

CONQUERING WITH COCKERS

LAURA STIMSON TALKS TRAINING, TRIALS AND TRIUMPH TO THE REIGNING COCKER CHAMPION HANDLER, BEN RANDALL.



FTCh Heolybwch Fatty - a champion in profile

The day after FTCh Heolybwch Fatty was crowned champion at the 79th Cocker Spaniel Championships, she sat on the peg with her owner and handler Ben Randall at a local shoot.

For Sophie (FTCh Heolybwch Fatty's kennel name), it all seems to have come so easily. The same can't be said for her owner, for whom this accolade has been a result of years of hard work, dedication and determination by an entire family.

Home to Ben is in the heart of Herefordshire's shooting country, between mile-upon-mile of apple orchards, at the Ledbury Lodge Kennels. From here Ben, his wife Nikki and two sons Joe (7) and Jack (5) run the boarding and training kennels, from which Ben produces cockers, labradors and springers for both trialling and field work. A venture in its relative infancy, the kennels have been open for just two

years - before then Ben and Nikki worked and lived near Bristol (Ben as a grounds manager and Nikki as a teacher). While the kennels and training centre may be new, Ben has been trialling for many years. Having been guided in his early competitive days by his father Keith and uncle Nicky (Neath), Ben's first field trial champion was a springer, Steadroc Setlands of Beggabush. After her success in the field she became the foundation of the Beggabush Gundog breeding line, the affix of the kennels. Her progeny have had numerous successes both in the UK and abroad.

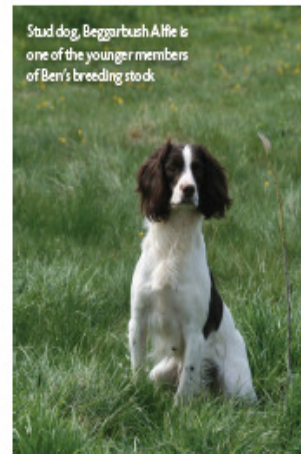
Ben purchased his first cocker spaniel after previously training a few for clients. His first

competitive cocker was Cheweky Houston of Beggabush - Molly at home - who Ben made up. Having tasted success with all the breeds he trains, he plans to continue to have a versatile kennel of dogs. "I'm enjoying training the cockers particularly at the moment, because of the success but also because for little dogs they have the heart of a lion, but I will always enjoy going out for a day's sport with one of each at heel."

Pedigree bloodlines, proven parents and dedicated training are all equally important and equally obvious necessities when searching for that champion puppy or indeed a companion for life in the field. But what extra does Ben look for in his dogs? "I'm looking for drive, style and natural ability in my trial dogs," he says, "but they've got to have the ability to take training, too." Obviously Sophie displayed all



The facilities at Ledbury Lodge provide the ideal training ground



Stud dog, Beggarbush Alfie is one of the younger members of Ben's breeding stock

these traits when she took the title in January, but was her talent always clear? Ben certainly thinks so. On visiting Sophie's breeder Gareth Davies, who owns both her sire, FTCh Mallowdale Zander and dam OFTW Dearn Valley Venus, he reckons that his choice of pup

was a simple one: "As the rest of the litter of puppies played Sophie had her nose to the ground and was hunting away, I knew then that was the puppy I wanted. By four months old I knew that she was the most naturally gifted dog that I've ever owned." Praise indeed for the little dog, who was made up to field trial champion in just a week.

So, having spotted a star in Sophie, what advice would Ben give to others pondering the purchase of a cocker as a peg dog? His answer is instant: "Get the advice of a professional, not just one but several people. You need to find someone who can find you a dog that has a temperament and ability that will match your own. I've sourced cockers for various clients, some of whom intended to trial, others looking for a dog for field work. To me a trial dog is simply a well-trained gundog." Ben himself works all the Beggabush dogs on local estates. He is often out six days a week in the season, both picking-up and on the peg.

Since his success, life at Ledbury Lodge has continued much the same as it always did.



Ben, wife Nikki and FTCh Heolybwch Fatty

Alongside the gundog kennels the boarding kennels, run by Nikki house dogs from all backgrounds, some of which are in for training to help with behavioural issues.

Some of the gundogs (housed in separate kennels) are pups from Ben's own litters which he is training on for himself, and others are dogs in training for clients. All are fed from the Skinner's range, which Ben believes helps to maintain the performance required to last the season. He also offers training to fellow triallers, with onsite accommodation, running simulated trial days during the season. "This is important," he says, "dogs can easily become trial aware so it's important that they train in the same environment as they compete."

But with a championship winning cocker now residing at the kennels, Ben is reaping the rewards of his hard work, which is as important in trialling as the pup and the pedigree passport: "It's so hard to get there to be champion and there are so many people who I need to thank for their help. Nikki, Joe and Jack, my parents Jenny and Keith, uncle Nicky, Derek and Libby Lloyd of The Much Cowarne Shoot, everyone at the Halesend shoot and many more people besides." A real group effort.

www.beggabushgundogs.co.uk
www.ledburylodgекennels.co.uk