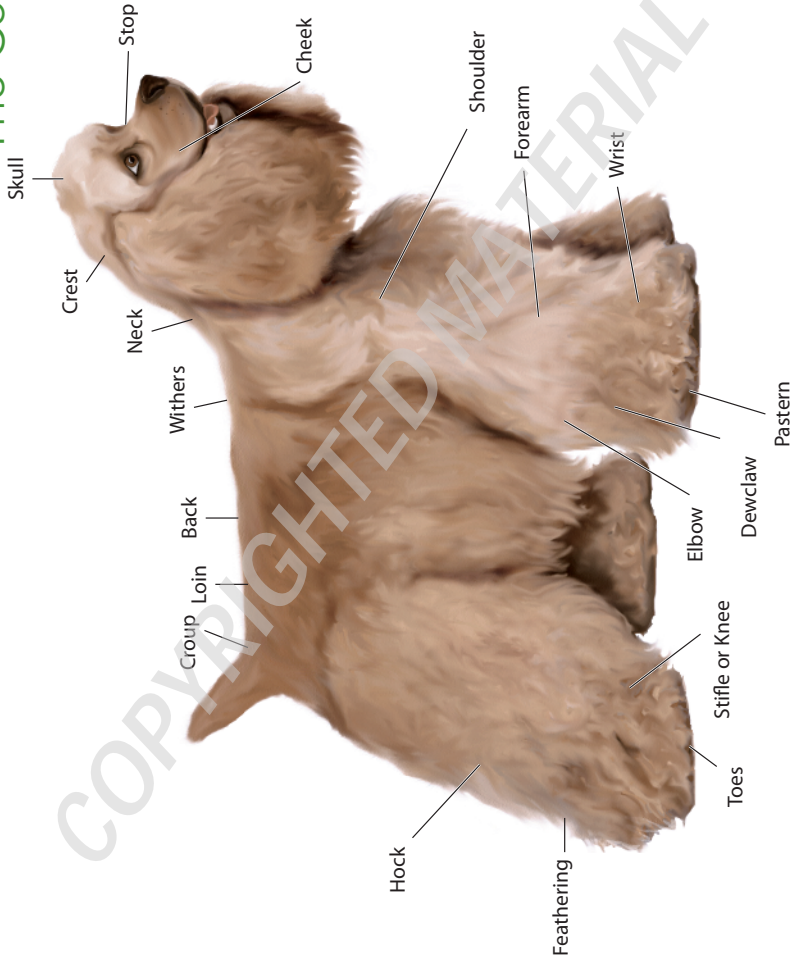


The Cocker Spaniel





Chapter 1

What Is a Cocker Spaniel?

Cocker Spaniels are perennial favorites among the dog breeds.

Everyone just seems to love

them. German Shepherd Dogs are recognized worldwide for their legendary working abilities, Bulldogs are instantly identified by their unique appearance, Poodles are known for their elegance, and Border Collies have exceptional intelligence. So what makes Cocker Spaniels stand out from the crowd?

Well, first of all, no one can look away from that face! With their sweet expression, large, dark eyes, and hanging ears, Cockers plant a hook in your heart right away. Then the wiggling body, wagging stub of a tail, luscious coat, and most important of all, that sparkling personality just finish you off. Once you meet a Cocker Spaniel, you become a Cocker fan.



What Is an American Cocker Spaniel?

The spaniel family of dogs is a very old one, with known records dating back as far as the fourteenth century in Europe. Many different breeds are descended from the original spaniels, including the Irish Water Spaniel, English Springer Spaniel, Welsh Springer Spaniel, Clumber Spaniel, English Toy Spaniel, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, and English Cocker Spaniel.

The American Cocker Spaniel is now a distinctly different breed than his closest relatives, the English Springer Spaniel and the English Cocker Spaniel. This book is about the American Cocker Spaniel. The breed is also known simply as

the Cocker Spaniel, and that is how he is registered with the American Kennel Club (AKC). He's also referred to as a Cocker for short.

The Cocker Spaniel's Appearance

The Cocker Spaniel is the smallest of the hunting spaniels. Although the toy spaniels (English Toy Spaniel and Cavalier King Charles Spaniel) are smaller, they are not true hunting dogs. The Cocker is also the smallest breed recognized in the AKC's Sporting Group—breeds developed to help humans hunt. Cockers stand between 13.5 and 15.5 inches tall at the withers (the top of the shoulders) and weigh between 24 and 30 pounds. Females are a bit smaller than males.

