

Icons of the Sport: Herman Mellenthin

Learn about the contributions of dog breeder and judge Herman Mellenthin.

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Herman Mellenthin

Herman Mellenthin is the acknowledged father of the modern American Cocker. His understanding of form and function inspired his canine masterpiece, the two-time Westminster Best in Show winner, Ch. My Own Brucie.

Born in 1895, Herman grew up on a Wisconsin farm and recalled the spaniels of his youth as versatile gundogs. By 1912, he had a kennel of Collies, Airedales and Cockers in Milwaukee but always attributed his success to his background in horses. After marrying and moving East in 1915, he worked for horse trainers Thomas McCarr and Tommy Murphy.

He never lost interest in Cockers, and watched the breed's downslide with dismay. Its substance, merry spirit and hunting drive were disappearing due to what AKC called "a misguided notion that function followed form." To Herman, identical traits made for a good show dog and a good gundog. He determined to create the Cocker that he visualized. This came from an unlikely source, an unknown dog called Robinhurst Foreglow. High stationed and short backed, his extreme type didn't impress the Cocker fancy. However, his pedigree was solid and two breeders realized his potential. William Payne acquired him in 1920, bred to his Westminster winner, Ch. Midkiff Seductive, and produced two-time ASC winner Ch. Midkiff Miracle Man.

In 1921, Herman used him to produce Red Brucie, an exaggeration of everything that was controversial about his sire. Red Brucie consistently produced cobbiness, long necks, lean, sloping shoulders, powerful drive and balance. In other words, he had everything the breed desperately needed. He was widely used, siring 38 champions, both bench and field winners. He provided the foundation for countless bloodlines and revolutionized Cocker type.

To many, Herman's greatest talent was discovering overlooked breeding combinations. Key to this was his wide choice of breeding stock. In the 1930s, as large kennels were supplanted by small, hobby breeders, he perfected the now common practice of placing dogs on breeding terms.

He registered his kennel prefix in 1926, but continued putting his dogs in other names, which shows that personal records were never his goal. However, he always regained breeding rights and his breeding program produced several great Cockers of the era like Ch. Torohill Trader and Ch. Lucknow Crème de la Crème. Equally focused on the Cocker's field ability, Herman helped to establish Cocker field trials, judged them and bred the first dual champion, a parti-color Red Brucie grandson Ch. FTCH. My Own High Time.

Red Brucie was almost 14 when Herman mated him to the 9-month old heavily linebred My Own Lady Huntington in 1935. This produced the dog worthy of the name he had been saving, My Own Brucie.

Herman recognized his quality immediately. For the rest of his life, Brucie was his personal companion.

During his four-year campaign Brucie was unbeaten in breed. In 1938 he went Best from the classes at M&E, and became AKC's American Bred Sporting Dog of the Year. The next year, he again went Best at M&E, also ASC, and became Herman's fourth Cocker to win Best American Bred at Westminster.

By 1940, Herman and Brucie were national celebrities and the Cocker was America's top breed. That year, Brucie pulled off one of Westminster's legendary upsets, defeating Nornay Saddler to go Best. He came back to defend his title the following year, along with his pups who went WD, RWD, WB and RWB.

It's no surprise that Herman was asked to judge Westminster in 1942. Ironically, his choice was Ch. Wolvery Pattern of Edgerstoune, the only foreign-bred dog in that year's lineup. He died suddenly two weeks later at age 53. The administrators of his estate reportedly sold Brucie to one of his co-breeders, Mrs. Peter Garvan, for \$10,000. Unfortunately, Brucie didn't thrive and joined his beloved master a year later.