

GUN DOG®

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(The British-bred
English cocker is not
your grandmother's
lap dog.)

Pocket Rockets

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JERRY THOMS

An aficionado of the English cocker spaniel once described these small, versatile hunting dogs as “pocket rockets,” a reference to their way of charging through the woods after ruffed grouse and woodcock or swimming furiously through cattails to retrieve ducks or geese.

“I love the English cocker’s hunting desire, its energy and stamina, and the way one of these 25- to 35-pound bundles of energy delivers the performance of a gun dog twice its size,” says Tony Roettger of Roettger’s English Cocker Kennels and Training Facility in Long Branch, Minnesota.

A lifelong upland gamebird and waterfowl hunter, the 28-year-old Roettger (pronounced rhét-ger) started out with springer spaniels but gravitated toward and finally settled on English cockers. “Although I learned to train spaniels by at first working with springers, I was fascinated with the personalities of the British-bred English cockers,” Roettger says. “Unlike the Americanized version of the breed, the British lines are dogs with very stable temperaments, high degrees of trainability, lots of personality, and loads of natural hunting ability.”

TRUE BRITS

“Anyone shopping for an English cocker as a gun dog needs to look into the breed lines that come from England—the ones that have been successfully hunted, field trialed, or hunt-tested there and in this country,” Roettger says. “Although I don’t mean to put down the English cocker ‘show dog’ people, I have to warn anyone who wants a good English cocker gun dog that getting one out of a line

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of 'bench dogs' is pretty unlikely. Those dogs have been bred mainly for appearance and have had much of the hunting instinct taken out of them."

Roettger also cautions against buying English cockers that don't have verifiable credentials based on field trials or hunt-test backgrounds in their pedigrees. As a field-trial and hunt test trainer and judge, he extols the advantages of breeding from hunting cocker lines that have been proven in trials and tests.

"English cockers from British lines may be wound a little tighter and may be somewhat more high-strung than most non-trialed or non-tested dogs, but they will be the cockers most likely to succeed as great hunters," Roettger says. "And, yes, these British-bred cockers will still be good pets and well-mannered house-dogs. But they will require a regular 30-minute session of hard exercise to keep them in good condition and to keep their energy levels under control."

British-bred English cockers make such good American hunting dogs for several reasons.

Brown and white, black and white, all black—color doesn't matter in the British-bred line of English cockers. Desire to hunt, good temperament and a cooperative attitude are among the traits that have counted the most in the development of this gun dog breed.

"Dogs bred in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland are providing most of the best breeding stock for modern-day cockers in America," Roettger says. "These first-generation, imported British lines have been producing some of the best hunters, a majority of the dogs that have been the winners in field trials and the major title-holders in hunt tests.

"British-based English cocker breeders are very restrictive, and the field trialers are very precise and demanding," Roettger adds. "For example, many of those who breed English cockers might actually destroy dogs that don't measure up to hunt-performance and field-tested standards. Or they may place, as pets, neutered adult dogs that don't produce good offspring. That is opposed to American dog breeders who seldom put down clearly inferior puppies or

Roettger Ridge Kennel Training Program

Roettger's English Cocker Kennels and Training Facility is located in Long Branch, Minnesota, 45 minutes northeast of Minneapolis-St. Paul. On a typical weekend, Tony Roettger and his wife, Bethann, will conduct from 10 to 12 one-half to one-hour long training sessions with individual clients and their English cockers.

"Our emphasis is on training the dogs and their owners to be an effective hunting team," Roettger says. "The first step is to acquire a well-bred English cocker from a reputable breeder who has some well-qualified field-trial and hunt-test breeding stock. The next step is to get the dog and its handler into a well-organized and long-term training program so that both the cocker and its handler learn good training habits," Roettger adds. For more information on British-bred English cockers, call the Roettgers at 651/674-0431.

Tony Roettger and a friend.





English cockers are bred to be efficient, enthusiastic retrievers of game. Although eight-month-old Annie needs some work on her retrieving style, there's no doubt her instinct to deliver this training bird to hand is very strong.

neuter substandard adult dogs," Roettger explains.

Likewise, field trial requirements are very rigid in such areas as judging temperament. For example, if an over-excited dog whines, yips, or barks when waiting on the line at a British field event, that dog is immediately disqualified and eliminated from the competition at that trial. That may seem like an excessive measure, but this sort of policy is typical among the British and has helped to produce the hard-hunting and highly biddable dogs now being imported to the U.S.

TRAINING ENGLISH COCKERS

"After some basic instructions from a professional spaniel trainer, many English cocker owners can often develop their dogs into good hunters," Roettger says. Because cockers tend to be close-working dogs in the field, you can teach them much of what they need to know while training in your backyard."

Where you usually need wide-open spaces to train big-running pointers or setters, you can do a lot of basic cocker training right around home, in a nearby public park or in close-by rural areas—anywhere there is a little natural cover similar to where you will be hunting.