The physical description here is based on the ideal Cocker Spaniel, as set out in the breed standard (see the box on page 13). No dog meets the breed standard 100 percent. But this is the ideal that breeders strive for.

The Body

The perfect Cocker Spaniel is a small, yet sturdy and strong dog. He's a hunting dog, and should always appear ready to go for a romp in the fields. His body is slightly longer (from breastbone to the back of the hips) than he is tall (from the ground to the highest point of the shoulders).



The Cocker is a hunting spaniel and retains that heritage, as can be seen in the instinctive stance of this little puppy.

What Is a Breed Standard?

A breed standard is a detailed description of the perfect dog of that breed. Breeders use the standard as a guide in their breeding programs, and judges use it to evaluate the dogs in conformation shows. The standard is written by the national breed club, using guidelines established by the registry that recognizes the breed (such as the AKC or UKC).

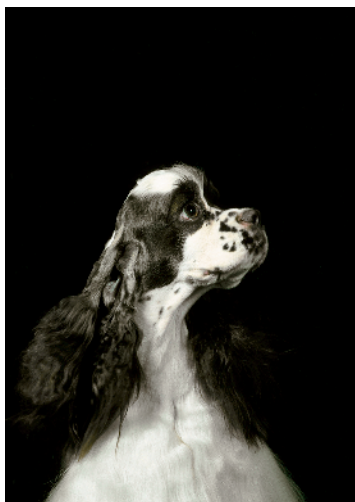
Usually, the first section of the breed standard gives a brief overview of the breed's history. Then it describes the dog's general appearance and size as an adult. Next is a detailed description of the head and neck, then the back and body, and the front and rear legs. The standard then describes the ideal coat and how the dog should be presented in the show ring. It also lists all acceptable colors, patterns, and markings. Then there's a section on how the dog moves, called *gait*. Finally, there's a general description of the dog's temperament.

Each section also lists characteristics that are considered to be faults or disqualifications in the conformation ring. Superficial faults in appearance are often what distinguish a pet-quality dog from a show- or competition-quality dog. However, some faults affect the way a dog moves or his overall health. And faults in temperament are serious business.

You can read all the AKC breed standards at www.akc.org.

He has strong, straight front legs. The shoulders form an angle of about 90 degrees from the upper arm. He has moderately angled rear legs that are parallel when viewed from behind. The hips are wide and well muscled. Any dewclaws on the rear legs may be removed.

The neck is long enough to allow the dog to sniff the ground. It is muscular and clean, with little excess skin. The back is strong and slopes slightly from the shoulders to the hips. The chest is deep with plenty of room for the heart and lungs to work well when the dog is in action. The tail is docked and carried in a straight line from the back or slightly higher. It should never be straight up or tucked under.



The head and face of the Cocker are distinctive, with the rounded skull and well-defined eyebrows.

The Head

The American Cocker Spaniel's head and face are two of the most recognizable features of the breed. The dog's expression, with large, round, dark eyes, is soft, appealing, and full of expression. The skull is rounded, the eyebrows are clearly defined, and there is a pronounced indentation between the eyes at the stop (the place where the muzzle and the skull meet).

The nose is black in black dogs, black and tans, and black and whites. In dogs of other colors, the nose may be brown, liver, or black, with darker colors preferred. The muzzle is broad and deep with square, even jaws. It should not be narrow or thin.

The ears hang straight down and are well covered with hair. The ears begin on the sides of the skull no higher than the lower part of the eyes.

The Coat and Colors

The Cocker's coat is one of his crowning glories. The hair on the head is short and fine. The body has a coat of a medium length with a protective undercoat and a fine outer coat. The extra hair on the ears, chest, abdomen, and legs—called feathering—is long and luxurious. This feathering is silky flat or just slightly wavy; it should never be curly.

This breed has some very specific color varieties and patterns. Any colors or patterns other than these are not acceptable in the show ring.

- **Black or black and tan:** These Cockers are all black or all black with tan markings over each eye, on the sides of the muzzle, the undersides of the ears, the feet, and under the tail. A tiny bit of white is allowed on the chest or throat.
- **Any solid color other than black:** This color variety is abbreviated *ASCOB*. These dogs may be any solid color other than black, which includes light cream through dark red. The color must be uniform all over the dog, although the feathering may be slightly lighter. A small amount of white on the chest is allowed.

