



Though English springer spaniels are best known as a flushing breed used to hunt upland gamebirds in general and pheasants in particular, this versatile gun dog has also always been capable of effectively retrieving waterfowl on land and in water.

Today's English Springer Spaniel

Stocked Full Of Desire, This Versatile Breed Is Born To Hunt

BY JERRY THOMS

Bubba was the first English springer spaniel I vividly recall hunting over more than 35 years ago on the South Dakota prairie. At the time, the pheasant population was in a short-term slump because of statewide drought conditions that made finding roosters difficult.

I was teaching English classes at South Dakota State University and started a conversation one day with Bubba's owner, who was a student from Minnesota in one of my Junior Composition classes.

"Yes," I confessed when the young man asked if I liked to hunt pheasants. And "yes," I said again when he offered to meet me that afternoon in a 280-acre tract of public owned cattails and prairie grass 20 miles west of town.

"Stand back," my new hunting partner warned as he got ready to release Bubba, his two-year-old male springer, from the back seat of his car where the dog had been bouncing every second of the ride from town to this hunting spot.

It was good advice because Bubba came barreling out of the back seat like he had been shot from a cannon. He ripped across the road ditch, leaped over a barbed wire fence, and disappeared into the sea of big bluestem and Indian grass.

"We had better get going if we want to shoot some roosters," his owner suggested as we climbed through the fence and took off after Bubba at a fast walk, then a quick trot, and soon a full run as pheasants suddenly started to spring into the air ahead of us 100 or more yards away.

A couple of long and hard hours later we headed back to the vehicle with Bubba still eager to run, but now tethered to a rope so we could load him up and head for home. The hunt, which had been fast and furious, was productive when we could keep up with Bubba. He found and flushed more than two dozen pheasants, only two of which were roosters that flew up close enough for on-the-edge-of-range shots.

On later hunting trips, in addition to finding live pheasants, Bubba also tracked wounded ringnecks and found shot-dead roosters that he usually retrieved in our direction before dropping them to head off after more fresh pheasants.

One early November afternoon Bubba ran toward a small slough at the far end of a big hay field and flushed a pair of mallards from a patch of open water. When the drake fell at the report of a 12-gauge, Bubba raced into the water, swam across the pond, and disappeared into a thick clump of tall cattails. He soon emerged and swam back with the duck clamped in his jaws.

"Once so far and just now," was Bubba's owner's answer to my question: "How often has your springer retrieved waterfowl out of deep water and heavy cover?" During the rest of the hunting season, Bubba fetched more ducks and even a couple of Canada geese that we jump shot off ponds and small lakes. In several instances, he even broke thin ice to get to the birds.

Bubba created the impression of being a naturally versatile bird-getting machine that would find and flush and retrieve upland gamebirds and fetch up any waterfowl he could see fall from the sky. Bought with no paper pedigree and no real background information on his breeding, he was a gun dog with lots of desire, a good nose, and a natural tendency to retrieve. His cooperation, willingness to hunt to the gun, and trainability were hard to evaluate because no one had ever developed these potential traits.

Though I never got to see if Bubba further progressed into a more civilized gun dog, in the following three decades, I have hunted over many English springer spaniels that still show Bubba's enthusiasm, natural hunting abilities, and wide ranging versatility. One of those more recent hunts was with Jen Tuttle, a 26-year-old springer owner, breeder, guide and hunter from Mitchell, South Dakota.

While we were getting ready to go hunting for pheasants and ducks, I told Tuttle my story about hunting with Bubba 35 years ago. She seemed interested, but not worried. "My line of springers probably has Bubba's intensity for finding birds, but my dogs probably are much better trained and under more control than what you saw with Bubba," Tuttle predicted. And she was right.

Kirby, Tuttle's four-year-old male, handled the way springers are described in training books or demonstrated on television shows. He methodically but quickly quartered across a 200-acre field of knee-high pasture grass, stopped and turned on voice and

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whistle commands, charged hard for spectacular pheasant flushes, and stayed steady to wing, shot, and fall when necessary.

He made one snappy retrieve to hand of a dead rooster, then tracked one broken-wing bird for 300 yards, which he fetched up and brought in without any hesitation. Likewise, on ducks, Kirby hit the water like a Labrador, racing after a wounded greenwing teal that fell in wet slough grass and swimming across a farm pond to pick up a drake wood duck. "All in a day's work," Tuttle said.