"Training English cockers is something nearly anyone can do with some professional help," Roettger says. "For those with their first English cocker, I usually recommend spending some time with a professional trainer, preferably with someone who specializes in spaniels and has some regular experiences with English cockers. Look for trainers who teach dogs and their owners how to hunt together. And try to find professionals that train cockers for field trials and hunt tests, even though you're mainly interested in having a gun dog for hunting," Roettger advises.

How much time should an English cocker owner expect to spend with a professional trainer to bring a well-bred dog up to this level of performance? "All this depends on the dog, its owner and the trainer, of course," Roettger says. "But, generally, the average well-bred cocker handled by the average experienced hunter can accomplish a lot in one-hour sessions three times a week over a period of two or three months. Or if that time scheme isn't an option, most young cockers from eight months to two or more years of age can be left with a trainer

for two or three months of a full-time training program."

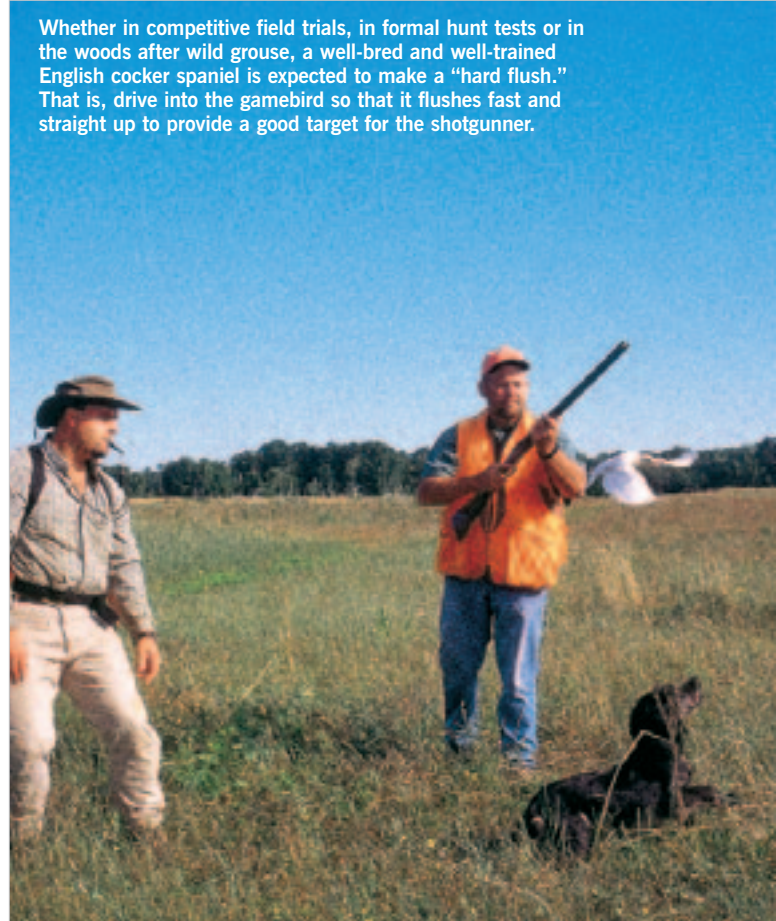
Most well-bred English cockers come with plenty of hunting genetics and desire, as well as a high intelligence and a real passion for pleasing their owners. Consequently, they usually don't need heavy-handed discipline.

"With the dozens of English cockers I've trained for hunting purposes as well as for trials and tests, I've seldom used a check cord and have rarely used an electric collar," Roettger says. "Most English cockers will respond best to positive reinforcement. The important thing is to make clear to the dog what you want and how they can best give the behavior you desire. If that happens, you don't need to force them into anything.

"Because British-bred English cockers tend to be precocious and can pick up adult-type training lessons when they're still puppies, there is sometimes a tendency to expect a maturity in performance that the dog's age won't support," Roettger warns. "So don't be disappointed if your cocker pup acts like a bird flushing and retrieving genius one day, then seems to forget all this a few days later. Eventually with time and maturity, all the basic lessons will finally stick."

Assuming you've bought a well-bred pup and have done an acceptable job of training, an English cocker around a year old should come when called (by voice or whistle), hup ("whoa" or "stay") on command and maybe take elementary handling (go right, left, or back on voice, whistle or hand signals). Likewise, at this age, the young dog should quarter in

Whether in competitive field trials, in formal hunt tests or in the woods after wild grouse, a well-bred and well-trained English cocker spaniel is expected to make a "hard flush." That is, drive into the gamebird so that it flushes fast and straight up to provide a good target for the shotgunner.



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the field, find and flush gamebirds, and retrieve them to hand. That dog may also, with some training and practice, track and retrieve with consistency running wounded game such as pheasant, grouse, partridge or quail.

“On a waterfowl hunt, an English cocker in this age range can be trained steady to wing and shot. And, of course, it should retrieve any birds that it can see fall, whether on land or in the water. All British-bred English cockers should be genetically programmed to love the water and to be good swimmers with no hesitancy or fear in retrieving from shallow sloughs or deep lakes,” Roettger adds. “If you’ve done your homework and you’re lucky, a year-old dog in a thorough early-training program may even take a line and respond to elementary handling on a retrieve.”