- **Parti-color:** Parti-color Cockers are white with patches of another color, which may include black, brown, red, cream, or roan (a mixture of colored and white hairs). The patches may also include freckles on the dog's muzzle.

Cocker Spaniels who are shown in conformation dog shows are divided into these same color varieties for the show ring. So you may see Cockers in the ring three times at the same dog show. These divisions came about based on the huge popularity of the breed at the turn of the twentieth century and the color varieties that were in demand then. In Britain in the 1800s, the red-and-white and black-and-white dogs were much more popular than solid-colored dogs, and at many dog shows only these parti-colors were exhibited. However, during the early 1900s in the United States, the black dogs were in big demand. Today, all three color varieties have their fans and all can be seen at dog shows.

This luscious coat does require a significant amount of care. That will be discussed in chapter 7.



His luxurious coat is one of the Cocker's most elegant features. But it does require a lot of care.

Gait

Gait is how a dog moves. As a well-balanced sporting dog, the Cocker possesses strength, speed, and endurance. It can be hard for a small dog to work in the field as a hunting dog, so good movement is essential. And good movement depends on correct structure.

The Cocker's muscular hips should drive him forward with power and the front legs must be able to reach easily to balance the power from the rear. In all respects, he should appear athletic and able to work in the field.

Cocker Character

Cockers have been described as merry, endearing, gentle, trusting, playful, and devoted. The Cocker Spaniel is well suited to live with people but retains a strong

desire to work. Breed expert Bobbie Kolehouse says, “This is a breed developed over hundreds of years to be a gentle household companion, an intruder alarm dog, and a competent hunting partner. While many Cockers today are not used as gun dogs, those dependable traits endear them to people who love a responsive, affectionate dog.” (Gun dogs were developed to help hunters find and retrieve game, often birds.)



A well-socialized Cocker Spaniel is great with kids.

They are also very responsive to their people and are an excellent barometer of the family. If the family is relaxed and happy, the Cocker will also be relaxed and happy.

However, if there is tension, anger, anxiety, or fear in the household, the dog will reflect that, too. Kolehouse says, “They are, in many ways, a measure of the emotional health of the household. Cockers are generally healthy dogs but their close connection to people makes them susceptible to chronic stress.” Chronic stress can lead to behavior problems (such as barking, destructive chewing, fearful behaviors, and obsessive compulsive behaviors) as well as health issues (including self-destructive behaviors and immune system disorders).

Friends and Companions

Although bred for centuries as a hunting dog, the Cocker is also a companion dog. He is very unhappy alone and is not the dog to leave out in the backyard for hours at a time. A Cocker alone is an unhappy dog, and unhappy Cockers are likely to bark—sometimes to the point of being problem barkers and causing neighbors to complain.

An American Cocker Spaniel will enjoy a romp in the field and a chance to flush birds and chase rabbits, but at home he wants to be close to you. A Cocker is a dedicated, loyal, affection companion. He will mirror your moods—so much so that many Cocker owners find that their mood is reflected in the face of their dogs even before they recognize it themselves.

A well-socialized Cocker can be good with children. They are small enough not to be overwhelming yet sturdy enough to play with the kids. This socialization is

important, though, because a Cocker who is not well-socialized can be worried, fearful, and even timid.

Trainability

Cocker Spaniels are experts at manipulating their owners. One look in those eyes and you'll understand how they do it. Training, therefore, is very important and should begin while the Cocker is a puppy. A kindergarten puppy class is a great place to begin. These classes emphasize the basic obedience commands (geared for the young puppy) and also incorporate a lot of socialization to other people and puppies.

Housetraining the Cocker puppy requires patience. Cocker puppies are slow to develop and mature. You will need to establish a housetraining routine and schedule, and then follow it for several months. Consistency and patience are the keys here. Chapter 10 will explain more about housetraining.

When the dog and owner work together, Cockers are very trainable. However, if the Cocker is allowed to set the rules—if you fall for those expressive eyes—a Cocker Spaniel can be rude, obnoxious, and difficult to live with. A well-trained Cocker, however, is a joy.

TIP

Top Dogs

In 1921, a black-and-white Cocker, Ch. Midkiff Seductive, made history by being the first Cocker Spaniel to win Best in Show at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Her owner was William T. Payne, a very famous Cocker breeder. Since then, Cockers have won at Westminster three more times. Ch. My Own Brucie won in 1940 and 1941, and Ch. Carmor's Rise and Shine won in 1954.