

THE EPAGNEUL BRETON IN THE U.S.A.

The story goes, that back in the early 19th century the British sporting gentleman would spend some time in Northern France shooting woodcock. With him he brought his gun dogs, which were principally English Setters. When it was time to return home, rather than take the dogs back to England, they would kennel them with the local gamekeepers to be used when they returned the following season.

As things will happen, some of these managed to escape their confines and there followed illicit affairs with the French spaniels, les fougueux, which means "the high spirited one." The French spaniel was a small black and white dog with a short tail, a dog totally devoted to his master and that was used to hunt for the pot.

The local gamekeepers quickly realized the potential of the offspring from these affairs, the resultant progeny being small bob-tailed spaniels whose sole purpose in life was hunting. Through careful breeding, the Epagneul Breton was born and in 1907 the first club was formed in France.

The Epagneul Breton, also known in the U.S. as the "French Brittany", is a close working gun-range dog, with a fantastic nose and uncanny bird sense, who is quick and fiercely intelligent and is a combination of sweet disposition and reckless courage used for hunting all varieties of upland game birds. The Breton is a dog that is at home in the field and in your chair. They are very loving, people-friendly dogs that crave human companionship and therefore thrives best when included in a family atmosphere. They are an easy train due to their intelligence, natural hunting ability and instincts. Heavy-handed tactics should be avoided as it can cause them to simply shut down. They are energetic and playful yet not hyperactive. They will hunt a full day in the field with zest and yet lay peacefully by your chair in the home. While they are commonly known as a "close-working" dog, their range will vary in relation to the density of cover and the availability of game. In heavy cover they may be working a few yards away while in open cover they may range out too 100 yards or so, in either instance checking back with his master during the search. The Epagneul Breton can be orange and white, liver and white, black and white or tri-color. They may be piebald or roan. They have the darker colored noses and eye color that gives them what is known as that "warm spaniel" look. In France they refer to their breed as "the smallest of the pointing dogs but the best!"

The breed was originally imported into America in the 1930's. Since then, but especially in the last 30-40 years, the brittany in America evolved into a type differing in both appearance and manner of working in the field due to breeding selections. The original dogs imported into the United States were orange and white dogs, and it was decided early on to breed only orange/white and liver/white colored dogs in this country. Selection and breeding in order to produce dogs that could compete in a manner required by the style of U.S. field trials affected the type as well. Thus the two types over the last 70+ years have evolved into different dogs...different styles of covering ground and different in looks, size and coloration. In 1982, the American Brittany Club successfully petitioned the AKC to have the 'spaniel' dropped from the breed name and they became known as simply the "brittany". Later the two types were differentiated by being known as the American Brittany and, as they are commonly known, the French Brittany (brittanys from France or European lineage). However, their official breed name is the Epagneul Breton.

In the late 70's some brittanys (called brittany spaniels at that time) were again imported from Europe for the purpose of returning to dogs with the characteristics of the original brittany, which suited it for the foot hunter and for the home. Although there was some limited breeding between the two types when the French dogs were first imported (around the late 70's), they found they could not consistently produce puppies with the qualities and conformation desired in the breed. Therefore that practice was very quickly stopped, or not practiced at all, by the breeders who were intent upon preserving the genetic characteristics they were seeking. It was ascertained that the best path to take would be to maintain separate types and to keep the breedings separate on our own volition. Most American brittany breeders agreed with not breeding between the two types as well because they did not wish to re-introduce the black gene into their lines.

Technically, many did not consider breeding between French and American Brittany cross breeding because all registries at the time provided only one classification for the registration of the breed, no matter which type. There were several personal experiences that propelled Bill and Kathy Dillon, Epagneul Breton owners and breeders, to become concerned about the integrity and the future of the breed in this country. In 1995 they began attempting to contact as many known Epagneul Breton owners and/or breeders and they formed the French Brittany Gun Dog Association of America. Bill and Kathy spent the next seven years as President and Vice President respectively and dedicated all their free time to establishing a foundation in this country for this breed.

Very few people knew in those early days what a "French Brittany" was and having already published a website for their personal kennels and navigating "cyberspace" for some time, Kathy designed, published and maintained a web site on behalf of the club and the breed as a whole as a means for educating the public and breeders. Kathy also established and maintained a registry across the U.S. of records of dogs owned across the continental United States and of breedings taking place geographically. The traditional path for breeds not yet recognized is to register the foundation dogs and to register the subsequent generations of dogs until recognition is achieved. We therefore established meticulous single registration and litter registration processes and built a database of dogs across the country eligible for Epagneul Breton foundation stock status. After five years of meticulous record keeping Kathy prepared a breed comparison which was presented to the United Kennel Club to document the differences and the need for a separate breed classification for the Epagneul Breton, and in 2002 a separate registry was established for the Epagneul Breton and the registry that was built was given to the United Kennel Club to maintain for the breed from that point forward.