Obviously, there are differences between the Bubba-type springer of three decades ago and many of the springers found today. "One big difference I see with today's springer spaniels is that there is more versatility in methods for training this breed," notes Paul McGagh, who is the full-time owner and operator of Glencoe Farm and Kennels south of Bismarck, North Dakota.

McGagh trains up to two dozen springers each year. "Where 35 or so years ago, there were only a few books on training these dogs and just a couple of training programs used for springers, today there are dozens of good instructional manuals and plenty of magazine articles on the subject of training any gun dogs in general and springers in particular," he says.

Likewise, McGagh feels there are more amateur and professional trainers who have developed more versatility in the methods for teaching springers more about hunting and retrieving all kinds of gamebirds in many types of habitat and all kinds of conditions. "Part of this comes from the upsurge of participation in spaniel field trials and AKC hunt tests," he says. "In addition, there is a great increase in hunters who run springers in Hunting Retriever Club events and hunting contests such as those sponsored by the National Association of Tournament Hunters or the Bird Dog Challenge Association."

SELECTING AN ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL

"A common prejudice is that springers used in field trials are firecrackers, which suggests that these competition dogs will run

fast with a lot of flash, finding hand-planted birds in tournament fields, but they will tend to burn out quickly on a real-life hunt," says Tom Ness. As a spaniel breeder, trainer, field trailer, and hunter, Ness has 30 years of experience with this breed at his Oahe Kennels in Menoken, North Dakota.

"I'll admit that some breeders have purposely developed a line of springers with light builds, long legs, and lots of speed—all features designed to make their dogs into judge-impressing field trial performers," Ness says. "With all this emphasis on a fast pace, however, these dogs often end up lacking in stamina and wild bird hunting sense.

"In the trial field, they may sometimes go like crazy for 10 minutes looking for hand-placed birds in a small area, then they're pooped out for the day and go rest in the dog crate. Though these lines of springers may excel in field trials, they don't necessarily do well as gun dogs on real life hunts on upland game birds or waterfowl."

Not all field trial dogs are like this, however. "There are lines of hunting springers with the standard more stocky springer body conformation and the springer desire to methodically hunt at a slower pace," Ness continues. "These hunting dogs can be used on wild pheasants, prairie grouse, or woods grouse one day, then put into a field trial the next day with good results. So, because not all so-called field trial dogs are the same, anyone looking at a pup or adult dog with a field trial background should be aware of this difference."

Some breeders have gone back to Great Britain and Europe to find the original English springer brood stock as a way to counter-

act the high-strung, high speed American-bred field trial springer. These dogs, the breeders say, are still developed with mild, easy-going temperaments, a high degree of natural ability in hunting and retrieving all kinds of game birds, and a willingness to accept training with a minimum of pressure. These original lines of springers, according to those who have and breed them, are best suited for the average upland gamebird and waterfowl hunter looking for a gun dog with an innate docile disposition, lots of natural hunting instincts, and all the genetic qualities for which this breed was first developed.

Other breeders have blended several lines of dogs to produce a versatile product that will do well in field trials, hunt tests, or



Kirby, a four-year-old English springer spaniel owned by Jen Tuttle of Mitchell, South Dakota, has retrieved every species of waterfowl in the Central Flyway.

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on hunting trips. "Because our springers are mainly tested in the field in actual real-life hunting for upland game birds and waterfowl, we include any lines of springers that will improve bird finding and retrieving abilities," says Morgan Haglin from Pine Shadows Kennel in Brainerd, Minnesota. "This includes springers from field trial backgrounds if we feel a need to increase speed and intensity and springers imported from overseas if we want to bring in calmer temperaments and greater cooperation."

"What we see any springer do in the field or on the water is what matters the most in putting together our long-term breeding program," Haglin states. "Pedigrees on paper matter, but observed performance counts the most when we plan out our litters and develop our line of gun dogs. To improve performance by any means possible means we have to be versatile in our breeding program."

TRAINING A SPRINGER

Though most lines of English springer spaniels bred for hunting come with all the right instincts for finding upland gamebirds and retrieving waterfowl, an early and disciplined training program is essential to producing a functional final product.

