

# The American Water Spaniel: Yankee Doodle Dandy

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HUP! Training Flushing Spaniels The American Way

**T**he American Water Spaniel (AWS) is as American as George M. Cohan, and just as capable of “doing it all” in his particular line of work.

A marvelous little all-weather ducker, the AWS can also bust the nastiest cover in the uplands to flush and retrieve birds for the boss. The dog’s small size and placid temperament make him ideal in a duck skiff, where he can slip into and out of the water without upsetting or soaking the skipper. His methodical thoroughness in the uplands makes him a delightful companion for the gunner over thirty-five years of age.

Developed in the last century in the Great Lakes region, and now the state dog of Wisconsin, this native breed possesses so many talents that the national breed club, American Water Spaniel Club (AWSC), has struggled for years trying to decide whether to seek AKC classification as a retriever or as a flushing spaniel. The breed must be classified as one or the other before it can participate in AKC Field Trials and hunting tests. The breed needs the exposure these activities, especially the AKC hunting tests, would give it among dog-loving hunters. Trouble is, the AWSC membership is badly split – four ways. Some members favor classification as a spaniel. Some favor classification as a retriever. Others fearing that either would eventually damage the breed’s dual abilities, have until very recently held out for dual classification. Still others prefer no classification at all.

The AKC has denied the AWS dual classification, and for good reasons. AKC field titles (FC, AFC, JH, SH, MH) do not indicate whether they were earned in spaniel, retriever, or pointing breed events. The breed classification does that. If AKC granted dual classification to the AWS, it would have to make similar grants for other breeds. That would lead to chaos, especially in hunting tests. Labrador owners might seek triple classification, since many use their dogs as upland flushers, and some even have Labs that point their birds.

Although the AWS cannot run in AKC field trials or hunting tests, it can run in two different non-AKC hunting tests for retrievers. The UKC affiliate, the Hunting Retriever Club, sponsors a fine program. So does the North American Hunting Retriever Association. (HAHRA), although it has no registry affiliation. However, like it or not, the AKC controls the market in both spaniels and retrievers. If the hunters are ever to discover the American Water Spaniel, they will have to see them perform in the AKC activities, especially AKC hunting tests.



**Spaniels are also good in water, especially American Water Spaniels, like Dr. Gary Forshee’s youngster here**

AWSC voted to remain unclassified in 1991, and again in 1998. They will vote again in 2003 on the three options, (retriever classification, spaniel classification, or no classification). No one can predict the outcome.

After years of experience with both spaniels and retrievers, I feel the AWS should be classified as a spaniel. Its abilities would make it a strong participant in AKC spaniel hunting tests. Spaniel hunting tests require water work at every level, even a simple water blind at the highest level. Frankly, AKC spaniel hunting tests appear to have been designed more for the AWS than for any other spaniel breed. The AWS's small size would work against it in AKC retriever hunting tests.

Okay, let's look at this spunky little Yankee water dog that has more talents than one AKC classification can encompass to everyone's satisfaction.

A welterweight among spaniels, the typical AWS weighs about 40 pounds and stands some 18 inches at the withers. This small stature, more that of a big Cocker or small Springer, clearly says "spaniel." However, his long tail says "waterfowler." I gained great respect for the usefulness of a long tail on any quadruped with all four feet off the ground when I one day watched a tailless squirrel struggle cautiously through the trees in our backyard while his fully tailed buddies did aerial acrobatics around him.

The AWS coat also says "dual dog." It can be anything from the flat, harsh, slightly wavy coat of the field-bred English Springer to the tight, hard curls of the Curly Coated Retriever. The less curl there is, the more dense the undercoat. Most AWS coats fall somewhere in the middle, much like that of the Irish Water Spaniel. Regardless of coat type, the outercoat is relatively short, only about one-half inch longer than that of the Labrador.



**Kelly's Chocolate Magic, owned by Dr. Gary Forshee**

The coat protects the dog quite well in the normally cold water of the upper Midwest, it's region of origin. It also protects him from briars and brambles in the uplands. However, it does pick up burrs, and they do work their way into the undercoat, where they are a real challenge to the owner. While owners cannot avoid the chore of pulling burrs at the end of the day – before cleaning their birds, their guns, and their aching anatomies – most have found ways to minimize it. Sharon Beaupre of Cambridge, Minnesota, lightly trims her dog's

coat before opening day –not enough to expose the dog to the elements, but just enough to make him less of a burr magnet. Dr.

Gary Forshee of Bonner Springs, Kansas puts a light coat of cheap hair oil ("the cheaper and greasier the better") on his AWS so the burrs don't twist into the undercoat. This lubrication also facilitates their removal.

