

by
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'Rocky' - a life saving Cocker?

SEVERAL years ago a young gamekeeper graduated from Sparsholt College, Hampshire. After work experience in Britain he moved to Virginia, USA, to take up a position on a shooting reserve which was run on British lines.

This meant that pheasant poults were reared and placed in release pens rather than adult birds being thrown by hand towards waiting shooters which, in North America, is the usual *modus operandi* for simulating traditional British driven pheasant shooting. In some places they use a tower and launch mallard and pheasants at the top to simulate our high bird shooting.

The keeper's name was Paul McGagh and, for a time, he worked under these conditions. But the toll of birds taken by the many protected raptors was enormous and, instead of achieving a return of 40 to 50 percent of birds shot to birds put down as is commonplace over here, this shoot yielded about one bird in the bag for every six poults put down.

Paul left the shoot to become a freelance groundhog and other pest controller then, a few years ago, set up as a gundog trainer, specialising in working cocker spaniels from stock exclusively imported from Britain.

Profound influence

A dog that was to have a profound influence was Maesydderwen Griffin, bred by Peter Jones in West Wales. There was drama attached to this dog from day one. His sire was the 1992 Cocker Championship, F.T.Ch. Jasper of Parkbreck. A lot of nasty things have been said about this dog by the envious but believe me, Jasper was a good one.

His owner, Carl Colclough, loaned the dog to Peter to mate to his F.T.Ch. Wernffrwd Melingoch, a bitch so hot you would swear she was powered by space rocket fuel. Jasper managed to abscond and did a tour of the Carmarthenshire countryside before Peter managed to apprehend him and the dog was able to perform his required function.

