

Pedi-G

Squashed faces, but
tails, cropped ears
and sizes. In this day
for people to keep b

► **By Julie Richard**

When Danny, a fluffy, blow-dried Pekingese, strutted past 22,000 rivals into the center ring to be crowned the supreme champion at last year's prestigious Crufts dog show, some humans who belonged to "losing" dogs were less than pleased. Rumors rippled through the competition that all was not as it seemed with the "perfect" little pooch whose bulging brown eyes protruded from a mass of golden hair.

Gossip had it that Danny had undergone a secret facelift to secure his place in history. If true, the show's organizers were quick to assert, he would be stripped of his title and sent back to the dog house, never to grace the ring again. An investigation was launched and his miffed "owners" were eventually cleared. Danny, it seems, had merely undergone a throat operation which did not alter his appearance, but did allow him to breathe better.

To outside observers, the scandal seemed comical. But it's a microcosm of more serious issues about pedigree breeding on both sides of the Atlantic.

Europe bans "unhealthy" breeds

In Britain, the government is considering a new animal welfare bill that includes a ban on tail docking, a cosmetic surgery routinely done on young Weimaraners, Dobermans and 72 other breeds.

In times gone by, cutting down their tails had a purpose. Working dogs pushing through thick brush could injure their long tails. But for the vast majority of dogs today, their hardest work

is to get off the sofa and make it to the food bowl. Still, breeders have tails docked because it's "the norm" of appearance for the breed – the "standard." And British breed associations and owners' clubs are lobbying furiously to preserve their right to cut off puppies' tails, although the surgery is now illegal in many European countries.

Indeed, the European Community is even considering a complete ban on the breeding of pet animals with genetic defects. In the world of breeding and showing, that's an earthquake! Gone will be the bulging eyes of Boston terriers with their resulting eye problems. Those exceptionally flat faces of Pekingeses, pugs, and bulldogs, prized by fanciers but which often lead to serious breathing difficulties, would be no more. Adios to Cavalier King Charles Spaniels with their notorious leaking heart valves, heart murmurs, and cataracts. And the list goes on, from breed to breed.

In America, resisting change

If what's happening in Europe seems a world away, it's not. The issue has already crossed the Atlantic, becoming a hot topic on the animal welfare stage. Dr. Elliot Katz, a veterinarian and the president of the animal protection organization In Defense of Animals, recently wrote to the American Kennel Club, asking them to take a proactive position against ear cropping and tail docking.

"The whole system needs to be modified," he says. "Dogs are more than just show things. We would like the AKC to use its position with the breeders to try to influence some of these



BREED?

bulging eyes, docked ears, unnatural shapes and sizes, and age, is it ethical to breed such dogs?



practices.”

Katz’s plea fell on deaf ears. Ronald Menaker, chairman of the board of the AKC, replied by saying, “Each breed parent specialty club owns its standards, and no AKC breed standards of excellence may be altered or replaced without the official approval of the parent member specialty club representing the breed in question.”

In other words, change in attitude and practice can only come from the very people most resistant to that change.

Breeding deformities

Dr. James Serpell, author of *In the Company of Animals*, associate professor of humane ethics and animal welfare at the University of Pennsylvania, and director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals & Society, is considered one of the world’s leading experts on pet keeping and its role in human society.

“There has been a long-held assumption,” he says, “that tail docking [which is often done without anesthetic] doesn’t hurt puppies because they are so young. But a study at Birmingham University in the U.K. found that puppies were extremely sensitive to pain but didn’t have the wherewithal to show it. The study showed formation of [deformed nerve cells], and that dogs sometimes suffered from phantom limb pain – permanent pain from the stump.”

But tail docking and ear cropping are only one element of the larger overall issue: Is it acceptable to breed what are, in truth, deformities into dogs – and also cats?

There’s no escaping the fact that the “spe-

cial characteristics” being bred into dogs are producing harmful genetic deformities. If Danny, the Crufts-winning Pekingese, hadn’t been bred to meet the human-imposed breed standards of a flat face, would he have needed a throat operation to correct breathing problems? Probably not.

“I don’t deny that breeders are strongly attached to their animals,” says Serpell. “But there is [also] their competitive desire to produce the perfect dog. There are a lot of undercurrents that aren’t very nice. There are elements of eugenics, racial purity, maintaining the bloodline. I’ve seen people look at a dog that doesn’t conform to the breed standard, like an undocked boxer, and stand there shaking their heads, muttering ‘Ruined. It’s ruined.’”

