

CBF ACTION FOR THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF THE FRENCH BULLDOG CURRENT SITUATION AND PROSPECTS

According to the WHO definition, “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity¹”.

This definition was originally produced for human beings, but is sufficiently universal to be applied to all living creatures, including dogs. It also insists on the fact that a state should not be defined in only negative terms, by the absence of a given fault, but especially in a positive way, by the existence of a quality. Here, health is characterised simultaneously on three levels: physical, mental and social, which is perfectly applicable to the French Bulldog.

The Club du Bouledogue Français (CBF - French Bulldog Club), which oversees the standard and promotes the breed, has been involved for many years in tackling hypertypes and the diseases affecting this animal. This article provides an overview of the club’s action, which concerns several different areas: the revision of the standard in 2015; the dissemination of information for judges, breeders and the public; and participation in scientific studies to advance knowledge of disorders affecting the French Bulldog, with a view to eventually finding a solution. It reiterates that the action of breed clubs is nevertheless limited by the existence of a production sector that is beyond the control of the canine organisations, and concludes with a number of proposals aimed at improving compliance with the standard and promoting better animal health.

How to achieve a perfect Bulldog

The revision of the standard

The new standard, which was written by the CBF committee, was validated by the Société Centrale Canine (French Kennel Club), then recognised by the Fédération Cynologique Internationale² (World Canine Organisation) on 17 April 2015. It is applicable at the international level.

This standard was written with a view to tackling hypertypes and any departure from the true morphological type. Right at the beginning, it makes it clear that “no point is exaggerated compared to the others, which could spoil the dog’s general harmony, in appearance and in movement”.

The characteristics have been specified such that it is perfectly clear that priority is given to the animal’s well-being. Several examples follow.

As regards breathing, the muzzle, which is about 1/6 of the total length of the head, must not be covered by a skin fold: the nostrils must be well opened, despite the slope of the nose towards the rear; the chest must be well let down and the ribs barrel shaped, leaving enough room for the lungs; finally, respiratory distress is a disqualifying fault.

With regard to the eyes, the rims of the eyelids must be black, since depigmentation of eyelids is a symptom associated with deafness, which is a severe fault.

As regards the body and movement, the proportions should not be too short and, in particular, “cobby” dogs, which are decidedly square, represent a hypertype sanctioned as a severe fault, since an excessively short backbone will produce vertebral anomalies.

The new standard takes account of sexual dimorphism: males should weigh between 9 and 14 kg and females between 8 and 13 kg. Overweight dogs are subject to osteoarthritis, dysplasia, carpal hyperextension and shortness of breath.

Other types of morphological anomalies are also being addressed, such as deviation or torsion of the jaw, leaving the tongue constantly visible, reversed hock, and taillessness, which are all disqualifying faults.

¹ <http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html>

² <http://www.fci.be/Nomenclature/Standards/101g09-fr.pdf> for the French version and <http://www.fci.be/Nomenclature/Standards/101g09-en.pdf> for the English translation.

Psychological well-being is not ignored, since aggressive or overly shy dogs are disqualified.

Consequently, the 2015 standard gives a clear, precise definition of a physically and psychologically balanced type of Bulldog. Breeders producing puppies that comply with this standard and judges who ensure the standard is respected in the ring prevent the production and promotion of dogs that will pose problems to themselves as well as to others.

The revision of the selection grid

The CBF is also responsible for awarding levels to sires and dams, which are then forwarded to the SCC for validation. The current version of this grid³, which was revised on 1 January 2016, introduces from the lowest level the obligation to take dogs for health checks.

To be awarded level 2, a dog must pass the TAN (natural aptitude test), which includes in particular a test for excessive shortness of breath. In addition, the dog must be genetically identified and its DNA fingerprint must be registered in a database managed by the SCC, which guarantees that its parents are themselves identified and that their health status is known. To obtain level 3, the dog must have a spine x-ray, carried out without sedation or anaesthetic.

