



# · BREED PRIORITIES · COCKER SPANIEL

BY NIKKI RIGGSBEE

**The** Cocker Spaniel was the most popular breed in the United States in the middle of the 20th century. The breed's popularity may well have been spurred by a dog named Ch. My Own Brucie winning Best in Show twice at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show, or possibly another named Checkers owned by Vice President Nixon, and another starring in the popular movie "Lady and the Tramp." The most recent AKC list ranks Cockers as 28th overall, the fifth most popular sporting breed.

The Cocker Spaniel was developed in England to help with bird hunting, so named because they were used on woodcock. In the United States, the breed evolved into two varieties, eventually splitting into two breeds in AKC—the Cocker Spaniel and the English Cocker Spaniel—in the 1940s. In most of the world, the AKC Cocker Spaniel is known as the American Cocker Spaniel. What AKC terms the English Cocker Spaniel is called the original name of Cocker Spaniel in other countries.

*This article is not intended to promote fault or part judging. Nor is it to imply that any characteristic called for in the standard is unimportant. Judging and breeding is about prioritizing and about what the judge or breeder will forgive. Discussing priorities can help in learning how to better evaluate a breed.*

We found seventy-six breeder-judges and mentors to invite to take a survey on Cocker Spaniel breed priorities. Forty-two agreed to participate, and thirty-two completed surveys were tallied. The contributing experts have been in the breed for more than forty years on average. Those who

judge have been doing so for nearly twenty years on average. Most of the breeder-judges have judged their national specialty.

## Cocker Spaniel Virtues

The survey included a list of sixteen virtues taken from the Cocker Spaniel standard. The experts prioritized them as how relatively important each is when evaluating a Cocker. The list below is in sequence by the average of the experts' rankings, with one being the most important.

1. Equable in temperament with no suggestion of timidity
2. Gait coordinated, smooth and effortless
3. Balance between front and rear assemblies
4. Topline sloping slightly toward muscular quarters
5. Shoulders well laid back forming angle with upper arm of approximately 90 degrees
6. Expression intelligent, alert, soft and appealing
7. Forelegs parallel, straight, strongly boned, muscular, set close to body well under scapulae
8. Ribs are deep and well sprung
9. From breast bone to back of thigh slightly longer than from highest point of withers to ground
10. Hind legs strongly boned, and muscled with moderate angulation
11. Neck sufficiently long, muscular and free from pendulous "throatiness"

12. Distance from stop to tip of nose is one-half the distance from stop up over crown to base of skull
13. Muzzle broad and deep, with square even jaws
14. When dog is in motion, the tail action is merry
15. Coat silky, flat or slightly wavy
16. Ears lobular, long, of fine leather, well feathered, placed no higher than a line to lower part of eye

Only seven of the sixteen virtues garnered majorities since many had a quarter or more of the experts with another opinion. The greatest agreement with twenty-one was on "Equable in temperament with no suggestion of timidity" (1<sup>st</sup>). Twenty agreed on "Balance between front and rear assemblies" (3<sup>rd</sup>) and "Coat silky, flat or slightly wavy" (15<sup>th</sup>).

Nineteen experts placed "Topline sloping slightly toward muscular quarters" (4<sup>th</sup>) ranking it between 2-5, but ten had it ranked 6-9, lowering its average. Eighteen of the group ranked "Gait coordinated, smooth and effortless" (2<sup>nd</sup>) in the top quartile with nine in the second quartile. The same bigger number had "Ribs are deep and well sprung" (8<sup>th</sup>) around the middle. The smallest majority valued "Ears lobular, long, of fine leather, well feathered, placed no higher than a line to lower part of eye" (16<sup>th</sup>) in the last quartile, but ten thought it belonged in the third quartile.

"Distance from stop to tip of nose is one-half the distance from stop up over crown to base of skull" (12<sup>th</sup>) was in the bottom quartile on fifteen surveys, but in the second quartile for nine. Fourteen experts agreed on "Hind legs strongly boned, and muscled with moderate angulation" (10<sup>th</sup>), "Neck sufficiently long, muscular and free from pendulous 'throatiness'" (11<sup>th</sup>), and "When dog is in motion, the tail action is merry" (14<sup>th</sup>). "Hindquarters" (10<sup>th</sup>) was quite important for the bigger number, but twelve had it well below midpoint. "Neck" (11<sup>th</sup>) was around midpoint for fourteen, in the bottom quartile for ten. "Tail action" (14<sup>th</sup>) was in the bottom quartile for the bigger number, but in the third quartile for nine, and much higher for seven.