Dr. Jean Dodd, a California veterinarian who has been part of the show world, breeding vizslas, recently produced a paper for the Association of Veterinarians for Animal Rights (AVAR) that provides specifics of the medical conditions that plague each breed. She has worked with numerous breed clubs in her career, advising on medical issues affecting dogs. She knows firsthand how difficult it is to get breeders to examine the issues openly.

“In the 80s, the Dalmatian club got involved with the English pointer club to produce an officially approved cross to get rid of the Dalmatian’s uric acid defect. It was a masterful stroke of purposeful breeding away from a defect. In just two generations, the defect was gone. But then the breed club suddenly reversed themselves and rescinded the thing because they declared it was ‘tainting the breed.’ It was such

a joke because they were the ones who suggested it in the first place. They just put the Dalmatian back where it was, with its genetic problems, and wouldn't allow it."

A question of ethics

To Katz, the issue goes to the heart of animal protection. "Ethics need to be brought into this," he says. "What we are doing is wrong and cruel. Purebreds have a myriad of medical issues, from back problems to eye problems. Many go blind. Others are so high strung as to become a danger to themselves and to others. Many of these dogs suffer for months or years because the "owners" are reluctant to pay the veterinary costs to correct what are often extremely painful genetic diseases and deformities.

"It is also very wrong for breeders, puppy mills, and pet stores to flood the market with puppies while millions of gentle animals are killed each year in our nation's shelters for lack of loving homes. It's time for people to save the lives of innocent animals by adopting rather than buying their next animal companion."

Serpell agrees that morality runs through the issue of cosmetic breeding. "We have a moral duty to not do something that's causing pain and distress to animals. In fairness, there are a lot of problems that came about accidentally, and you can't blame the breeders because they weren't intending to produce them. But now that we are aware of them, they need to look into the problems.

"The biggest concern is when the physical problem is a direct result of selection, wanting to create a particular physical confirmation, as in the bulldog and Pekingese. When our own aesthetic sensibilities are directly causing the problem, that is pretty reprehensible. And I can't countenance chopping off bits of animals for no reason."

Confronting the issues

But getting breeders to confront the issue can be very difficult. "I talk to breeders quite a bit," says Serpell. "Some are open, but others look at you as though you are the Antichrist!"

On the open side is Dr. John Reeve-Newson, a frequent judge at dog shows. As a veterinarian and breeder of French bulldogs, he's had much experience with the physical and behavioral challenges purebred dogs face.

"Some of the problems come from what I would call an exaggeration," he explains. "If a flat face is good, than a really flat face is even better. So the traits are exaggerated. You can breed a bulldog with an open [nostril passage] so they can breathe better. But as judges, we must judge the dogs according to the standard given by the breed clubs. We cannot deviate from those."

Reeve-Newson says that, as a judge, he wouldn't be bothered at all by an undocked tail or uncropped ears. (In fact, in Canada where he judges many dog shows, dogs with undocked tails and uncropped ears are acceptable and are not to be penalized by judges.) In the U.S., judges have no influence at all over breeders or their practices. Their mandate is simply to judge a dog by the standards supplied by breed clubs. Neither does the AKC hold any sway. In other countries in Europe and in Canada, the equivalent to the AKC actually prepares the standards, allowing them greater latitude to eliminate requirements such as tail docking and ear cropping. But Reeve-Newson admits that his attempts to talk to American breeders openly about some of these issues have generally met with resistance.

"A few years ago, I was discussing the temperament problems that some St. Bernards have, and I made some smart remark that if I was caught in a snow drift in the Swiss Alps and saw a St. Bernard coming toward me, I would quickly bury myself in the snow



Chihuahuas: Subject to heart problems and hypoglycemia. Dry eyes and possible damage to the cornea. Vulnerable to injury because of their small size.



Pugs: Small nostrils cause breathing problems. Can't tolerate heat. Skin wrinkles must be cleaned, and eyes checked for abrasions. Knees are liable to pop out.



Basset Hounds: Eyelids can roll in (causing irritation) or out (causing infection). Susceptible to foreleg lameness, cysts on feet, glaucoma, outer ear infection, joint problems, twisting of the stomach, and excessive bleeding.



Saint Bernards: Hip and elbow dysplasia. Eyelids can roll in or out. Prone to sudden twisting of the stomach and to enlarged hearts.



