

## **WCSS – A CHILD OF WOE WHICH QUICKLY MADE ITS MARK**

In the 17 shooting seasons from 1997-98 to date (2014-15), 18 different Clumbers have won field trials.

That may not sound so very impressive, but compare it with the past, when there was only one winner in the 84 years between 1913 and 1997. That was in 1990. The point is not that this dog, *Venaticus Duncan*, to whom all today's working Clumbers go back, was exceptional; but that the breed as a whole has undergone a transformational uplift in the quality of its work so that a variety of individual dogs (and a couple of bitches), with all the vagaries of breeding, opportunity and handler skill, have attained the demanding standard needed to take a first in a field trial.

Leave aside that minority breed field trials set the bar somewhat lower than any variety spaniel trials. The rules are the same for handlers and for judges. And as one highly regarded spaniel man said to me at a trial last season: "They still need winning."

The catalyst for this change has undoubtedly been the Working Clumber Spaniel Society. There should be no place for it. And I say that as one of its co-founders and the main architect of its positioning and policy.

The society was born in strife. It was not a case of a few happy and dedicated Clumber owners getting together to share their interest in working their dogs. It gave them that chance, but they felt compelled to distance themselves from that club and to achieve something quite different from it. The Clumber Spaniel Club had become entirely dedicated, in practice if not in principle, to the showing of Clumbers. It was therefore supervising the contraction of breed interest, and breed development, to a Clumber that was good really for only one thing: being seen in a show ring.

That artificial environment is not a place in which to safeguard the health and the future of the Clumber spaniel. Without the influence of the needs of working, even of pet owners, to inhibit the concentration on show points, exaggeration of the breed is inevitable. You can argue this is not so, but whatever the breed (or indeed the animal), showing causes exaggeration.

The like-minded founder members of the WCSS were people with a very different vision. I had written a mission statement, sent it to those I could interest, and an inaugural meeting was held in a village hall in Avon in September 1984. The objects enshrined then are unchanged today.

In the 30 years since, the society has grown – in numbers, in stature, in influence. In fact it began to make its mark from the very first.

It started as a means of giving a collective voice to those interested in the breed other than as an ornament, with its health and working characteristics in decline. The fact that no fewer than 70 members subscribed from the outset made something clear: there was a large body of interest and opinion not represented by the UK breed club.

Virtually without exception, during the preceding decade no one was breeding Clumbers for anything other than to show. If, like me in 1975, you wanted a Clumber as a working gundog, you got one from more or less solid show breeding over several generations.

Interest in working Clumbers was not enormous in the mid-1980s, but it had never died. Problem was, all the stock had to come from breeders who were not selecting for

working traits. So the quality of the work was lower – unquestionably – than from a purpose-bred animal. Poor work, poor health: it was a cycle that spelled decline. Yet, because breeders of what were show-bred animals sold dogs to working homes, some of them had working lives. So what did breeders say to prospective working owners? “Yes, of course my dogs work. All Clumbers will work. A ‘working Clumber’? There’s no such thing.” At best this was self-delusion. The succeeding ten or so generations of working Clumbers have given the lie to that sort of talk. Of course, 20, 40 generations will do so even better.

In the next nine years, enrolments exceeded 350. These were not breeders, but ordinary owners. Though mostly not interested in disputes with other Clumber opinion or with the Kennel Club, these individuals – for the good of the breed they admired – submitted themselves to strict rules and common objectives. Because they agreed with them.

Key to the society’s rapid influence was its communications programme (which received a Sword of Excellence award from the Institute of Public Relations in 1991). Put simply, it changed public perceptions of the breed. We had found we could not change the supply side – the policies and practices of the main – show – breeders. But by a process of creating awareness and educating the sporting and general public about the issues affecting the breed, we shaped the demand side.

The society was a rejection of what the breed club stood for. The breed club, in turn, found it necessary to try to persuade the Kennel Club to reject the society’s bid to become an accredited organisation. This was an attempt to smother it at birth. How near it came to success I do not know. I do know it took us 18 months to get recognition. Just as well, as we let it be known we would go to law to get it.

Taking a view that it was working requirements that would save the breed, the society as its champion had to be tough in the early days. Owners of working Clumbers today, be they members or not, have much to thank the society for.