

Spaniel Field Trials: History

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American sportsmen used Spaniels for hunting game birds and waterfowl long before there were Spaniel field trials. The Cocker Spaniel, recognized by The Kennel Club of England in 1892, had no trouble gaining stature in the United States as a hunting dog. The breed even had a sponsoring club early in the game—the American Spaniel Club, a strong organization founded in 1881, which eventually took all the hunting Spaniels—the Clumber, the Sussex, the Irish Water Spaniel, the Field, and the Springer Spaniel—under its wing.

The first stakes for Cocker Spaniels were held at Verbank, New York, in 1924 by the Hunting Cocker Spaniel Field Trial Club of America, a club that was largely the creation of Mrs. Ella B. Moffit, a well-known sportswoman from Poughkeepsie, New York.

The name Hunting Cocker Club was changed to Cocker Spaniel Field Trial Club of America and the catalogue of its trial on October 28-29, 1931, shows that the judges were David Wagstaff and Captain Paul A. Curtis. Other luminaries of the Spaniel world who officiated as guns or stewards included Ralph C. Craig, Henry Ferguson, Elias Vail, Dr. Samuel Milbank, and H. E. Mellenthin, breeder of Dual Ch. “My Own High Time” and of the famous “My Own Brucie.”

The English Springer Spaniel breed, which had become eligible for AKC registry in 1910, started to gain in popularity as an effective hunting dog in the early 1920s, ever since Freeman Lloyd, a respected gundog journalist of his day, wrote glowing of this “rare” new breed’s ability as a hunter and a retriever.

There was never any conflict between the Cocker people and the Springer people. From the beginning, trials held by the Cocker clubs included stakes for Springers. Likewise, Springer clubs throughout the country held Cocker stakes, and American and English Cockers competed in the same stakes without breed distinction.

Field trials were the perfect showcase for the Springer. The first field trial for Spaniels in the United States took place in late 1924 at Fisher Island, New York.

There was always a “bench show,” or conformation judging, held in conjunction with the early trials at Fishers, and it was judged by a show judge. This was dropped in later years, but there still exists the Horsford Dual Challenge Cup, presented in 1926 by William Humphrey of Shrewsbury, England, for the “Best Looking, Best Working Dog” in

the trial. The trial judges now select the winner. Other impressive trophies of long standing are the British Challenge Cup and the International Gun Dog League of England Challenge Cup.

With English Springer Spaniels competing in Spaniel trials, it was only natural that 1926 should see the founding of that breed's parent club, the English Springer Spaniel Field Trial Association-the only AKC breed parent club to carry a field-trial connotation in its name.

The Depression years and World War II caused an alarming decline in Spaniel trials between 1934 and 1945; but it was a rekindled interest in field trials for Cocker Spaniels that led the way to inspired activity in Spaniel trials. For nine years there was a National Championship for Cocker Spaniels, the last one being held in 1962 at Amwell, New Jersey.

For over thirty years the game little Cocker Spaniel had become the darling of the dog-show world, where in misguided innocence, the natural hunting instincts of most Sporting Breed dogs are bred-out on the notion that function follows form. With no pool of Cockers having functioning genes available in America for breeding, the Cocker became a modern day, field-trial dinosaur-another man-made, huntless sporting dog.

Fortunately a few Cocker field trial enthusiasts remained. Thanks to a dedicated group of English Cocker breeders who worked on expanding their gene pool with imported dogs. The English Cocker Spaniel Club hosted a National Championship field trial in 1998, over thirty years since the 1962 national championship. The trial was open to American Cocker and English Cocker Spaniels and was held in Hillsdale, Michigan.

FC Flathome Accord, a male English Cocker was awarded the title of 1998 National Cocker Field Trial Champion.

The English Springer Spaniel did not suffer the same fate as the Cocker, because the basic pool of functioning genes for the breed remained intact in England. Nevertheless, once again, breeding for form in the American show ring produced an entirely different dog from the specimens found on the modern English Springer Spaniel field-trial circuit.

The following additional milestone dates have been important in the development of field trials for Spaniels in America:

1947: First National Championship Stake for English Springer Spaniels was held by the English Springer Field Trial Association at Crab Orchard Lake, Herrin, Illinois, with 32 starters. "Russett of Middlefield," bitch, O/H Dr. C. G. Sabin, Portland, Oregon, was the first National Champion.

1953: First National Championship for Cocker Spaniels was held by the American Spaniel Club, Herrin, Illinois. "Camino's Cheetah," O/ H. C. McGrew, Fortuna, California, was the first National Champion.

1960: Amateur Field Championships first available for Spaniels.

1963: First National Amateur Championship Stake for English Springer Spaniels was held by the English Springer Spaniel Field Trial Association at Hazard Farms, Wilmington, Ohio, with 52 starters. "Pam's Aphrodite of Camden," bitch, O/ George Webster, London, Ontario, Canada, was the first National Amateur Champion.