Thus, only healthy, well-balanced dogs with parents that are themselves in good physical and psychological condition can move up to a higher level and be considered suitable for breeding.

The revision of the TAN

The different parts of the Natural Aptitude Test (TAN)⁴ are defined by the CBF committee. Only committee members and appointed delegates are authorised to test dogs, during events organised by the CBF (national breed club shows and regional competitions). The test was redesigned in 2011.

Whereas the standard mainly concerns the morphology of dogs, the TAN focuses on their psychological well-being. Of the five different parts of the test, three determine sociability towards people and other dogs (the welcome by the examiner, the slalom, and the participants greeting), another concerns the dog's reaction to an unexpected situation (the judge suddenly opens an umbrella just in front of the animal), and the final part tests the dog's obedience (the "come" command). At the end of this test, any dog presenting signs that can be interpreted as excessive shortness of breath will fail.

Thanks to these additional checks, standard conformity and the TAN, a Bulldog presenting morphological anomalies will never have a future in shows, and dogs that fail their TAN or have not had health checks will never move up to a higher level.

Disseminating information about the standard and health

The CBF has a wide range of communication tools enabling it to promote the standard and to disseminate any useful information concerning Bulldog health among judges, breeders and the wider public.

The website

Over time, the website (<http://www.cbf-asso.org>) has become the CBF's main channel of communication. Updated on average once a week, it is the most appropriate medium for rapidly disseminating official information to the general public.

Every month, the website's public area provides the cumulative list of all dogs that have obtained levels 2 to 6. In the members' area, this list is presented month by month.

The website also provides a list of sires rated at least at level 3, with inclusion in this list being voluntary. Owners are now encouraged to report the results of any health checks their animals have had, whether mandatory or optional (concerning the state of vertebrae, or luxating patella, for example).

The website also publishes articles on health problems⁵ that have previously been the focus of publications in the paper version of the newsletter.

³ http://www.cbf-asso.org/txt/carriere_grilleselection.htm

⁴ http://www.cbf-asso.org/txt/carriere_tan.htm

The e-newsletter

The e-newsletter, which was first published on 15 November 2012, was the solution the CBF found to the problem of the prohibitive cost increase for traditional printing. It is published once a month and regularly includes an article on a veterinary issue. CBF members are notified via the club's Facebook page and email, and can download the newsletter. It is also sent to judges and to the SCC steering committee.

Edition n°38 (25 June 2016) thus included an article on the mobilisation of veterinarians against canine and feline hypertypes in brachycephalic breeds; n°32 (20 November 2015) warned of the risk of toxicity from rawhide bones given to dogs to chew on; n°29 (20 August 2015) drew attention to the danger of foxtail grasses in summer; and n°27 (1 June 2015) focused on leishmaniasis. Older editions dealt with demodicosis, kennel cough and pine processionary caterpillars, among other problems.

A very wide range of health issues are thus addressed, not only according to current events, but also according to the season, or to the emergence of a health problem detected by the CBF committee or its members.

The paper newsletter

Although budget constraints have forced the CBF to reduce the number of newsletters printed every year, it still publishes one or two editions annually. This publication is sent to members of the club and to French judges of the breed.

As soon as the issue of brachycephalic syndrome was raised at the international level, the CBF published two articles to raise awareness about it, one in 2011⁶ and the other in 2012⁷.

The dangers of hypertypes were described in an article in 2014⁸, showing that they affect not only dogs, but also cats, horses and livestock, and that veterinarians, breed clubs and the FCI are all mobilising on this issue, raising the question of whether, one day, some breeds should be banned, and whether "mixed breed" dogs should be encouraged.

The new standard was published in edition n°1 of 2015⁹, and forwarded as an offprint to the French judges reporting to the SCC.

In that edition, an article¹⁰ highlighted the importance of teeth for dog health, and how they are taken into account during judging, while another¹¹ provided a detailed explanation of canine prognathism.

