**The Retriever, Dog, & Wildlife Blog**



**The two principles for a new dog fancy**

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As long-time readers of this blog know, I think we need a new dog fancy.

By “fancy,” I simply mean the cultural institution that sets the mores and values for breeding dogs. The initial fancy was developed in the period from 1860 to about 1885 under the premise of improving strains of domestic dog. This was the time of Victorian science, which had inherited a legacy of the scientific breeding that traced back the eighteenth century agriculturalist Robert Bakewell.

This was also a time when zoology consisted of Europeans with some scientific training going to the far corners of the world in search of new beasts. If someone saw a bear with somewhat off coloration, that person usually declared it a new species.   This was the age of taxonomic splitting to the extreme.

And it was applied to dogs in ways that we would later come to regret. In those days, it was common to apply those taxonomic splitting principles to dogs. Even if you could get several breeds in the same litter, it was generally accepted that one would register each puppy according to its phenotype. Perhaps the most extreme example is the Bedlington terrier and Dandie Dinmont terrier problem. At one time, [one could get either breed in the same litter. I](http://books.google.com/books?id=Ax9DAAAAIAAJ&dq=bedlington%20terrier%20dandie%20dinmont%20same%20litter&pg=PA173#v=onepage&q&f=false)f it had dwarfism, it was a Dandie. If it had legs, it was a Bedlington. At some point, the Bedlington terrier’s coat was altered through cross-breeding with a poodle, and it became much less likely to have strains in which Dandies and Bedlingtons would pop up in the same litter. In Northumberland and the Scottish borders, there were drop-eared terriers that produced long-legged and short-legged varieties, but the dog fancy decided to split them up.

And now they are quite different dogs.

Fights in breeds about the true type also led to breed splits.

Yes. It was politics. The golden retriever was split from the flat-coat for two reasons:  1. It was believed to be of Russian and not British origin and 2. the yellow dogs weren’t winning prizes at shows.

The last breed split I’ve seen that resulted from a dispute over phenotype was the division of the Norfolk and Norwich terriers. At one time, there was a breed drawn from the little terriers of East Anglia that was called a Norwich terrier. There were two varieties:  one with prick ears and one with folded drop ears.  If you have both ears in a breed, it’s actually pretty hard to breed for consistent ear carriage– just ask the people who breed phalenes to papillons in the US–so they decided to split the Norwich terrier into two breeds in 1960.

Splitting up types and refining them were the main activities of the dog fancy. They didn’t have a good grasp on the science of population genetics at all.

These were social climbing people who wanted to innovate and create. In some ways, their hearts were in the right place.

But they were still stuck in the limitations of the Zeitgeist.

We now know that splitting up dogs into often contrived esoteric forms called breeds and then shutting off all those breeds from almost all infusions of new blood are actions that are not going to lead to improved health or welfare. We also know that if rigorous selection is performed within those breeds, we are doing nothing more than making the march to misery move at double-quick.

The dog fancy that we have right now isn’t really that far removed from the Victorian days.

It has generally been impervious to new scientific findings that have directly challenged axioms about blood purity and rigorous selection within a closed population.

It has also been impervious to suggestions that breeding for certain phenotypes are directly responsible for creating health problems. The extreme brachycephaly of pugs and the sloping hyena backs of German shepherd dogs can be demonstrated to cause very real maladies, but these criticisms are ignored.

One intellectually lazy argument is to attack anyone who points out these facts about extreme conformation as an animal rights activist. I know the full mantra– “You’re one of those PETA types who wants to end dog ownership!”

Not at all.

When one points out the absurdity of blood purity in this day and age, the other intellectually lazy argument is to say that one wants to end purebred dogs  or selective breeding.

I rather enjoy it when people who don’t wish to debate the issues simply put words in your mouth and intentions in your head that you simply wouldn’t consider in the first place.

No. I actually want to encourage selective breeding, but I want to give breeders more tools and more freedom to correct genetic problems and to innovate. Innovation is the key. People need freedom to think and to experiment.

The problem with the dog fancy is that skills and knowledge were passed on like apprenticeships. A new breeder would hook up with an older established one, and the established one would give out all the advice. That established breeder likely got his or her ideas from earlier one, who in turn got it from an earlier one. In the end, it may be that this wisdom all gets traced to someone who lived either in a time when we simply didn’t know or someone who was trying to peddle a pet theory about how to breed dogs (see [Brackett’s formula](http://www.border-wars.com/2010/12/bracketts-formula-for-failure-1.html) for a good example of that one).

That’s not a culture of innovation. That’s a culture of tradition– often the culture of tradition for tradition’s sake.

In order to create a dog fancy of innovation we need a new paradigm, and I think this new paradigm needs to be based upon two principles

1. Science
2. Empathy

The first principle is oddly lacking in so much of the modern dog fancy.  People use scientific findings. If there is a new genetic test for a disease or a recessive coat type they don’t want, they are excited to use it.

But when science questions the validity of long-standing traditions and ideas passed on from established people to their apprentices, that is when things get ugly.

There is very little critical thought, and critical thinking is key to having science as a main principle.

It can be acceptable for someone to say that if you don’t trim the fur on Keeshond’s feet, its pasterns will become weaker.  (Someone did actually say this!)

If the dog fancy were more science-based as a founding principle, people would not be able to get away with pronouncements that are either not provable or are demonstrably false.

I don’t see why it’s such a scary notion, but a lot of people get nervous when you start talking like this. That’s because you may discover that some long-held shibboleth is nothing more than bullcrap.

Empathy is the other principle that is sorely lacking in the world of dogs.

I don’t know how someone can claim to love a dog and be satisfied with its constant discomfort.

But that’s exactly what you see when people breed extremely brachycephalic pugs that cannot cool themselves efficiently or breathe properly.

As soon as you start down this path, the accusations of confederacy with Ingrid Newkirk come out, and the breeders almost always say “It’s in the standard.”

And this is where the two principles come together. Breed standards are like scripture. They are written by fallible human beings.

They are also interpreted by fallible human beings, and they are misused by even more fallible ones.

At some point, your empathy for the dog has to bring to a critical analysis of the standard and the institutions that claim to be acting in its best interest.

It is at this level that the modern dog fancy has let the domestic dog down.

We can change it, but we have to be acting with the right principles.

Otherwise, we’ll fall into the trap that goes “All we have to do is have working trials replace dog shows and things will turn out fine,” which is followed by the even more absurd variant that goes “All we have to do is make sure our champion dogs pass a working test before they become full champions.”

Both of those statements are acting in the old paradigm.

They simply will not change things enough to make a real difference.

The new dog fancy cannot be the based on the old. It must be based upon principles that are worthy of the dogs themselves.