The Duchess of Cambridge with her cocker, Lupo



Ben Randall (front) and Ian Openshaw (right) prepare for the first-place run-off in 2011

D. TOMLINSON / MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY / PA PHOTOS / IN RIDLEY



Show-bred dogs, such as this American cocker, look very different from their working cousins



A competing dog in the 2006 Cocker Championship with a live retrieve



Cockers are remarkably strong, able to retrieve hares half their size

spaniels. It is preferable that dogs and bitches should weigh less than 35lb, but I have seen a son of Wilfred of Cromlix that weighed 40lb. This pleased its owner, Mr Fraser, as it was able to tackle Scottish rivers in flood. FTCh Wilfred of Cromlix won the Cocker Championship in 1967 and is a dog that many working cockers have in their pedigree.

Cromlix was both the affix and the home of Lady Auckland, who was best known for her working Gordon setters. Erlandson also noted in his article that cockers make excellent house dogs, and that Jimmy Wylie, while staying at Cromlix House with Lady Auckland, commented that, "You had to eat your food quickly, or else the house cocker sitting on the next chair would have it off your fork!"

Champion cockers

The first Cocker Championship was held in 1925 and the event has been

held annually ever since, except during and after World War II (there was a gap from 1939 until 1949), and during the foot-and-mouth outbreak of 1968. Perhaps a turning point for the cocker was the hat-trick of victories for Erlandson's bitch *Speckle of Ardoon*, from 1972 to 1974. Speckle was a tireless hunter and the sort of dog that would make a strong contender in the Championship if she were alive today.

Incidentally, several cockers have won more than one championship, including most recently FTCh *Heolybulch Fatty*, in 2011 and 2012, while in 2007 and 2008 Simon Tyers won with *Timsgarry Barlow* and *Timsgarry Valtos* respectively — the two had different sires but were out of the same bitch, *Timsgarry Kelly*.

If you are considering getting a cocker as a Gundog, do your research carefully to make sure that you get a dog that suits you. Cockers are

Cockers are not as easy to train as Labradors, so buy from a kennel known for trainability

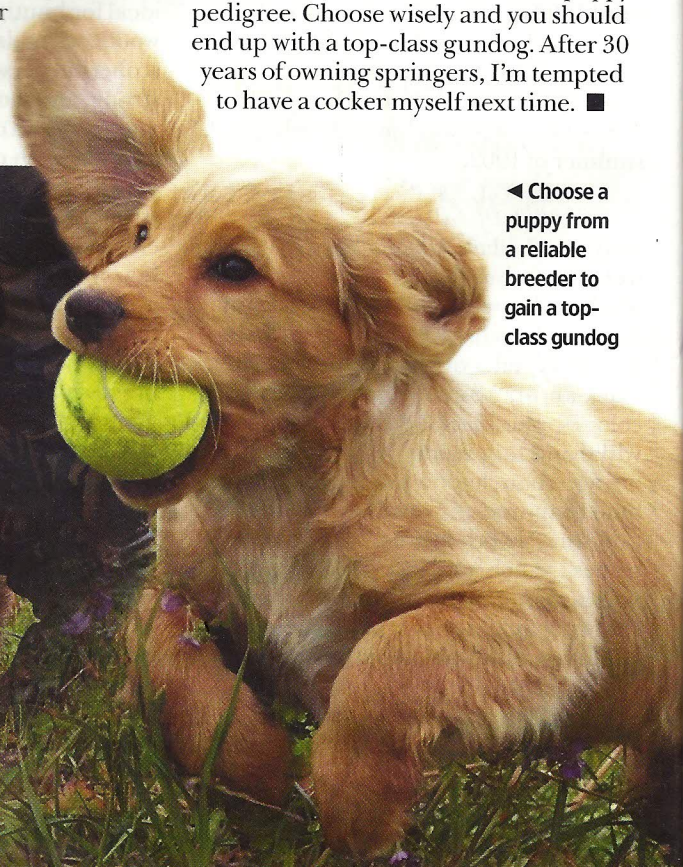
not as easy to train as Labradors, so do ensure that you buy from a kennel where the dogs are known for their trainability and temperament.

Unless you are planning to compete with your dog, don't buy a puppy of purely field trial breeding, as you may find it too much to handle. And if you want a healthy dog, do make sure that you buy a puppy that hasn't been heavily inbred, as a few dominant sires may well appear on both the paternal and maternal sides of a puppy's pedigree. Choose wisely and you should end up with a top-class Gundog. After 30 years of owning springers, I'm tempted to have a cocker myself next time. ■

Working cockers are available in a wide variety of colours



Choose a puppy from a reliable breeder to gain a top-class Gundog



D. TOMLINSON/P. QUAGLIANA