Dachshunds: Epilepsy, diabetes, and deafness are common. Dry eyes cause damage to the cornea. Knee problems and disc disease are frequent.



Afghans: Can develop paralysis due to necrotic myelopathy. Sensitive to anesthesia, and prone to tail injuries and hip dysplasia.



Labradors: Hip and elbow dysplasia. Prone to sudden twisting of the stomach. Eye problems.



Chows: Subject to hip and elbow dysplasia, and sudden twisting of the stomach. Juvenile cataracts and breathing problems due to small nostrils.



Pekingese: Breathing problems due to elongated palate and small nostrils. Their prominent eyes are subject to corneal abrasions. They cannot tolerate heat.



Beagles: Subject to disc disease, glaucoma, hip dysplasia, epilepsy, and juvenile cataracts.



Lhasa Apsos: Knee problems and kidney failure are common. Numerous eye problems: eyelids that roll in; retina problems that lead to blindness; abnormal eyelashes that cause eye irritation.



Great Danes: Subject to hip and elbow dysplasia, enlarged heart, juvenile cataracts, and malignant bone cancer. Abnormality of neck vertebrae causes lack of coordination or paralysis in rear legs.



Chinese Cresteds: Sparse coat leads to skin problems and allergies. Also weak teeth that wear down.



Shar-Peis: Hip dysplasia, knee problems and arthritis. Wrinkles must be cleaned regularly. Eyelid problems.



English Springer Spaniel: Frequent infections of the outer ear. Hip and elbow dysplasia. Eyelids can roll in or out. Retina problems can lead to blindness.

for fear it might eat me. A St. Bernard club threatened to sue me. So I stopped trying to discuss those type of issues. I have enough stress in my life. To quote Goethe, "Against stupidity, even the gods argue in vain."

On the not-so-open side would be Burton Yamada, who has been involved in the dog show world for 35 years and will be judging the Best in Show contest at the Westminster Dog Show in 2004. When questions turned to cosmetic alterations and genetic defects in breeds, he declared that he no longer wanted to participate in this article since he is actively battling against animal rights groups, which, he said, have been "infiltrated" by radicals.

As a breeder of standard schnauzers, a dog that routinely has its tail docked, Yamada sees no reason to consider changing the practice. "In my breed we do crop the ears and dock tails, and I have no problem with that. The standard calls for that. It allows it. It doesn't hurt the dogs that much."

Yamada added that tail docking and ear cropping can be compared to spaying and neutering, saying that those surgeries, too, are done without an animal's consent. When it was pointed out that spaying and neutering are done to prevent the birth of animals for whom there aren't enough homes, Yamada continued to insist that there is no difference.

"Spaying and neutering have a utility," he argued. "But they can just as easily cause the pharmaceutical industry to have pills that would have the same effect. Or they could leave the animals unaltered and just separate them – make sure they don't breed. That's no different than what the Catholic religion promotes."

Change will come

Professor Serpell believes that the entrenched attitudes of breed clubs will change, one way or another, as public awareness grows.

"Many people would be shocked if they really knew what was being done to the animals," he says. "The more coverage the topic gets in the media, the more people will wake up and pay attention. It's going to be forced on breeders, sooner or later, by public opinion.

"If I were the breed clubs, I would be thinking we need to start discussing it *now*, and start making compromises. But I'd have to say I'm not optimistic about that happening."

Serpell doesn't think the planned breed bans in Europe will work here in the U.S. But he equally has no illusions that the breed clubs are going to address the problems themselves.

"You need a fifth column," he says, "a coalition of alternative breeders who are prepared to do the unthinkable, outcross these breeds with other breeds to produce a more healthy animal.

"In an ideal world, we'd forget about appearance, and we would focus on behavior and temperament. We would begin to breed dogs that are adapted to living with people as we live now – animals that would be happy in the kind of conditions we currently keep them in: urban environments, small enclosed spaces."

Reeve-Newson is more optimistic. "There are a lot of good breeders out there," he says. "And there has already been some very positive change. We receive less than half of the hip dysplasia in golden retrievers and Labs than 15 or 20 years ago. And we hardly see any more hereditary blindness in miniature schnauzers.

"Not all breeders are equal, sure, but there are a lot who love animals and are aware. Virtually every breed group has people that also rescue animals and work to find them good homes.

"Breeders are like any other people. You get good. You get bad. But many really love their breeds and are working to address the physical problems and make things better for them." 🐾