However, the CBS does not limit itself to following and reporting current events. It also warns of other dog health problems that are not currently in the spotlight, but which may be in the future, such as luxating patella¹².

Thus, the CBF publications do not simply provide information on the organisation's activities, but are full of articles written by leading specialists in an educational spirit, aimed at responsible breeders and knowledgeable dog fanciers.

⁵ For example, heatstroke, demodicosis, slipped disc, canine herpes virus, cherry eye, luxating patella dislocation, and soft palate elongation.

⁶ OECHTERING (Pr. Gerhard), "Le syndrome brachycéphale - actualités sur une maladie congénitale bien connue", in Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter^o1, 2011, p. 10-11. This article first appeared in *Veterinary Focus*, vol. 20, n°2, 2010. Its French version was proofread by Dr Valérie Freiche.

⁷ PONCET (Dr Cyril), "Le syndrome brachycéphale", in Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter^o3, 2012, p. 34-36.

⁸ LAFON (Dr Maud), "Hypertype : quand le mieux est l'ennemi du bien", in Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter^o2, 2014, p. 31-35.

⁹ Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter n°1 of 2015, p. 22-31.

¹⁰ POLLET (Dr Robert), "À propos de la mâchoire et des dents du bouledogue", in Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter^o1, 2015, p. 32-39

¹¹ BOCHER (Dr Pierre), "La vraie prognathie canine", in Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter^o1, 2015, p. 40-44.

¹² RAGETLY (Dr Guillaume), "La luxation de la rotule chez le Bouledogue", in Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter^o1, 2013, p. 5-7.

The World of Frenchies in 2013 and 2014

The WOF is a publication edited by Bas Bosch, luxuriously printed in a glossy, full-colour, hardcover edition that is published every two years and constitutes a sort of directory of French Bulldogs at the international level.

The latest volume, which was released just after the publication of the new standard in 2015, provided the CBF with an excellent opportunity to present to the whole world, in English, the characteristics of this standard, along with a commentary¹³.

The commentary book for the standard

The CBF is currently working on a commentary book for the new standard, to be published in late December 2016. Each of the points of the standard will be recalled in it, accompanied by comments and illustrated with photos, showing both dogs with good type and others that depart from type. The book will also specify the qualifications to be given in shows, according to the faults observed.

This book will be distributed free of charge to members and to judges of the breed. It will be on sale for non-members who are interested in the French Bulldog.

Promoting scientific research on canine health

The CBF is convinced that, in order to ensure better animal health, there is still scope for improving our knowledge. This is why it is committed to encouraging and supporting research projects in veterinary medicine.

Screening for vertebral anomalies

Breaking new ground in this field, in 2006 the CBF embarked on the screening of thoracic vertebral anomalies in the French Bulldog¹⁴. The goal of this operation was to establish a database to better identify the distribution of these anomalies within the breed, as a first step.

The club joined forces with Professor Pierre MOISSONNIER, from the École Nationale Vétérinaire d'Alfort (Alfort national veterinary university), within the framework of a pilot study that is still ongoing. Breeders ask their veterinarian to do spine x-rays for their dog, which they then send to Professor Moissonnier for analysis. It should be noted that for any Bulldog aspiring to level 3, this screening is mandatory.

This study led to a doctoral thesis, defended on 29 September 2011 by Nicolas KRUMEICH¹⁵, which can be consulted and downloaded in full on the CBF¹⁶ and ENVA¹⁷ websites.

The findings of this thesis are alarming. Almost 91% of the dogs studied are affected by vertebral anomalies. These anomalies foster the development of degenerative disorders, such as intervertebral disc degeneration, which may result in disc herniation and neurological symptoms.

Consequently, the CBF is continuing to work in collaboration with Professor Moissonnier's team on this pilot study of vertebral anomalies. The second part of this process is the cohort study concerning dogs registered in the database. This will enable observation of the emergence of any neurological symptoms in dogs, whether or not they have vertebral anomalies, and to thereby determine whether those with anomalies are more subject to spinal cord injuries than the others. The third part will consist in subsequently determining the genetic characteristics of unaffected dogs and encouraging their breeding in order to limit the prevalence of vertebral anomalies in French Bulldogs.

