

A Question of Practical CANINE POLITICS

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This Op-Ed reflects the opinions of the writer.

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I wish to skip the gentle introductions to our next discussion and get down to brass tacks. Let us explore the long argued, heatedly debated practices of ear cropping and tail docking.

Before we begin, let us get the facts out of the way. Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland have all banned cosmetic ear cropping and tail docking. In Australia, ear cropping is a prohibited procedure under State & Territory legislation and is an offense under the Rules and Regulations of the Australian National Kennel Club and its Member Bodies. Tail Docking is a restrictive procedure under its State and Territory legislation. Obviously, there are many countries in the world that I did not cite, but for the sake of this discussion I list the principal countries involved in the sport of purebred dogs.

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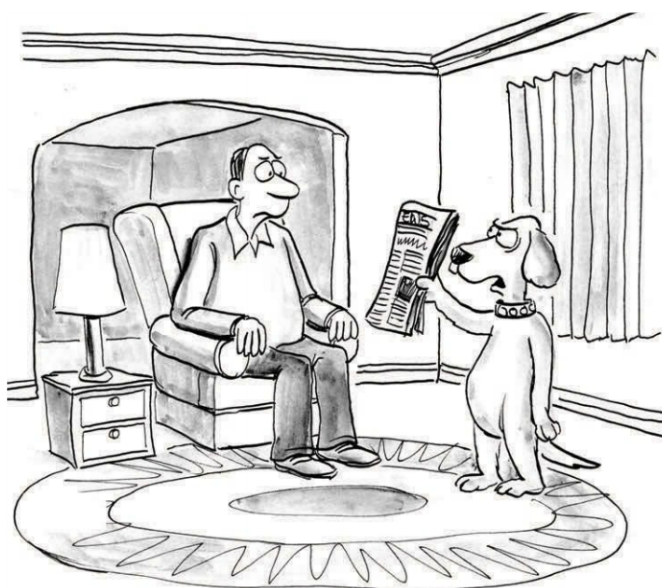
As for the United States, cropping and docking have long been accepted practices. There are often-heard explanations tendered as to why these practices are maintained on terriers, working and field (gun) dogs. Customs whose social phenomena have been ingrained in American Kennel Club (AKC) sanctioned purebred dog events — particularly conformation competition — essentially dictating what is best liked in the show ring for over a century.

Opponents argue and belabor these practices while fingering the American Kennel Club as the source or chief culprit behind disfiguring dogs. However, they would be wrong because, although the AKC emphatically supports cropping and docking procedures it, in fact, does not own the individual breed standards. These breed standards belong to the parent member Specialty Breed Clubs who alone are responsible for any alterations to its requirements. In fact, the AKC Charter & By-laws, Article IV, Section 4, states that 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. Having said that, it is obvious that any state, territory, or federal legislation would supplant the wishes of Parent Member Specialty Clubs on these two matters. Officially, the AKC position is that ear cropping, tail docking, and dewclaw removal, as described in certain breed standards, are long accepted animal husbandry practices integral to defining and preserving the breed character, but also to enhance good health. These procedures improve the health and safety of dogs and do not constitute animal cruelty.

In preparation of our immersion into the cropping and docking controversy, I thought it smart to delve briefly into the history of these customs and appraise the opinions of those who came before us. Despite shifting positions throughout history, one thing is clear and absolute — that this ensuing debate has been ongoing for a great while according to the esteemed author Edward William Jaquet, Secretary of The Kennel Club from his consummate book, *The Kennel Club: A History and Record of its Work*, published in 1905. Mr. Jaquet noted that this subject of dispute even predated the formation of the Kennel Club and in his words, “has long been debated between mere fanciers as opposed to amateurs or real dog lovers.”

As recorded by Jaquet, cropping became a question of practical canine politics in 1889 after an op-ed piece was written up in the December 1887 issue of *The Kennel Gazette*. The author, Mr. Sidney Turner, advanced the recommendation that ear cropping be abolished based on the grounds of cruelty and absurdity. His eloquent treatise moved a great many people in their depreciation of the customs and subsequently; he brought forth the resolution to restrict it at the Kennel Club’s shows. Interestingly, Mr. Jaquet records the ensuing debate in which the only excuse offered for the practice was that it saved the animal from suffering from tears and bites. To this, Mr. Sydney Turner craftily replied that Nature never erred and that her work could not be improved upon by art.

