

JUDGING THE ENGLISH COCKER SPANIEL

The Breed Education Committee for the English Cocker Spaniel Club of America selected the following well-known, respected, Breeder/Judges to answer several questions and share their thoughts and insight on judging the breed:

David Flanagan, Decorum (NY) exhibiting/breeding for 50+ years, judging since 1998.

Bonnie Threlfall, Edgewood, Reg. (NC) exhibiting 50+ and breeding 40+ years, judging since 2000.

Virginia Lyne, Ranzfel, Reg. (Canada) exhibiting/breeding for 53 years, judging since 1969.

Andrew Jones, Shenmore (UK), exhibiting/breeding since 1985, judging since 1991.

Doug McFarlane, Merimac (WA) exhibiting/breeding since the early 1970s, judging since 1998.



Bad vs. good dog silhouettes.

Please explain what you are looking for in your first impression of a class of English Cockers as a whole?

D.F. The idea of examining and judging a dog, comparing it to the ideal and placing it accordingly with the other dogs in the class can seem daunting when you first judge, and the tick-tock of the “two-minute-per-dog” clock can be overwhelming. The more experience one has, the more of a routine you develop.

When a class lines up in the ring, I look for animals that have proper balance with regard to size and proportion. I then move from the front of the line to the back of the line getting my first impression of head and expression. Next, I move from the back of the line forward looking down over the animals to see the shape of the dog with regards to neck set, roundness of rib, length of loin and roundness of rear. Finally, I send the class around to observe ease and fluidity of movement, balance and topline.

B.T. From across the ring I am looking for compact, one piece dogs with balanced angulation at both ends. I am already mentally eliminating the long dogs that appear shelly and narrow, with

dramatic toplines and rears extending way out behind them. I want to see the entire dog as a package without my eye being drawn to one or more exaggerated features. The correctly-made dogs will appear rounded all over, with no sharp angles or lines.

V.L. My first impression is always a check for balance and overall proportions. I am looking for an alert, moderate dog with nothing exaggerated and showing a confident, merry temperament. Generally my first impression comes when the dogs are doing their initial move around the ring.

A.J. First impressions are the chance for the dogs to grab my attention. As I walk down the line I’ll be drawn to those that have shortness, balance and most importantly, angulation. As I send them once round the ring those with character and drive on the move will demand attention. In a large class after first impressions I should have a handful in my mind who will be the contenders and maybe even one that already stands out as the likely winner.

D.M. When I am first looking at a whole class I look at each dog to determine proper breed type and assess their overall balance and conformation. I ask myself, ‘Does the head match the rest of the dog; does the neck flow smoothly into the shoulders; is

the backline level; do the angles front and rear match; is the dog square; and are there any extremes or exaggerated parts, like a long back leg or long loin?’ These all make up the characteristics that help me form that first impression.

What are absolute necessities for correct breed type?

D.F. The absolute necessities with regard to breed type are balance and proportion, proper bone and feet, roundness of rib and rear, a short, hard back and a properly balanced head with a sweet, melting expression, and a tail with never stops wagging, all on a sound animal.

B.T. There are five necessities to correct cocker body type, which enable the dog to do the job for which he was bred, that being pushing through thick, very dense cover most often higher than the dog. They are of equal importance, so in no particular order: 1) A protective forechest for pushing into cover. The forechest will only be present if the dog has the correct forehand assembly, the shoulder being well laid back with equal length and return of upper arm, placing the front legs well under the dog. 2) Thick bone. The amount of bone should almost seem too much for height of the dog, but is necessary to support the correctly made body. I have yet to see an

English Cocker with what I would consider too much bone. 3) A very well-sprung ribcage, which is deep and carried well back towards the dog's rear. 4) a SHORT, broad loin. This is a compact, cobby breed. 5) A "hammy" rear, with thick muscling on both upper and lower thighs. The thick muscle only accompanies a MODERATELY angulated rear. A line dropped from the point of the buttock should land immediately in front of the rear toes.

V.L. My breed essentials are a compact dog, with a good spring of rib, moderate bone, width in hindquarter and a merry temperament. A pleasing head piece that has the look of a Cocker and never that of a Setter is a determinant of true breed type.