The character of the AWS is pure American. In fact, my one-word description of the breed is "opportunistic."

Perhaps the most distinctive AWS quality is their peculiarly American intelligence. Call them clever, crafty, or whatever, they can carpe diem better than any dog that walks, swims, and barks.

For example, in the early days of the heartworm problem, Tom Olson of Milaca, MN began giving his AWS daily caracide pills. The dog accepted each one, feigned chewing until Tom turned away, and then hid the pill behind an out-of-the-way chair. One day Tom found about thirty pills back there and realized he had been outsmarted.

Vaughn Brockman of Menomonie, Wisconsin, had an AWS, Sergeant Barney Good Times, back in the 1960s that became a legend among Vaughn's hunting and nonhunting friends for his craftiness. In an effort to control Barney's range in the uplands, Vaughn bought an electronic collar, one of those early models that only worked when the dog was grounded. The dealer assured Vaughn that he could solve the problem forever with no more than three jolts. Clearly he had no experience with AWS in general and Barney in particular. Within the first three jolts, Barney realized that the discomfort went away when he jumped, and also when he put a lot of distance between himself and the boss. Vaughn still laughs when he tells of watching Barney make long kangaroo leaps, one after another, as he hustled out of the transmitter's range. That was exactly the opposite of what Vaughn had in mind, and therefore precisely what Barney had to do to win

AWS are possessive, so they make excellent watchdogs for those who allow this trait to develop. However, if the owner shows that he disapproves of this kind of behavior, the average AWS will desist.

A very personal dog, the AWS becomes attached to one family, and especially to one member of the family. He focuses his life on that one person, bonds only with him/her, and manipulates the other family members as required. For this reason, that one person should train the dog. AWS do not respond well to professional training, unless the pro can establish a strong bond with the animal first—which takes time and therefore costs money.

As a youngster, Vaughn Brockman sent Sergeant Barney Good Times to a pro, from whom Barney learned plenty in his own crafty way. From the first day, Barney steadfastly refused to acknowledge the pro's existence, much less accept his training. After three weeks of futility, the pro called and told owner Vaughn Brockman to come and get his worthless dog. When Vaughn arrived, the pro gave him a demonstration with Barney. However, instead of refusing to work, Barney did everything right! Reluctantly, the pro agreed to keep the dog for another try. Three weeks later, he called Vaughn again and told him that all Barney would do was sit and watch the other dogs work. When Vaughn picked Barney up, this time, without a demonstration, the pro told him that he hoped that he would never see another AWS in his life. During the following hunting season, Vaughn found that Barney had learned plenty just sitting and watching the other dogs work.



**Kelly's Chocolate Magic hits the water big-time...**

"In fact," Vaughn chuckles, "Barney hunted like a fully trained dog ever after!"

Pro Tom Dokken of Northfield, Minnesota has trained many AWS over the past few years, so he has some interesting insights into the breed's personality. He says they mature more slowly than Labradors and learn more slowly, too. Tom takes a typical Lab through his basic program in three months but has to spend for four or five months cajoling an typical AWS through it. He feels that he succeeds more frequently with AWS's that have been well socialized at home before he sees them, that he bonds more easily with such dogs. Tom prefers starting an AWS at about five months old, when the dog is still quite malleable.

The AWS is physically tough, durable, and healthy. Dr. Gary Forshee, who has been training and hunting them for twelve years, told me has yet to spend a buck on his vet's for anything but elective procedures and repair of hunting injuries. None of his AWS;s has ever come down with any of the many current maladies. Douglas Doyle of Stanfordville, New York told me that his vet calls the AWS the toughest breed he has ever treated.

Mentally tough, too, the AWS has enough aggressiveness for an occasional crippled honker. While the goose-hunting specialist needs a bigger retriever, the catch-as-catch-can hunter who shoots an occasional goose can depend on an AWS to bring it in to him somehow. Vaughn Brockman once tried unsuccessfully to keep a nine-month old female puppy from going after a bluffing and blustering crippled Greater Canada. The youngster broke and charged the puffed-up, hissing honker, hitting it full tilt in the chest. The bowled the bird over and knocked it senseless, making it easy for the little dog to grab its neck and drag it back. Driving through a bird and then picking it up on the way back seems to be a trait more common in American dogs. I have seen Chessies do this often, but I can't remember ever seeing any other retriever breed do it.

Douglas Doyle, who hunts a little of everything with his AWS's, told me that his dogs retrieve about half a dozen geese a year. I asked if they are all stone-dead. "Are yours all stone-dead?" he answered. Good point.

