

Breeder's Forum
A transcription of an informal breeder's forum
by Anne Rogers Clark

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"The video tape was made in the show building. Dogs barking all around. Much of the conversation was hard to understand but I have transcribed it as well as possible considering the circumstances." - Kay Sutter

One of the things that people who aspire to breed the breed, and judge the breed and to understand the breed should understand is where this breed came from.

Forty years ago it was a long-backed breed, a saggy topline breed, a breed with front problems as far as straightness was concerned, and they were generally cow-hocked. They grew very little coat. They had beautiful heads. They were wonderful, wonderful dogs to have around. To have in the house and to have in the field. They were NEVER great show dogs. If you got enough show out of them so that they finished and finished handily you did very well. But when you started thinking about specialing (which you didn't do too much in those days because you had to beat the American Cockers, and you didn't do too much of that back then), you got into that big group ring and they looked around and said, "Oh, this is much too big for me to run around in. Why don't you run up and down and I'll stay here and wait for you until you come back?"

Those traits in that gene pool are always there and that is something which you have to remember when you are breeding the breed, and when you are judging the breed and when you are owning the breed.

The drag of the breed is to long and low. The drag of the breed is to crooked front legs and not very sound hindquarters. Their heads have always been good. As we've come along and become popular, we've done great things as far as getting dogs shorter and higher, and getting harder toplines. We've changed the breed somewhat in order to have them fly around our big group rings with the Springer and to keep the American Cockers from running over them.

We've changed them in some ways to make them almost small setters, which is something we have to fight against - they are still Cockers. We've also changed heads in the breed as we've come over the years. And now, we do have to look at heads and say does that have too high an earset, the pop eyes, and so forth? Or does it have too long (a Setter) head?

Looking for the correct head has become one of the things that you have to do when you are judging English Cockers. (This bitch has a slight roman finish to her nose, you could do a little grooming.)

Bring in the dogs (for hands on and conversation about the breed):

This black and white bitch is a very handsome, modern, cockery type of English Cocker. The standard calls for a bitch to be 15-16 inches tall. She's a short-backed bitch and has a nice hard topline. Being black and white, she's a little sparse in coat - for people who are used to seeing the American Cocker with their very, very full coats. Given a preference I would rather see one with this type of coat than an overdone one with a lot of flyaway coat that does very little for them.

This bitch has a very handsome head - you know, once a handler always a handler, you notice that when I presented the head I tucked the throat up which cleans it up and gives you more definition of foreface. Even so, she doesn't have a great deal of throat considering the amount of foreface she has. When you see this much foreface, you're going to have just about that much throat, which is not too much throat on an English Cocker. The minute they get dried up in the throat, they get dried up in foreface.

The planes on an English Cocker head have never been specified in either the old standard or the new one because there's a bit of a hassle over them. Anybody who has been in the breed for years knows that you should have as close to level planes as possible and the muzzle and backskull should be the same length. A slight but definite stop. An eye that is oval and set to look straight at you - not wrapped around the sides of the head - but not a poppy, big American Cocker eye. The ear set is low.

The mouth is a perfectly normal mouth with a full compliment of teeth and fits that way. The old standard said "mouth level" and nobody ever thought about it because you know you don't want a level mouth on a sporting dog. But those people who had a questionable mouth said "that's all right. It's an even bite and the standard says so." The new standard has clarified that.

Eye should be dark and the third eyelid may be pigmented or unpigmented. This bitch has unpigmented third eyelids but because her eye is not droopy and the eye fits the socket beautifully, you don't get any of the bloodhoundy look. If she had the slightly droopy eye and it has pigmented third eyelids, it doesn't show up as bad and you can get away with it. Here's a bitch with unpigmented eyelids, which is perfectly alright and, because the eye is beautifully set, you're not even aware of it. It

tends to concern you when you're looking at a glorious EC head and you say "now there's something a little bit wrong here." If she's showing a little bit of haw or if the eye is loose enough to have a little pocket where seeds, etc. can lie, that is a fault.

The second bitch, an orange and white, if you look head on, she has a very attractive head but when you look at it from the side you find the problem that you get into in the head that tips off in the backskull and has a high frontal bone. The new standard still doesn't say anything about planes but it says that they should not have a high frontal bone which then disturbs the look of the head. Then, as this tips off this way, the muzzle tips down this way and this is an incorrect head for the breed.

Once you get into this kind of head, you have to start to wonder - is this the same length as this (indicating back-skull to muzzle)? Is this foreface a little bit bigger? It just throws your eye off completely. However, look at the bitch head on and that's a very melting gorgeous expression.

This third one is a young bitch. (Owner indicates she is 14 months). In the adolescent uglies. She's not always going to look like this. She's going up in the air now - she's grown up - now she's got to grow down (indicating chest) and she's going to have to put on body and substance.