"We have lots of springers brought here for training as hunting dogs," says Tom Dokken from Oak Ridge Kennel in Northfield, Minnesota. "One thing I've learned about this breed in general is that they tend to be headstrong and stubborn if their owners don't establish themselves as the dominant alpha figure in the relationship."

"Always remember, if you give a springer an inch one time, they will take a mile every time thereafter," Dokken warns. "But once your dominance is established and your training program becomes clear and consistent, most springers will turn into dependable gun dogs with a degree of success often greater than many other breeds."

"Because springers tend to be early bloomers and fast learners, most indi-

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viduals should be started in a formal training program at an early age," Dokken adds. "At seven weeks, a springer pup can be started on basic obedience with commands such as 'come,' 'hup' or 'sit,' 'heel,' 'no,' and 'kennel.' Don't expect immediate perfection at this age, but do expect steady progress. At the same time, introduce pups to simple retrieving exercises and get them familiar with live birds as part of this early training approach," Dokken suggests.

"In order to create springers that will hunt wild gamebirds,

hunt," Chaney believes.

"Our training program is designed to produce versatile springers, that is, dogs that will hunt all upland birds and any waterfowl," says Jim Keller, owner-operator of Wildwind Kennels in Knox, Maine. "Our training methods are pretty much the same for hunting dogs and performance dogs. In other words, the pheasant, quail, and ruffed grouse dogs go through the same basic training exercises as our field trial dogs.

"The main objective, in both cases, is to develop hard-charging springers that stay close to the gun. And, yes, most all our



put them on pen-raised birds as soon as possible," advises Hal Chaney from Linden Kennels in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. "Feral pigeons, bobwhite quail, chukars and pheasants can be hand-placed or free-flown into a field where springers can find them for work on search, flush, steadiness, and retrieve.

"Live pen-raised ducks released in water are good for developing a search for wounded waterfowl and as a realistic way to develop a dependable retrieve. But the best training for springers comes from regular exposure to wild birds on a real

dogs will do double duty performance as field trials and wild bird hunters because of our training philosophy. Every season all our field trial winners go with us to hunt pheasants for three weeks in Montana," Keller adds as further proof of his dogs' versatility.

E-COLLARS FOR SPRINGERS?

Some English springer spaniel trainers claim that e-collars are not necessary on these dogs because this breed is genetical-



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In addition to hunting both upland gamebirds and waterfowl, English springer spaniels are almost affectionate to a fault and make good house dogs and personal companions.

ly programmed to hunt close to the gun and to be cooperative, responding best to conventional hands-on rather than remote training methods. Other trainers argue that springers, as with any other gun dog breed, can learn lessons in basic obedience and in field or water work with e-collars as a supplement to standard training techniques.

"Many springer trainers don't use e-collars not because they don't need to, but because they don't know how to," is the opinion of Tony Roettger, a springer spaniel breeder and trainer from Roettger's Ridge Kennel in North Branch, Minnesota. "I'll admit that many springers can be trained without an e-collar. But I'll also say that these dogs can be trained quicker and better by those who know how to use an e-collar in their training program."

THE ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL FIELD TRIAL ASSOCIATION WEBSITE

The ESSFTA.com website may have "Field Trial" in its title, but the information there gives a broad view of the breeding and training of springers along with a list of competitive events such as field trials, hunt tests, obedience trials and related activities for springer spaniel owners across the country.

See the Spaniel Manual part of the website in particular for information on picking a puppy or trained adult dog as well as names, addresses, and phone numbers for regional English springer spaniel clubs. Also included is a list of books on the his-



Springer spaniels generally are genetically programmed and easily trained to track and retrieve wounded upland gamebirds in all kinds of habitat and weather conditions.

tory and training of English springer spaniels by several well-known authors as well as magazines relevant to springer owners.

CONCLUSION

"Would you want to see Bubba back here today?" one springer spaniel owner asked after hearing the story of hunting with that half-wild, but certainly productive gun dog some 35 years ago. "Yes" was my answer—but with some qualifications. One would be to know something about Bubba's pedigree to determine how to shape his inborn talents with modern training methods.

"Bubba could be a better gun dog today because we now know more about how to shape springers into hunters, no matter what their genetic history," says Paul McGagh. "And though this might be so about almost any breed of gun dog, it is particularly true about English springer spaniels." *

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