"Expression intelligent, alert, soft and appealing" (6<sup>th</sup>) was in the third quartile according to thirteen experts, but nine ranked it in the top three. Thirteen had "Forelegs parallel, straight, strongly boned, muscular, set close to body well under scapulae" (7<sup>th</sup>) ranking between 6-9 and another thirteen ranked it 11-14. Twelve valued "Muzzle broad and deep, with square even jaws" (13<sup>th</sup>) near or in the last quartile, but ten put it closer to the middle.

"Shoulders well laid back forming angle with upper arm of approximately 90 degrees" (5<sup>th</sup>) was in the top quartile on eleven surveys, in the second quartile on nine, and the third quartile for another nine. Eleven surveys ranked "From breast bone to back of thigh slightly longer than from highest point of withers to ground" (9<sup>th</sup>) around the middle, while nine were in the bottom quartile, and eight were in or near the top quartile.

"Ribs" (8<sup>th</sup>), "proportion," (9<sup>th</sup>), and "hindquarters" (10<sup>th</sup>) were less than one-tenth of a point apart so additional input might easily rearrange their relative positions in the list. One-and-one-half points separated the averages of "Shoulders/angulation" (5<sup>th</sup>) and "Expression" (6<sup>th</sup>), confirming the importance

of the top five.

## Cocker Spaniel Faults

The survey also included sixteen faults taken or derived from the Cocker Spaniel standard for the experts to rank based on how serious each issue is to them. The faults are listed below in sequence by the average of the expert ranks, with 1 being the most serious.

1. Timidity
2. Appears long and low
3. Does not cover ground with his action
4. Back not sloping evenly and slightly downward from shoulders to tail
5. Chest not deep, or its front not sufficiently wide
6. Shoulders not clean-cut or sloping
7. Teeth too small or do not meet in a scissors bite
8. Hips not wide or quarters not well-rounded and muscular
9. Excessive coat or curly or cottony textured coat
10. Upper lip not full nor of sufficient depth to cover the lower jaw
11. Feet turn in or out
12. Eye color not dark brown
13. Tail carried straight up
14. Neck with pendulous "throatiness"
15. Adult dog height less than 14½ inches...an adult bitch height less than 13½
16. Tail not docked

There was more agreement on faults, with ten having majorities, than on the virtues, although several had split opinions as did many virtues. The greatest agreement was on "Tail not docked" (16<sup>th</sup>) with all but two experts putting it in the bottom quartile, and twenty-four ranking it last. "Timidity" (1<sup>st</sup>) was in the top three on twenty-five surveys. Temperament is at the top of both lists, but with much more agreement when it is faulty.

Twenty four put "Appears long and low" (2<sup>nd</sup>) in the top quartile. Nineteen surveys ranked "Does not cover ground with his action" (3<sup>rd</sup>) from 2-5. "Back not sloping evenly and slightly downward from shoulders to tail" (4<sup>th</sup>) had the smallest majority in the top quartile, but another fourteen placed it around the middle. Eighteen experts thought "Shoulders not clean-cut or sloping" (6<sup>th</sup>) in or near the second quartile; another nine had it middling or lower.

Twenty-two experts agreed on "Adult dog height less than 14½ inches...an adult bitch height less than 13½" (15<sup>th</sup>). "Neck with pendulous 'throatiness'" (14<sup>th</sup>) was in or near the third quartile for twenty, but seven had it above midpoint. "Eye color not dark brown" (12<sup>th</sup>) also had a split opinion, with eighteen ranking from 11-14, and another eight from 7-10. The smallest majority considered "Tail carried straight up" (13<sup>th</sup>) unimportant, but eight had it closer to the middle.

