

Talent in a Small Package

The Braque Du Bourbonnais

by Rick Van Etten



Imagine you're a contestant on the television gameshow "Jeopardy" and one of the categories is Dog Breeds. An answer comes up that reads, "A small, short-tailed pointing dog that originated in France." Because you possess lightning-quick reflexes that have made you the envy of all your gunning companions, you hit your buzzer before the other two contestants can react. Alex Trebek calls on you and you reply (being careful to

phrase your response in the form of a question, of course), "What is the Brittany?"

Chances are excellent that this is the correct response . . . that is, unless the "Jeopardy" producers are trying to throw you a curve. An equally correct response would be, "What is the Braque du Bourbonnais?" and that's exactly the question we're going to address in this article.

Given both breeds' similar stature, conformation, hunting style and

Phantom's Mademoiselle Maggie, owned by Pat McMullen of Richfield, Minnesota, earned a Prize III in NAVHDA natural ability testing.

their shared country of origin, it's tempting to describe the Braque du Bourbonnais (pronounced *brahk do boor-bon-NAY*) as a shorthaired version of the Brittany. But such a description is both oversimplified and inaccurate. While it's likely the two breeds share some common an-

cestors, the Brittany was primarily derived from spaniel lines; the smooth-coated Bourbonnais, on the other hand, is more closely related to various pointer and hound types.

Beyond that, it's difficult to pin down many specifics concerning the latter breed's origin. One of a half-dozen French pointing breeds identified as braques, the Bourbonnais is named for the province in the central part of France where its principal development took place. The name *braque*, by the way, is derived from the French verb *braquer*, meaning to aim—hence a dog which aims at, or points, game.

According to several canine authorities, including M. Jean Servier, former president of the Club du Braque Francais (French Pointer Club), the Braque Francais is one of the oldest—perhaps *the* oldest—of all pointing breeds. (For a more detailed discussion of the Braque Francais, see the breed feature in the April/May, 1992 issue of *Gun Dog*.) Writing in *The World Encyclopedia of Dogs* (Galahad Books, 1971), Servier states that the French Braque—which is bred in two sizes and looks much like a German

shorthair—gave rise to various pointing breeds throughout France and the rest of Europe. Those developed in France, the majority of which were named for the regions of their origin, include the Ariege, the Auvergne, the Dupuy, the St. Germain, and the Bourbonnais.

Most of these French pointers are at least somewhat similar in type, but the Bourbonnais is distinguished by its size, color and markings, and the fact that it was originally born tailless or with a very short tail. In *The Atlas of Dog Breeds of the World* (T.F.H. Publications, Inc., 1989), authors Bonnie Wilcox, D.V.M., and Chris Walkowicz note that tailless puppies occasionally turned up in Braque Francais litters, further supporting the likelihood of a connection between this breed and the Bourbonnais.

Wilcox and Walkowicz also mention a woodcut done by the Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi in 1580 that shows a dog very similar to the Bourbonnais pursuing a gamebird. The dog has short ears, a bob-tail, and a smooth, heavily ticked coat. If the animal portrayed is indeed a Braque du Bourbonnais, then fanci-

ers can claim for their breed the distinction of being among the very oldest of all pointing dogs.

Despite this venerable history, however, the Bourbonnais never achieved real numerical strength, nor did it ever become well known outside of France. In fact, the breed came dangerously close to extinction in the 1960s. According to the brief introduction to the current French standard, breeders' overemphasis on producing naturally tailless dogs with a coat color called faded lilac—breeding for conformation rather than working abilities, in other words—caused many sportsmen to lose interest in the dogs.

The breed was saved from oblivion by the efforts of a small group of fanciers brought together in 1970 by Michael Comte, now president of the Club du Braque du Bourbonnais in France. Because breeders had stopped registering their dogs due to the lack of interest just mentioned, Comte's group found it necessary in 1975 to petition the Federation Cynologique Internationale (FCI), an international kennel club, to open an "initial registry" for the breed. This permitted fanciers to register Bourbonnais which lacked pedigrees but exhibited all the requisite characteristics of the breed.