The breed is tough in other ways too. While swimming back with a duck, one of Douglas Doyle's dogs was sucked into a culvert full of rushing water. The dog thrashed its way through the culver and out the other side—with the duck still in its mouth. Nor did it hesitate to leap back into the water the next time the boss dropped a bird. For all his mental and physical toughness, the AWS has a strong sense of fair play, which the smart owner will never violate. In this, the breed resembles to other American breeds with which I am familiar: the Chesapeake Bay Retriever and the Boston Terrier.



...and swims through the decoys.

The AWS will accept punishment in training, as long as it understands what it did wrong. However, the dog won't put up with mistreatment, which violates its sense of fair play. If the trainer establishes proper rapport with the AWS and takes the time to lead it through the training, punishment will seldom be needed. The AWS really wants to please that one human with whom it is bonded.

If the trainer, even that special person, abuses the AWS – by too severe punishment or incomprehensible punishment or even excessive neglect—the dog will quit, refuse to work, turn him off. A surprisingly few repetitions will convert this into a permanent condition, creating a dog that may never trust another human being, a canine robot that goes through the motion of living with none of the spaniel merriment.

The AWS may use its opportunistic intelligence to deal with mild punishment it feels is unjustified. For example, in one family the husband handled all the canine corrections. Whenever the dog felt justice had not been properly served on a specific occasion, it would sneak into the bedroom, pull the husband's pillow – never the wife's- off the bed, and lift its leg on it. The man could hardly ignore such eloquent complains, so he and the dog gradually negotiated a mutually acceptable code of "canine criminal law."

The AWS will figure ways to deal with every person in the household, especially those who dislike dogs. Years ago an AWS—owning parish priest in Wisconsin had an assistant who didn't share his enthusiasm for dogs. The AWS sensed—and resented—this attitude, of course, so it haughtily ignored the offending assistant. However, on occasion, it would avenge itself by keeping this priest awake at night. The dog would wait quietly outside the assistant's bedroom window until about five minutes after the light went out. Then the dog would yodel softly, just loud enough to be heard in the one room. When the light came back on, the dog would be quiet again, waiting until about five minutes after went out again before returning the serenade. That way the priest would just get to sleep each time before being woken up again. The dog would repeat this for several hours.

The assistant was happy to be transferred to another parish—and the AWS probably took his departure as a “personal” triumph as proof of who really was in charge.

The breed does have a tendency to yodel. The AWS in the story above used to join in its owner in singing High Mass on Sundays—from the safety of the rectory window. Yodeling becomes an operatic art form with some AWS's. A true Caruso of the breed sits down, points its muzzle to the heavens, opens its jaw, closes its lips until it's mouth is a small round hole, and then moans softly. In an urban setting, such unearthly sounds in the middle of the night can reduce neighborly harmony to a dangerously low level. However, the AWS will accept early training in “Hush!” thereby never developing its full operatic range. Many American Water Spaniels “grin.” This looks like a snarl, for the dog curls his lip up, uncovering his teeth. However, it also wags and dances all over, showing delight at seeing a family member or at the prospect of going hunting. The dog's total demeanor shows that it is grinning, not snarling. Many Chesapeake's show happiness this way, too.

The AWS is a delightful dog, a character if you will. However, it has never regained its pre-World War II popularity, even in the upper Midwest. Since the end of the Big One, highly publicized imports have dominated the American hunting dog scene to the detriment of our homebreds, especially the American Water Spaniel. To bad for no other breed can do so many things the American hunter needs done. The AWS was developed right here long before we started adapting British and European breeds to our needs.

This may change in the near future, especially if the AWSC seeks AKC classification as a spaniel and starts running the breed in spaniel hunting tests where they can best show their dual ability. Many modern American hunters live in situation which don't allow more than one dog, situations which favor the smaller dog: apartments, condos, urban and suburban houses with tiny yards. The American Water Spaniel fits into any of these environments, in fact into any environment suitable for human habitation. Besides, the AWS will hunt anything a feather-chaser can stuff in his game bag. Some even use them for rabbits.

Douglas Doyle sums it like this: “I can hunt everything I want to hunt in my area (New York) with an American Water Spaniel, and do it on less dog food.”

But the American Water Spaniel is much more than a do-it-all meat dog that is cheap to keep. A delight around the house, it has the charming ability to smile at its owner and communicate, if not speak, George M. Cohan's immortal line: *“My mother thanks you. My father thanks you. My sister thanks you. And I thank you!”*

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