

For as long as I can remember my Grandmother lived with us. When I was twelve we moved from Rotherham to Worksop where Dad and Mum ran a pub. My parents worked long hours so I spent a great deal of time with Gran. She told me stories about living in Denaby, a “pit” town. I think most people envision a gritty mining village at the bottom of a valley, but my Denaby memories were one’s of happy visits with a loving family. Gran especially loved Denaby. To her, everywhere else in the world was just a stopping off place.

Occasionally, on Sundays, we’d all pile into the family car and drive over to see relatives. The visit always started with Mass, then a pint or two at the “Hilltop Pub” and finish with Roast Dinner. At the pub, while they were getting half crocked, I’d sit in the car park with a fizzy pop and bag of crisps.

On the drive home, Gran and I shared the back seat and, inevitably, her hearing aid would begin to emit an oscillating screech while she commented on the passing scenery, “Oh look Betty! They cleaned that yard!”

Mum answered, “Agnes! Check your hearing aid! It’s screamin’.”

Gran turned to ask me, “What’d she say?”

I rapidly tapped my finger in and out of my ear, “Your hearing aid!”

Gran smiled back at me, “You’re right! That bunch were a little touched... bless ‘em.”

Mum, shouting over the trill, “Watch out John! You’re drivin’ too fast!”

Dad chimed in using his standard comeback to Mum’s driving critiques, “Oh, stuff it Betty!”

Gran traced a quick sign of the cross over her heart, returned to looking out the side window and muttered to no one in particular, “Took ‘em 60 years to mow that grass!”

Now, 2 decades later, I’d returned to South Yorkshire looking to purchase some Cockers. This took me to the home of Chris and Ann Oakley who lived in Clifton, a small village near the old hometown of Denaby. After some pleasantries, they invited me to their garden to see their dogs. Passing through the back gate, we paused a moment to take in the view. Chris casually began to point out landmarks, “There’s the church and at the top of the hill is The Hilltop Pub.

That name, The Hilltop Pub, flooded my mind with memories long forgotten. I’d been to it time and again, but, I’d never seen it from this angle. I savored the irony of standing so close to the past and recalling the voices from my youth. Turning my gaze, I could see the outline of Denaby at the bottom of the valley and imagined it covered by a blanket of soot, now gone, thanks to the closing of the mines in 1968. At this moment, I was once again sitting in the back seat of a blue Fiat chattering with Mum, Dad and Gran. I felt an ache in my heart for long ago memories that still made me smile.

My reminiscing was cut short by a lemon colored Cocker jumping up and down, demanding my affection. Shooing her away, my attention was drawn to a little black

and white Springer sitting near the gate of his pen, his coal dark eyes riveted on Chris. He was positive, any deviation of his attention would cause him to miss something so miraculous, life thereafter would hardly be worth living.

Chris told me the young Springer was named Kesh, owned by a close friend from Newcastle. "It's a sad story," Chris confided. "Ann and I are looking after Kesh while our friend's wife fights cancer. He's put a fair amount of time training him in the basics but didn't have time to get Kesh on a single head of game. He's a good dog, though. Wants to please. Might make into something special."

It was true, Kesh showed little interest in marking the thrown tennis ball, preferring to watch Chris throw it. Kesh was proficient taking hand directions to locate the retrieve once Chris called his name.

I really liked the look of this dog and especially his dark eyes. I'd been thinking about trying my hand in US Springer trials but finding it difficult to locate a Springer that excited me. When I first came to the United States, I had brought a black and white Springer with me named Rick. I might have had an image of him in my mind that I was trying to replicate.

I supposed it might be serendipity that sent Kesh our way that day. The gentleman, who owned him, understandably preoccupied, let him go. Vicky and I took him back to California.

For the remainder of winter, Kesh seamlessly blended with the Cockers proving to be a pleasant dog to live with. No hyperactive bouncing up and down, running between your legs or squirming around your feet like the Cockers. He was content to be in one's presence and sit quietly. We thought about the spring and moving back to North Dakota where we'd introduce Kesh to the "morning walk" and get him working on quail in the woods behind our house. Once there, Kesh proved a curious study.

The purpose of our "morning walk" is to allow our dogs to have a free run for several minutes on the unfenced acreage southeast of our farmstead. If we are lucky, the dogs will find the odd pheasant cock tucked in cover and chase after him as he flies away. Not Kesh. Ever the gentleman, his interests didn't seem to stretch much further than what treasures he could find hidden in my pocket.

