

# DUFFEY ON DOGS

by Dave Duffey

## RIGHT FOR THE TIMES



**T**he biggest, baddest, most beautiful or best he ain't. But the Brittany is making a bid for the title of most popular gun dog among the pointing breeds. If he hasn't already reached that pinnacle, bet on it within the next 10 years.

Taking nothing away from the Brittany's ability to serve the "shoe-leather" upland bird hunters of this nation, it may be that Britts are taking over because their time has come. They are right for the times, as far as a heap of hunters are concerned, most adaptable to the situations U.S. sportsmen seek or stumble onto. They didn't take the country by storm in the decades following their 1930s introduction; France's contribution to the docked-tail pointing breeds, they were classed as "Continental" pointers, setting them apart from the traditional long-tailed pointers and setters of British Isles origin.

But their progress has been steady, the publicity about them reasonable and their performance of a quality that satisfies an upland gunner who is willing to accept somewhat short shrift in the style and class department if it means he's able to see his dog most of the time they are afield. For the man who is positive that the only way to gun the uplands is with "a dog that hunts with me and I don't have to go hunting for," the Brittany represents a well-hedged good bet.

There are figures, as well as field observation and commentary, that indicate the Britt's ascendancy toward the top of "bird dog" popularity. Last time I looked, the American Kennel Club had it topping the annual registration lists for pointing breeds by an overwhelming margin. There were about 17,000 Britts signed up, almost twice as many as the next most popular breed in the pointing category, the German short-haired pointer with about 9,000 annual registrations.

In case you are curious, going down the AKC's list other approximate numbers are Irish setter 4,500; Weimaraner 4,000; Vizsla 1,700; English setter, Gordon setter and German wirehaired pointer about 1,000 each; and pointers (English or American, depending upon whether you think the place of origin or highest development deserves credit in designating a breed), less than 500.

Of course, anyone who does much hunting will legitimately dispute those figures as an accurate representation of sporting breeds actually hunted. Compared to the large number of pointers and English setters working for the gun but few Irish setters and Weimaraners, the use of AKC registrations skews the statistics.

The AKC draws support from show exhibitors, obedience trainers and people who enjoy their dogs primarily as pets, for the bulk of its registrations. While included in the

sporting breed classification, a big percentage, if not a majority, of AKC registered gun dog breeds are never shot over.

For example, cocker spaniels are tabbed as sporting dogs. They have ranked near or at the top of the AKC's list for *all breeds* popular in the U.S., about 95,000 registered annually. None of the pointing breeds, however, rank in the top 10.

Labrador retrievers with over 70,000 registrations and Golden retrievers with almost 55,000, however, rank third and fifth, respectively, on the popularity list. This reflects an interest in those breeds among dog owners who do *not* hunt them, as well as those that do; both breeds are heavily represented afield, while the Cocker, as a hunter, is virtually non-existent. In the AKC's sporting dog classification, the Brittany's hunting use is analogous to that of the Lab and golden. Lots of them are never hunted.

The poor showing in the AKC's popularity poll by such immensely popular gun dogs as the pointer and the English setter is easily explainable. Most *serious* fanciers of field-

*If it isn't the most popular gun dog in the U. the Brittany will be. There are more and more Brittanys taken into the field every year.* Photo courtesy of Quail Hollow Kennels, Salem, New Jersey

type pointing breeds, particularly pointers, English and Irish setters, are disdainful of the show-type dogs within their breeds registered with the AKC. So, predominantly, dogs within those breeds intended and used for hunting are registered with The Field Dog Stud Book.

This anomaly is another indication, however, of the Britt's general popularity, for Brittanys are frequently registered with the FDSB as well as the AKC. And while the American Brittany Club has more AKC-affiliated members (about 3,400) than any other pointing breed, Britts not only compete in FDSB events but some of the major field trials for the breed, run under the aegis of the AKC, more closely resemble FDSB trials than they do the more artificial formats of the sponsoring organization.

