

THE TREK *to Bismarck*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KEITH SCHOPP



If you're an English Cocker Spaniel field trial enthusiast, all roads led to Bismarck, N.D., and the 2013 National Cocker Field Trial Championship.

Dave Williams headed north from Crete, Neb., with a 25-foot camper in tow and three cockers kenneled in the back of his pickup. Williams had one dog qualified, "Pearl," and one goal: to guide Pearl through five land series and one water series and be a finalist at the 2013 National Championship.



Dave Williams holds "Pearl."

Walt Leytham headed west, feeling a bit like Lewis and Clark must have, with a 27-hour drive from his home in Charlottesville, Va. Leytham figured it would be worth it. He qualified two dogs, "Ruthie" and "Darcy," but Leytham's motivation hung around his neck in the form of a necklace containing the ashes and a photo of Darcy's mother, "Belle," a beloved cocker who died too young.

Bob and Tawney Crawford headed 1,300 miles east from Olympia, Wash. Diagnosed with breast cancer last May, Tawney Crawford immediately thought of the 2013 National in October. There's no way she was going to miss it. Sorry cancer. Her cockers come first. Tawney Crawford fought to make the trip, and received permission from her oncologist to schedule two chemotherapy treatments during her stay near Bismarck.

Ralph Mowder, a local from Menoken, N.D., wasn't going far, but had high hopes for "Bentley," his first field trial cocker. Only 2 years old, Bentley conveniently qualified for the Bismarck National, so Mowder needed only to roll out of bed and drive a short distance to the trial grounds.

Williams, Leytham, the Crawfords, and Mowder were ready. So were their dogs. By the end of the week, one would be a National Champion. Let the trial begin.



The faithful gathered before dawn, a sea of orange in the middle of the North Dakota prairie. A large tent anchored the parking area, and a dusting of snow and a brisk northerly wind made it feel colder than the 25-degree temperature. As judges and workers prepared for the first brace of the National, some competitors took refuge in the tent, where an ample supply of coffee and doughnuts awaited.

Others took time for a photo session just outside the tent. A makeshift studio consisted of a couple of bales of straw and a handful of cornstalks. Tawney Crawford was all smiles as she posed with FC Quailmoor Quite Right ("True") at her side. She was dressed for the weather, but her cheeks were rosy red from the cold.

"She's a tough customer," says Bob Crawford, her husband, not referring to his wife's ability to handle the weather. "She took a chemotherapy treatment the day before the trial, and she'll have another one before we leave. She's dedicated, and she's doing great. A lot of it is attitude, and the dogs help. There's nothing better than a dog. Is there?"

His wife agrees.

"When I found out about the cancer in May, the first thing that came into my mind was this National," Tawney Crawford says. "I have two great dogs, and I really wanted them to be here."

Immediately, her friends in the sporting dog world stepped up.



Tawney Crawford, who received the Bixby Award for her contributions to the sport, poses with "Bee" and "True."

"Paul McGagh, a pro right here in Bismarck, called me as soon as he heard and said, 'I'll do whatever it takes to help. I can take your dogs, keep them here and get them in condition if you're not able to do that. Whatever you need,'" Tawney Crawford recalls. "Paul offered that as a friend, not as a pro trainer. And it means a lot to me."

She decided not to take McGagh up on his offer.

"I needed the dogs at home with me to help me get through this," Tawney Crawford says, of True and Bee, just part of the Crawfords' stable of field trial cockers. "Dogs are great therapy, you know?"

For the next four days, Tawney Crawford would muster all the strength she could to handle her dogs and compete, with husband Bob Crawford at her side.

Little Dogs That Do It All

Orange *Purina Pro Plan* flags chart the field trial course for about a mile through the tan and snow-specked prairie grass.

Judge Marty Knibbs was on the left. Judge Mike Noland was on the right. Dogs ran two at a time, and each judge focused on one dog, evaluating game-finding ability, steadiness, marking, and retrieving. The little dogs could do it all, with special attention given to covering ground, "briskness of questing," perseverance, and courage in facing cover. The cockers must



An English Cocker Spaniel swims to make a retrieve during the water series.



Members of the Cascade English Cocker Spaniel Fanciers traveled from Washington state to attend the National Championship in Bismarck, N.D.

flush boldly, sit or “hup” on a whistle, take hand singles, and track runners long distances, if necessary.

Dogs that perform well after three or more contacts are typically called back for the next series to be evaluated by the other judge. With 72 dogs qualified, the judges, handlers and spectators marched back and forth across the section of grass for hours.