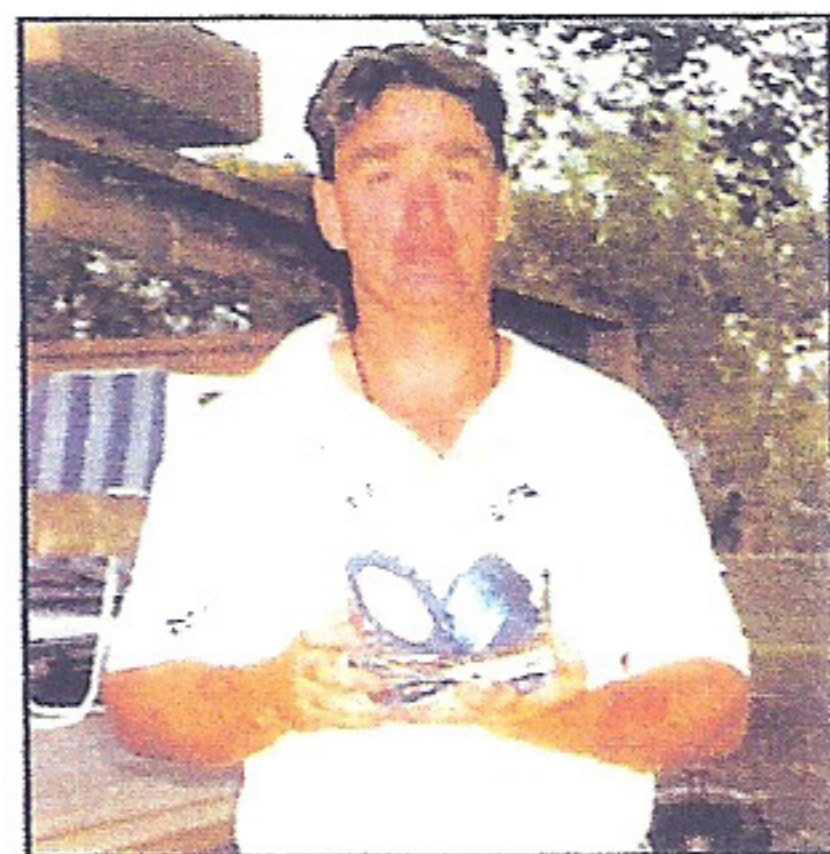
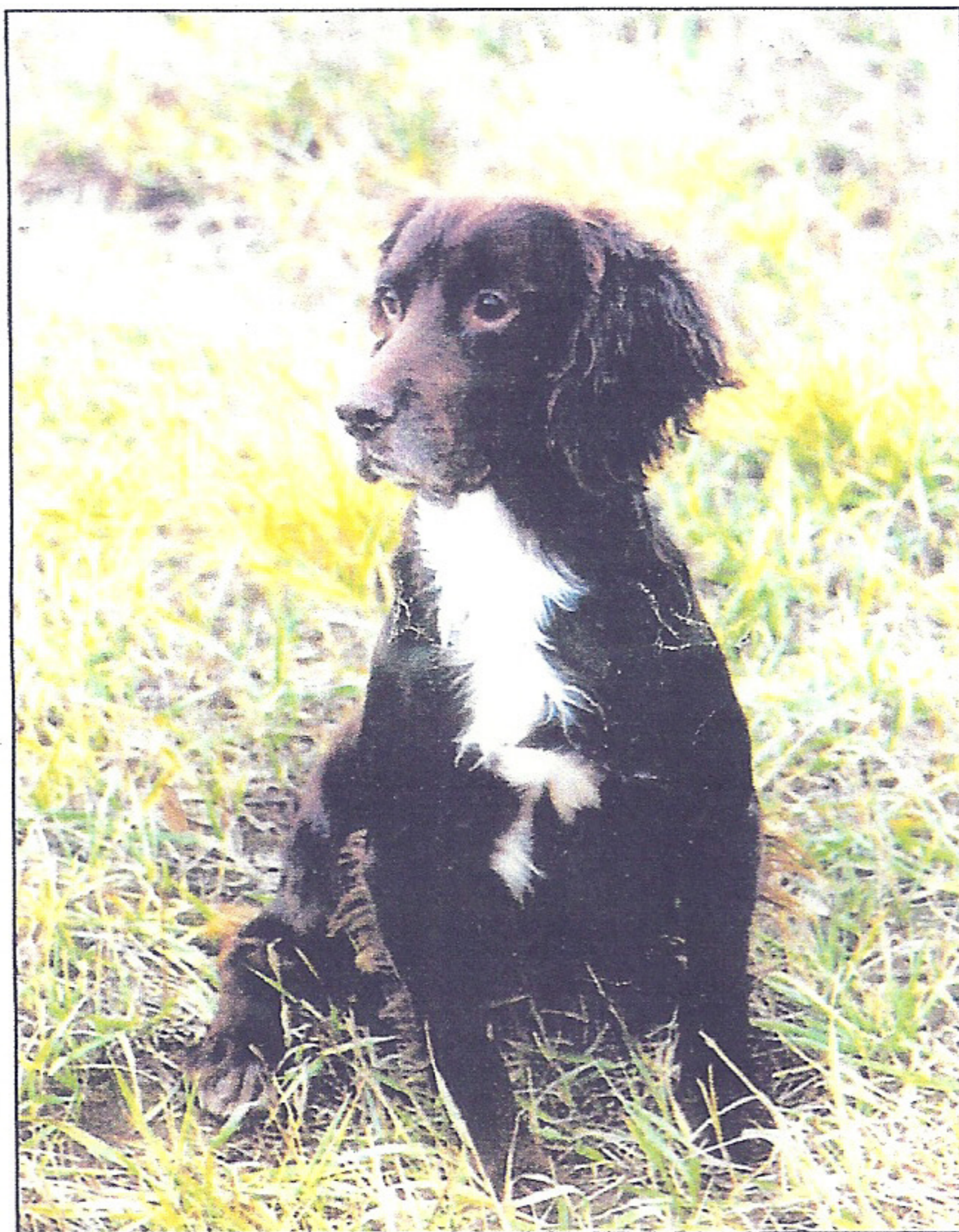
Carl Colclough took Griffin as a service pup then sold him to Paul McGagh but, unhappily not long afterwards he died, I believe of heart-stroke. However, before he died he was mated to Art Person's bitch F.T.Ch. Nancarrow Rosy Mantle.

Paul acquired a dog pup and sold it to Mark Rose, who has a welding shop in downtown Chicago. The pup's name was Griffin's Pride Rocky. He spent every hour with Mark, either mouse hunting in the shop, pheasant, crow or dove hunting, salmon fishing in cleaned up Lake Michigan and any number of activities Paul says he is probably better off not knowing about.