A.J. Put simply, the English Cocker should be a lot of dog in a small package—meaning substance, compactness, width of front, strong ribs and a wide well-rounded back end, all of this with that essential merry character and driving movement displaying the breed's love of life.

D.M. Well let's start at the front of the dog. Expression: I put a lot of emphasis on expression. I don't get hung up on head planes as long as they are not exaggerated and don't affect the expression, but the dog must have that melting expression the standard calls for so eye placement, eye shape, eye color and proper chiseling under the eye are all important to me along with muzzle length balanced with the skull. Body: Since the Cocker is built to plough through thick brush, that dictates the body structure which must have well-sprung ribs, deep chest, ribs well back with a short loin, wide hip bones to support a strong muscle mass on the rear with well-developed first and second thigh. Tail set should be off a slightly rounded croup. When viewed from above, the roundness of body must be evident. The angles front and rear should be balanced and with good bone and substance, without being coarse or cloddy.

Attitude: The standard starts right off with "merry". That tail action must display that characteristic and be in constant motion. Proper carriage is important. A gay tail is not desirable and you will see it in the ring. Balance: While in motion all the parts have to come together for a

smooth effortless gait with a firm slightly sloping topline.

Describe what you hope to find when examining a dog—on the table as well as moving.

D.F. The table examination lets your hands confirm or deny what your eyes have told you. This is when you feel for proper bone, fore-chest, flat shoulders, round ribs, short loin, tail set, proper stop and chiseling, bite, etc. This is also when you feel for muscling, proper condition, coat quality and proper trim. Let's not forget that English Cocker exhibitors are masters of illusion, it's your job to figure out what is real and what is not.

On the move I look particularly at the side gait as proof of proper construction and balance. This to me is the true test of what your hands have felt on the table. I am not known as a down and back freak—I use it as a tool, and it is very useful for optical illusion tan points can give. Watch the pads of the feet! A tip for judging this breed, if you feel you need to reexamine a dog, be sure to put it back on the table and to not attempt to go over it on the ground.

B.T. When examining an English Cocker, do not "blow by" the head once the bite is checked. The body gets the dog to the bird, but the head has to do its job, too. Looking at the bite you will notice that the teeth can be considered rather large for the size of the dog. Although developed to flush and retrieve woodcock, he is also perfectly capable of working pheasant, if necessary. With that in mind, I look for a strong, full muzzle equally balanced in length to the backskull. The sides of the backskull should not be rounded (coarse). Still looking at the head straight on, the top skull should have a noticeable arch to the sides with only a slight flattening at the very top. The arch is necessary to anchor the jaw muscles. A thoroughly flat top skull is incorrect. Correctly placed eyes of correct shape and color, together with the requisite chiseling under the eye, and the grooved stop, and ear set, complete the exam from the front. I then evaluate the head from the side. Holding the muzzle parallel to the ground, I check to see where the eyes are looking. For function they must look forward over the



muzzle and not into the sky. The neck is just long enough to comfortably reach down to pick up a bird and to carry the bird without interfering with front movement, but not too long as to be out of balance with the rest of the dog. A giraffe neck would not support a heavy bird for any distance. I then examine the rest of the dog hopefully finding the five requisites mentioned in the above question. Feet should be an extension of the bone, and be deep, round, and cat-like. As part of the exam, this breed has to be looked at over the top. The ribs are the widest part of the dog, followed closely by the rear. This is a broad, round dog. He is not narrow and angular—that is "Setter" type and should never be rewarded.

When moving, a balanced English Cocker keeps the same outline as standing. He should show equal reach and drive in moderation. He has a SLIGHTLY sloping topline, and not the extreme topline of the

American Cocker. Because of his roundness and considerable width, this breed cannot single track.

V.L. On the table I am looking for soft roundness—in the rib, the skull, the firm width of thigh and strong hindquarter. This is never a breed of sharp angles. I want to find forechest and depth of body at least to the elbow. I want to feel quality of bone that is proportionate to size. I expect to see a soft expression from a dark, slightly oval eye that looks straight at me. The head will have a moderate stop and good width over the muzzle with a soft curve of lip without excess flews. I also assess coat quality—never excessive and of correct protective texture, not barbered severely. There is meant to be a jacket with protective hair and some undercoat. I want to find a thick, tight foot for this sporting Spaniel.