These efforts unquestionably renewed interest in the Bourbonnais, although the dogs are still quite rare today. There are probably fewer than 1,000 in the entire world, and of these, only a handful reside in North America. Working with Michael Comte and M. Francoise Saret (another French breeder), Bonnie Wilcox and Chris Walkowicz helped introduce and publicize the breed in the United States through an article which appeared in the April, 1988 issue of *Dog World* magazine. Since that time, several dogs have been imported from France, and their owners are unanimous in their praise of the animals.

Among the most enthusiastic Bourbonnais fanciers in the U.S. are Beth and Ron Cepil of New Tripoli, Pennsylvania. The Cepils obtained their first Bourbonnais, two males



French field trial competitor Brio de la Benigousse displays the compact form and musculature of the Braque du Bourbonnais.



Because of the Bourbonnais' small size, it is able to enter and work through heavy brush that might deter a larger dog. This is Phantom's Tracker of Northland, owned by Jim North of La Puente, California.

and a female, in 1989 through the efforts of Pete Curley of Merrimac, Wisconsin.

"Pete went to France and worked directly with the president and secretary of the breed club to make the necessary arrangements for importing several of the dogs," Beth Cepil explains. "It was Pete who introduced us to the breed when my husband decided he wanted a rare pointing dog."

Two of the Cepils' dogs, Dalton de la Benigousse and Deesse de la Benigousse, produced a litter in 1991 that included the first Bourbonnais to be evaluated in North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA) testing. That dog, Phantom's Mademoiselle Maggie, earned a Natural Ability Prize III with a score of 89 points. She is owned by Pat McMullen of Richfield, Minnesota.

Beth Cepil of New Tripoli, Pennsylvania with two Bourbonnais puppies, Phantom's Mademoiselle Maggie and Phantom's Dusty Snow. Maggie became the first Bourbonnais to be evaluated in NAVHDA natural ability testing.

Recalling how he first became interested in the Bourbonnais, McMullen states, "I was looking for a versatile dog that would retrieve ducks and woodcock and was also a pointing breed. I wanted something smaller than a German shorthair, wirehair, or Griffon, and when I saw Beth Cepil's ad for Bourbonnais pups

in *Gun Dog*, I decided to check them out."

McMullen acquired Maggie as an eight-week-old pup and reports that even at that young age she demonstrated the proper instincts and a high degree of birdiness. "She was very attracted to anything that flew, becoming almost mesmerized, and she would also flash point pigeons," he says, adding that she took to retrieving quite naturally, as well. "I just played with her at it, making it fun, and now if she sees anything fall, she'll retrieve it. She's also very softmouthed."

Craig Nelson, a farmer and pheasant hunting guide from Centerville, South Dakota, confirms McMullen's assessment. Nelson worked with Maggie for a six-week period and was so impressed that he subsequently bought a Bourbonnais pup for himself, a male named Phantom's Brush Buster, from the Cepils' second litter.

"If I hadn't liked Maggie, I wouldn't have bought a pup," Nelson says. "But she was as easy a dog as any I've ever worked with—for her age level, she did everything naturally, making her a real pleasure to train." In addition to Buster, Nelson currently has Brittanys and Large Munsterlanders.



"Maggie was a very hard-driving dog in the field, and I think the Bourbonnais could be a real comer, subject to their availability," Nelson continues. "They have a good temperament, they're cooperative, and they work hard for you. They're also an affectionate dog, very pleasant to have around."

Pete DeAngelis, a professional trainer from Slatington, Pennsylvania, shares some of those opinions. Although DeAngelis primarily trains and campaigns pointers and English setters in major field trials, he has worked with four Bourbonnais, including the Cepils' Dalton, and says he thinks the dogs might do well in shoot-to-retrieve stakes. "They're similar to the Brittany in the way they cover ground, and they work with a nice high head," he observes.

DeAngelis also believes the Bourbonnais' temperament will appeal to many hunters. "They're a trainable dog, not real headstrong, and they have a comfortable range for the average hunter," he says. "Somebody who just wants a dog as a companion to go bird hunting with, and isn't worried about flash, will be happy with them."

As noted at the outset, it's very tempting to compare the Bourbonnais to the Brittany, and regarding the issue of size, such a comparison seems particularly valid. Sporting dog writers have long acknowledged that a primary reason for the Brit's popularity is its compact size, making it a natural for suburban and even urban households. Many Bourbonnais fanciers feel this same characteristic could significantly contribute to the acceptance of their breed by North American sportsmen.

