

# · BREED PRIORITIES · ENGLISH COCKER SPANIEL

BY NIKKI RIGGSBEE

The English Cocker Spaniel is the original Cocker Spaniel, and in most of the rest of the world it is called "Cocker Spaniel." Outside of the United States, the AKC Cocker Spaniel is called the "American Cocker Spaniel." The English Cocker was developed in England as the smaller spaniel used for flushing woodcock versus the larger "springing spaniel" and "field spaniel." In the United States, it was recognized as the English Cocker Spaniel, a separate breed from the Cocker Spaniel, in 1946.

Forty-four English Cocker Spaniel breeder-judges and mentors were identified to invite to take a survey identifying their priorities when evaluating their breed. Thirty-eight agreed to participate. Thirty-five surveys were returned.

This group has averaged almost 39 years in the breed. Those who judge average nearly nineteen years doing so. Most of the judges have judged their national specialty, and all have judged other English Cocker specialties.

*continued on page 244*

*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.*

*Questions, Comments, or Concerns? Contact AKC Judge Ms. Nikki Riggsbee at this email address: [Nriggsbee@aol.com](mailto:Nriggsbee@aol.com)*

### English Cocker Spaniel Virtues

The experts were asked to rank a list of virtues taken from their breed standard. As an aside, I have a breed's parent club representative proofread my lists to see if I have missed any very important features. I try to cover the whole dog, recognizing that I cannot include everything in a list limited to sixteen items. The list below is in the experts' average priority sequence, with one being the most important.

1. Compactly built, short-coupled
2. Ribs well sprung, springing gradually to mid-body, tapering to back ribs which are of good depth and extend well back
3. Expression soft, melting, dignified, alert, intelligent
4. Upper arm set well back ... the elbow beneath the highest point of shoulder blade
5. Forechest well developed, prosternum projecting moderately beyond shoulder
6. Moderate angulation
7. Solidly built with as much bone and substance as possible
8. Gait characterized more by drive and appearance of power than by great speed
9. Loin short, broad, very slightly arched, not enough to affect topline appreciably
10. Neck graceful, muscular, arched, blending cleanly into sloping shoulders
11. Muzzle equal in length to skull, well cushioned, cleanly chiseled under eyes
12. Upper thighs broad, thick, muscular, providing plenty of propelling power
13. Hips relatively broad, well rounded
14. Feet firm, round, catlike
15. Tail in constant motion while dog in action
16. Coat medium length on body; flat or slightly wavy; silky in texture

"Compactly built, short-coupled" (1<sup>st</sup>) was placed in the top three placements by 31 experts, with 25 placing it first overall. Its average was over three points ahead of the second place virtue, further emphasizing its top position.

At the other end, "Coat medium length on body; flat or slightly wavy; silky in texture" (16<sup>th</sup>) was in the last quartile on 33 surveys, with 22 ranking "Coat" at the bottom. Its average was nearly two points lower than the adjacent virtue, confirming its lesser importance.

Twenty-six experts put "Tail in constant motion while dog in action" (15<sup>th</sup>) in the last quartile. Usually this is an indicator of temperament and therefore important. I'm thinking it was ranked near the bottom since it isn't an issue or problem in this breed.

"Ribs well sprung, springing gradually to mid-body, tapering to back ribs which are of good depth and extend well back" (2<sup>nd</sup>) and "Forechest well developed, prosternum projecting moderately beyond shoulder" (5<sup>th</sup>), had majorities of 22 and 21

respectively. "Upper arm set well back ... the elbow beneath the highest point of shoulder blade" (4<sup>th</sup>), in the second quartile for eighteen, contributes to the "forechest." These features enable their function to push through undergrowth, important for the group.

Eighteen experts also agreed on "Expression soft, melting, dignified, alert, intelligent" (3<sup>rd</sup>), "Loin short, broad, very slightly arched, not enough to affect topline appreciably" (9<sup>th</sup>), "Upper thighs broad, thick, muscular, providing plenty of propelling power" (12<sup>th</sup>), and "Feet firm, round, catlike" (14<sup>th</sup>). Thirteen others placed "Feet" more around midpoint. The bigger group had "Loin" above average in importance, but twelve ranked it from 10 to 13. The last of the 11 majorities, with 20 agreeing, was "Hips relatively broad, well rounded" (13<sup>th</sup>).

Those features that didn't muster a majority had split opinions. "Moderate angulation" (6<sup>th</sup>) was very important for 15, mid range for ten, and in or near the last quartile for eight. "Solidly built with as much bone and substance as possible" (7<sup>th</sup>) had a similar split.