Look at her head - a head like this at this age could make up just a little bit more in its backskull so that it doesn't have that slight drop. This head - as was the 2nd bitch's head - is just starting to border a little bit on the setterly look rather than the cockery look. Looking into the face, she's a little small in the eye - she needs a little bit more open eye.

The first thing you look at when you go down a class is balance and proportion. It's the same for any breed. You don't want a long low English Cocker. You don't want a high-legged English Cocker with no angles at either end. You want a slightly rectangular dog who has just a slightly sloped topline - not a ski-slope. Decent angle in shoulder. Must have forechest out in front. We're getting a lot of English Cockers who's 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!

They've got to have a nice spring of rib without being barrel chested. And the spring is a heart-shaped rib - flat on top, spring there and then going into a fairly deep keel. Hard top-line - nice amount of angulation behind. Just a nice balance and proportion all at one time.

Back to the second bitch. Compare her balance and proportion to the black and white. This orange and white is much longer cast, she doesn't balance nicely - her length of leg to her length of back. Look down on her length of loin. It goes from here to there which is too much. Reading directly from the standard: "Height at withers slightly greater than from withers to tail set". NOT forechest to end of body, which gets you short and high and Poodle / Afghan / Doberman proportion. Look at where the front legs come down. She's decently laid back but her front's way out in front of her. Look at the standard which says that the elbow should be under the highest point of the wither, which gives you the correct front - which gives you the nice forechest.

Back to the young one. We've touched on her before. It's a rather pretty balance and proportion - it's just at the wrong age to look at. She has length of leg. A little shy in forechest. She's going to look a lot different with six months - at 20 months - of growth and condition on her. She's always going to be a different type from the b/w and the b/w bitch is a preferable type. Even though you can condition the hell out of something like this and you teach it to show and do all those things, she is still too stringy and she's not cockery enough.

One of the big winners in the late 40's and early 50's called Ch. Enniskillen's Gypo. He was by a dog called Ch. Shikar Wyn's Sentinel who went second in the group at the Garden in those days when an English Cocker had never gone second in the group at the Garden. Sentinel was a very short-backed dog, very cockery kind of dog, a great showman. He was far ahead of his time.

He was shown in the days when nobody bothered to count testicles - he had one! And he's behind all of our breeding: as a matter of fact, three foundation sires in this country have three testicles between them!! We all go back to them and that's why we all have testicle problems generation after generation.

Anyway, Sentinel grew hair til hell wouldn't have it. I mean he had masses of it. He was a light blue roan and he was very flashy and very showy. Sentinel was bred to a bitch of Olga Hone Rogers (my mother) and got Gypo, who was a dark blue roan, a good sized dog and had more hair than the law allows. And because it was the time when we were worshipping hair, they grew it and grew it and grew it. He had it all over. His front legs were covered with it. These novice people went to a handler and said how do we trim this dog. The handler put the foot down and made three cuts and rounded it off and said that's fine. And Gypo went off and won himself another group.

We went from that to more and more hair on all the colors and I think the only thing that stopped the English Cocker from going the way of the American Cocker were a pair of pushy broads called Annie Rogers and Janie Kamp who started to trim the hell out of the breed and to expose the front legs. That happened because I had a dog with very good front legs and Janie had a dog with very bad front legs. I cut all the hair off my dog's front and caught Janie for a while until Janie figured out a way to make her dog's front legs look straighter by cutting some hair off and leaving some hair on. So I cut all the hair off my dog's feet and beat her some more and it went on that way - that kind of competition. It did very well so long as we were knocking heads against each other and the stiff English Cocker competition was in the East. When the English Cocker started to become popular and get all over, people went back to the Hair Bear Syndrome. Then along came Bonnie and she really turned everybody around with her presentation of the English Cocker. Trimming it to the lines so that you could see the dog, exposed front legs, tightly trimmed feet: she set a precedent which everybody now, thankfully, is following.

In the old days, we prayed over every hair - leaving tufts out to here because it was hair. Where today you get a fairly sparse coat as the b/w bitch has, instead of praying over those wisps, they are trimmed off. You can see her lovely straight front legs. The hindquarters are trimmed so that you can see down the back of the stifle. Every hair on the English Cocker today is trimmed - not to the detriment of the breed but in order to present it as a smooth workmanlike sporting dog that can, in most cases, find birds for you one week and be cleaned up and presented in the show ring the next week. And keeping it from going the way of some of our sporting dogs who grow too much coat.

(Following are some disconnected comments which were made during the question period. We could hear none of the questions from the audience.)

...very tipped in croup. She had to go a million miles per hour and she took a million steps. Tipped croup keeps the rear legs from driving out - kick or follow through - tends to keep the legs underneath them.

...If you want to have a good group competitor, you have to have a dog of correct type; who is a willing mover; who you can show properly under judges who require properness and who you can show like a damn fool under judges who require them to be damn fools.

