

Nicole Brule-Walker with some of the French spaniels she and her husband, Marc, train and work with in Yorkshire

The “*oooh la la*” of HPR

David Tomlinson takes a look at the French spaniel, an ancient pointing breed that works well in woodland and hunts with pace and style

If you'd never seen a French spaniel, you could be forgiven for mistaking one for a large English springer. The heads and ears are similar, so too are the colour and markings, and they have the same enthusiasm for life and for hunting. The most important difference is that the French breed is expected to hunt, point and retrieve (HPR), and the English dog doesn't have to bother with the pointing.

Some English springers do point, and I'm sure that with selective breeding you could produce your own English pointing spaniel within just a few generations. However, there's no need to do so. If you've always wanted an HPR spaniel, then the *épagneul Français* is for you. It's an ancient pointing breed that flourished in 16th- and 17th-century France, when it was used to find game that could be netted by a hunter, such as larks, partridges and quail.

It fell from popularity in the early years of the 19th century, when it was largely replaced by imported English setters and pointers, and by 1900 was almost extinct. It was rescued by

◀ The French spaniel resembles the English springer in both looks and enthusiasm for life

a sporting priest, Father Fournier, who is widely regarded as the breed's saviour. The French Spaniel Club was founded in 1906, when Father Fournier gathered together the few remaining French spaniels and started a breeding programme that saved this distinctive spaniel from extinction.

Today, the French spaniel remains rare in its native country, but it has a small band of enthusiastic supporters, so its future looks assured. Unlike English springers, which have been exported around the world, few French spaniels left France, but in the early 1970s a number were imported to Canada, and the Canadian Club de l'Épagneul Français was founded in Quebec in 1978. There are also French spaniels in the USA, the Netherlands and Germany.

Why it was never imported into the UK remains a mystery, but, with the notable exception of the Brittany, no French sporting dogs have ever become established here, perhaps because of our enthusiasm for German breeds. Another reason may be its similarity to the English springer: in the days of quarantine, if you were going to import a foreign breed, then you might as well bring in something different.

Canadian imports

The fact that there are now French spaniels in the UK is entirely due to the enthusiasm of Nicole and Marc Brule-Walker. Nicole is Canadian, and grew up with these spaniels in Quebec. Marc is a professional trainer with a passion for working gundogs, and together they run a boarding and training kennels near Thirsk, in North Yorkshire. When he mentioned to Nicole that he fancied the challenge of working with a different breed, Nicole suggested a French spaniel. He liked the idea, and they imported their first one, a bitch called Clovissounette, from Quebec in 2009.

My first encounter with a French spaniel was at a field trial in southern

France, where a single representative of the breed was running. I was willing the dog to do well: the fact that it didn't was as much due to poor handling as a reflection on its ability. However, the French breed club has concentrated on trying to keep the French spaniel true to its origins as a genuine sporting dog. It has a reputation as a good all-rounder, and in Canada is widely used for the popular sport of "canicross", a competitive form of cross-country running with a dog. It is also used as a sled dog — not something at which you could imagine an English springer ever excelling.

Sporting dogs

As I discovered when I went to meet Nicole last year, the Brule-Walker's spaniels are unlikely to become sled-dogs, nor are they destined for the show ring, but the couple hope to establish this spaniel as a sporting dog here in the UK. Doing so will be a lengthy

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process. The breed isn't recognised by the Kennel Club and isn't even on the import register. Marc does, however, have the advantage of being both a professional trainer and also a keen shooting man, so he can ensure that his dogs not only fulfil their sporting potential, but can also be seen working.

Marc's spaniels have been used for beating, picking-up and as peg dogs. However, I was assured that hunting is what they do best, and from what I saw they certainly hunt with both pace and style. Unlike English springers, they use air scent, so hunt with their heads up. They are fast and cover a lot of ground. In France, they are regarded as one of the best breeds to hunt woodcock because they work well in woodland.

Whether the breed will ever catch on here is debatable, but for anyone who despairs of the diminutive white-bodied trialling springers we have today, the French spaniel has a certain appeal. Marc and Nicole are planning to breed a litter next spring, and I will be surprised if they have any difficulty finding suitable sporting homes for their puppies. ■

For further information, visit www.frenchspaniels.co.uk.

Gundogs

By David Tomlinson



We must remember the risks our dogs face

Last season a friend's promising young dog was knocked over and killed on a shoot day. It was a devastating experience. The unfortunate dog wasn't on a public road, but was hit by a shoot vehicle. It was a sad reminder of the need to be aware constantly of the risks our dogs face when we work them, even in what, at first, appears to be a safe environment.

On one shoot where I have worked my dogs, the keeper refuses to have any dogs in the beating line because so many of the drives are close to a country lane. It's not a busy road, but it's fairly straight so vehicles are invariably travelling at speed. Picking-up isn't a problem, as all the birds are driven away from the road.

However, there can be few pickers-up who haven't had that heart-stopping moment when their dog chases a runner towards a road. It's the ultimate test of the stop whistle, and it's a sad fact that many dogs are so excited that they either fail to hear the whistle or ignore it altogether. The moral is never work your dog near a road unless you are 100 per cent sure you can stop it under any circumstances.

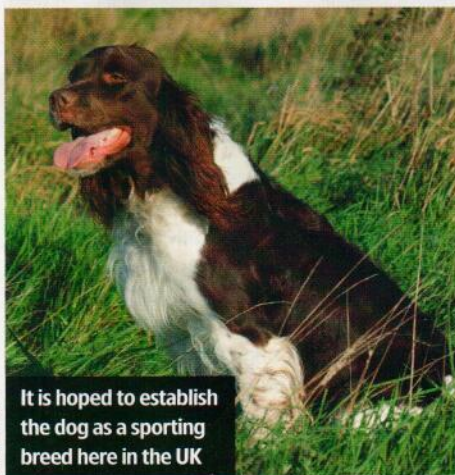
On several occasions I've been appalled by shoots that insist on putting on dangerous drives. One shoot I used to pick-up at had thousands of acres and numerous drives to choose from, but the owner still insisted on one where the Guns had their backs to a busy road, barely 100 yards behind them. It was an unrestricted country lane, and certainly not one you would ever send your dog across. All the pickers-up insisted on working their dogs on leads here, which may have hampered their ability to retrieve birds, but made sure that there were no canine casualties.

We may laugh at the current fixation with health and safety, but this drive was patently unsafe because of the risk of shot birds falling on vehicles. I always wondered whether the shoot's insurance would have covered it if a driver had crashed as a result of a falling bird hitting his or her car.

Another shoot, where my wife picked-up, decided to reverse all its drives for the last day of the season. This resulted in a drive across the A14, a dual carriageway and Suffolk's busiest road. Sensibly, the picking-up team all withdrew their services. I never heard whether this drive was repeated, because my wife decided never to pick-up there again. ■

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Next week David looks at commonplace foods that can be poisonous to dogs



It is hoped to establish the dog as a sporting breed here in the UK