Thirteen had "Gait characterized more by drive and appearance of power than by great speed" (8<sup>th</sup>) in the second quartile, with 12 ranking it definitely below midpoint. "Neck graceful, muscular, arched, blending cleanly into sloping shoulders" (10<sup>th</sup>) was important for 13, but 14 placed it around midpoint, lowering its average. "Muzzle equal in length to skull, well cushioned, cleanly chiseled under eyes" (11<sup>th</sup>) was between 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> for 14 experts, but 11 surveys placed it 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>.

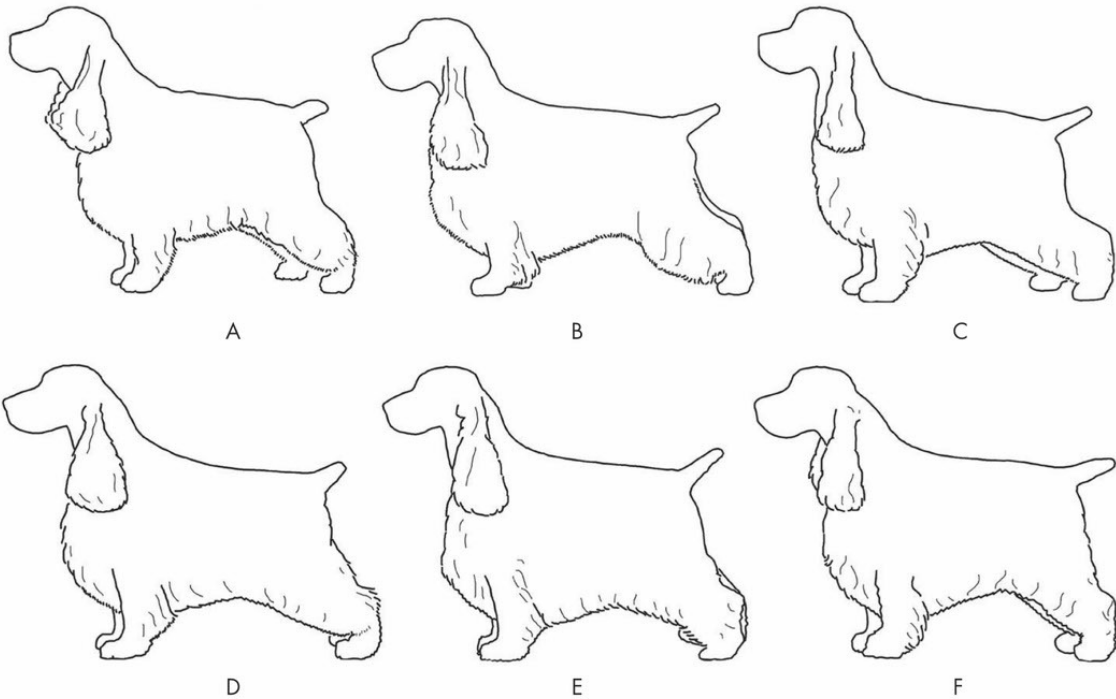
It was noted above that the averages for the first and last virtues were well above or below its neighbor. Nearly two points separated the averages of "Hips" (13<sup>th</sup>) and "Feet" (14<sup>th</sup>), confirming the relative value of the bottom three. Three averages were fairly close, so that additional input could change their relative ranks. "Gait" (8<sup>th</sup>), "Loin" (9<sup>th</sup>), and "Neck" (10<sup>th</sup>) were within one-tenth of a point from the adjacent virtue.

### English Cocker Spaniel Faults

The experts were also asked to rank a list of faults directly from or derived from the standard. They are listed below, from most serious to least serious.

1. Chest so narrow that front appears narrow or pinched
2. Ribs not well sprung, not extending well back
3. Lacking much bone and substance
4. Topline sagging or rumpy
5. Loin not short and broad
6. Head coarse or with sharp angles
7. Angulation greater or less than moderate
8. Hips not relatively broad, well rounded
9. Crabbing or rolling (gait going and coming)
10. Cloddy or coarse
11. Jaws not strong, not capable of carrying game
12. Toes not arched and tight
13. Temperament sluggish or hyperactive



*English Cocker Spaniel Outlines**Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex***DOGS**

14. Tail not in incessant action while at work
15. Eye color not dark brown (except in livers and liver parti-colors)
16. So profusely feathered as to interfere with field work

The greatest agreement was on last place "So profusely feathered as to interfere with field work" (16<sup>th</sup>); thirty of our experts had it in the last quartile. Twenty-seven surveys put "Chest so narrow that front appears narrow or pinched" (1<sup>st</sup>) in the top quartile.

