

Popular Dogs: Cocker Spaniels

From cuddly companions to steadfast hunters, Cocker Spaniels can do it all.

Susan McCullough

Losing a dog is devastating, but it helps to have a friend around to console you. For Cocker Spaniel breeder Bobbie Kolehouse, that friend turned out to be another dog.

The first dog had become ill and declined so rapidly that “there was no time to adjust to the problem, much less the loss — and I grieved for him,” recalls Kolehouse, who lives in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. “He was never sick, and then he was. The vet and I couldn’t get a handle on it before he died 10 days later.”

Kolehouse tried not to give in to her grief in front of her other dogs, because she didn’t want them to experience the stress of seeing her unhappy. But one of those dogs, a Cocker Spaniel named Crystal, knew that Kolehouse needed some TLC — especially during the first night after the dog’s death, when the pain of loss is often sharpest.

“When I went to bed that night, my cherished Crystal came up beside me and lay with her head touching mine,” Kolehouse says. “Her breath, my breath, and mine ... hers. The rhythm finally let me fall asleep.”

Crystal isn’t alone among Cockers in her ability to understand what her people are feeling. Many devotees of this breed cite similar instances. This canine therapeutic touch is just one reason why Cocker Spaniel owners are passionate about their breed.

Origins in the Field

Although the Cocker Spaniel has keen healing talents, the breed’s origins are nowhere near a therapist’s couch or, for that matter, any other indoor setting. All spaniels originated in Spain to hunt and retrieve game for their masters. The Cocker Spaniel’s original purpose was to hunt woodcock — hence, the term “Cocker” — and other small birds.

That hunting heritage finds its way into the personality of today’s Cocker Spaniels, even those dogs that do little or no hunting. Cockers “love to play; they will chase a ball for hours,” says breeder Nancy Gallant of Battle Creek, Michigan. The ball replaces the bird as quarry, and the dog’s stamina reflects the need for energy in the field.

A good hunting dog needs to pay attention to what’s going on around him and to be attuned to what the hunter is doing. According to Kolehouse, that’s no problem for the Cocker Spaniel. “They are like bright, social children who always ask questions,” she says. “They are so responsive, reading their owners all the time.”

Although the Cocker Spaniel pays close attention to the people in his life, this breed is not necessarily a clinging vine. “People forget that they’re sporting dogs,” Kolehouse says. “They are bred to be active and independent enough to move into the field, yet will stay close to you and work with you as a partner.”

Although the Cocker Spaniel’s most important job today is companionship, some still hunt. Kolehouse trains her Cockers to work in the field, starting with Crystal and continuing with two of Crystal’s daughters and one of Kolehouse’s other dogs.

But Cocker Spaniel versatility doesn’t stop at the field, the show ring or even the obedience ring. For example, many of these dogs do very well in the exciting sport of agility, which requires the dog to obey a handler’s commands to complete an obstacle course as quickly as possible without making any mistakes. According to the website AgilityAction.com, four Cocker Spaniels were among the first 115 dogs to earn the coveted title of Master Agility Champion when the title was established in the late 1990s by the American Kennel Club.

But a Cocker Spaniel need not become an agility champion to benefit from the sport. Noemi Arthur, who lives in Sterling, Virginia, found that agility classes further enhanced her already close relationship with Finley, one of her two Cocker Spaniels. “Even though we never got to the competition level, she very much enjoyed the [agility] classes and showed great promise,” Arthur recalls. “She was very good at taking directions and pretty fearless about performing the exercises.”

Delighting the Human Eye

The Cocker Spaniel not only can work hard, but he also can look great while doing that work. Dog-show enthusiasts have long appreciated the Cocker's beauty in the show ring. In fact, Cocker Spaniels have won that most prestigious of American dog shows, the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, held at New York's Madison Square Garden, four times. A single dog earned two of those wins: Ch. My Own Brucie, who took the Best in Show trophy in 1940 and 1941.

Other Cocker Spaniels may not have won Westminster, but they came pretty close. On 14 occasions, a judge named the Cocker Spaniel the best Sporting Dog at Westminster, making that dog a finalist for the Best in Show trophy.

Unfortunately, such canine beauty does have a downside. Although she adores her Cocker Spaniels, "I could do without the expensive grooming bills," Arthur admits. "They require a lot of coat maintenance, and clipping them is not something I am comfortable doing myself."

Sharon Elliott, who is active in Cocker Spaniel rescue in Magnolia, Texas, agrees. "They are a high-maintenance dog," she says.