Continuing in his recordings, the Secretary of the Kennel Club reported that the cropping question was further championed by Mr. Edgar Farman whose entreaties to the Prince of Wales, Patron of the Kennel Club, resulted in His Royal Highness coming clearly down on the opposing side of cropping. Ultimately, and after a number of years of deliberations and petitions the resolution was moved on March 31, 1895, and carried unanimously that the alteration in the then Kennel Club Rule 22 stated, “No dog born after 31st March, nor Irish Terrier born after 31st December, 1889, can, if



"I'll only give you the paper if you promise not to let the news upset you."

cropped, win a prize at any Show held under Kennel Club Rules.”

Perhaps one of the main reasons why there was such vociferous discord amongst dog people in the late 1800s and early 1900s is the means and methods of how these previous century fanciers performed the procedures. Some may regard fascinating and others disgusting; early century books reported that the kennel men or maids used their teeth to bite off the tails. A description of such was written in *The Dogs Of Great Britain, America, And Other Countries. Their Breeding, Training, and Management in Health and Disease* by the English sports gentleman John Henry Walsh, 1810-1888. Mr. Walsh reported that, “Before weaning, any cropping which is intended, whether of the dew-claw or tail, should be practised, but the ears should be left alone until the third or fourth month, as they are not sufficiently developed before. If, however, the operator does not understand his business thoroughly, it is better to leave the latter organs alone, until a later period, as otherwise the proper quantity may not be cropped or

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rounded, as the case may be. Indeed, ever the most skillful hand will hardly ever manage either the one or the other well before the fifth month; and in hounds it is usual to defer it until they are nearly full grown, as they often lose a considerable quantity of blood, which interferes with their growth. But the tail and dew-claws may always be best done, and with least pain, while with the dam; besides which, her tongue serves to heal the wound better than that of the young puppy, who has hardly learned to use it. Regular dog-fanciers bite off the tail, but a pair of scissors answers equally well; and the same may be said of the dew-claw. If, however, the nail only is to be removed, which always ought to be done, the teeth serve the purpose of a pair of nippers, and by their aid it may be drawn out, leaving the claw itself attached, but rendered less liable to injury, from having lost the part likely to catch hold of any projecting body."

Rawdon B. Lee's 1894 historical endeavor, *A History and Description of the Modern Dogs of Great Britain and Ireland (The Terriers)* contains other notable recordings of cropping methods. Lee tells us, "The mutilation is usually done when the animal is from seven to ten months old. It is a troublesome performance, requiring considerable skill and nerve. It is customary in many cases to have the dog under chloroform when it is being performed upon, and one operator has an ingenious contrivance to which he fastens the patient with straps."

Throughout the preceding two hundred years to today, the explanations offered as reasons for these practices are allied. Most postulate that the removal of these appendages is to improve the health and safety of dogs and do not constitute animal cruelty. The AKC disseminated and reiterated this position in their *In Session* newsletter, Issue Spring 2011, *Issue Analysis: Dispelling the Myths of Cropped Ears, Docked Tails, Dewclaws, and Debarking*. "The cropped ears help enhance the Boxer's hearing, thereby helping it perform its tasks to the best of its ability. Other dogs, such as the Brussels Griffon, were historically kept in stables to catch vermin or other pests. Cropping the ears protected them from damaging bites when cornering a rat or another unwelcome animal." AKC and fanciers submit the familiar argument that docking prevents the tail from getting snagged or damaged if the security, police and hunting dogs

have to go through thick brush or under a fence. However, what is an unusual argument set forth by AKC is that the purpose of cropping, among other benefits, is to prevent ear infections common in dogs with long, floppy ears. Hmm, as a side note, this is a new one on me. I am a hound specialist, and a large number of dogs having long ears are in the hound group of which they are not cropped.

In like manner, canine history records similar defenses as set forth above by AKC. One only has to refer to the century-plus old works of Rawdon Lee's *A History and Description of the*

Modern Sporting Dogs of Great Britain and Ireland, or his previously cited (*The Terriers*) to read parallel justifications. From *The Terriers*, "That there is no doubt that the bull terrier, be he either big or little, has not reached that height of popularity his merits might deserve, by reason of the obnoxious custom of cropping his ears. This cruelty was originally perpetrated in order that when fighting the ears would not afford hold for an opponent's teeth. Then the aural appendages were cut right off. Now the operation is a much more artistic piece of work...which is said to give the animal a smarter and more aristocratic appearance." From Lee's *Modern Sporting Dogs*, "For a hundred years or more, it has been, and still remains, though some packs now discountenance it, the custom to "round" the ears of foxhounds, which is neither more or less than shortening their aural appendages, to prevent the latter

from getting torn in covert, or in going through or over the fences. This is done at about four months old." The earlier mentioned John Henry Walsh, who wrote under the pseudonym "Stonehenge", believed it useful in preventing canker either from foul blood or mechanical injury.