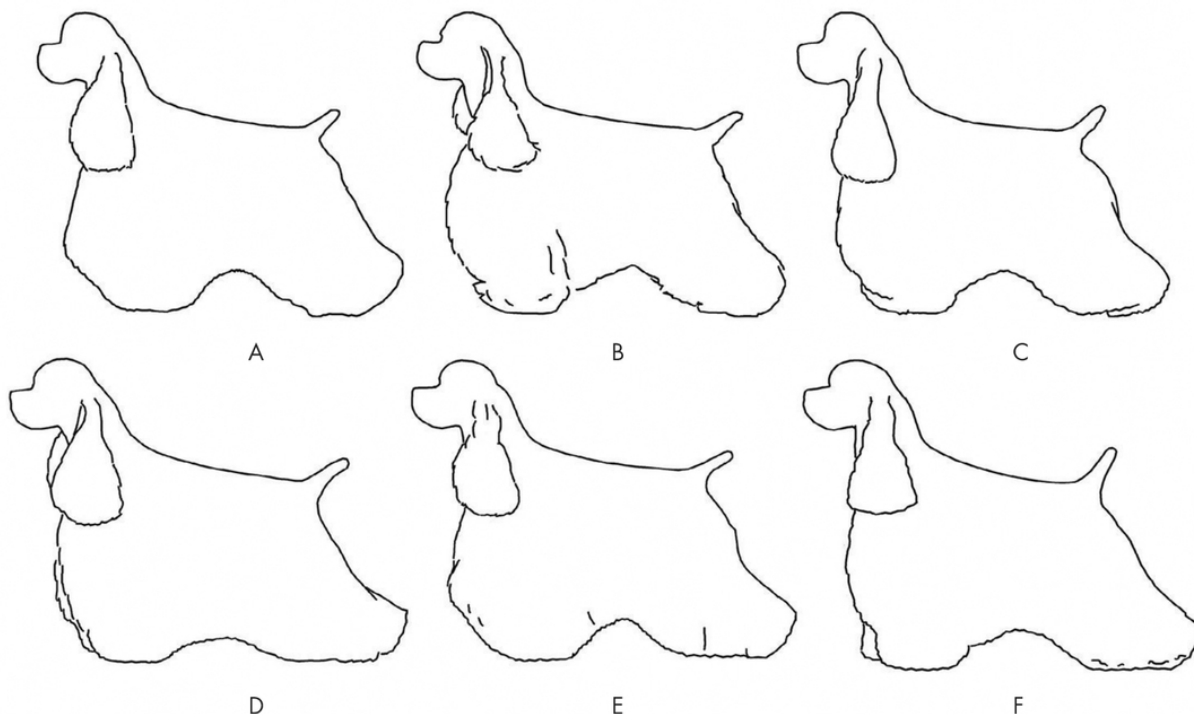
Half of the group agreed on "Upper lip not full nor of sufficient depth to cover the lower jaw" (10<sup>th</sup>) and "Feet turn in or out"



## Cocker Spaniel Outlines

*Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex*

### DOGS



(11<sup>th</sup>). “Upper lip” (10<sup>th</sup>) was in the second quartile for another seven and the bottom quartile for another six. The bigger group put “Feet in/out” (11<sup>th</sup>) middling or lower, with another ten from 12–14. “Chest not deep, or its front not sufficiently wide” (5<sup>th</sup>) was 3–6 on fifteen surveys, but around the middle on twelve.

Fourteen experts had “Hips not wide or quarters not well rounded and muscular” (8<sup>th</sup>) ranking from 4–7, while another twelve put them in the third quartile. “Teeth too small or do not meet in a scissors bite” (7<sup>th</sup>) was ranked 10–13 for thirteen experts, but nine placed it in or near the second quartile. “Excessive coat or curly or cottony textured coat” (9<sup>th</sup>) produced three different opinions: for ten, it was very serious, nine thought it middling, and another nine had it in or near to the bottom quartile. The averages of these three faults were less than one-tenth of a point apart so that additional input could change their relative rankings in the list.

The Cocker experts were fairly consistent in the lists of virtues and faults. Temperament, movement, topline, and front assemblies ranked highly. Rear was near the middle. Tail was

at or near the bottom, and neck in the bottom portion. With the exception of “Expression” (6<sup>th</sup>) and “Dentition” (7<sup>th</sup>), head characteristics were in the bottom half of both lists. Coat was more important as a fault than as a virtue, as was proportion.

### Outlines

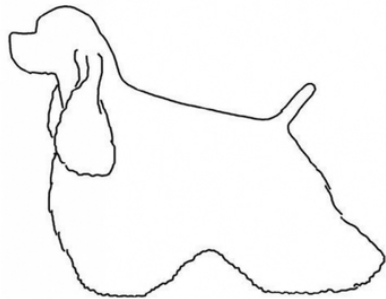
The survey included outlines of six Cocker dogs and six Cocker bitches for the experts to place as they would classes at a dog show. The outlines were made from photos of very good to excellent Cocker Spaniels; the photos were of real dogs so none is perfect. It’s a challenge to judge a coated breed on outline alone. The placements might well change if the judges could go over the dogs with their hands, see more details, and watch them move.

The Cocker Spaniel dog with the best average placement and most first placements was outline “A.” Those who placed him first commented “most balanced, pretty head type, muzzle profile, low ear set, front well under,” “slightly sloping topline,

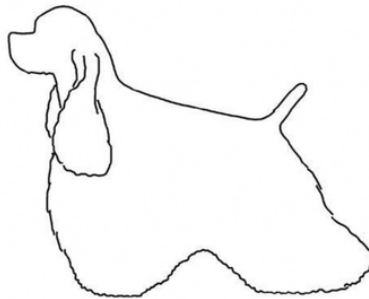
## Cocker Spaniel Outlines

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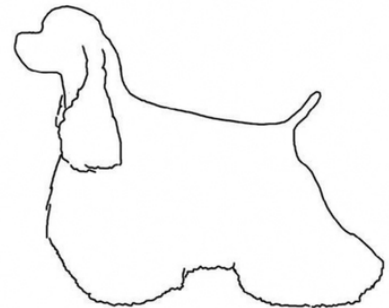
### BITCHES



