

Small PACKAGE, BIG DOG

Intelligent and eager, Boykin spaniels meet the needs of many of today's upland and waterfowl hunters.

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY KEITH HENDRICKSON

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Boykin spaniels are at home in a duck marsh or around the house.



The second day of the 2009 dove season was overcast and chilly as Blake Waggoner sat on the edge of a harvested cornfield in northern Orange County. As he scanned the gray sky for doves, a chocolate-colored dog named Grace sat at his side did the same, her brow furrowed slightly over amber eyes.

Dark brown retrievers are not uncommon in dove fields or duck swamps — chocolate Labradors and even Chesapeake Bay retrievers are the usual suspects. But Waggoner's charge was neither a leggy Lab nor a burly Chessie. Grace is a Boykin spaniel, pocket-sized compared to the larger retrievers but no less an asset in the field and an easy keeper in the house.

South Carolina has a mixed bag of contributions to the greater good (Vanna White, Santee-Cooper and the Marshall Tucker Band notwithstanding), but for the sportsman, the Boykin might top the list. In fact, the Boykin's heritage traces back to Spartanburg (also home to the Tucker boys) and to the crossroads community in Sumter County from which the breed gets its name.

HISTORY OF THE BREED

The early history of the breed is a tad hazy, but Bill Crites knows it as well as anyone. Crites, an environmental engineer who lives in Columbia, S.C., has owned Boykins for about 20 years and served for six years on the board of the Boykin Spaniel Society.

"A guy named Mr. [Alec] White found this little dog in a train station in Spartanburg, and it followed him to church," said Crites. "Mr. White was a big hunter, and one of his friends was Mr. [Whit] Boykin."

Boykin was trying to develop a smaller retriever to hunt ducks and turkeys in the Wateree Swamp. Much of their hunting was done in "section" boats, portable craft that fit together like a nesting doll. "You can imagine a big dog jumping out of a little boat," said Crites. "You'd go swimming in the Wateree Swamp."

Boykin took the little dog named Dumpy home and eventually bred him to a small dog found unclaimed in a crate at the Camden railroad station. From this unlikely pairing between 1905 and 1910 came the foundation of the Boykin spaniel, which is also one of the few homegrown American breeds.



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Keeping true to the melting-pot heritage, Crites said, other blood was added to the original stock to hone the hunting edge. “We know for sure there’s Chessie; that’s where the gold eyes come from,” said Crites, whose wife, Dawn, is also an enthusiast. “We know for a fact there’s American water spaniel, and there’s some springer spaniel.”

Crites said that the two most common retrievers at that time were the Chesapeake Bay retriever and the American water spaniel. Obviously this was well before the explosion of the popularity of the Labrador retriever.

Like many of the Continental breeds, the Boykin has a docked tail. “The tail’s docked because a wagging tail was not conducive to turkey hunting,” said Crites.

Some folks may confuse the Boykin with a cocker spaniel. Try not to vocalize it around a Boykin owner. “Most everyone will buck right up and give them an education,” said Crites. Cockers, like several other once-proud field breeds, have been diluted over the years for show and pet stock, something Boykin owners are keenly aware of.

A COMMON PATH

A background in big dogs — retrievers and pointing breeds — is a common trait among Boykin owners. “My brother always had pointing dogs,” said Waggoner, who is the vice president of a multi-state retail company. “I lived on my brother’s setters and shorthairs.”

Waggoner got his first Boykin, Grace, in 2001. “I hadn’t had a dog since I was a kid,” he said. The Boykin appealed on several levels. “You got a house, and you don’t want a dog that eats the house. Also, I don’t do a lot of big-water duck hunting.”

Crites’ experience was similar. “My granddaddy was a big bird dog man. I came from West Virginia to South Carolina about 21 years ago. I bought my first one out of the paper and gave it to my then-girlfriend, now my wife. I think that sealed the deal,” he said with a laugh.

The breed’s tractability and personality mesh well with today’s wing shooter. “We kind of look at them as next century’s dog,” said Crites, who also has an English setter in his kennel. “We don’t hunt the way our daddies did. If you hunt 12 days a year, you may not want to keep a Lab or Chessie.”

The Boykin Spaniel Retriever Club, founded in 1982, has about 75 members who are owned by their “little brown dogs” and holds bimonthly field trials

Boykins are sometimes said to be “next century’s dog,” perfect for the duck hunter or upland bird hunter (right) whose trips afield might be fewer than his father’s were.

in North and South Carolina. The club held one trial at Jump and Run Farms in Louisburg last year. The format was similar to what one might see at a typical trial, if a bit scaled down. Boykins aren’t Labs, but a different tool for many of the same jobs. A third the size of the average Lab, Boykins weigh between 25 and 40 pounds and top out around 18 inches at the shoulder.

Club members drove as many as six hours to test their pups in water and land retrieves up to 125 yards in distance. Four classes from Junior Puppy to Open catered to experience levels for both dogs and handlers, and the atmosphere was more cooperation than competition. It was here that the Boykin’s utility as field partner and family dog shone bright. Mathias and Sarah Linden of Raleigh brought eight-month-old puppy Grady.

“He wanted a hunting dog, and I wanted a small house pet,” said Sarah after Mathias had worked Grady in a puppy series. “Now that I have the little guy, I’m going to start looking at hunting local creeks,” said Mathias, who duck hunts Pamlico Sound. The Lindens seem prototypical Boykin fanciers; urban and looking for a multipurpose canine, easy both in the house and in the field.

