



## Working Spaniels

*Working Spaniels in South Africa are almost entirely English Springers, writes Noel Bass. There are said to be a few bloodlines whose working ability has yet to be proven, along with a couple of Cocker Spaniels and Brittany's.*

All the English Springer bloodlines are from the UK and as is the case in the UK, the E.S.S. in South Africa is split into what amounts to two separate breeds. The working dog bears little, except superficial resemblance to the show variety, being generally of smaller stature with less feathering on the legs and a shorter coat.

The most popular working dogs amongst the shooting fraternity in South



Africa are probably the H.P.R. (hunt, point and retrieve) variety, followed by the English Pointer and Labrador Retriever. The E.S.S. has not enjoyed the popularity here that it does in Britain mainly due, I believe, to its longer coat which picks up too readily the large variety of very persistent burrs, etc., found in the South African veld, not to mention those imported from Australia during the Anglo-Boer War with the horse fodder brought into the country to feed the British Army's horses. The

E.S.S. enthusiast of course, overcomes this by clipping the ears and coat of his dog at the start of a shooting season. This handily solves the problem.

The most outstanding trait of the English Springer Spaniel is their courage. They will tackle the thickest of thorny cover with total dedication and enthusiasm to locate and flush birds for the gun. No cover is too thick, water too cold or bird too large for this big-hearted little dog.

There has always been a sprinkling of working Springers in the country, perhaps more in Natal (the last outpost of the British Empire) than in other provinces. In an endeavour to popularise the breed in the shooting field, the Working Spaniel Association was formed in Johannesburg in September 1982 by a group of E.S.S. enthusiasts, amongst them a certain Lionel Wilson. Lionel had immigrated from the UK some years before where he had been involved in game keeping and was an ardent believer that the E.S.S. was the best gundog a man could shoot over. He had introduced into South Africa a line of Springers which still prevails today, although the blood has been improved since by imports from the UK by other members of the Working Spaniel Association (W.S.A.).

The majority of W.S.A. members

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are shooting people who initially showed little interest in field trials, although a decision was taken some years ago that the Association would support field trials as a good way to promote Spaniels. There are three gundog clubs (all Retriever clubs) which run Spaniels Stakes.

At first we had difficulty in fielding seven dogs in a Field Trial, but today this number has grown substantially with many dogs now capable of entering without disgracing themselves, and the popularity of the sport has grown within the WSA to the extent that we now hold our own Annual National Field Trial, in addition to two or three other field trials per annum. The standard of the Working Spaniel in South Africa has improved dramatically to the extent that we now have four field trial champions.

The popularity of the E.S.S. as a shooting dog is also growing as people get the opportunity to see them at work. Unfortunately pups from good working stock are not easy to come by and there is always a waiting list. ▲

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