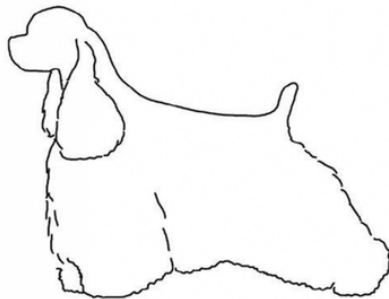
U



V



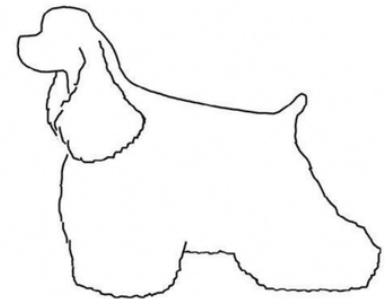
W



X



Y



Z

tailset continuation of topline," "breed type personified, beautiful head piece," "most correct type and silhouette, correct head proportions," "neck set," and "compact, cobby."

The dog with the next best average placement and next most first placements was Cocker "E." Those who liked him said "nice flow from neck to tail," "moderate, correct length of foreface, correct slightly domed top skull," "beautiful tail set 45-degree angle," "masculine with typey outline, balanced, nice ear set," "matching angulation," "correct proportions in head and head in balance with body," "correct topline," "slightly longer than tall," "up on leg without exaggeration," and "shoulder layback."

The best bitch using the same criteria was Cocker "W." Those who chose her noted "best balance, topline, head, and angles," "better set under with proper shoulder layback," "clean neck and shoulders, need a little more lip," "good hard topline, good length of neck," "pretty head, muzzle profile, ear set," "breed type, exquisite outline, perfect topline and tail set," "correct length of muzzle to slightly domed top skull," "feminine,"

"slightly longer than tall," and "clear standout."

The bitch in second place was Cocker "V" based on average placement score, although bitch "U" had one more first placement than "V." Comments on "V" included "selected on outline," "well proportioned, good head," "most balanced, good angulation and tail set," and "up on leg and short back."

Best of breed is open for discussion. Dog "A" was named BOB ten times while bitch "W" was BOB nine times. But "W" had seven more first placements than next best "A" and a much better average placement score.

All the outlines were placed first on at least one survey except "B." All outlines were unplaced on at least one survey except "W" who was in the ribbons for all of the experts. Dogs "B" and "F" and bitches "X" and "Y" were most often unplaced.

### Essential Characteristics

The experts were asked to name four to six characteristics

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## BREED PRIORITIES - COCKER SPANIEL

that a Cocker Spaniel must have to be a good one. Temperament was named most often—happy, friendly, loving, and merry. Movement had the next highest mention: ground covering, balanced reach and drive, maintain the look while moving, with no topline bounce. Then the experts wanted balance, especially front to rear but also head to neck and body. Topline must be slightly sloping, firm, and strong, standing and moving. Head was also important. It should be chiseled with the muzzle and top skull in balance and a soft and appealing expression.

### Additional Notes

The experts were asked to provide additional suggestions for students of their breed. Here are some considerations they would like us to remember.

- Value coat texture, not volume or length.
- Never choose a dog with a bad temperament or timid.
- You must get your hands on the dog under the coat to the real dog, for very clever groomers can create a wonderful picture of a dog that doesn't exist.
- Proper head proportions and the soft appealing expression are hallmarks of the breed.
- Above all, a Cocker Spaniel must be merry.
- He is a hunting dog and must be built to do his job.
- Long and low is the drag of the breed.
- Ground covering, effortless gait is very important to being able to do field work all day without tiring. For this, balance is important.
- For a sporting dog, balance of muzzle to skull is important.
- The coat must be silky with shine; heavy cottony texture coats are a nightmare.
- Don't fret about a tight lead as long as you can see movement.
- Don't ever not put a dog up because you think it doesn't have enough hair. They all have too much.
- Judge the dogs moving.
- Proper leg extension includes being close to the ground, not lifted. Fronts should set well under.
- Talk to as many breeders as you can; continue talking to your mentors.
- Overdone heads with a high dome and large round and loose eyes are incorrect.
- This is not a toy breed. Jaws are strong and long enough to hold and retrieve game. The width of the muzzle approximates the width of back skull.
- Evaluate gait by watching the pads of the feet coming and going.

Many thanks to the Cocker Spaniel experts for participating in this project and sharing their knowledge.