"A lot of people prefer the smaller-sized dog," says Jim North, a Bourbonnais owner from La Puente, California. "The Bourbonnais isn't hyper, but easy-going and a very good housedog." He also notes that T (short for Phantom's Tracker of Northland) tends to be a bit standoffish with strangers, a trait valued by many owners who prefer that their dogs show discretion in making friends.

North trains his dogs, which have previously included German shorthairs and Weimaraners, on valley and Gambel's quail. In addition to hunting birds with T, North also uses her to blood-trail deer wounded

by bowhunters, a task well in keeping with the Bourbonnais' history as a continental or versatile gun dog. "When tracking deer, she never gets beyond 40 or 50 feet, so I don't have to work her on a leash," he says, adding that she is also close-working while bird hunting.

North describes T's style afield as very cautious. "She creeps like a cat to get in as close as possible—when she points, you know that's where the bird is!" he says.

Pat McMullen characterizes his Bourbonnais in a similar manner. "Maggie is very careful when she works birds," he says. "She really burns up the field until she winds game, then she stalks. But she keeps her nose high, unlike my Brit, who works with a lower head."

Another characteristic mentioned by almost every owner contacted is the Bourbonnais' hardiness. For all of their small size and short coat, the dogs apparently lack nothing when it comes to fortitude. Pat McMullen recalls Maggie introducing herself to water by jumping into an icy lake to chase ducks, and continuing to hunt as though nothing had happened after badly gashing the inside of her flank on a fencepost. Jim North says T can hunt in the extreme heat of southern California better than any other dog he has seen.

That's not to imply, however, that the Bourbonnais is a real "tough nut" when it comes to temperament. Most owners say the dogs tend to be on the soft side, requiring little force during training, or as Pete DeAngelis puts it, "If a guy is heavy-handed, he probably shouldn't own one." Owners also give the dogs high marks for responsiveness, tractability and quickness in assimilating new lessons.

The Bourbonnais' physical characteristics are perhaps best summed up by Pat McMullen. "They have different build than a Brittany, with a wide, deep chest and a narrow waist," he says. "Basically, to most people they look like a miniature German shorthair." The standard calls for males between 20 and 22½ inches tall and 39 to 55 pounds; females between 19 and 22 inches and 35 to 48 pounds.

Although in earlier times Bourbonnais breeders concentrated on producing pups that were born tailless, this is no longer the case. "It's

very rare to see a naturally tailless Bourbonnais nowadays," says Beth Cepil. "The dogs are now born with full tails that are docked, and the standard allows tails up to six inches."

Another distinctive characteristic of the Bourbonnais is its coat. At first glance, most sportsmen would simply call the dog heavily ticked or roan. But the breed standard is much more specific regarding markings and color, stating, "Shades of 'faded lilac' and 'wine' are achieved by the overall effect of maroon [chestnut]-colored spots and lines blended in together to give a mottled effect. There is a streaked appearance. In 'fawn' dogs, a lot of different blends of beige, creams and brown spots and lines blend in together to achieve the shade of 'peach blossom.'"

The standard also allows solid spots of color, but stipulates that they may not dominate the coat or be too prevalent. If such a spot appears on the dog's face, it may not cover both eyes. A black nose and any trace of black markings are also forbidden.

Although the Bourbonnais is still extremely rare, Beth Cepil says that the breed is becoming better known outside France, with representatives in Italy, Germany and Greece, as well as the U.S. There is not yet an official breed club for the Bourbonnais in North America, however, so owners are registering their dogs with NAVHDA. "We would like to see more people work their Bourbonnais in NAVHDA tests as a means of introducing the dogs to others," he says. "The NAVHDA training program is also very much in keeping with the breed's temperament and hunting style."

The Cepils are currently awaiting the arrival of two more Bourbonnais from France. Beth and Ron plan to work the dogs with the Pennsylvania NAVHDA chapter to prepare them for Natural Ability testing in the fall. Beth is a member of the Club du Braque du Bourbonnais in France, and says she will be happy to serve as an intermediary for anyone wishing to import a dog.

For more information on the Braque du Bourbonnais, the French breed club, and news of upcoming litters, contact Beth Cepil at 5961 Musket Road, New Tripoli, PA 18066; (215) 298-3310. □