PICKING A PUPPY

In the past 10 years, Larry Hanson, an English cocker owner, breeder, trainer and field trialer, has imported nearly a dozen English cockers from the British Isles. He’s been to England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales seven times to look at and buy breeding stock. Hanson uses his cockers to hunt upland gamebirds and waterfowl around his home in Tracy, Minnesota, and across the Midwest.

“Finding good English cockers in the British Isles is fairly easy because most hunters and field trialers there are very dedicated to improving the breed,” Hanson says. “Finding a well-maintained breed integrity in this country, however, can be a real challenge. Locating an American-born, British-bred

British-bred English cockers are genetically programmed to be hunters first and foremost, unlike the Americanized English cocker show lines, which don’t have much instinctive interest in flushing or retrieving gamebirds.



How Smart Are English Cockers?

How smart are British-bred English cocker spaniels? Mike Larsen of Federal tells a story about a day he was hunting ruffed grouse by himself in the Minnesota woods. Because this was before he owned a gun dog, most of his hunts required long walks that took him many miles into the forest. On one of these occasions, Mike discovered that his billfold had fallen from his pocket somewhere along the way. The next day he returned to the woods to search for it.

While he was looking, he glanced up and saw a black-and-white English cocker spaniel walking toward him with the lost billfold in its mouth.

“My gosh, how did this little dog find the billfold and know it was mine? This must be a miracle!” Mike said.

“Not really,” the cocker spaniel replied. “Your name is on your hunting license.”

Emma, Mike Larsen’s English cocker, weighs only 24 pounds—but she retrieved this 10-pound Canada goose during an early-season hunt in Minnesota.



English cocker puppy takes some special care and consideration.” Hanson made several suggestions for those searching for an English cocker pup.

Beware of English cocker breeders who don’t have dogs closely connected to British pedigrees. Watch out, in particular, for backyard breeders who don’t field-trial or hunt-test the parents of their puppies. Be cautious of any English cocker puppy seller who has only one well-pedigreed and titled parent in his brood-stock. A single field trial Champion stud dog or a lone Master Hunter mother might not provide enough genetic material for a top-of-the-line puppy that will most likely become a naturally talented hunting dog.

Don’t buy an English cocker pup unless you actually see the parents. “See” means to observe the mom and dad at work in the field or in water on live birds of some kind, in conditions that closely simulate a real hunting situation. If, for some reason, you can’t personally see the parents, ask for

a video that shows both parents performing a meaningful series of hunting activities.

When examining the parents of a prospective puppy, look for evidence of a stable temperament (the dogs relate well to each other and to people), calmness (no frenetic jumping or mindless running) and boldness (a desire to flush and find gamebirds). Likewise, watch for marking ability and good nose (the dogs should be able to clearly see birds go down and can quickly smell and find them). Expect hard flushes (where the dog charges in to put a bird into flight), a soft mouth (a retrieved bird should not be chewed up into shreds or pieces) and a willingness to hunt bird-holding cover (the dog should go into habitat most likely to have game).

Be suspicious of English cocker puppy sellers who don't ask you plenty of questions about yourself, your hunting experiences and your expectations for your prospective pup on a wide variety of game birds. All of this quizzing may seem irrelevant, intrusive and out of context, but it shows that the breeders care about their pups and want them to belong to someone who will bring out the best of what this breed has to offer.

Expect to be put on a waiting list if the English cocker breeder feels you deserve a pup from his or her line of dogs. This waiting list means that this breeder's pups are popular, that litters are planned in advance based on real demand and that this isn't a "puppy mill" cashing in on a "fad" interest in these gun dogs.

Count on paying a fair price for a well-bred English cocker gun dog out of field-trial and hunt-test lines. Don't be surprised or dismayed by seven-week-old pups in the \$500 to \$750 range. And if this is your first English cocker, don't hesitate to spend \$25 to \$50 per hour for instructions from a qualified professional gun dog trainer.

THE DOG OF THE FUTURE?

"I've heard it said the English cockers will be one of the main dogs in the future of upland gamebird and waterfowl hunting in America," Tony Roettger says. "That's because they have the ability to hunt and retrieve the whole range of gamebird species and are fairly easy to train. In addition, they are very easy to keep in a suburban setting where big pointers and retrievers might be bothersome or even intimidating to the neighbors.

"Though many English cockers could be 'kennel dogs' if necessary, most end up as house dogs because of their gentle dispositions, naturally good manners, stable temperaments and tendency to readily bond with people," Roettger says. "In addition, their relatively small size, (15 to 18 inches high, and 25 to 35 pounds) makes them easy to have around the house.

"In the home, however, they will take all the liberties you'll allow. So don't feed them at your supper table or let them into your bed unless you don't mind a dog that eats and sleeps with you all the time. Of course," Roettger adds with a smile, "those sorts of things never happen at our house." *

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