On the move, I expect to see a firm, hard topline, reach in front matched by a rear that steps under and pushes back to provide balanced reach and drive. I look for correct carriage of tail that is carried off the end of the croup without being pegged up like a Terrier. Hocks are short. I want my dog to hold the same shape on the ground moving that I saw on the table during the examination. I place a considerable emphasis on the side movement as I feel it is at this point that balance and correct proportions are confirmed.

A.J. On the table is the chance to go ‘hands-on’ and assess real quality. I hope to find a melting eye and expression (looking into the eyes of a top rate Cocker should be like looking into heaven—kind, warm eyes looking straight back at you, saying, ‘Love me’); with that I want strong bone, straight legs, most important good width of front; layback of shoulder and deep well sprung ribs, short loin, strong and wide back end, well-angulated and finally a good, well-presented coat. On the move, confidence, merry character, sound and driving movement, happy ever wagging tail. In short, “all Cocker”.

D.M. On the table I’m looking at the finer points: eye shape, eye color, bone, feet, coat condition, depth of undercoat, muscle mass and condition, ribs well sprung and back, with a short loin, and correct set on of



the tail. I’m hoping to confirm the impression I formed as the dog moved in the class. When the dog is moving again I want to see how all the parts fit together. I watch the down and back for soundness, again to confirm what I feel on the detail table examination. When I send the dog around I want to see nice balanced extension front and rear. The gait should indicate power and look effortless, no pounding or choppy front movement. I hope to see the dog floating across the ground with head slightly forward, exhibiting the proper topline and outline, and all at a moderate speed.

What do you find the most challenging about the breed when you judge?

D.F. We have some really beautiful dogs in our breed, but I wish there were more. I suppose the biggest challenge is trying to stay focused when faced with a mediocre entry.

B.T. I really find nothing challenging about judging the breed. If you understand the function of the breed and learn what constitutes correct “Cocker” type vs. incorrect “Setter” type, you will reward the right dogs.

V.L. Without focusing too much on negatives I think that there are some common faults I see in the English Cocker in the ring today. Lack of a Cockery shape—too often we see the long necked, longer bodied, narrow, fine-boned dog with an over-angulated rear that races at great speed. This is not a Cocker. Too many of our dogs do not have the bone and rib-spring the standard calls for.

Dogs that are not in hard muscle and athletic form are challenging to judge. Dogs that are emulating the drag of the breed, the Field Spaniel with a longer body and different proportions are challenging to judge. Dogs with incorrect toplines,

high rears, dips and rises and pegged tails are challenging to judge. Narrow fronts and the resulting bad front movement are challenging to judge.

Keep coming back to look for the moderate, balanced, firm topline and happy temperament Spaniel that could do the job it was bred to do. Understand the differences between the Cocker, the English Springer and the English Cocker. You will have a much better appreciation of the three breeds if you are clear on their differences as well as their common heritage.

A.J. For many these days, seeing past the hairdressing is the biggest challenge. On both sides of the Atlantic showing this proud historic gundog breed is turning into a grooming contest, so to be a good judge you will need to use your head and your hands to see past the sometimes stunning coiffure. Trust your hands and your eye for balance and you’ll find the good ones!

D.M. I am not sure the challenges are that much different from most breeds, at least the Sporting breeds. There is a lot of variation of type. Sorting through a class of dogs where none look similar can be quite a challenge. I also find with our breed that they can look wonderful while stacked, and you see a dog that fits your mind’s eye for what you like and then they move. Toplines go off, the tail is down and the attitude may be less than “merry”. This breed is very intelligent and can decide not to show off their merits on any given day. When that happens, my advice is to choose the best “Cocker” not necessarily the fanciest mover. When you get both, that’s a good day!

And finally, from Anne Rogers Clark, second generation ECS breeder and ECSCA Past President...

A.C. In any breed, the whole dog is hung on its front end. How the neck is set, how its topline is, all go to the front.

Must have forechest out in front. We’re getting a lot of English Cockers whose fronts drop straight down, a so-called Terrier front where they’re laid back in shoulder, are short in forearm and their fronts are way out in front of them with no forechest—it’s totally incorrect for a Cocker. Got to have some forechest! ■