

CLUMBERS COULD TEACH UK KENNEL CLUB ABOUT STANDARDS

BY JAMES DARLEY



Roughshooting in the Chiltern Hills, Clumber spaniel bitch Ros watches a pheasant flush and stands aqiver for the shot

In an outbuilding on a ridge in the beech-clad Chiltern Hills, quiet rolling shooting country just 40 miles out of London in the direction of Oxford, a red heat lamp burns round the clock above a historic litter of spaniel puppies that attest to the turnaround of an ancient working breed.

The nine puppies are the first Clumber spaniels ever whelped with two field trial winners for parents. They were born on a Saturday night in October, when their dam, Ros (Sedgehurst Rosamund Venaticus) went into labour three days early. She had been mated two months earlier to Ben (Flintwood Blizzard), owned by Ron James, involving my wife Crissy and I in two journeys to Pembrokeshire on the Welsh coast

facing the Irish Sea, and a total of 1000 miles on the road.

Only hours earlier the same day, we had taken a heartbreaking decision to destroy a favourite dog, Max (Sedgehurst Maxim Venaticus), with an irreparable broken foreleg sustained on routine exercise before a day's picking-up at West Wycombe Park. I would have had the whole team of four out, with a planned bag of 400-plus redleg partridges. Max was 10 and, when in his prime he won a third field trial, had achieved a record unequalled since Queen Victoria was on the throne. That record has now been surpassed by Ron James' Sam (Sedgehurst Netherstowey), bred in Devon by Debbie and John Zurick.

The lights at the UK Kennel Club's

grand headquarters in London's Piccadilly have also been burning late recently. Its officials and committee men have been hastily and shamelessly reinventing themselves as the guardians of dog health and breeding quality – even deserving of government legislation to give them yet more powers.

Their panic was prompted by a BBC television documentary *Pedigree Dogs Exposed*, aired in mid-August. It was a damning indictment of breeding practices in the show world, effectively condoned by the Kennel Club. But the ruling body of the world of dogs would have us all believe that it has not experienced a sudden Damascene conversion to concentrate on soundness. While admitting to

listening to public opinion (for which read, fearing for its reputation) and needing to do more about inbreeding and breed standards that ignore crippling faults, it would like to be seen as independent of the show interests that we all know call the tune and pay the piper.

One of the breeds coming under impending scrutiny is the Clumber spaniel. Not before time, many of its working enthusiasts would say. The breed standard, the Kennel Club's description of the ideal, in 2008 specifies a Clumber of double the weight given in the standard in 1908,

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recommending 80 pounds as the "ideal" weight for a male. There were in fact four standards during the years between, each progressively raising the size of the breed to match the dogs of the show ring. The last change made in 1986 was opposed during a prior consultation period by the

Working Clumber Spaniel Society, but as a new grouping seeking Kennel Club registration in order to function at all, its voice was a little muted at the time.

In less than a quarter of a century since its formation, this breed society has helped achieve a remarkable transformation in the fortunes of Britain's largest land spaniel. Among the minority spaniel breeds, Clumbers dominate. In the past 10 shooting seasons, 11 different dogs have won field trials. This compares with just one in the previous 84 seasons. The average X-ray hip score (for hip

dysplasia) of work-bred Clumbers is 12, while that for others is 55 (low being good). In size and type, trainability and temperament, pace and punch, Clumbers have been restored to a Victorian model that owes nothing to the breed standard, but meets the expectations of

sportsmen. Demand continues to grow for these appealing gundogs, although for most guns it is still a comparatively rare joy to see one or more working on a shoot.

Amazingly, the Working Clumber Spaniel Society, its credentials including an evaluation scheme for work, size, hips and eyes approved by the British Veterinary Association and used as a model by other breeds, has not even been informed by the Kennel Club of the review of the breed standard now taking place and the development of a breed health plan. If any organisation was in a position to demonstrate from experience what works in Clumbers, it is the WCSS, yet the KC has apparently chosen not to involve it.

Could this be pique? Could it make the record of the organisation, now trying to persuade government minister Hilary Benn that it should be entrusted with the improvement of dogs through statutory powers, look as bad as it really is? The Kennel Club would do well to swallow its pride and gratefully accept the help offered by the Working Clumber Spaniel Society, an offer made before the KC announced its critical review of standards.

The historic litter of puppies opening their little blue eyes upon the golden colours of the autumnal hills above High Wycombe will of course be restricted to working homes. One of those, incidentally, will offer it the chance of hunting ruffed grouse and woodcock in upper New York state with Bob Thomas. But their heritage, the eight or more generations of working blood behind them, has proved its value in restoring this breed, and the enthusiasts passionate about working Clumbers stand ready to share their knowledge, for the benefit of all, with the body in the dog world that allows no other to represent them.



Eye-bright, a redleg runner briskly gathered when picking-up on a driven partridge shoot on a warm September afternoon