However, concurrent with these traditional, euphemistic rationales, the veiled truth remains that these customs also were based on whim or fancy, simple aesthetics. History records that for hundreds and hundreds of years the Boarhound or Great Dane was recorded as having cropped ears. Interestingly, in 1846, H.D. Richardson writes that the Dane's ears were small and carried back, but these were invariably taken off when the dog was in whelp. Another coincident observation or accounting of the Dane opines that the ears were big and hung down in a



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fashion so ungainly that it was the custom to crop them. Further, the esteemed Secretary of the Kennel Club recorded that German dog clubs petitioned the Kennel Club to exempt Great Danes from the cropping ban citing that an uncropped Dane had a very ugly appearance, which would "do away with the breed." Even the doyen of the Manchester Terrier, Mr. Henry Lacy confessed to being true that he admired a cropped ear that created, in his considered opinion, a sharp, bright appearance to this particular terrier.

In addition to citing artificial tradition and inference to health, some advocates maintain that fanciers opposing cropping and docking are attempting to control other dog fanciers' lives. To that degree, the following may provide a provocative discussion. There are over 180 AKC recognized breeds today of which a minority minimum of 20 breeds have cropped ears and a minority minimum of 62 breeds who are docked. The reality is that the majority of breeds are not physically altered, yet to some extent it appears the majority is being held hostage by the minority in my opinion. What of the argument that the continuance of these antiquated practices in AKC conformation events is gainful munition for the animal rights activists? So that I am abundantly clear, I am not foolish enough to believe that if we eliminate these customs from the specific breed standards we will see an end to the animal rights onslaught. Advocates and fanciers alike must recognize though that the understated rationales served up for hundreds of years justifying these procedures are, in this present age, objectionable, and ill-favored. In short, no one is buying into them anymore. We need to command and forge our future instead of letting extremists dictate and shape it with prohibitory legislation. Let us construct, advance, and promote thoughtful, gradual revisions of these procedures in a rapport-building manner. Point blank, I think maintaining procedures in dogs that have been banned in the majority of the rest of the world is not advancing the best interests of AKC and purebred dog enthusiast's passionate pursuits.

In 1976, The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) resolved and recommended to the American Kennel Club and appropriate breed associations that action be taken to delete the mention of cropped or trimmed ears from breed standards for dogs, and to prohibit the showing of dogs with cropped or trimmed ears if such animals were born after some

reasonable future date. Through the subsequent years, their published position has remained unchanged, even strengthened, as it is now their recommended position, no longer just suggested. These are the professionals who administer to a great majority of these cosmetic procedures and for nearly 40 years they have recommended against continuum of the customs.

The AKC has claimed that there is nothing in AKC rules, nor in any breed standard, that requires an owner to have such procedures and that dogs are judged based on the compliance of that dog to its breed standard. Further, they have pointed out that having such alterations is not necessary for an entry in a conformation event. The latter is true, but what is not valid is the AKC position that an unaltered dog has the same potential to win as any other dog in that breed who has been cropped or

docked. A lion's share of exhibitors in altered breeds justifiably disagree with AKC's statement as many have witnessed a judge excuse a dog for not being altered. I too have observed and listened to an AKC judge excuse an undocked Australian Terrier from competition because it had a natural tail. Consider the AKC Brittany standard that states that if the tail is not a natural bob, then it is docked to approximately 4 inches, and any tail substantially more than four inches should be severely penalized. It is not a far-fetched prediction that were a magnificent imported Brittany with a longer tail — as is acceptable in most all of Europe and the U.K. — exhibited at an AKC dog show, this entry would be excused or, at the very least, severely penalized effectively eliminating it from competition.

The AKC Board of Directors is reputed to be our sport's leaders. This cabinet can institute changes as they have obviously and memorably done so previously affecting competition events, despite the Delegate Body. Decidedly, traditions and customs have important roles in our sport, but objective, logical reviews of those that have been vociferously criticized for hundreds of years leads all to the realization that it is time to transition our methods of animal husbandry into the 21st century. Now, more than ever before, it is a question of practical canine politics. In the near future, we may very well concur with Mr. Rawdon Lee when he wrote in 1906, "Happily, this cropping is illegal nowadays, and is only alluded to here as one of the follies of a fast passing away generation."