In addition, Brittanys have enjoyed great success, including the winning of championship titles, in National Shoot-To-Retrieve Association trials (affiliated with the FDSB but geared toward developing bird dogs that are walked with and retrieve what's shot) and some go through their paces in those tests to prove the worth of multi-purpose pointer/retrievers conducted by the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association.

Those accomplishments indicate the widespread popularity of the breed. But competition and testing are drops in the bucket compared to actual hunting with gun dogs done by sportsmen who have never seen a field trial or don't need or desire a multi-purpose dog when afield.

What's making the Brittany a favorite is that for increasing numbers of hunters, wide open spaces and rural living have become a thing of the past. Bird hunters are now more often urban-based and even those residing in the country and small towns are severely restricted as far as hunting available land is concerned, in this second half of the 20th century.

This situation has prompted some special requirements for a hunting dog that fits modern day life-styles with a minimum of inconvenience.



*and pointers of game birds.* Photo courtesy of Quail Hollow Kennels.

Theoretically and actually, the Brittany fits; a compact, intelligent pointing dog readily adaptable to city and suburban living.

Essentially, Brittanys are close-working seekers and pointers of game birds, best utilized by hunters who walk on weekend forays afield. Some are field trialed or hunted from horseback. But, for the most part, as wide-ranging, big country, covey-finders, they come up short. Their forte is as a close-in gun dog for the on-foot hunter, whether probing the wooded covers of the northeast or the grainfields of the nation's breadbasket.

Even in the tradition-laced Deep South, where "bird dog" means a quail-hunting pointer or English setter, and in northern climes, where the flushing breeds are most practical for the game and terrain, the ubiquitous Britt has punched its paw prints in alien turf. That's a mark of upland versatility.

What most likely accounts for the Frenchman's general acceptance by U.S. hunters is the discovery that the Britt is a *comfortable* pointing dog with which to hunt. Most being naturally close-working, they also

possess a spaniel curiosity that leads them to probe tangles and cover clumps rather than skirting edges, rimming big fields or disappearing over rises for a cursory check of greener pastures.

This makes them less desirable, even unsuitable, for prairie and plantation hunting. But it fits the mode of hunting most practiced by a majority of today's sportsmen, brought about by limited opportunities and restricted coverts.

There is a psychological appeal as well. Newly minted hunters, lacking experience and dog training know-how, are uncomfortable with dogs possessing a high degree of drive that will frequently be out of sight. Even if they admire insatiable desire and day-long endurance, they don't have the facilities, time or insight to get the most from that type of gun dog. Even veteran hunters, who in their more active years knew and considered only pointers, will almost apologetically explain that they've converted to Brittanys because "I'm just not up to chasing after one of those hard-heads anymore."

Coupled with *natural* close ranging is strong pointing instinct and a

cooperative willingness to pick up on the retrieving portion of gun dog work that is as good or better than this combination in any of the other pointing breeds. Being intelligent and biddable, along with having strong natural inclinations, makes Britts comparatively easy to train.

While that's all to the good, the Brittany temperament has drawbacks. Risking over-simplification, they are "kid-glove" dogs. That makes them unsuitable for the brusque, non-nonsense, forceful trainer who demands the ultimate in desire, style and endurance and doesn't hesitate to come down hard on a dog to get what he wants.

Mishandled Brittanys will sulk. Occasional wrong moves or continued overzealous disciplining will result in difficult-to-deal-with balkiness, requiring more patience to overcome than many hunters possess. Loss of temper by a trainer sets back the development of any breed. With most others, an exasperated sportsman can get away with occasional lapses. But with a Britt, harshness and mistakes can cause more

serious problems, the *trainer* finding it necessary to work his way back into the dog's good graces, rather than having the *dog* try to make amends to get back on even keel.

This too matches a change in times and attitudes, however. Sometimes, with individuals within any breed, a trainer has no choice but to crack down. But the stereotype of rough and ready dog *breaking* is phasing out. While a "broke" dog or a "well-broke" horse is still used to describe a mannerly animal, gentler *training* is in vogue.

More than ever before, women hunt and ride, and those of female gender do well as trainers of dogs and horses. Ladies and gentlemen who find it difficult to "get all over a dog," even when he needs it, will have the best rapport with a Britt.

