

Judging the English Cocker Spaniel

By Bonnie Threlfall

Let me start by explaining what I am looking for in my first impression of a class of English Cockers as a whole. From across the ring, I am looking for compact, one piece dogs with balanced angulation at both ends. I am already mentally eliminating the long dogs that appear shelly and narrow, with dramatic toplines and rears extending way out behind them. I want to see the entire dog as a package without my eye being drawn to one or more exaggerated features. The correctly made dogs will appear rounded all over, with no sharp angles or lines.

One must keep in mind there are five necessities to correct cocker body type, which enable the dog to do the job for which he was bred, that being pushing through thick, very dense cover most often higher than the dog. They are of equal importance, so in no particular order: 1) A protective forechest for pushing into cover. The forechest will only be present if the dog has the correct forehand assembly, the shoulder being well laid back with equal length and return of upper arm, placing the front legs well under the dog. 2) Thick bone. The amount of bone should almost seem too much for height of the dog, but is necessary to support the correctly made body. I have yet to see an English Cocker with what I would consider too much bone. 3) A very well-sprung ribcage, which has to be deep (at least to the elbow) and carried well back towards the dog's rear. 4) a SHORT, broad loin. This is a compact, cobby breed. 5) A "hammy" rear, with thick muscling on both upper and lower thighs. The thick muscle only accompanies a MODERATELY angulated rear. A line dropped from the point of the buttock should land immediately in front of the rear toes.

When examining an English Cocker, do not "blow by" the head once the bite is checked. The body gets the dog to the bird, but the head has to do it's job, too. Looking at the scissors bite you will notice that the teeth can be considered rather large for the size of the dog. Although developed to flush and retrieve woodcock, he is also perfectly capable of working pheasant, if necessary. With that in mind, I look for a strong, full muzzle equally balanced in length to the backskull. The sides of the backskull (zygomatic arch) should not be rounded (coarse) and the cheeks are flat. Still looking at the head straight on, the topskull should have a noticeable arch to the sides with only a slight flattening at the very top. The arch is very necessary to anchor the jaw muscles. A thoroughly flat topskull is incorrect. Correctly placed eyes of the right shape & color, together with the requisite chiseling under the eye and the grooved stop, & proper ear set, complete the exam from the front. I then evaluate the head from the side. Holding the muzzle parallel to the ground, I check to see where the eyes are looking. This breed does NOT require parallel head planes when viewed from the side, but for functionality the eyes must look forward over the muzzle and not into the sky.

The neck is just long enough to comfortably reach down to pick up a bird & to carry the bird without interfering with front movement, but not too long as to be out of balance with the rest of the dog. A giraffe neck would not support a heavy bird for any distance. I then examine the rest of the dog hopefully finding the five requisites mentioned above. Feet should be an extension of the bone, and be deep, round, and cat-like. As part of the exam, this breed HAS to be looked at over the top. The ribs are the widest part of the dog, followed closely by the rear quarters. This is a broad, round dog. He is not narrow and angular - that is "setter" type and should never be rewarded.

When moving, a balanced English Cocker keeps the same outline as standing. He should show equal reach and drive in moderation. He has a SLIGHTLY sloping topline, and not the extreme topline of the American Cocker. His tail is carried horizontally. Because of his roundness and considerable width, this breed cannot single track

If you understand the function of the breed and learn what constitutes correct "cocker" type vs. incorrect "setter" type, you will reward the right dogs.

“What you have done is to judge the overall picture, made your first cut on type and rewarded the soundness of your typical specimens.”

“An untypical cocker that is sound is useless.

A typical cocker that is sound is priceless.”

Anne Rogers Clark, past President of the ECSCA