More majorities were on the less serious faults. Twenty-seven also agreed on "Tail not in incessant action while at work" (14<sup>th</sup>), 26 on "Eye color not dark brown (except in livers and liver parti-colors)" (15<sup>th</sup>), 20 on "Temperament sluggish or hyperactive" (13<sup>th</sup>), and 19 on "Toes not arched and tight" (12<sup>th</sup>). Eleven others thought "Bad toes" (12<sup>th</sup>) above average in seriousness.

Two more serious faults had majority agreement. Twenty concurred on "Ribs not well sprung, not extending well back" (2<sup>nd</sup>) and 21 on "Lacking much bone and substance" (3<sup>rd</sup>).

Another 11 had "Ribs" in the second quartile. Those with other opinions on "Lacking bone/substance" varied from fifth to sixteenth.

Nineteen agreed on "Hips not relatively broad, well rounded" (8<sup>th</sup>) ranking it around mid-point. Another 11 placed it 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup>. Note that many of the important faults would detract from the breed's ability to have the strength and power to push through underbrush for game.

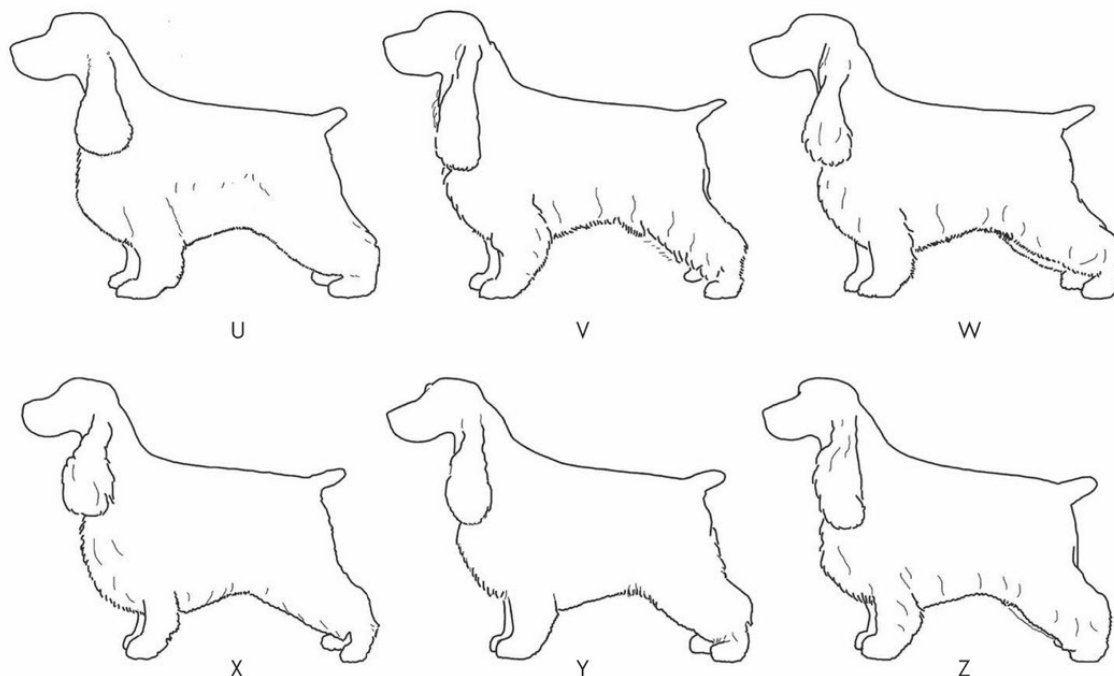
Most of the other faults had bi-polar rankings. "Topline sagging or rumpy" (4<sup>th</sup>) was quite important for 14, but only moderately so for another 14. Sixteen had "Loin not short and broad" (5<sup>th</sup>) around or just above midpoint, while 11 thought it very serious. "Head coarse or with sharp angles" (6<sup>th</sup>) had a similar split. "Angulation greater or less than moderate" (7<sup>th</sup>) was in the top quartile for eight, the second quartile for 13, and from 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> for ten.

"Crabbing or rolling (gait going and coming)" (9<sup>th</sup>) was middling for 17; eleven had it from 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>. Fifteen ranked "Jaws not strong, not capable of carrying game" (11<sup>th</sup>) from 10<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup>, with another 11 putting it from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup>. "Cloddy or

## English Cocker Spaniel Outlines

*Pick Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex*

### BITCHES



coarse" (10<sup>th</sup>) was in the third quartile for 11, but all over for the rest.

"Tail not in action" (14<sup>th</sup>) averaged more than two points lower than "Sluggish/hyperactive" (13<sup>th</sup>), confirming the lower seriousness of the bottom three faults. None of the faults' averages were unusually close to each other.