It was agreed by everyone who was at the organizational meeting that the French had done an amazing job in maintaining the "total dog" concept with the Epagneul Breton for nearly 100 years. There had been no major drift in type or hunting style because of the types of procedures they had utilized all those years, and we were enjoying the benefits of those efforts. Therefore those who were at that meeting agreed that it was important for the breed's continuity in this country to emulate the procedures utilized in the breed's country of origin as closely as possible in order to maintain the characteristics of the breed that we all admire.

Though Bill and Kathy met with varying degrees of opposition and criticism through the years from different camps in the states, they continued dedicating their time to putting the best interests of the breed first and striving towards their goal of establishing a solid foundation for the future of the breed.

For many years those involved in the club Bill and Kathy began seemed to share a common hope and a common dream for the breed. However, after competition venues began to be established those making decisions for the breed began to drift from the original founder's visions for those venues and away from the commitment to put the breed's best interests ahead of titles and personal agendas. When the drift became more than could be tolerated by their consciences and the politics that plague so many dog clubs became intolerable, the Dillons regretfully resigned from involvement with the breed organization.

But that did not end their goals for the betterment of the breed in this country nor their involvement in being paving the way and writing Epagneul Breton history in this country and seeing their goals come to fruition, even though some said it could never happen.

Bill began competing their dogs in France in the spring field trials. He was the first American to ever do so. He pioneered the path of competing in a country where he didn't speak or read the language with professional handlers on their terms and under the very strict and unforgiving rules of France's CEB in trials that are held on wild birds, often few in number. In 2005, with his dog Tatoo, he was the first American to ever win a CACT in a France field trial. That year he was the first American to put a Trialer title on an American owned dog. That year the Dillons returned to France and entered Tatoo in the France CEB's breed club specialty show and again made history by Tatoo receiving an Excellent rating and thereby qualifying to receive France's RECOMMENDED STUD status – the first dog in America to receive such a rating and the only dog in America to date to have this ranking.

In 2007 Bill once again wrote some history for the breed in America by being the first American to ever qualify to run a dog in the Coupe de' France, the French Cup. Not only did his dog Ultra qualify to enter the competition, but he won a R.C.A.C.T, and though some there thought Ultra should have been awarded the C.A.C.T. we were happy to be the first American and first American owned dog to win such a prestigious award at the crème d' la crème event for Epagneul Bretons worldwide. Ultra is to this day the first and only dog in the U.S.A. to have won a champion field trial title in France and to have competed in the French Cup.

Then in 2008 international history was written when an American, Bill Dillon, qualified two dogs to compete in the Euro Cup for the first time ever, and to as well win an award of Tres Bon with his dog Tadoo. Tadoo was one in only six dogs that earned an award at the 2008 Euro Cup, which was held that year in the Czech Republic on wild birds (naturally).

Not just any dog can compete in a Euro Cup. They must pre-qualify by having a certain number of wins in prior field trials and meet other qualification criteria. Only the best of the best of each country is selected to represent that country and sent as a team to compete. Bill received the blessings of the American Kennel Club and the Federation Cynologique Internationale, and with the approval of the Continental Field Trial Commission, he was proud to be standing with the American flag and two of his Epagneul Bretons (French brittanys), CH.Tadoo du Bois Courcol, Tr. and CH. Ultra de la Source Aux Perdrix, Tr. as the official representative for the U.S.A with all the other teams lined up alongside.

In 2009, once again having received the approval of American Kennel Club, the Federation Cynologique Internationale and the Continental Field Trial Commission, he entered his pre-qualified dogs in the 2009 Euro Cup, this time held in Spain on wild birds. And this time his dog CH. Ultra de la Source Aux Perdrix, Tr. was awarded an Excellent in the Euro Cup's Excellence Prix as well as winning an Excellent in the 2009 Spanish Cup. Another page in history was written for Americans and the breed in this country.

Bill has been a pioneer for this breed on an international basis, opening doors that in the past had been securely closed to Americans. He didn't want to go to France and compete in a couple of trials just so he could say he'd done it and add it to the dog's resume. He wanted to compete on their terms, on their turf and under their strict rules without any leeway being given because he was a visitor being given anything. He wanted to prove to the international community that American dogs could be serious competition and to open doors for others who may someday want to follow the trail he has blazed. The process to open those doors was long and complicated and took a great deal of dedication and perseverance as well as courage. He has earned the respect of judges, other competitors, professional handlers and personal friends in many different countries. The dogs he competes have earned that same respect and admiration. In addition to the doors opened for the breed and American handlers, Bill's desire to compete in the Euro Cups opened a door to discussions between the F.C.I. and the A.K.C. Discussions that may lead to a better and more active involvement between the two entities.

So our dreams and our goals for the breed are being realized and our contribution towards the future for this breed in the U.S.A. continues to revolve around the breed's origin, the traditions that have maintained the breed for over a century as a consistently talented sporting breed and wonderful companion dog, and not compromising our values, our ideals or our means for realizing those goals.