

# Calling All Cockers



All eyes are on the man in the English field jacket as he pulls a fuzzy tennis ball from a mesh bag. The four English Cocker Spaniels seem mesmerized as Paul McGagh places the ball in a plastic hand thrower and launches it far into the field.

The cockers know this drill, and dare not move. Instead, they somehow sharpen their focus as Paul methodically reaches into the bag for another tennis ball. He repeats the process until 10 tennis balls of varying colors are hidden in the tall grass.

The cockers know the fun is about to begin.

Paul makes them wait a bit longer, then in a barely audible voice, whispers "Freddie."

The reddish cocker hears his name and explodes from his place, slicing through the wet prairie grass and alfalfa en route to tennis ball nirvana. At 50 yards he catches scent, whirrs, digs in the grass, and comes up with a trophy. Proudly he returns the ball to Paul while the other cockers wait their turn.

"Well done lad," Paul says as Freddie wiggles with enthusiasm. "Well done Freddie. Freddie, HUP!" The hup command means sit, and Freddie's behind promptly hits the ground.

The game continues, with Amber, Paddy, Storm and Freddie taking turns until all 10 tennis balls are back in the mesh bag.

Paul is pleased and explains that this is more than a game. "It creates a sense of competition, it reinforces patience, it makes the dogs focus on me."

Paul uses his voice as a training tool — speak softly and carry a big bag of tennis balls. The way he says "Freddie" in a soft, gentle, soothing tone seems to electrify the little cocker.

"It seems to me the less you shout at them, the more they listen," Paul says.

The English Cocker Spaniels at Glencoe Farms and Kenel in Bismarck, N.D., listen very well, and win an awful lot under Paul McGagh's whistle. To date, he has made 27 champions. In 2003, Paul entered 19 open all age stakes, winning 15 trials and placing second six times. He handled the 2003 Cocker National Champion, NFC/ENFC Chynell Megan ("Megan"), the first



Paul McGagh praises Amber, above, after a nice run. At left, Storm, Freddie, Paddy and Amber wait their turns.

B R E E D E R   P R O F I L E

spaniel ever to win both the English National Championship and the American National Championship. Paul earned the High Point Professional Handler award in 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000, and again in 2003. His FC Warrener's Yellowhammer ("Sydney") was the 2003 High Point Dog, winning six open stakes.



Paul McGagh and his companion and partner, Vicky Thomas, along with assistant trainer and kennel manager, Mike Delaney, comprise the Glencoe Kennel team. How they all arrived at the 500-acre North Dakota farm overlooking the Missouri River is quite a story, and begins in Paul's native England where the finest English Cockers reside.

Paul was reared in "The Canon," his

Amber waits intently for her turn in the field.

Freddie is ready and focused for Paul.



father's pub in North Nottinghamshire, England, a frequent gathering place for hunters and their dogs — primarily terriers in pursuit of rabbits. Paul enjoyed working with hunting dogs, including a Springer Spaniel, and was educated as a gameskeeper, specializing in wildlife management at Sparsholt College, then the only college in England offering such a degree.

Job offers came from the United States, and Paul soon was hired to manage a large preserve in Texas. Paul later moved to Virginia and an exclusive hunting preserve, where he became friends with Mike. In 1991, Paul returned to England with the intention to find and import some British bloodlines. Field trialing cockers were



Paul sails another tennis ball during a training drill.



Vicky and Paul with Cracker, Storm and Sydney.

quite rare in the United States, with the last cocker trial held in 1963. After a 30-year gap, a trial boasting a 25-dog field was held in Fort Collins, Colo., in 1993.

“I won it actually,” Paul says. “I should say my dog Lucy won it. I brought her from England as an 8-week-old puppy. She was 20 months old then, and she’s still alive today, retired at the house in Pasadena. She’s produced four champions and her granddaughters have placed twice in the Nationals. If not for Lucy, and my success with her, I probably would not have bothered with cockers.”

And he definitely would not have met Vicky. Back in 1995, Vicky Thomas, of Pasadena, Calif., was the owner of her own imported English Cockers and in search of a professional handler and trainer.

“Some friends said Paul McGagh was the best, to look no further,”

Vicky says. “And they were right. He has an amazing way about him, and dogs and people really respond to him.”

The rest, as they say, is history. Paul and Vicky found more in common than their passion for English Cockers, then found a perfect setting to share that passion in North Dakota, with abundant wildlife, rolling hills



Dr. Amy Reese Ekerberg of Mission Valley Veterinary Clinic examines Speck during her monthly visit to the clinic.