Head of steam

By the age of 13 months, Rocky had developed such a head of steam that he was running rings round Mark so he brought him back to Paul for further training. He had developed a range, more akin to an all age pointer but Paul tightened his pattern by using quail pens, an unknown technique to me as I am only conversant with using small quail release pens from which the birds are released into open country, then return to the call of captive cock birds.

While Paul was working on Rocky, disaster struck. Mark developed a particularly severe form of cancer and, after drastic treatment and a



● (Above) American F.T.Ch 'Griffin Pride Rocky.
● (Left) Multiple award winner, expatriate Englishmen Paul McGagh.

bone marrow transplant, he went into remission. During his darkest days Mark would call Paul constantly from the hospital in a morphine-induced haze to check on Rocky's progress. This gave Mark a focal point and it is the belief of Paul, and Mark's closest friends, that the overwhelming desire to reunite with his dog pulled him through.

It may well have been that there was an additional boost when I went over to judge in 1997 at some trials in North Dakota. Up to that point,

Rocky had only run in four trials, taking a first, a second, a fourth and a certificate of merit, but on the occasion of my visit he put it all together and won both open stakes of 37 and 38 entries.

He won another stake that year, then picked up a fourth the following Spring and, in October 1998, took a fourth place in the first National Cocker Championship to be held since 1962.

Mammoth event

In the USA, Cockers are only allowed to compete within their own breed but the Canadian Kennel Club allows them to challenge their larger cousins, the Springers. Rocky did just that and took a second place in a Springer stake of 35 entries. This qualified him to run in the Canadian National Springer Spaniel Championship, a mammoth event of 117 dogs.

He completed all five series and scored a double A-plus each time. There were a total of nine Guns who shot three at a time on a rota system and, after Rocky was awarded a Certificate of Merit, were unanimous in voting for him as the recipient of the Guns' Award.

What seemed to break completely new ground were letters to Mark and Paul, from one of the Guns, Dicky Corkum from Nova Scotia. His letter to Paul reads:

"Just a few words regarding the 1999 Canadian National. Back in the early 80s as a teenager, I was invited to shoot my first National. I realised then just how lucky I was to be picked to be on our National team. Since then I was captain of three Nationals and the opportunity to shoot many others. The point I wish to make is that I have some great memories of Nationals in the past.

"Then came Sudbury. Well you and Rocky put on a show that can only be described as sensational for lack of a better adjective. As a Gun that was out there and seeing everything hands on, it was spectacular. You and Rocky were able to handle everything that was thrust upon you with awesome style. You two made it look easy.

"Let me tell you that you competed against 116 of the best Springer Spaniels in North America. You had handlers with five or six dogs and handlers with some red hot dogs going to the National. The task ahead of you must have seemed overwhelming.

"In the course of the four days I talked to so many handlers who complained about the cover being too heavy, the retrieves were too long etc. Then I think about walking up to you when the third series was being run, at the top of the hill when you were grabbing a wink of sleep. I sat down beside you and we had a brief talk.

Positive and cool

"When I got up to shoot I said to myself 'Here's a guy that drove halfway across the country with one dog, which is a Cocker, to compete against all of these Springers, and he's remaining so positive and cool'. It was a great pick-me-up for me and I said to myself, that is why I am here. For guys like that.

"As the weekend proceeded I reminded the other Guns to sit up and take notice of this little brown Cocker. By days' end the entire National Gun Team was a-buzz about you and Rocky. We were all aboard the Rocky Train destination fourth and fifth series. Going into fifth series, the Gun Captain met with all us Guns and said he was going to pick only the top Guns over the four days to shoot the series.

When I found I was one of them, I was excited. At this point I had already shot some birds for Rocky but to think I might have the honour to shoot over Rocky again, Rocky came into the line but I was one of hundreds in the gallery cheering you and him on. I will end by telling you that in my 20 years of trialling, I never saw a more exciting performance as Rocky put in at the Canadian National. You were so deserving of the CM and Gunners' Choice that I know you will be back next year to win the gold because you can.

"You provided me with a memory that will last a lifetime. If we, as field triallers in North America, set a standard for sportsmanship and professional behaviour, your friend set the standard by which all others will be judged. It was a pleasure and an honour to have you participate in the Canadian National in Sudbury."

Any further comment from myself would be superfluous.

