

# The right to breed

by Catherine McMillan, National Post

I still recall my first visit to the Small Animal Clinic at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon. As the young resident took down my puppy's health history, she advised that if I spayed my little dog before her first heat cycle, the risk of mammary cancer could be eliminated.

"Good to know," I replied. "But how will that affect her future as my foundation bitch?"

Some 25-plus years later, "Peras" has hundreds of champion descendants across six continents, while I am quite likely the first and only commercial artist to co-author a peer-reviewed paper for the American Journal of Veterinary Ophthalmology.

That young resident's words were a warning, though I didn't know it at the time. Veterinary medicine, once an equal partner with breeders, sportsmen, and food producers, is being transformed by an activist viewpoint that reduces owners to "guardians" and elevates health providers to the self-appointed role of animal "advocate."

"Spay and neuter" has achieved cult mantra. Dog breeders are held in suspicion: The only good dog is the "natural" one. Defects are blamed on breed standards, despite the fact that the majority of purebreds are produced by family pets and commercial breeders, their puppies as far removed from the show ring as a second-hand pickup from the Formula One track.

This attitude is reflected by provincial boards that recently have moved to impose bans on ear cropping and tail docking. Though long the subject of some controversy, these procedures serve both aesthetic and practical ends, injury prevention and hygiene among them.

This current turf war over puppy tails is just a preview of coming attractions. The state that has no business in the bedrooms of the nation seeks to insert itself into the fallopian tubes of its poodles.

A Canadian Kennel Club (CKC) director recently recounted the hostile atmosphere at a recent meeting with the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA): "These vets are not only speaking of cropping and docking. Several, led by New Brunswick, are openly critical of the CKC's breed standards, feel that breeders are poorly educated with respect to health, genetics and breeding practices to support an animal's welfare and are censorious of breeders -- in particular those breeders who breed conformation dogs for show. They are criticizing our standards for individual breeds and are of the opinion that we are not supporting the puppy purchasers with healthy dogs."

To achieve this, they hint at legislation. After all, who better to condemn the docking of a puppy's tail than the person who will, in a few weeks time, slice open her abdomen to remove a healthy uterus? Who better to seek criminalization of ear cropping than a profession that declaws kittens for profit?

For as often as they're consulted by media and policy makers on matters canine, a veterinarian receives no training in basic breed identification, much less the diverse origins and forces that shape gene pools. It's unreasonable to expect them to -- it takes a lifetime of study to master a single breed, much less hundreds.

The film Best in Show presented the dog-show circuit as a caravan of loopy narcissists. Omitted from the script were the contributions of the fancy to everyday canine society -- rescue efforts, training classes, consumer advice, the millions raised, the efforts donated to health research.

There is no profit in showing dogs, for costs quickly negate the returns. It's an esoteric pursuit, driven by love of breed, competitive reward, and that appreciation of form and symmetry shared by all artists, a thing we know as "beauty." The Doberman's "look of eagles," the merle collie's loud and luxurious coat, the silhouette of the Skipperke -- those things that fill the eye can determine the fate of breeds, for it is their beauty that so often attracts and inspires human beings to devote resources to their perpetuation.

The distance between a breed and extinction is five years, for this is the average reproductive lifespan of a female. For rare breeds and those with limited genetic diversity, it takes only one ill-conceived edict on the part of policy makers to start it down the road to collapse.

It seems like a small thing, this battle for a veterinarian's liberty to practice as he sees fit, a dog breeder's quest for perfection. After all, no one needs to crop ears on a Boxer. But then again, no one needs a Boxer at all, or any sort of pet. Purebreds (of all species) carry health risks derived from their genetic founding fathers. Breeds weren't created to compile longevity records, but to perform tasks for mankind -- to dispatch vermin, predators, and enemy barbarians, locate game, retrieve over water, to pull sleds, or warm a dowager's bed on a cold winter night. And so, they remain imperfect.

The Borzoi is living history of czarist Russia, the giant Mastiff a modern echo of ancient Rome -- but they suffer high rates of bloat. Poster artists recruited the English bulldog as a symbol of resolve in World War II, but the massive head that encouraged a nation results in caesarian sections. The Dalmatian's spots are beloved of Disney and children everywhere, but the genetics that create them can result in deafness. The merry spaniel can wag an undocked tail to bloody pulp, but no one hunts woodcock in these parts. Better no cocker, they say, than no tail.

Like so many other small things in this brave new humane world -- history, property rights, individual liberty, and the beholder's permission to declare something "beautiful" -- the eradication of the purebred dog is underway, aided and abetted by those we once considered friends. And yet, to this breeder at least, so seldom has one small thing carried with it such symbolism for what it is we are allowing them to destroy.

There is an air of nihilism in what they do. Like "green" zealots who insist millions will die from climate change unless we reduce the earth's population by billions, their ideological sisters in veterinary activism would solve the problems of purebred dogs by eliminating them altogether. They seem oddly disconnected from the reality that for veterinary medicine to survive, the patient must reproduce.

- Catherine McMillan lives in Saskatchewan and runs the blog "Small Dead Animals." In 2009, Miniature Schnauzers descending from her "Minuteman" kennel line include those ranked #1 in the breed in the USA, Canada, Brazil and England, along with the #2 MS in Australia and the Jr. World Winner at the World Show in Slovakia.