The Working Clumber Spaniel - Health and Breeding issues.

Recent breeding by the WCSS for tight eyes, sound temperament and excellent hips has made distinct improvements in the health of the working bred dogs, and issues in the past with poor eyes (entropion and ectropion) bad hips and poor temperament are rare or non-existent in working bred Clumbers. The Society continues to strive towards the perfect healthy dog fit for its original purpose as a working gundog.

Check for Hip dysplasia (HD)

WCSS recommends that all dogs are hip scored, and that breeders only use dogs with low hip scores (25 or less)

DNA tests for genetic mutations

The result of these tests can be either CLEAR (no copies of the mutant gene), CARRIER (one copy of the mutant gene) or AFFECTED (two copies of the mutant gene). Note that the progeny of a clear sire and clear dam will also be clear (hereditary clear), and the progeny of one affected parent and one clear parent will always be a carrier. There is no possibility of breeding an affected dog if at least one of the parents is clear for the mutation. A carrier will never develop the condition but may pass to its offspring if mated with another carrier or an affected dog.

See the article 'Breeding with carriers' on the Breed Notes page for more information.

Currently we advise that Clumbers are checked for two such genetic mutations which have been found in the breed. PDP1 (Pyruvate Dehydrogenase Phosphate 1 Deficiency) and EIC (Exercise Induced Collapse). Both tests can be done from a simple cheek swab (buccal swab).

PDP1

Most Clumbers in the UK are hereditary clear for PDP1 (either bred from clear parents or where the parents status is unknown are tested clear for PDP1). This has never been an issue in the UK but there have been cases in other countries. We recommend that breeding stock is tested if the status is not known.

EIC

Since the EIC test was validated for Clumber spaniels in September 2015 a few affected dogs have been identified, along with several carriers. It is early days yet for this test but the indications are that dogs affected genetically may not necessarily be affected clinically so it is important that all breeding stock is tested before selecting a breeding partner, so that no further affected dogs are produced. Mating a carrier or an affected dog to a clear partner will ensure no more affected pups are produced. Pups from an affected to clear mating will all be carriers but pups from a carrier to clear mating could be either clear or carriers so should be tested to check their status – ideally before rehoming - and clear pups placed in homes where the owners intend to breed.

The WCSS statement on EIC is available on the website on the Breed Notes page with more information.

Further information on these schemes can be obtained from The Kennel Club or The Animal Health Trust
Eye Tests

Eye testing – should be done under the KC/BVA/ISDS Eye Scheme or the KC/AHT Scheme or the ECVO Scheme. (Eye examinations should be repeated annually and should be within 18 months of the date of registration of a litter).

The Society encourages members to eye test their dogs before breeding and also encourages members to only breed from dogs free from entropion and ectropion.

COI (Coefficient of In Breeding)

COI provides an indication of the probability of shared genes in breeding lines. Its use is enhanced by an outline understanding of major breeding strategies.

Breeding Strategies

The WCSS does not promote any particular breeding strategy. Is that a dreadful cop-out? In our view it’s a sensible strategy in its own right. Not blindly following one line requires more thought, not less.

Let’s be in no doubt that our breed has been restored to the healthy working dog we have today by knowledgeable line breeding. Without such care we’d still have dogs with distressing eyes, dubious trainability and crumbly hips. We’ve got to applaud the ‘best to the best’ way we got here and not shirk from appreciating that essential re-building work.

Equally, we can’t ignore what modern genetics tells us is on the other side of the coin. Inherited diseases which present as only one copy in an animal have benign results but two copies equals an inherited disease. Unfortunately small, highly related populations increase the chances of this happening so expanding the gene pool is obviously a good idea. But how?

Pure population geneticists follow the holy grail of pretty much unrelated dogs and this can, in their eyes, excuse the breeding of dogs with some known faults under controlled conditions. That’s a bit extreme for protectors of the hard won progress in working Clumbers so fortunately a less extreme strategy is on offer. By resisting the temptation of repeat matings and encouraging the use of as many desirable different dogs as possible we get a workable strategy which many can support.

Another path to a widened gene pool is to look towards gradually reducing the Coefficient of Inbreeding (COI). This can require some carefully researched introduction of overseas bloodlines or looking outside purely working lines. The accent here is on careful research and considerable thought to avoid pursuing a COI number at the expense of the working dog. In the hands of the right breeder this has a contribution to make.

We could also try to actually grow the gene pool by a brief and controlled outcross to a similar breed. We’ve already seen some Kennel Club approved (essential) crosses imported from Sweden and the results are being carefully watched. The risk of inherited diseases actually being imported from other breeds has to be accepted and obviously some loss of ‘type’ is at stake. However, with careful selection valuable dogs might become available to the general population within a couple of generations of selection for Clumber type and abilities. Not one to try at home lightly but a few breeders have the right touch and application to consider it.

WCSS has no business to be stipulating breeding strategies but it can encourage variety in a practical way. Free advertising of tested stud dogs on the WCSS webpage is a good place to start. Taking in the thoughts of pragmatic experts such as Dr Tom Lewis is another invaluable tool. Constructive, thoughtful breeding strategies will see us home.

There are ways over the hurdle of a small gene pool and probably each has a part to play. Multiple approaches offer essential balance…. As long as they are connected by breeders prepared to think,
research, and think some more, and to work together… It’s not as simple as following a simplified single mantra.