Kesh's marking skills improved through the use of dummy launchers. I elevated him on an old pheasant crate before firing a dummy using a low load. His normal habit was to spring off the box, run past me in the direction of the retrieve and then stop and spin 180 degrees to face me, demanding to be handled. This was frustrating as the dummy lay in full view! Eventually, I began to turn my back as he ran past which started having a positive effect.

Initially, he would still stop and look for assistance but, not finding any, giving him a slight head nod would push him in the right direction. But Kesh's Achilles heel appeared

when he ran into a problem; he'd immediately revert to his old ways of looking at me for help. Almost every dog has some kind of weakness buried somewhere and it's every handler's nightmare knowing the weakness could pop out at the least opportune time! Notwithstanding this, Kesh had a magnificent work ethic. It took a little time but, as his confidence grew, he evolved into a proficient marker.

I released a number of free flying quail in our woods to see if Kesh would be interested in their scent. My hope was he'd flush one and his instincts would trigger a chase, something that always worked with Cockers. Not Kesh. Walking with him in the woods, if by chance he'd step on a quail, they could hardly find blue sky before Kesh would spin around and lock eyes on me. He just wouldn't hunt! Not a single aspect of that task remotely interested him.

Helping him become confident finding game was finally just a case of repetition. Every evening, taking advantage of a good breeze, I would set him up in a short hay field, his early training paying dividends. He could be left indefinitely in a field and not move. Initially I would throw in a wing clipped pigeon 10 yards to his left and another one the same distance to the right. Returning to a "casting off" position I would send him for the first bird and then the second. I increased the number of birds down the field and stretched the distance apart. It took a little patience and time but it was satisfying to see his momentum grow with each find.

That summer I had decided to give Kesh a try at trialing and then I got a call suggesting I purchase a dog named Taff, paraphrased as "the dog you've been looking for." So, we took a chance and shipped him to the States and not much later added Kizzy and Tina. We went from zero to four Springers in one summer! Taff became the US High Point Springer in 2005 and was a natural athlete who proved to be hard to beat in his heyday. Kizzy was classically stylish and Tina a powerhouse bird finder. Kesh could never replicate Taft's athleticism, Kizzy's class or Tina's power so I turned him over to Vicky to run.

In retrospect Vicky and Kesh were well matched as neither were natural Field Trialers. Every time they went into the field, one or the other would learn something and I enjoyed watching them! Vicky is fond of telling me her favorite series was running in the 5th Series of the Canadian National in Manitoba. Kesh winded a bird off to Vicky's right and the cover was such that she and the judges could see the bird moving ahead of them. It had been drizzling all day and the bird ran up the course and jogged across a muddy path. On the other side, the bird tucked under a pile of dead fall allowing Kesh the time to track his foot scent. Picking up a snippet of scent, Kesh bounded across the path and the bird resumed his race! From the gallery, my nerves were getting to me as Kesh now neared the end of the field and the cover turned into woods. I kept thinking of Kesh's Achilles heel, which thankfully, I'd never mentioned to Vicky because her Achilles heel is to "think too much." So Vicky blithely followed Kesh into the trees, which proved more difficult for her to navigate and, apparently, the bird thought so as well. In not too long a time, the bird flushed, flying back off to the right of the gallery. The gunner shot and for a breathless moment I waited to hear if it had dropped. I didn't

want to watch as a nightmare scenario began to unfold in my mind...“was this the moment Kesh’s Achilles heel kicks in”? I vaguely heard Vicky call his name and I could hear him smashing and cracking cover as he bounded out of the woods, running directly to the downed bird. Bringing the bird back, he sat at Vicky’s feet like a true gentleman.

This remarkable run was the first time Vicky finished a National and Kesh placed forever in our hearts! And, I must admit, sometimes when I watch Vicky run a dog, I loose 10 years off my life!

As I mentioned, during the time that Vicky and I owned Kesh, we ran a solid string of Springers. They deservedly won more and their success kept Kesh from earning his Championship title. No matter, because my Brother John’s kids thought of Kesh as their personal Field Trial Champion. Jules, Annabel and Georgina had been raised with cats and, given their choice from our kennel, Kesh was their pick. He was at his most comfortable around children and related to them as they did to him. The kids loved to play games and Kesh wanted nothing more than to be part of those activities. He would do whatever these youngsters bade him even though they were all under 12 years old. They loved him and he loved them. It took a little out of Kesh when John who, ironically, ended up in the mining business, returned with his family to Australia. Ultimately, John got a little Cocker named Lacy from New Zealand. The kids love Lacy but as they’ve grown into adults, they often remark how much Kesh meant to them while they were young.

Kesh was a small, black headed Springer who, because of a family tragedy, found his way to California. But, he’d obviously been raised with tender care in the place of his roots, the coal country of Northern England.