

The Rise of the Sussex Spaniel

The great little gun dog gets its moment in the spotlight.

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Last year, history was made during Westminster when a little brown dog trotted away with Sporting Group First at the presentation of this famous dog show. That's a long time to wait for a breed that's been recognized by the American Kennel Club since the very beginning of the club itself. It is still not recognized as a viable hunting companion by the larger brethren of the sport, but this may all be changing if a small handful of fanciers have their way, since the Sussex Spaniel is a very good gun dog and should, at the very least, be celebrated as one by the very people who carry forth the breed's torch for generations to come. Trainer Don Krueger of Orion Guided Services of Oregon can tell you, "For a man or woman who loves the outdoors but is not in the peak of condition, a Sussex makes a great choice in gun dogs if you want to do some hunting." Indeed, you won't have to invest in a horse, nor will you have to spend hours each week on a treadmill in order to keep up with a Sussex on the weekends. What you will have is a great time in the field and, if you're a good shot, a chance to stuff your game pouch, as the Sussex even though it's spent generations on the couch, in the backyard and in the show ring still has its instincts for field work well intact, and has a nose on par with the very best that the Sporting Group has to offer. Krueger should know he's the trainer behind the breed's first Master Hunter, Ch. Sundowners Swing That Music, MH, a dog owned by Jan Hepner and bred by AKC judge and Sussex expert, Pluis Davern. Davern, a retired professional handler, began in Golden Retrievers in 1967 and fell for the "darling little brown dog" in the early '80s. A seasoned dog trainer who ran her now-famous Sussex, the late Int. Am. Can. & Mex. Ch. Sand Creek's Up to Snuff, CDX, SH, to his Senior Hunter title, Davern gives us some insight into the breed's natural ability. "They're a soft breed and you can't be too strong with them in training because they don't require that, don't want that and will shut down on you, but if you allow them a little time and expose them to the field, they're delightful. Some people say that the Sussex isn't very smart, but as soon as this comes off the lips of this arrogant species that we are, I am instantly suspicious of the speaker, as Sussex Spaniels are very smart, quite manipulative, and their drive to do hunting is much stronger than the average Sussex Spaniel person really understands or knows. They're very active and yet they have the delicious ability when they walk into the house to settle down; they have an off and on switch that is often missing in a field-bred English Springer or Labrador, yet they are remarkably birdy." Indeed, Davern and Krueger agree that in, say, a litter of four, all can easily become hunting companions. This known fact may have a lot to do with the tiny gene pool that Sussex breeders have long lamented, but if it's made life difficult for the breeder projecting pedigrees it's also a surprising plus for the breeder who wants to maintain the breed's desire to hunt.