

The new cocker king

Ben Randall has realised his dream of both owning a kennels and training spaniels. **Paul Quagliana** meets this year's Cocker Championship winner

Ben Randall was still basking in his success at winning this year's Cocker Championship when I visited him at his Herefordshire home. His cheerful demeanour did not betray any of the tearful emotion he showed on being declared the winner several weeks ago. Still uncertain of victory after the last event, his agony had been prolonged as the results were announced in reverse order.

Ben's background in fieldsports stretches back into childhood when his father Keith used to take him foreshore fowling around Clevedon, in Somerset, as a 12-year-old. Lack of time has unfortunately put paid to his fowling exploits,

▼ L-R: Ben Randall with his sons Joe and Jack and wife Nikki with their FTCh *Heolybwich Fatty* and the Cocker Championship Trophy

as with a burgeoning kennel business the shooting has been put on hold. His father bought him his first dog at the age of 14—a black-and-white spaniel named Grouse with which Ben won a few tests and trials when he was 15 years old.

His uncle, Nicky Neath, a professional Labrador trainer, was an inspiration and it was by working with him and handling the dogs that Ben received much of his core training as a youngster. Ben finally bought his first trial dog *Steadroc Setlands of Beggarbush*, which was to be his first field trial champion and went on to become the foundation of Beggarbush Gundogs. She has produced a two-time American championship winner and many field trial and open trial winners in the UK. Ben freely admits that without the support of friends and family and particularly the shoots with which he is involved, he would not have attained the highest levels of success in trialling.



Max, the latest stud dog at Beggarbush Gundogs



Three of Ben's gundog kennels which form part of a spacious block

In the early 2000s Ben began building up his kennel business, which has culminated in a dozen dogs that include champion springers as well as winning springers and cockers—notably his championship winner *Sophie Heolybwich Fatty* which was bred by his friend Gareth Davies. Sadly, Ben would not reveal where the Fatty part came from.

When it comes to training spaniels Ben loves both springers and cockers but says his heart really lies with the cocker spaniel. "Training both breeds I have found cockers more natural and willing to please—at least mine are. Cocker's have got more recognition in recent years and as such have become more popular. They are simply very likeable dogs".

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Ben and his wife Nikki gave up their jobs as a grounds manager and a teacher several years ago to fulfil their dream of running a full-time kennels and working with dogs in the country. As well as the gundog side they also run a boarding kennels. Ben breeds for trialling with his dogs producing two to three litters a year. He sources field-trial homes for the ones he does not retain.

He is also a Kennel Club panel judge for spaniels and all his dogs work on local shoots picking-up. He is proud to say that, contrary to critics who claim that field-trial dogs are only good for winning competitions, all his dogs pick-up well.

What does the future hold for Ben and his dogs? "Winning the Championship was a lifelong dream for me. My goal is to be as successful as I can and to continue my cocker lines with a Championship winner in my kennels." ■

Ben and Nikki can be contacted on dogs@ledburydogkennels.co.uk, or tel: 01531 670 960. For more information, visit www.ledburydogkennels.co.uk or www.beggarbushgundogs.co.uk.

Ben's top tips

What should a novice trialler do to get started?

"I believe they should go to a professional for breeding and training advice. The key is to remember that it is a marathon, not a sprint. Take your time and do the job properly. I used to play rugby and would adopt the attitude that you should train how you play and play how you train. So practise as if it were an actual trial."

How important is diet?

"Diet is hugely important. I use Skinner's Working 23 which I feel contains the correct combination of proteins, nutrients and oils. Despite the last two hard winters it has kept my dogs in peak condition as I use them for picking-up as well as trialling."

How many clubs should you join?

"I am a member of about 40 clubs, but a beginner is perhaps best to stick to their local clubs initially. It pays to help out with your club; offer to do some stewarding and some picking-up. This is all good practice for the future in giving you an understanding of field trials from all angles. Most clubs only cost about £12 to join."

How important is gundog security?

"These days it is more important than ever with the number of dog thefts taking place. I have had to spend £8,000 on all manner of security measures, but I think investing in security is good sense."

Is travel sickness in dogs an issue?

"It is not normally an issue, but ideally get the dog used to long car journeys from a young age as attending trials can involve travelling long distances. It is preferable to travel up the day before."

When should you start training your dog?

"It should be from around 12 months onwards. Serious preparation should start then. Basic handling and retrieving should have been done before that. A good idea is to attend field trial training days. I run two field trial training days a week during the season. It is all walked-up so simulates a real field trial."

When should you retire your dog?

"When it gets too naughty."