It’s hard not to smile watching a Boykin work in the field. They don’t lack the drive of a bigger Lab, they just display it differently. Like all dogs, each Boykin has its own personality, but sometimes their size and eagerness give them an almost impish quality. Their desire to please is evident, and though the dove field may be the Boykin’s best playing field,

watching one retrieve a mallard reveals no struggle on the dog’s part.

For some owners, the competition of a field trial serves other purposes. “I am competitive, but the dog just took me with her,” said Waggoner of his start. “It took me two years to get to field trials. It’s kind of like a community. You’re all there for the same reason, and if you start winning, it’s icing on the cake. I’ve also learned to be a better trainer.”

The sense of camaraderie is almost palpable at the trial. “These are some of the most loyal owners I’ve ever seen. These people are crazy,” Waggoner laughed. “I’ve seen them raise thousands of dollars at the drop of a hat.”

They may be crazy, but crazy like the proverbial fox. The Boykin Spaniel Society keeps a surplus of funds totaling over a quarter of a million dollars. Several decades ago the breed had a problem with hip dysplasia. Today the society has a subsidiary, the Boykin Spaniel Foundation, founded to help overcome detrimental genetic traits. The foundation now provides reimbursement to owners who have their dogs checked for genetic disorders, and it provides grants to university veterinary schools at Georgia, Auburn, Cornell and N.C. State.

TRAINING

Joel Porter of Cherryville knows a thing or two about training Boykins. As a pro trainer at Crown Creek Kennels with over 16 years of experience, he sees more and more Boykins in addition to the Labs, goldens and Chessies. Socialization is key.





ALL ABOUT BOYKINS

The Boykin Spaniel Society was founded in the summer of 1977 in Camden, S.C. Within the first year the society had more than 300 members from 25 states. An official registry for the breed was started in 1979. The Boykin Spaniel Society has now grown to more than 2,000 members hailing from every state in the union as well as Canada, Switzerland, Austria and Germany.

The Boykin Spaniel Society's first annual National Hunting Test was held May 23, 1980. Since then the competitors have grown steadily in numbers and ability, attracting dog owners and handlers from all parts of the country. A National Hunting Test is held each spring in South Carolina. Boykin spaniels now compete regularly in sanctioned trials of the North American Hunting Retriever Association and the Hunting Retriever Club, Inc.

In 1982 a cooperating organization named the Carolina Boykin Spaniel Retriever Club was formed. The group holds six hunting tests a year, training classes, seminars and judging clinics.

"The biggest thing with a Boykin is early socialization—human, bird and field," he said. "You really have to socialize a Boykin early on to guns, birds and water, especially water."

Porter said that the trainer needs to be mindful of the dog's size and physical characteristics when training and hunting. "The Boykin doesn't have the body fat, mass and double coat [of the Lab] to sustain it in cold waters," Porter said.

The Boykin's small size means that hunters need to be mindful of the hunting scenario, Porter said. Blowdowns that might not hamper a longer-legged breed can slow down the smaller dog. The big water of the Currituck might not be the Boykin's milieu, but the cypress swamps of eastern North Carolina are where it excels for water work, in addition to the dove fields. Porter also advised not to discount the Boykin for upland work as part of its versatile profile.

"They're phenomenal flushing dogs," he said. "That may be their forte. They may be the flushing and retrieving versatile dog like the shorthair is the pointing and retrieving versatile dog. They're also excellent family dogs." Porter said that what the Boykin lacks in size it makes up for in heart. They just need the early socialization, and the trainer needs to train at the dog's pace, not the trainer's pace.

REAL DOGS

As business-minded as they are in the field, Boykins can be downright impish at home. Dawn Crites has more than a few stories about her dogs. "They're goats," she said. "They love toilet paper, Kleenex. They gnaw on furniture. I have two chairs by the bay window, and they've ruined the arms jumping on them to bark at the birds outside."

Like some other breeds, Boykins hide food and bury bones. "Our first Boykin, Maggie, buried bones in the houseplants," said Dawn Crites. "I'd find them years later when I'd re-pot the plants." Dawn also said her "girls" can sing and dance. All she has to do is scratch their butts. She cautions that this is not typical Boykin behavior. "Not everybody's children are as talented as mine," she said.

Despite their small stature and agreeable mannerisms, Boykins are still canines. In the predawn shadows outside his Durham home, Waggoner was loading equipment into his vehicle before heading out to the dove field. Grace and Faith were crated in the back. A stranger offered his hand in greeting for the dogs to sniff, and they went from docile to defensive in a split second. Waggoner explained that the combination of their master's property and their confinement made them more defensive than normal. The stranger was relieved he did not "draw back a nub," as they say in the South.

Later in the dove field, Waggoner related a favorite story about Boykins. "We were tundra swan hunting out of Knotts Island near Currituck," he said, "and



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Blake Waggoner of Durham loads up after a day in the dove field with one of his versatile Boykins.

someone knocked one down. Faith was all keyed up, so I said, 'Go, Faith.'" Waggoner grinned as he told the story. "The dog was 28 pounds, and what's a swan weigh, 20? She brought back three more that day. Seeing that little dog go out and get that swan was big stuff."

And that epitomizes the Boykin. Its calling card is versatility; equally at home on a couch or in a blind, it is the canine equivalent of the utility infielder. It is a Carolina original, courtesy of our neighbors to the south, coming soon to a dove field or duck swamp near you. ♦

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