

GUNDOG CHAMPIONS

Natural ability

MARCUS JANSSEN TALKS TO BEN RANDALL, WINNING HANDLER AT THE 79TH COCKER SPANIEL CHAMPIONSHIPS.

CONDITIONS WERE TOUGH from the off for the 79th Kennel Club's Cocker Spaniel Championships, held at Queensberry Estate in Scotland. In such adverse weather, and with stiff competition, the path to victory for the eventual winner was invariably a serious challenge and real test of ability and handling. It was only on the second day that Ben Randall allowed himself to believe that his bitch, FTCh Heolybwch Fatty was in with a real shout. "Her second run of the day was absolutely text book, and I remember thinking to myself, we're actually in with a chance now." Indeed FTCh Heolybwch Fatty did go all the way to take the honours with a performance that made Ben immensely proud.

Ben owns, trains and handles the bitch himself, being unbeaten in her last three trials in the run up to the championships. He explains: "Significantly, about a month before the national championships, she won her first Open on the Wednesday, and then on the Friday of that very week, she won again and was made up to FTCh."

Ben and his wife Nicky own and run Ledbury Lodge Kennels in Herefordshire, with Ben having learnt his trade from his father and uncle. He has had several champions before – both springers and cockers but as Ben explains FTCh Heolybwch Fatty stands out: "Within one month of receiving her as an eight-week-old pup, I could see there was something special

about her. I've had many dogs, some great ones, but none of them have come close to having her level of natural ability".

With FTCh Mallowdale Zander as her sire, Heolybwch Fatty's breeding and natural ability are invariably the key to her success, but training and handling are just as important. So, what is Ben's secret to getting the most out of his dogs? His reply comes without hesitation: "It's a marathon, not a sprint," he explains, "don't push your dog too quickly, give them time to develop and improve naturally without putting too much pressure on them. It's important not to rush things."

With such experience and having worked with a number of breeds, it is clear that cockers hold a special place in Ben's heart: "They've got hearts of lions," he says with unashamed adoration, "and they'll retrieve the biggest birds in the worst conditions when even bigger dogs might struggle. They've just got such great characters".

Ben would like to thank his wife Nicky and father Keith for all their help and support.

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