¹³ BÉGUIN (Daniel), "Presentation of the new Standard of the French Bulldog, with a commentary", in Bas Bosch (ed.), *The World of Frenchies in 2013 and 2014*, BBPress, The Netherlands, p. 23-27.

¹⁴ Newsletter n°2, 2006, p. 31-34.

¹⁵ Newsletter n°3, 2011, p. 7-8.

¹⁶ http://www.cbf-asso.org/txt/anomalies_vertebrales_these.pdf

¹⁷ <http://theses.vet-alfort.fr/telecharger.php?id=1407>

Genetic characterisation of vertebral anomalies in the French Bulldog

During the Ordinary General Meeting of the Société Centrale Canine on 29 April 2016, Professor Laurent TIRET, from the École Nationale Vétérinaire d'Alfort, and Doctor Marie ABITBOL, from the École Nationale Vétérinaire de Lyon (Lyon national veterinary university), presented a research project¹⁸ consisting in applying the French Bulldog methods developed for humans in the field of medical genetics. The goal is to identify the mode of transmission for vertebral anomalies as well as their chromosomal location, in order to develop a genetic predisposition test. This project has received financial support from the SCC, in the form of a cheque for 11 170 euros. The CBF also contributed by indicating to researchers, who require a larger number of study subjects, the contact details of other breeders (with their permission) who could be interested in taking part in the study underway.

Other actors concerned by the French Bulldog

The different actions launched by the CBF would be just a pipe dream if they were not implemented in the field.

Judges

Judges hold a strategic position in the designation and promotion of balanced dogs. They confirm dogs registered in the LOF (French Stud book), which gives these dogs access to level 1 and is the starting point of their career. Confirmation thus represents an authorisation to breed.

During dog shows, judges show competing dog owners and the public that the standard is being applied. Conversely, a judge who does as he pleases discredits the standard.

This is why, as soon the new standard was officially published, the CBF sent a copy of it to each of the judges approved by the SCC to judge the French Bulldog breed.

However, there is still room for improvement. Further on, under the section entitled “Recommendations to improve the situation”, we provide suggestions made by the club to ensure the new standard is applied.

French breeders

The CBF conducted a statistical study¹⁹ for the year 2014 of breeding in France of French Bulldogs registered in the LOF, based on monthly data sent by the SCC regarding births.

Breeders producing fewer than two litters per year account for around 70% of kennels, whereas those producing more than six litters account for less than 3%. French breeding is artisanal. Moreover, breeders producing at least 12 litters in 2014 account for less than 8% of the production of purebred puppies. The rate is extensive.

Consequently, the structure of French breeding protects it from the rapid, widespread dissemination of health disorders. The potential birth of affected puppies and their integration into breeding programmes remain confined to a local level.

Dogs that have bred only once account for just over half of active sires. If we add those that have bred twice, this increases to three quarters of active sires, and half of all births. On the contrary, dogs that have bred between 8 and 13 times account for less than 2% of sires and just over 8% of births. The French model is therefore by no means overly intensive. The risk of a popular sire in great demand potentially spreading genetic or health anomalies does not exist. This popular sire problem does not concern French Bulldogs registered in the LOF.

Finally, it is important to note that with a steadily increasing number of births²⁰, in excess of 6 000 puppies since 2011, the French Bulldog is far from being an ailing breed! The health problems that have been reported are not critical, since they do not prevent the continued growth in numbers, with mostly healthy dogs.

¹⁸ See, in e-newsletter n°37 (http://www.cbf-asso.org/adherents/lettres/lettreCBF_37.pdf), the report on this project by Daniel Béguin, p. 4-5.