## The English Cocker Revival

With a temperament best described as "merry," the English Cocker Spaniel descended from the spaniel group and initially was differentiated by size. The larger spaniels were known for "springing" game and became known as Springer Spaniels, while smaller variety was called the woodcock spaniel or cocker.

In 1892 the Kennel Club (England) finally recognized them as separate breeds, with the cocker becoming the English Cocker Spaniel. The English Cocker Spaniel Club of America was founded in 1936, and the American Kennel Club (AKC) recognized the English Cocker as a separate breed in 1946.

Although considered one of the finest small hunting dogs, English Cocker Spaniels in the United States declined in numbers and popularity to the point that field trials were suspended in 1963. After a 30-year gap, and thanks to breeders and handlers who began importing proven British bloodlines to expand the gene pool, the English Cocker Spaniel revival began and field trials resumed in 1993.

The English Cocker Spaniel Club hosted a National Championship field trial in 1998 — the first since 1962, and the breed momentum continues today. In 2003, NFC/ENFC Chynell Megan ("Megan") became the first spaniel ever (springer or cocker) to win both the English National Championship and the American National Championship. Megan is owned by A.R. and Ollie Ginn of Texas, and was handled at the Queen's Estate by Wendy Openshaw, and in the United States by Paul McGagh.



Madí covers some ground.

and prime habitat. The 500-acre Glencoe Farms and Kennel was created with the goal to become the place to train the world's finest hunting English Cockers.

The property offers a blend of historic buildings with state-of-the-art kennels and appointments. The farm was a stage-coach stop in the 1800s, and the red-and-white "Sitting Bull Barn" is famous locally for an overnight stay by the legendary Chief en route to standing trial in nearby Bismarck. An old schoolhouse sits next to an array of pigeon lofts and sheds.

Anchoring the farm is the 3,000-square-foot indoor kennel, featuring 18 runs with heated floors and an epoxy surface for ease of cleaning. Several large outdoor exercise pens provide ample play and running room for the energetic cockers, who love company and companionship.

The care of all the residents at Glencoe Kennel is a top priority. A local veterinarian examines every dog every month to ensure a clean bill of health. "We think it's very important, and it is well-received by our clients," Paul says. "We want our dogs to look good and feel good."

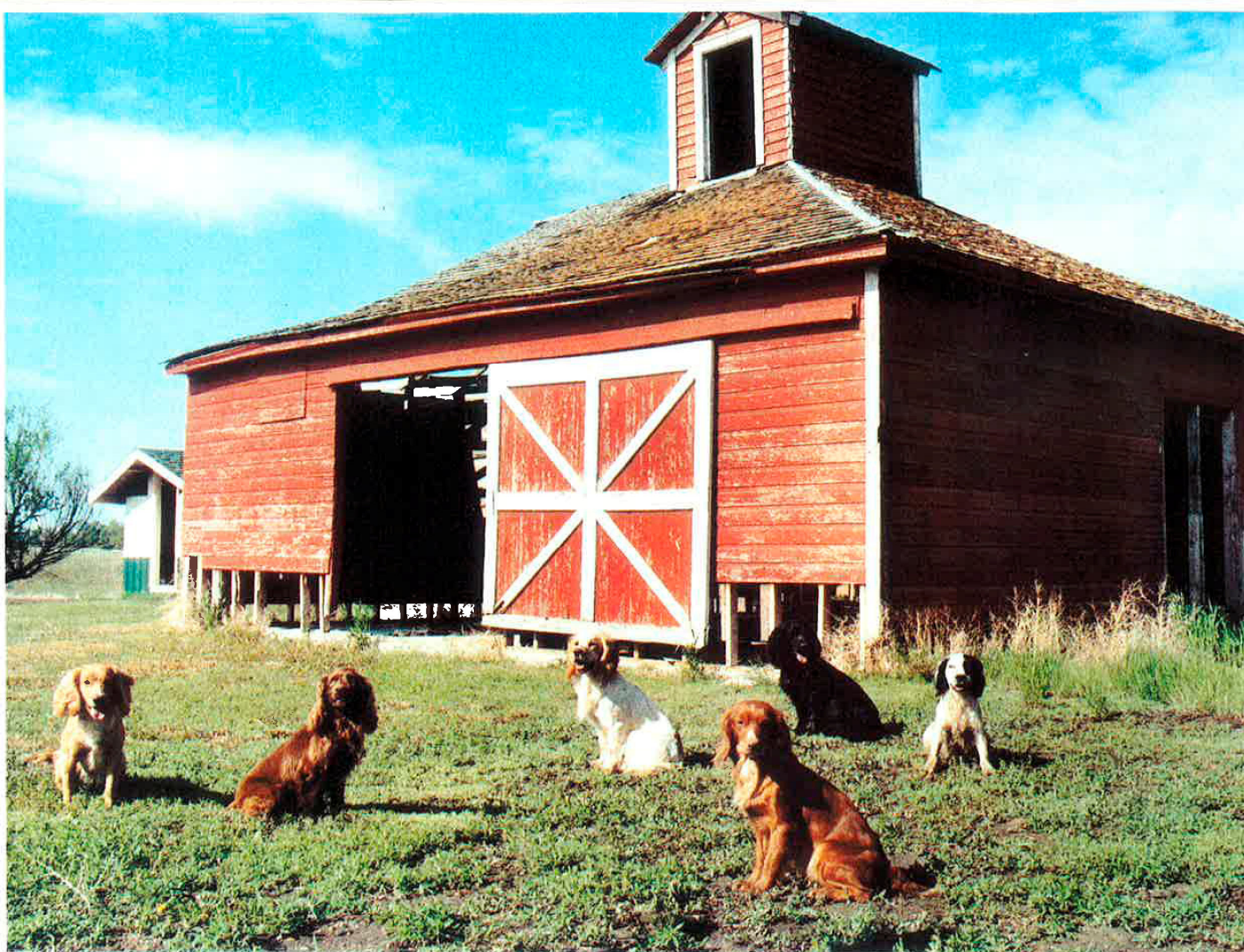
"English Cockers are very bright, they have a big heart, and they absolutely thrive on learning new things," Paul says. "Plus, they're real characters. They make me laugh."

