

# THE EPAGNEUL BRETON IN THE U.S.A.

By Kathleen Dillon

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 to 100 yards or more, in either instance checking back with his master during the search, which is why they are referred to as "close-working". 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 based on color and to produce dogs that could compete in a manner required by the style of U.S. field trials. 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 as possible regarding the formation of a breed association and through conversations with them found that there were many other concerned owners across the country. In 1997 an organizational meeting was held in Missouri. The group that met together were concerned about the total dog - the natural hunting ability in the field, the ability to be a companion in the home and breed conformation as set forth in the European standard. This group gave birth to Club de l'Epagneul Breton des Etats-Unis d'Amerique, which translates to Epagneul Breton Club U.S.A. However since most Americans don't speak French and wouldn't relate Epagneul Breton to "French Brittany" at that time, we also utilized the club name French Brittany Gun Dog Association of America. We knew we had quite a job ahead of us, with education of both the public and breeders being one of the main priorities.

The association was formed to serve as the parent breed club for the Epagneul Breton and we quickly gained recognition as such by the C.E.B. clubs in Europe. However, we were aware of requirements that were necessary to be met in order to qualify as the national breed club with a registry in the U.S. and we therefore set our long-term goals and began patiently striving towards those goals prior to requesting recognition as the breed's parent club.

We knew that in order to have our goal met of a separate breed classification for the Epagneul Bretons, we would have to maintain records of dogs owned across the continental United States and maintain records of breedings taking place geographically. The traditional path for breed clubs representing breeds not yet recognized individually or officially by a professional kennel club such as the UKC, is to register the foundation dogs at the club level 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.

It was agreed by everyone 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 at that meeting and those joining later 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. Therefore we set about establishing the confirmation process, T.A.N. events (natural hunting ability tests), establishing conformation shows for the Epagneul Breton and establishing field trial rules derived from the rules utilized in France which are foot trials held for working gun dogs. We determined to bring in licensed and knowledgeable judges and individuals from France primarily, but also other countries, to instruct and to train us in these areas because we felt that such training was critical prior to actually implementing an event.

Having already published a website for their personal kennels and navigating "cyberspace" for some time, Kathy Dillon volunteered to design, publish and maintain a web site ([www.french-brittany.org](http://www.french-brittany.org)) on behalf of the club and the breed as a whole. Soon after the 1997 meeting the second web site on the internet having to do with French Brittanys was published for the parent club. Its purpose was meant to educate the public, educate breeders, provide a source for news between printed publications, to provide a forum for members to get involved and to have pictures of their dogs published and provide the consumer with links to breeders of registered Epagneul Bretons across the country. Very few people knew in those days what a "French Brittany" was, let alone the distinct differences, so education was, and continues to be, high on the agenda. In the early years of the organization we produced a newsletter, which was upgraded two years ago to a full color, professionally printed magazine. Due to the cost of a publication of that nature we are limited in the number that we can produce, and thus publish a 1<sup>st</sup> semester magazine and a 2<sup>nd</sup> semester magazine each year, which is sent to each of our members and affiliates. Our membership has grown steadily with each year, reaching about 250 at the end of 2002.

After five years of growth and meticulous record keeping it was felt that the Epagneul Breton development in this country had reached a stage where the justification for a separate breed had been reached and where we felt there was a need for a secure venue to deposit irreplaceable historical pedigree information. But just as importantly we also wanted to secure an association with a third party, professional canine organization (preferably one known for its support of the working aspects of the dogs)

for the benefit of the future of the breed in this country. The directors of this association felt that the total dog concept of the UKC would mesh perfectly with our club's "total dog" priorities for the breed and approached UKC. A breed comparison was presented to document the differences and the need for a separate breed classification for the Epagneul Breton. In 2002 our petition to separate the breed was granted by the United Kennel Club and a separate registry was established for the Epagneul Breton. At the same time, this association was designated as the provisional Epagneul Breton National Breed Club. The registry that was built by this association since 1997 was given to the United Kennel Club and all dogs registered prior to this transfer were entered into the U.K.C. registry as the foundation stock of the epagneul breton in the USA. Our breed's standard based on the FCI (international) standard was adopted and published by UKC, the T.A.N. (natural ability test) rules have been finalized by the UKC and European style field trial rules are due to be finalized and adopted next. Our dogs are now eligible to be shown – for the first time in this country – utilizing the standard for the Epagneul Breton!

We have met with varying degrees of opposition and criticism through the years from different camps in the states, but the individuals who stepped forward did so with the dedication, resolve and the commitment to put the best interests of the breed first and we have many sources that encouraged us and mentored us along the way. Our association has met it's goal of establishing a solid foundation for the future of the breed: a separate breed classification and registry and an arena in which to compete the dogs in both competition and conformation, both of which can now be accomplished in conjunction with the United Kennel Club. A page of history was written for the Epagneul Breton breed in 2002 thanks to the foresight of the United Kennel Club and to our alliance with them. But none of that would have been possible without the involvement of the many, many individuals around the globe.

Our sister clubs in Europe and the friends we have made in France, Ireland, England and other European countries have always been of great support to us from the club's inception. We owe a special thank you to Henri Guelou, a director as well as a past President of the CEB of France and also an official confirmateur and judge of field trials in France, for all of the expertise he has shared with us and the training and information he provided over the years. It has taken the resolve of caring individuals with a vision and willing to sacrifice their personal time for the sake of this club to get the breed where it is today, such as Ed and Joyce Smith who shared Bill and Kathy's hopes and dreams for the breed and were at the organizational meeting and have been there for the club steadfastly since, like Fred Overby who perhaps didn't know how much a part of his life this would become when he volunteered to provide his legal expertise, Bob Luff who handles the club's marketing efforts and never misses an event, RL Dalrymple who had an early vision for the breed and provides an article for each of our magazines, Lynda Kieres who's organizational skills and dedication has been irreplaceable as Show Secretary, Paul Ehlers who spends an insurmountable amount of time performing the thankless duties required of the corporate Secretary, Jane Phillips a staunch supporter, benefactor and interpreter, William Ward, an avid hunter and aficionado of the breed for his various duties as a Director and to all the other members who have actively performed rolls on committees over the years. Neither can we overlook the members who, by registering their dog at the club level with FBGDA, played an important role in helping to secure a place for our breed in this country. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank them for believing in us and in the breed as a whole, and we would especially like to thank the United Kennel Club for being a huge part of securing a sound future for our dogs.

We have all shared in a common hope and a common dream and together been a part of that page of Epagneul Breton history being written in this country and together are seeing the goals come to fruition that some said could never happen. We held our first UKC sanctioned events, including a specialty show and a T.A.N. (natural ability test), at our national meeting in May of this year and we will hold our first sanctioned field trial in the spring of 2004.