The group was fairly consistent between the two lists. Bad ribs was second on both. Chest was first as a fault, fifth as a virtue. Bone/substance third as a fault, seventh as a virtue. Angulation six and seventh. Loin ninth and fifth. Coat, tail action, feet, and temperament were lower on both lists. Strength and power characteristics were generally important.

### Essential Characteristics

The survey asked the experts to list four to six characteristics that an English Cocker must have to be considered a good one. Topping the list was a good head, including width and length of muzzle, low set ears, large nose,

and beautiful soft expression. Next most often named was temperament (merry cocker, willing worker) and effortless movement, especially side gait with reach and drive and power more than speed. These were followed by balance and compactness (cobby, short coupled).

### Outlines

The experts were asked to evaluate outlines created from photos of quality English Cocker Spaniels, on outline only. They placed two classes – one of six dogs and a second of six bitches – and then selected Best of Breed. Since the outlines were made from photos of actual dogs, none is ideal. Further, the experts might change their placements if they could see the dogs in person, have their hands on them, and see them move.

The English Cocker dog with the best average placement score and the most first placements among the males was dog "F." Those who selected him as best male said "overall moderate and balanced with good bone and feet, nice arch of

neck, smooth blending into withers,” “compact, moderate angulation, good tailset,” “front set under him, gently rounded croup,” “correct off square proportion, level back, good shoulder layback, short coupled,” and “head balanced, slightly domed skull, moderate stop, muzzle 50% head length.”

The dog with the next best average placement was English Cocker “C.” Those who placed him first said “tail set correct, cobby, good neck length,” “good proportion and balance, good bone, lovely head, neck into shoulders, good feet,” “short coupled, level head planes, muzzle length equals skull,” and “well balanced, up on leg, forechest, well placed shoulder.”

While “C” had the second best average placement, dogs “D” and dog “E” had more first placements than “C.” On the other hand, “C” was selected as Best of Breed more often than “D” or “E.” So which English Cocker was second best dog is open for discussion.

The English Cocker Spaniel bitch with the best average placement and the most first placements was “Z.” Those who liked her best wrote “moderate outline, lovely feet, gently rounded croup, short cobby body,” “short back, good substance and balance, nice tailset, good blend of neck,” “good bone/substance, nice head,” “square outline, slightly rounded top skull, ample stop,” “lovely cockery shape,” “most depth of body, moderate angulation, better angulated front,” “correct topline,” “slight rise of loin,” and “best example of packaging and type.”

English Cocker “U” had the next best average and next best first placements among the bitches. Comments on her included “moderate outline, slightly sloping topline, head planes and balance of muzzle to skull correct,” “proper leg length,” “moderate angulation, cockery, good shoulder/upper arm, lovely head,” “ nice neck into shoulder, balance and substance,” and “compact, tail placement, rise over loin.”

Bitch “Z” had the best average placement and the most first placements overall and was selected BOB most often among the bitches. But the experts selected dog “F” BOB most often of the twelve. So you decide the winner.

Dogs “C,” “D,” “E,” and “F” and bitches “U,” “W,” and “Z” were placed first by at least one expert. Every outline was out of the ribbons on at least one survey. Dog “B” and bitch “V” were unplaced most often, with dog “A” close behind.

#### Additional Notes

The breed experts provided some additional comments for students of English Cocker Spaniels:

- This is a moderate, short backed, balanced dog.
- The head is the hallmark of the breed; I want to melt into the soft expression.
- The ECS should be round vs. any sharpness of angles. Roundness of body and bone. Never long, angular, or narrow.
- Type over movement.
- Cockery, not settery. This breed is not a mini setter.

- Compact, short loin, well ribbed, broad upper thigh, tail in motion.
- Make sure the dog’s outline is the same moving as standing.
- Deep chest (at least to top of elbows) with good rib spring and forechest that fills the hand and as wide as your hand moving underneath.
- Nice thick, round feet for working in the field all day.
- Best way to judge the width of the rib, loin, and rear is to view the top of the dog from the rear.
- Type, Type, Type: pleasing head, strong front, body, and bone, not so heavy as to be cloddy or coarse.
- A one-piece dog with lots of substance.
- Should have the face of a duchess, but the bottom of a cook. They must have the power and muscling to power through tough undergrowth to bring home relatively large birds.
- A good English Cocker head with a clean back-skull, plushy muzzle, chiseled, and with a soft eye that is melting and dreamy.
- Round, moderate, and merry.
- There is no preferred color.

Thanks so much to all the English Cocker Spaniel breeder-judges and mentors for sharing their knowledge.