He recounts one exceptional bitch named "Brit," who had a talent for using her paws to unlatch kennels. "When we train we might take eight or 10 dogs to the field and she would reach out and flick the latch, and every dog would barrel out of the kennel — except for Brit. She would sit there like a good girl. It took me a while to figure out what was going on. You'd be thinking, she's the only good one. It turned out that she was turning them all loose to get into trouble."

Paul keeps 30 or more English Cockers, plus some Springer Spaniels at Glencoe, and follows a rigorous training regimen that makes for long days and nights. A typical day might include teaching young dogs to sit and stay in their place, and working on steadiness. His training arsenal is not limited to tennis balls. A metal barn at the far end of the property is home to some 2,000 pheasant chicks that will grow into handsome roosters and hens



A Glencoe client, Donna Joannides of Denver, with her English Cocker Madigan.



English Cockers come in a variety of colors. This bunch posing in front of the barn includes, from left, Dante, Freddie, Storm, Amber, Paddy and Spook.

by fall. Three quail houses in a wooded area of the property hold hundreds of birds and provide ample training opportunities. The cockers flush the quail and the birds return to their recall pens for food and water.

Watching the young dogs work birds is quite enjoyable for Paul. Upon release, the cockers zip to-and-fro with reckless abandon, working left to right in front of their handler. "She's onto one now," Paul says, as Amber zeroes in on a brushpile, then disappears into the tall grass and underbrush. The quail flushes and Amber sits to watch to bird fly away, then gazes at Paul. "Gooooood Girl. Well done."

The scene is repeated often, dog in, dog out, until all have had their fun. Paul pays special attention to each dog, and that seems to make all the difference. "Any good dog trainer can make a dog perform," Paul says. "A really good dog trainer can make a dog want to perform."

Mike Delaney says Paul's innovative approach to training sets him apart. "He is always thinking and comes up with new ideas, new ways to train," Mike says.

Vicky agrees, saying, "He keeps learning and evolving. He won't be training in two years the same ways he's training now."

Paul and Vicky winter in Pasadena — providing great training challenges and opportunities. "I love urban training," he says. "We have fewer dogs at the Pasadena house, but there's very limited space, there's no birds, and you don't dare shoot a blank gun or training pistol or the LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) would be circling overhead in a helicopter."

Instead, Paul reverts to playing games, with great results. "I'll use my tennis balls," Paul says. "I'll make the dogs sit, then I'll walk around the house, then I'll send them one-by-one. Then maybe I'll toss a few more balls, make them sit while I walk in the house. I might extend it to 30 or 40 minutes. It's a fun little game. They know there's an end. And there's a reward for them at the end. If you play games — indoors or outdoors — it tends to stimulate them, and in turn they will stimulate you!" ■