...skinny rumped dogs look setterly, not cockery. Need muscle mass, width of pelvis.

...if he looks like he moves, that's probably the best dog you've found

today. Ted Young could take anything (gas money dogs we called them) and by the time he got it trimmed and pushed, pulled and twisted together on the line - that was beautiful - then they tried to walk! It's the total of all the parts when they move.

...There are a variety of people across the country. Their ideas may be different from yours, but they have a point of view that they can back up. They are articulate and they know what they are talking about. There are many people you can go to and say, hey, I don't understand this.

...Educate yourself. Read all the books. Remember the video.

...if you don't have balance and proportion you don't have the breed. Look at the class - 15 in the class - The first two are helpful, the next three should've stayed home, this one here looks like a heck of a good one. First cut on type and you put up the soundest of your typical specimens.

...What is the point of putting up a mediocre specimen over a nice typey dog who has movement problems. Would you breed to the mediocre dog or the typey dog?

...People understand rear ends more easily than they do fronts. In any breed, the whole dog is hung on its front end. How its neck set, how its topline is, all go to front. Rears are easy to see. "Oh, that dog is cow-hocked."

...Folded ears - not flat like the Field Spaniel. They're just flaps of skin and I hate to see a dog fall just because of an ear or a slightly droopy eye - as in "There's a dog with no droop but has an ugly head."

...The cross we have to bear with this breed today is that they must be socialized, socialized, socialized! If we don't do it before the teeth come in and if we don't get them to look up at us rather than looking at their feet - they will never make a show dog because it's there in the genes. You could not raise an English Cocker to be a tenth the show dog of a Poodle and we worked four times as hard with the English Cocker.

...When Kate Romanski, secretary of the ECSCA, got her first English Cocker, she wrote and had published a letter that said she was getting out of American Cockers because they were so full of heritable faults. She was getting into a nice, good, clean breed like the English Cocker. She didn't know what she was getting in for. Because we have everything genetically wrong like deafness, epilepsy, hip dysplasia, hermaphrodites, legg perthes, testicle problems, kidney disease, PRA, mention it, you've got it all.

...You can't breed dogs by the book but you have to breed knowing that you have heritable problems that you have to beware of, to check on. Even if you do breed from dogs that you know there's genetic problems in their backgrounds - because, by God, we've all had them - try to know what you can do to breed out - so that someday down the line we'll have a breed that is free of these problems.

...Problems? Spindly bone, chicken breasts, feet. (Negative comment from audience regarding raising puppies on wire floors) I can raise great footed poodles on wire bottoms. It's in the nutrition, clean feet, and not big fat puppies.

...Short toes. Be nosy. There is a problem in our breed that you are not aware of until the puppy is 3-6 months old. The problem is that the outside toe of the front foot, as the dog grows, ends up "short". It's not crippling. It skips generations. Well trimmed 99 out of 100 people will not find it. I have never seen a short toe in solids. It is in England, too.

...I would breed dogs with that type of heritable problem (short toes)- which is not a crippling heritable problem. And I would be concerned with it if it cropped up to a great extent in a litter of puppies. And I would always have it in the back of my head that it was in my breeding. And I would always look for it.

I don't think that I would breed a deaf dog.

I don't think that I would breed a dog that was blind.

I don't think that I would breed a dog with kidney problem.

I don't think that I would breed a dog with a severe health problem because that's not fair to you or to the dog. And if it turned out to be a great winner and it was dead when it was three, what difference would it make to the breed - because this should be an ongoing thing. It should be something that people could breed to.

...People have had problems with temperament right along. They're not born show dogs. They're bed dogs, house dogs, under-your-feet dogs, and shed-on-the-carpet dogs. In order to get them to be show dogs you have to go through untold hell to make them that way.

...Settler cockers - the problem was always there. What compounded it was that Setter people went into it and liked the Setter look, liked the long neck and the long head. Also, the longer, rangier dog can fly around the ring faster and could keep up with the Springer and not be overrun by the American Cocker. But it got out of hand. These things can happen to breeds. Breeds change overnight because something comes along and is

flashy and does something different. I think that many of our breeds are almost as good as they're going to get, i.e. a saturation point. But they're not as free of heritable defects as they're going to get. Now what people look for is the different, the interesting, the bizarre variation on the old theme and that's how those things get going.

...width, as relative to the Setter - they should not be as flat-sided as Setters. English Setters show problems of straight forearms and not have any forechest. Irish Setters are getting better in this. Gordons don't have straight legs but they do have good forechest.

...Refer to old standards - reread - you may find a nuance, suddenly, even after 25 years of judging

- "That's what they mean by that!" Somebody wrote those standards that knew a hell of a lot more than we do. We know the names of the bones and those kinds of things, but those guys worked with these dogs and bred them for a particular reason and use. Form followed function in those days.