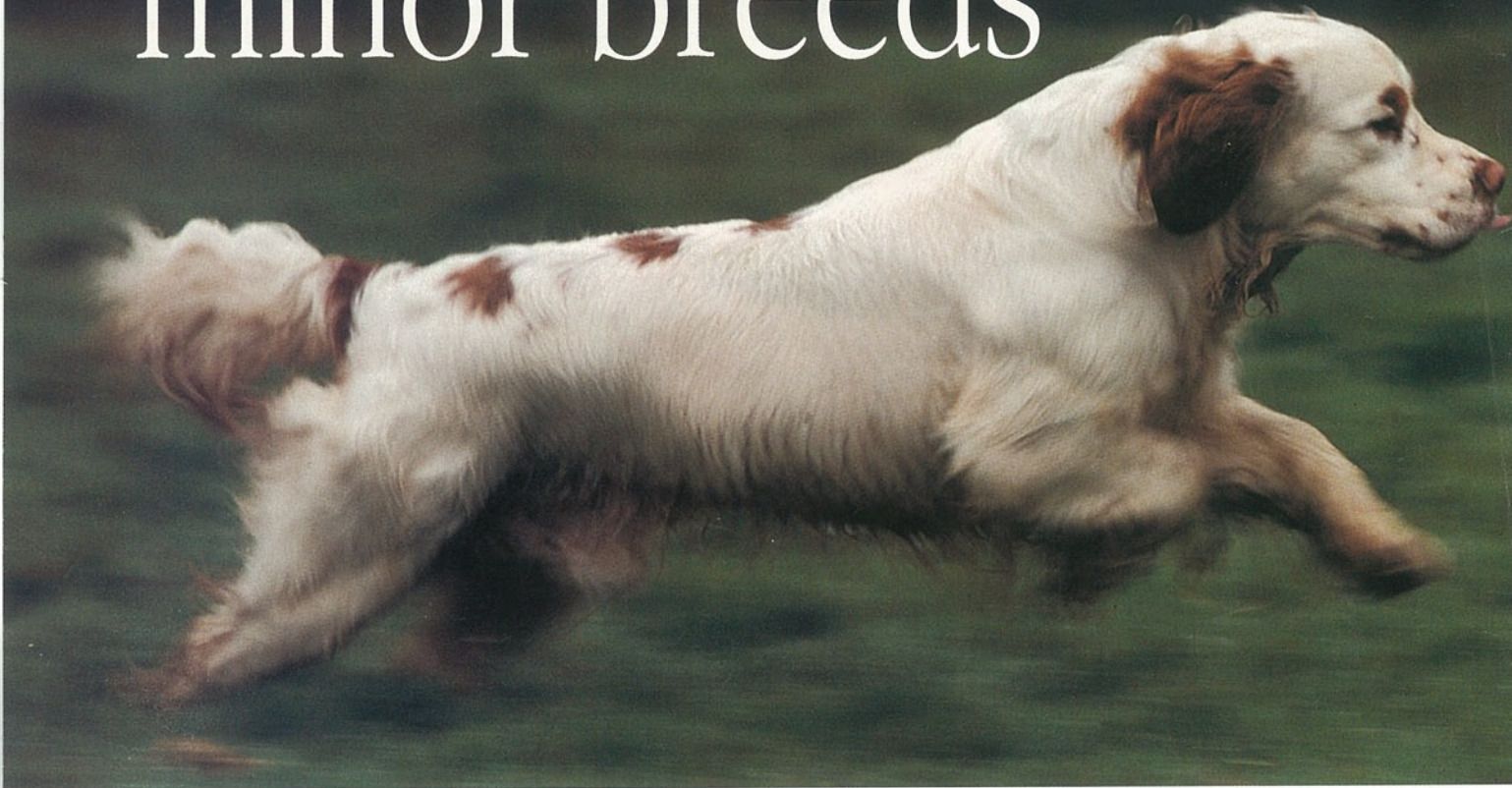


Major battle for minor breeds



Clumber spaniels — deemed inferior by the Kennel Club. But with what justification, asks **David Tomlinson**

Some years ago, I was out beating with my oldest springer, then aged six, when a retired "keeper looked her over. "I really like springers when they get to eight," he declared, "as by then they've started to calm down." Like many springer owners, I've become used to their exuberance, enthusiasm and selective deafness, but have often thought it would be good to have one without the turbocharger.

There is, of course, an alternative for the spaniel man who doesn't want to give in and get a Labrador. It's called the Clumber spaniel. The trouble is that good working Clumbers are even rarer than steady springers. For the past 25 years, a number of Clumber enthusiasts have struggled to rescue the breed from the confines of the show bench and put it back where it belongs — in the shooting field.

Two seasons ago, I experienced the delights of a day's roughshooting with Clumbers, and discovered that a good one can hunt with all the enthusiasm of a springer, and retrieve equally competently, too. I also learned that a fit working

Clumber is quite capable of pacing itself so that it will happily work all day, not something that can be said of all working springers.

Debbie Zurick, secretary of the Working Clumber Spaniel Society, is quick to point out that comparing a working Clumber with a springer is unfair. Both are expected to do a similar job, but they have a different style and way of doing things. While the Clumber may not be as fast as the springer, it's likely to be a more methodical hunter, with a good nose that it will use to great effect.

However, one of the problems enthusiasts for the breed have had to face is convincing English springer spaniel and cocker enthusiasts of the Clumber's many merits. Too many people who should know better (including some well-known A-panel field trial judges) have looked at Clumbers and seen them simply as large white spaniels without the drive of the English springer spaniel. Just because they don't work in the same way as a springer doesn't mean that they are not as good a dog, they're just different. Each breed should be taken on its merits, and not simply judged by the characteristics and ability of the

dominant breed in its group.