Nadine Kohn of Glencoe, Minn., hugs “Hank” after a successful series.

Leytham and Darcy were No. 13 in the running order. A tall, thin man with long, curly hair, Leytham stood out because he never wears a hat in the field. Darcy is a small white cocker, who was soaking wet after navigating the wet grass and completing the first series in fine fashion.

Leytham scoops up Darcy and gives her a pat, then begins the long walk back to the parking area. “As good as she is, her mom was that much better,” Leytham says. “Her name was Belle. I lost her at an early age. She was 5 years old and just one point shy of her FC (Field

Champion title) when she twisted her bowel. That was it. She died in a matter of minutes.”

Leytham says the 27-hour drive was nothing. “I’d have driven farther if I had to,” he says. “I’ve wanted to be at a national for a long time. We put in thousands of hours training. There was no way I was not coming to North Dakota.”

Leytham smiles and laughs. “In fact, I’m missing my nephew’s wedding. I asked them what the date was, and they told me it was this weekend. I said, ‘Sorry, I cannot make it.’”

Leytham says he had Belle cremated. “I told my wife, when I die, mix my ashes with hers. I found this necklace that holds her ashes and photo online. I wear it at field trials. I’m wearing it right now, over my heart.”

A Close-Knit Community

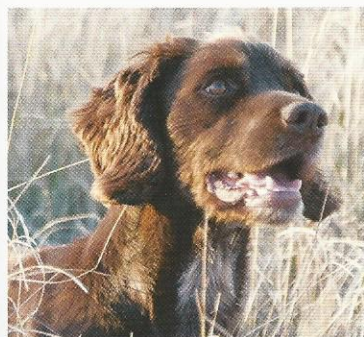
The cocker community is a close-knit group, and the Cascade English Cocker Spaniel Fanciers are as close as they come and here in full force. Based in Washington state, at least a dozen members have made the trek to Bismarck. Several are staying at Glencoe Farms and Kennel, home to McGagh and Vicky Thomas. McGagh has won the Cocker National four times as a handler.



Paul McGagh, who handled the third- and fourth-place finishers, is pictured with "Pete" and "Snickett," the fourth-place finisher.

Williams' camper also is parked at Glencoe for the week. Williams is a client of McGagh's, as are many of the temporary residents at Glencoe. Pearl is out of McGagh's breeding, and McGagh provided Pearl's early basic training as a pup. Now, Williams will handle Pearl and essentially compete against McGagh and two other pros who live in the Bismarck area.

Less than 10 miles away, Oahe Kennels, home to pro trainer and handler Tom Ness and his wife, Robin Putnam, also is quite



Cockers, such as this one, perform with an intensity in the field that endears them to their owners.

busy. A couple of campers are parked next to the kennel, and guests and clients come and go throughout the day. Ness trained and handled the winning cocker at the 2010 National, and his FC Parkbreck Elm of Bishwell ("Mave") was recently recognized as a 2013 English Cocker inductee at the Bird Dog Hall of Fame in Grand Junction, Tenn.

While McGagh, Ness and another local pro, Dan Murray, are handling multiple dogs, most of the competitors at this National are amateurs, rank-and-file owner-handlers, who own a few dogs and are dedicated to the game.

In the cocker world, the highest award for dedication to the game — the Harold S. Bixby Service Award — is presented annually at the National to an individual who has continuously, unselfishly and distinctly promoted English Cockers in the field. Mr. Bixby, or "Bix" as his friends called him, passed away just a few days before the Bismarck National at the age of 90. The Bixby Award became a posthumous honor with special meaning at the Thursday night National banquet and silent auction at Elks Lodge 1199 in downtown Bismarck.

McGagh, the pro who handled many of Bix's dogs, was called on to say a few words about his friend and client. McGagh's remarks included a story about one of Bix's great dogs, FC Kenyee Donna of Windmillwood ("Meg"). McGagh handled Meg to win the 2001 High Point Dog honors with 46 points — the most ever in a single year.

"Meg was a special dog, and when Bix retired her, he placed

her at a plantation in the South to hunt and live out her days," McGagh related. "Bix always kept track of her, and she had some age on her. Bix died on Sunday, October 20. And we learned that Meg died on Monday, the very next day. I thought that was rather interesting."

When the winner of the Harold S. Bixby Service award for 2013 was announced, the banquet room erupted with applause. It went to Tawney Crawford.