The breed does offer two extreme types. Although for a few hunters the wide-ranging dog is just what the doctor ordered, the "field trial" type is widely criticized. The other is the "shoe-polisher" type, less complained about because owners fail to recognize that a dog sticking around

underfoot doesn't rate the description of a "close-working dog." *Hunting* close and dawdling around aren't one and the same.

For the most part, performing properly, pointing dogs *hunt* well beyond gun range, ideally "shutting down" in tight cover and "reaching" when the terrain opens up. For their own peace of mind or other reasons, some hunters want their pointing dogs constantly within gun range, as *flushing* dogs, like spaniels and retrievers, must be.

But a dog that is tripped over and must be constantly encouraged to "find the birds!" is a sorry excuse for a gun dog, less useful and practical than one that needs hollering at to curb his desire and exuberance from time to time, or even "sung to" so he can keep track of his handler when he constantly goes to the extremes.

To varying degrees, each way, most hunters want something in between the independent wide-ranger and the trot-in-place nonproducer and, by searching hard or getting lucky, should be able to locate a Brittany that suits them. Starting with a pup, he might wind up with the wrong kind for him, which shouldn't sour him on the breed, but sometimes does.

Not infrequently, the Brittany has been confused with the English springer spaniel, based on similarity in appearance and until a few years ago its designation as a Brittany spaniel. Purists can shudder at this observation, but confusion over the divergent hunting styles ("don't all spaniels *flush* their game?") has to some degree contributed to Britts being used as flushers.

Now the proper designation of the breed is simply Brittany. Dropping the spaniel part of the name serves the interests of brevity and clarity. Properly, Britts point game. The hunter does the flushing. It should no longer be necessary for "experts" to explain that the Brittany is "the only spaniel that should point" and eliminate confusion when breeds are categorized as pointing, retrieving and flushing types on lists.

But the past dies hard. It will be some time before the general public notes the change. For a time, some

*Britts are comparatively easy to train because of their intelligence and biddability. Photo by Dave Books.*



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hunters will identify Brittany work with the mode for other spaniels, seeking game in a quartering pattern before the gun and flushing it within gun range. The Britt's size, short tail, and similar coat will continue to plague it when described as "one of them orange and white, long-legged springers."

Popularity-wise, that may not be all bad. Some folks are out there to shoot birds. A dog that will produce them within range, with minimal formal training, suits them fine. So expect to see for some time Britts "doing it wrong" because their owners have no expectation of them pointing, or are perfectly happy with instinctive flash points that alert gunners just before Britts spring in and put birds into flight.

It should be noted that if matching a prescribed physical standard is important, or if a dog is obtained primarily for showing or as an attractive companion, the Brittany ranks up near the top as a dual breed, with wins in both conformation shows and field trials. But among hunters, "handsome is as handsome does" and field Britts show variances in size and physical appearance; from snipey little fox terrier-like examples to sturdy critters as leggy as some English setters.

For the most part, they are considerably smaller than the other pointing breeds, with short-backed, "cobby" bodies making the legs appear longer than they are. Of quiet, non-quarrelsome demeanor, some have an almost cat-like aloofness. They fit well into a world of apartments, condominiums, compact automobiles and the "singles scene." Whether or not they are kept as hunters, they make good house dogs and

the hunter who feels he needs more than one dog to make his days afield may find a brace of Britts more convenient than a pair of larger, more rambunctious dogs.

Despite its ascension to "top dog" status in this country during a 50-year span of development, there has been some interest in importing and breeding "French Brittanys," seemingly to attempt restoration of a type similar to those first brought into this country and still preferred in France. But dissatisfaction with what the Britt has become over the

years in this country apparently isn't widespread. Along with difficulties in obtaining recognition and registration, a general need for and acceptance of original type Brittanys hasn't been evidenced. The considerable change the Britt has undergone, including diversification as to type and use in order to match widely varied preferences among U.S. hunters, has positioned the breed in a coincidental place and time frame that makes it a leading contender as *the* hunting dog of the present and future.

