

Special Delivery: The B



Boykin Spaniel

by Clarke C. Jones
photos by Dwight Dyke

Two stylish bird dogs pose as if frozen in the chilly, fall mist. “POINT!” yells Dave Pomfret, lifting his hat in the air while seated astride his horse. A pair of hunters approach, move past the dogs, flush the quail, and fire. The bird dogs are trained to be steady to shot and do not move. The downed birds now must be located and retrieved in the tall grass. Darin Strickland brings up a Boykin spaniel, its long, wavy coat quivering with energy, and releases it near the marked, fallen birds. The small, brown dog disappears into the high broom-straw. Strickland tracks the spaniel’s movements by watching the tops of the grasses sweep about in a zigzag pattern. Quickly, the Boykin emerges from the cover with a quail, delivers it in precise fashion to Strickland, and then dashes back into the grasses to find the remaining bird.



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—Dave Pomfret



As the winning handler of the 2013 AKC Pointing Breed Walking Gun Dog Championship, Dave Pomfret knows something about bird dogs. He has owned pointers and setters since the 1970s and began field trialing them in the early 1980s. Now he uses a Boykin spaniel to retrieve the quail shot at Blandfield Plantation. “I have never had a more pleasant, competent, willing, and people-oriented dog. Of all the dogs I have owned, it will do the job with the least amount of training,” states Pomfret, who is the upland manager at Blandfield.

“A Boykin wants to please you completely in the worst way,” Dave continues. “They are not kennel dogs. In my opinion, they want to be around people. And they are very easy to house break.”

Eleven states have an official state dog, six of which could be called hunting dogs. While Virginia’s State Dog—the foxhound—may have the most aristocratic heritage, South Carolina’s State Dog, the Boykin spaniel, could be said to have come to us through Divine Providence. The story goes that in the early 1900s, Mr. Alexander White found the dog on a Sunday morning near his Presbyterian church in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and later turned it over to Mr. L. Whitaker Boykin of nearby Camden to train.

There is speculation regarding the underlying genetic makeup of a Boykin: the Chesapeake Bay retriever, the American water spaniel, the springer spaniel, and cocker spaniel, all appear to have had a hand in its creation. The end result of that genetic soup is a not-too-big, enthusiastic, hunting dog ready for upland wing shooting, turkey, and waterfowl hunts.

Harriet Clark runs Laurel Grove Shooting Preserve in Sutherland, and acquired her first Boykin around 1965 when her husband was given a Boykin puppy by one of his patients. At the same time, another patient gave her husband an Irish setter pup. “We were going on vacation at the time, so we left both dogs with a dog trainer for hunting purposes.

When we came back, my husband was expecting the trainer to be raving about the Irish setter because it was thought to have a good pedigree. The trainer said, ‘Friend, I don’t know about that red dog but that little itty, bitty dog, now that’s a bird dog!’”

At Laurel Grove, Harriet’s Boykins retrieve pheasant and quail. Having shot over Harriet’s Boykins, I can testify that they are eager hunters. “In my opinion, Boykins are easy to train,” Harriet says. “I handled one Boykin that won both the Boykin Spaniel Society Flushing Championship and the Boykin Spaniel Society Retrieving Championship, and I am the only one who blew a whistle over her. I don’t give lessons, because I have nothing to teach anyone,” continues Clark, modestly, implying how easily trainable a Boykin spaniel is.

Even though the Boykin has a reputation as a fast learner, some breeders caution that a new Boykin owner transitioning to a Boykin from working with, say, a Lab or Chesapeake retriever should remember that just as all pointing breeds are not alike, neither are all flushing breeds. Although eager to please, a Boykin may “shut down” if it is overcorrected and therefore may require a gentler hand.

Dave Pomfret recognizes that this small dog does have its limitations and does not recommend a Boykin to those who predominantly hunt geese, especially in Virginia’s eastern marshes when the tide is out. Any waterfowl hunter who has had to trudge through two or three feet of thick, muddy marsh goo knows it is tough going. However, Pomfret insists Boykins do make great duck and pheasant dogs.

The Boykin has been described as “a duck dog that does not rock the boat.” If you have ever been on the water in January in a small jonboat, you know how important that can be.

Keith Boshier of Bluff Ridge Kennels in Chesterfield likes the Boykin breed for its versatility in hunting different game. He

appreciates their drive to compete, perform, and please the handler, as well as their love of companionship. “I am an avid duck hunter and have always had a Lab for duck hunting,” says Keith. “Now I depend on my Boykin for retrieving my ducks.”

Some people also use Boykins to hunt turkey and work at dove shoots. Joey Coleman of Rock Hill Boykin Spaniels in Richmond is passionate about the abilities of a Boykin and its versatility. Coleman first discovered the Boykin when a friend took him turkey hunting and used a Boykin spaniel for flushing turkeys. Joey now owns eight Boykins; the oldest is 13 and the youngest, almost two years. “Anyone who has had hunting dogs knows eventually they [the dogs] get to an age when physically they cannot do it anymore. My two oldest are now retired, so I need to keep training younger dogs for the field.” Coleman adds, “What really attracted me to the breed was in that small, compact size came so much tenacity, versatility, and affection.”

Coleman’s research of the breed led him to the Boykin Spaniel Society, which is the official registrar of Boykin spaniels. Coleman is very impressed with the society and the work they do to improve the breed. The Boykin Society works diligently to mitigate any health issues inherent in the breed and aims to improve its bloodline. For that reason, the Boykin Spaniel Society established a Boykin Spaniel Foundation to provide support. Formed to further clinical studies and research on hereditary diseases, the foundation reimburses Boykin Society members a percentage of the fees for testing and DNA evaluations conducted by the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA) and compensates registered breeders for additional health tests. At various Boykin spaniel events around the country, the foundation funds free heart and eye certification clinics.

Bill Crites serves on the board of directors of the Boykin Spaniel Society and the Boykin Spaniel Foundation. He reports that,



“This pilot program has been so successful in enticing members who might not otherwise have their dog’s hips evaluated ... Over the past 15 years, Boykins have moved from the second most susceptible breed for hip dysplasia to 17th. During that time, the incidence of hip dysplastic dogs has been reduced more than 45 percent.”

As more than one Boykin owner pointed out, a Boykin is not a kennel dog—it wants to be with you. The Boykin will share your couch with you as well as take cover beside you in a duck blind. When hunting season is over, Boykin owners often participate in field trials or hunt tests sanctioned by the Boykin Spaniel Society or the AKC. Its smaller size (35–40 lbs. male) makes it ideal for those who are downsizing their lifestyle and still would like a hunting and traveling companion. Also, an excited 35-pound dog running to greet you when you come home can be less intimidating than an enthusiastic, 95-pound Labrador charging at you, doing the same thing. Note that a Boykin’s longer-haired coat, which lies flat to moderately curly, will require more frequent grooming or brushing than shorter-haired dogs. And just like any retrieving dog that spends time in the water, a Boykin’s ears should be checked periodically.

If a compact sporting dog suits your lifestyle—for hunting, trialing, or just hanging out with the family—then you may want to consider letting a chocolate brown Boykin own you. As Joey Coleman says, “Boykins are like potato chips. Once you have one, you have got to have another.” 🍌

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.

RESOURCES

- ◆ The Boykin Spaniel Society has recommended guidelines for purchasing a Boykin on their website at: www.boykinspaniel.org/pupbuyer.php
- ◆ You can find out more about training or trialing with Boykin owners in our area by logging on to: www.midatlanticboykin.com