The Clumber is a member of that small group of spaniels known as minority breeds — the others are the Welsh springer, Sussex, field and American cocker. It was generally thought that they were called minority because there were so few of them, but it seems that the Kennel Club (KC) holds a different view. In 1998, without so much as asking anyone involved with the breeds whether or not they minded, trials run for the minor breeds and the awards gained in them ceased to be recorded in the Stud Book. It seemed that these breeds were also minor in importance, even if their owners paid just the same fees to the KC as those with English springer spaniels or cockers.

It was James Darley who happened to discover this anomaly during a visit to the KC's library early in 2000. To say he was surprised is an understatement. He explains that "for a hundred years, from 1899 to 1998, trials for Clumbers and other minor breeds were treated exactly the same as other spaniel trials. For the next three years, their trials and awards were deemed not to exist. And from this year, only the

◀ **Shouldn't we be doing everything to encourage minority breed in the field?**
 ▼ **Debbie Zurick and 10-week-old Hugo**

dog gaining a first will be respected and remembered, a system completely out of step with any other category of field trial."

James has had more awards in trials with his working Clumbers than anyone else, and has been at the forefront of re-establishing the Clumber's working credentials. He has been unable to discover why the minority spaniel breeds have been singled out by the KC for such treatment, or should it be, lack of treatment? "It appears to me, and probably to most owners of minority breed spaniels dedicated to rebuilding them as working breeds, as some kind of prejudice, and as if awards were given lightly and without merit."

James adds that, "though minority breeds field trials may be thought by some to be a comparatively recent development, records show that this isn't the case. Stakes limited to breeds other than cockers and English springers go back to the 19th century, while in the early years of the 20th century, they were held as regularly and as frequently as stakes for the breeds which have since flourished more."

It's worth noting that the regulations under which trials for the so-called minor breeds are run are identical to those for all spaniel trials. The fees are the same, the judges appointed on the same basis, and the KC licence identical, so for the latter body to suddenly start to ignore these trials, held under its own rules, seems extraordinary.

The Kennel Club is famous for its lack of democracy, but the nearest thing it does have answerable body is the Field Trial Liaison Council. This represents the 115 gundog societies

and clubs that are affiliated to it. James Darley, on behalf of the Working Clumber Spaniel Society, campaigned hard to ensure that all the members of the council knew about the problem, and what was at stake. As a result, at the last meeting of the council on 21 May, 48 of the 50 members attending voted for KC field trials regulations to reinstate all award winners of minor breeds field trials to the stud book.

This resolution has since been considered by the KC's field trials sub-committee at its most recent meeting. Despite the overwhelming support for the move, there was no guarantee that the committee would take any notice of it, while minutes of the meeting are not made available for anyone to see. However, one of its members, Graham Cox, who also serves on the Liaison Council and is a prominent field trialler best known for golden retrievers, reported the meeting as encouraging. "The committee took onboard everything the council had agreed unanimously. It's going to be setting up a meeting soon, to which representatives of the minor breeds will be invited."

James Darley commented: "I hope this will, at last, be an opportunity to right the numerous wrongs that have been imposed, out of ignorance and prejudice, and in disregard of the KC's own rule book. These have worked against the best interests of the efforts to preserve and improve these rarer working breeds. The KC needs to acknowledge the strength of feeling among gundog triallers generally — that we expect governance, based on real knowledge gained first-hand, a broad historical perspective and goodwill. The proposed meeting will be a long overdue opportunity to celebrate the richness and diversity of British gundog breeds, and to recognise — not penalise — their differences."

That such a situation was allowed to develop in the first place reflects badly on the KC, and one starts to doubt the motives of its committee members. Life would be awfully dull if we all worked English springers and Labradors. Surely the KC should be doing everything within its power to encourage the minority breeds to excel at what they were bred for in the first place — shooting.

Real Clumbers

To find out the facts behind this curious story, I travelled down to Exmoor, to talk to Debbie and John Zurick, and to see their latest two generations of genuine working Clumbers. Well-proportioned, handsomely marked and full of zest for life, these are good-looking dogs that are destined to succeed in the shooting field. Forget about those flabby,

droopy-eyed apologies for Clumbers that appear on the show benches — and have difficulty getting off them. The revival of the Clumber as a working breed is a genuine success story. If you would like more details of working Clumbers, contact Debbie Zurick, tel (01643) 831427, or come and meet the working Clumbers at The CLA Game Fair later this month. ■



Daft spaniel run-offs

Kennel notes

by Keith Erlandson

In British spaniel trials, the most important work is carried out in the first two runs and, very often, judges are able to decide the trial according to the grades they have given, without further trial. This varies from the American system, where every well-rated contender must run a third round and a double A-plus dog can come to grief in the third round.

I have frequently been struck by what an anticlimax some of our run-offs are, after what has been a good trial, with plenty of testing cover and a good game supply.

I have seen many run-offs conducted on poor, scrappy ground, which has not invariably been conducive to finding the best dogs. After two runs in good interesting cover, many good dogs find a bit of poor ground uninteresting, and do not look as good as they would do in real spaniel cover. This favours the more automatic, windscreen-wiper type of spaniel which is willing to run about like a clockwork mouse under any conditions.

When the famous sire, *Don of Bronton*, won his first novice stake on two runs, I was asked to run-off *Robbison of Guibernant* for what turned out to be second place. He ran off against another dog on heavily grazed sheep pasture, lacking a single blade of grass. I mentioned to the judges that they must be looking for the best finder of sheep dung. Despite my cheek, I got the verdict. ■

