

## Reflections by Paul Mc Gagh

I celebrated our 30 year "Cocker First Trial" anniversary on a warm April morning in Lone Pine, California. Our bitch, Inca, was bustling through the high desert cover checking each sage bush she encountered. Hardly the "revered" Cocker Cover we hear bantered about today, but typical hunting cover for California. She encountered a faint wisp of scent and went with it, she was fully committed. Weaving off the trial course, she occasionally lost scent and then picked up the foot track of the elusive chukar. Warm Lone Pine breezes caressed the back of my neck as I watched her waste no effort in a futile attempt to take body scent from the subtle downwind. She kept her head low and her nose close to the ground, deciphering any information the departed bird had left. We headed off towards the looming base of snowcapped Mount Whitney, gradually leaving sage plants behind for bare desert. Still Inca persisted on the sparse trail of the elusive bird. A quick glance back saw the blaze orange of the field-trial gallery disappearing as a speck in the distance. There was just Inca, Judge Donny Mock, Gunner Chip Bunker and myself. Catching a glimpse of the running chukar I could see it had reached the verge of a narrow desert road paralleling a barbed wire fence. The rutted road proved the Chukars demise as it hesitated briefly and changed course. The momentum change won Inca a few vital seconds. She quickened her pace, switched direction and with a burst of speed pushed it air bound. As it arched back, the chukar was dropped by Chip Bunker providing Inca with a straight forward retrieve. This was probably the best piece of dog work I've encountered in a judged environment as the most memorable occur in lonely places with only nature as the witness.

Thirty years prior, along the perimeter of a beautiful lake in Fort Collins Colorado, I was handling a classy little cocker named Lucy. That day, with a strikingly similar action to Incas', she tracked out and flushed 5 cock pheasants and deftly retrieved a striking rooster to hand to finish her 2nd series. It was the first US Licensed cocker trial to be held in 30 years. At that moment, we were running under the eye of judge David Jones. Lucy is Inca's Great, Great, Great, Great, Great Grandmother on both the top and bottom of her pedigree. Lucy and Inca went on to win their respective trials.

The Inaugural Fort Collins trial had an entry in the mid-twenties. The dogs were almost all British or a generation removed. No viable working dogs remained in the US after the failure of the cocker trial movement in the early 60s. I caught a plane from Richmond Virginia with my friend Mark Merhige. Arriving on a Friday, it was an inspirational meeting between a collective of working cocker enthusiasts, all excitedly gathered for the first time, so wonderfully lacking in braggadocio because, thankfully, no one had a damn thing to brag about! It was one of those unique moments where there's an instant unspoken bond between like-minded folks on a totally level playing field. The most complimentary thing you could say is we were a group of eccentrics with a common longing to be out in nature with our recently rediscovered little artful dodgers.

I personally was very impressed with the folks and dogs that turned out. Certainly, many contributed to the success of the sport three decades later and still do.

I want to say in those days, I was fortunate to have Art Person as an early client. For the record, Art Person's bitch, Freckles, was present at the inaugural 1993 Fort Collins trial. I was running her dam, Brit, in the puppy stake who was pregnant with her and littermate, Rocky. I've heard all kinds of offhand comments how the cockers entered in those early trials were all but irrelevant to today's vastly superior dogs. Those "historical dogs" were as good then as any dog running today.

Art's Freckles finished second in the first National Championship in 1998 and Rocky, owned by Mark Rose, placed fourth. Freckles then returned in 2000 (the very next National) after sitting on a Mississippi porch for almost two years with zero bird exposure to win first place. Harold Bixby's Millie took second and Rocky's daughter Zoe finished fourth. Art and Bix, both ever humble, approached our sport with a spirit of lightheartedness and joy, underlined by a serious dedication. They actually found value in dissecting their own dogs field trial runs with precision, always quick to point out shortcomings, usually with a laugh and a shake of the head. It was an honor to ultimately win National Championships for each, coincidently with cocker bitches that I would still rank in the top dogs I've handled.

Everyone has their personal story of what enticed them into the world of field Cocker. My journey started in 1991 when I acquired three pups from England that, luckily, passed on quality traits. They were not perfect by any means, and, on reflection, maybe I'm glad I've never had a perfect Cocker. If I had that might have marked the end of my journey or my usefulness in it. I hope, as the cocker baton is passed on to the next generation, we will be remembered in a positive light and, that they, the future generations to come, will share the magic of watching their cockers the way we did at the beginning of our adventure.