

# The cocker man cometh

There is so much more to the Cocker Championship winning handler Ben Randall than just the nail biting run-offs, as **Martin Puddifer** discovers.

**B**en Randall is a very busy man. The broad-shouldered 36-year-old Somersetian has spent over half of his life working or training dogs, and such is his commitment to his craft he has hardly had time to dwell on his win at the Cocker Championships at Drumlanrig Castle in January.

We met at Ledbury Lodge Kennels, a venture Ben and wife Nikki left secure jobs in Bristol to manage in 2009. The newly re-developed kennels occupy a small pocket of Herefordshire countryside, and encompass a boarding kennels and Beggarbush Gundogs - a gundog training facility that also breeds spaniels and labradors. Ben divides his time between both sides of this fledgling business, and while long days not training scores of other people's dogs are spent training and competing with his own you won't hear him complaining, such is the way when you're living your dream. Ben's journey into handling began during his teens, first through his wildfowling father and then later under the wing of his uncle Nicky, a professional labrador trainer.

"I stayed with my uncle a lot during the school holidays and during the season we went out beating and picking-up. When he trained his labs I was essentially a dummy thrower, but I made sure I kept a close eye on the way he worked. Once I got my first spaniel I was able to work it while putting his techniques into practice. As time went on I started accompanying him to tests and it opened up a whole new world for me."

Ben has come a long way since those days as a dummy thrower. His boyhood hobby gradually became a part-time job that saw him clock up thousands of hours (and miles) training and competing around the country. By his mid-twenties Ben had his first field trial champion, a springer, Steadroc Setlands of Beggarbush. The Beggarbush line was subsequently born and Steadroc Setlands's progeny has already made up American and French champions, as well as numerous stud dogs around the country.

## Core training values

While Ben has sought to learn as much as possible from his peers to improve his performance - Derek and Libby Lloyd from The Much Cowarne Shoot, Skinner's Dog Food and Jeremy Organ from Edgegrove Gundogs are cited as big influences - the assistance he gives to other handlers is elevating his reputation in gundog circles. A passion for dog psychology and the behaviour of pack animals is at the core of his approach to one-to-one training and



Ben's gundog work at his training kennels in Herefordshire covers a wide range of breeds and disciplines.

the specialist training days he hosts. "I try to teach my pupils to think the same way that a dog does. I get very frustrated when I see a handler chastising a dog for an error that wasn't their fault, because the dog needs to understand exactly what's being asked of it before it can do anything.

"A common problem I deal with is dogs pulling on and not listening to their handler. This usually happens when handler's focus too much on their dog's positive attributes and completely forget to address their weaknesses. A boxer whose only asset is an incredible left hook is never going to beat an opponent who exploits weakness on their right - the same principle applies in gundog handling, everything has to be as strong as it can be if the dog has even a chance of succeeding.

"I make sure the dog knows exactly what is required by conducting exercises over and over again, only moving onto the next stage when I am satisfied the dog understands what it is being asked to do."

Ben is all too aware of the factors that can disrupt a handler's concentration at tests and trials. For him, handling has to be about enjoying oneself - prize money should be a secondary motivation and accusations of judging conspiracies should be dismissed as "just one of those things". The simulated field trial days he runs for first-timers run accordingly.

"We go off into the orchards and simulate a trial as closely as possible - all of the sights and sounds and smells are there for the dog to get accustomed to. It's important to train as though you are competing, only then will the dog be prepared, and by the end of the session a dog will know when it does right and wrong, when it'll be scored etc. There has to be the element of fun in there too, so I try and make sure the handlers have a smile on their faces."

## An emotional victory

Winning this year's Cocker Championship with FTCh Heolybwloch Fatty (out of sire FTCh Mallowdale Zander and dam OFTW Dearne Valley Venus) certainly put a smile on Ben's face. And the headline grabbing victory made those long days and time away from his young family all worth the effort. Like his uncle or any competitive handler, things have not always gone his way, and while he has paid his dues quietly, his emotion at being crowned the winner at Drumlanrig was there for the assembled crowd to see.

"Preparation for the championship wasn't easy because of the dreadful winter we had. My training days helped, as did the picking-up work

Right: Ben Randall with FTCh Heolybwloch Fatty; the pair won the Cocker Championship at Drumlanrig Castle in January.

I was doing - Ben picks-up on The Much Cowarne and Halesend shoots through the season. Fatty hunted well on fantastic ground that held a lot of distractions. There were birds flying everywhere but she held her nerve well.

"I was a little nervous going into the second run but we were at one together and I hardly had to use my whistle at all. I knew then that we were in with a chance but I felt physically sick before the run-off against Ian Openshaw. Fatty's breeder, Gareth Davies, could see I was nervous, took me to one side and told me that all I had to do was believe that we had what it took to win. Those words got me back onto my feet and by the time we were called forward I was ready."

The victory that came in the hour that followed has now brought Ben and Beggarbush Gundogs to a wider audience.

Fatty has recently been mated and hopes are high for a repeat victory next year at Conholt. It is surely only a matter of time until Ben is competing against one of her progeny and dealing with a whole new set of emotions. ■

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