"Tawney deserves it," McGagh said later. "She does an amazing job of bringing people into the sport. She has a litter of puppies, and 18 months later they're showing up and doing well in the game."

The Final Series Begins

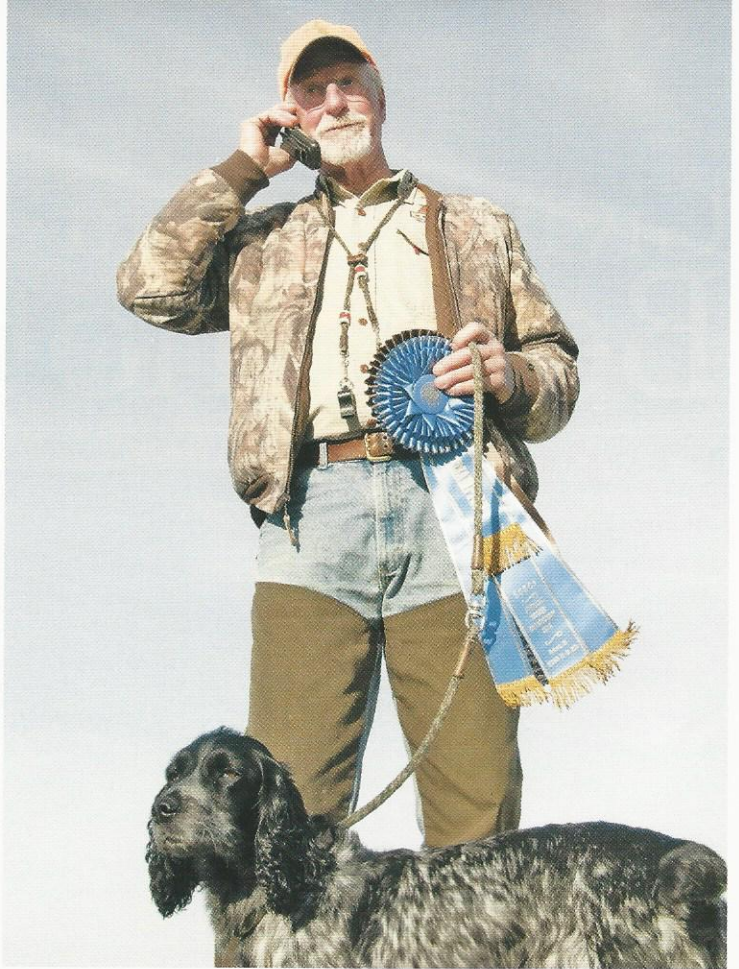
By Saturday, the field was set and the fifth and final series on land had begun, with 13 dogs back. Unfortunately, Leytham was already headed back East. Darcy went out after the second series, but Leytham loved every minute of the 2013 National. He drove 27 hours straight to get home, thinking about the next National and wearing that necklace with a favorite dog.

Tawney Crawford was still "in" with True. Mowder and Bentley were back, and Williams and Pearl were sitting pretty. But the wheels can come off in the last series, and a strong performance can create some separation for the judges. Tawney Crawford actually fell, hard, in the wooded course as she struggled to keep up with little True. But she got back up, and made it through the fifth series.

Ten dogs completed the last land series, including True, Bentley and Pearl, who seemed to build her performance at each



Ralph Mowder and wife Deb prepare for the fifth series with "Bentley."



Dave Williams phones home, with Pearl, the new National Champion, at his side.

contact throughout the course. They needed only to complete a water retrieve to finish the 2013 National.

Then, it was over.

They gathered under the tent surrounded by prairie, before a table of crystal and brass trophies, waiting for the judges to announce their decision. The 2013 National Cocker Championship goes to Williams and Warrener's Ruby Throated Hummingbird — better known as Pearl.

Hugs, handshakes, happy tears.

Mowder and Bentley took second — quite an accomplishment for a 2-year-old dog and an owner-handler's first attempt at a National. "This is the first cocker I've trialed," Mowder says. "He's an energetic little dog. It's that good *Purina* food!"

McGagh handled the third- and fourth-place finishers, as well as received a certificate of completion for another dog. Tawney Crawford earned her certificate of completion with FC Quailmoor Quite Right, and also won the Dungarvens Ready-Teddy Challenge Award, which honors lady handlers for accomplishments afield.

All the placement winners are fueled by *Purina Pro Plan* brand dog food.

Williams stood outside the tent with Pearl at his side, and made the phone call to his wife back in Crete, Neb. "Hello, sweetheart," he says. "The 2013 National Champion lives in your house!" ■