¹⁹ BÉGUIN (Daniel), “Statistiques 2014”, in Club du Bouledogue Français, Newsletter n°1, 2015, p. 19-22.

The role of natural selection

During natural matings, males with respiratory difficulties may die. Similarly, if they compete in dog shows, the long car journeys expose them to respiratory distress.

Females with respiratory problems may die during natural pupping. If they have a caesarean delivery, they may not survive the anaesthetic. Moreover, when their milk comes in after pupping, this also causes an increase in respiratory effort.

Consequently, no serious breeder would take the risk of breeding a bitch with respiratory problems, as the risk of mortality is high. As for males, their activity would be limited to their own kennel.

French law protects consumers and monitors breeders

France has a *Code de la Consommation* (Consumer Code) that provides strong protection for buyers and obliges breeders to be vigilant about the quality of the puppies they sell.

During a sale, the breeder must inform the buyer about the puppy's health and provide a veterinary certificate. He must also give the buyer a leaflet mentioning, inter alia, the weaknesses associated with the breed.

In addition, the *Code* provides for a guarantee of compliance under which, within a two-year period, the seller must compensate the buyer for any faults observed in the animal that can be corrected. In recent disputes, the French courts have generally found in favour of buyers. They tend, for example, to order full repayment of the price paid for the puppy²¹, in addition to compensation that makes the bill even bigger.

French breeders who are tempted to sell puppies with disorders are taking financial risks, making the operation highly dissuasive.

Limits to action by the breed club

Action by the CBF is partially impeded by a certain inertia observed among the different stakeholders involved in the canine world, and by the fact that unjustified parallels are drawn between LOF and non-LOF dogs on the one hand, and between dogs with different geographical origins on the other.

Limited power over breeders

Unlike in other countries, the efforts made by the CBF in favour of the breed stop at the gates of kennels. For example, it does not have the power to prevent a breeder from producing both LOF and non-LOF dogs, or to promote natural pupping over caesarean delivery, or to object to a dam producing a litter every six months.

The measures it takes to promote the standard and to ensure better health in dogs need to focus more on persuasion than on constraint, and take a long time to bear fruit.

Do veterinarians distinguish between LOF and non-LOF dogs?

When veterinarians report health problems affecting brachycephalic breeds, including the French bulldog, do they take care to determine whether the affected dogs have a pedigree or not? Indeed, breeders who comply with the standard subject themselves to more constraints than others, who seek only financial returns, with complete disregard for any ethical considerations or quality requirements.

Should unjustified parallels be made between LOF and non-LOF dogs?

In France, a large number of non-pedigree Bulldogs are produced and are sold without difficulty, since the prices charged are often well below those of purebred dogs. Many dogs are also imported from puppy farms

²⁰ 5977 in 2010, 6044 in 2011, 6189 in 2012, 6504 in 2013, 6224 in 2014, 6261 in 2015, according to SCC figures.

²¹ See the judgement by the Angoulême Magistrates' Court of 19 December 2012 (<http://centrale-news.blogs-centrale-canine.fr/?p=1116>). A breeder who sold a puppy with ectopic testis and refused to find an amicable solution was taken to court by the buyer. He was ordered to not only reimburse the puppy itself at a cost of 2 200 euros, but also to pay compensation set by the judge at seven matings at 200 euros each.

outside France. This is a real “grey area” of breeding, for which no accurate figures are available, and which is developing without any consideration for the standard or any control by the regulatory authorities in charge of the canine world .

However, we believe it is particularly serious and unjust that animal rights advocates and the media, which are poorly informed, make no distinction between breeders of purebred dogs and the others, in other words those without pedigrees.

Is brachycephalic syndrome as severe everywhere?

Observations concerning brachycephalic syndrome since the early 2010s have been made by Scandinavian veterinarians and breed clubs, before being shared by the United Kingdom. The Bulldogs examined were from these countries. However, for many years these countries have been building their population in an almost closed circuit, without using enough dogs imported from abroad to provide new blood. To what extent do the health problems reported in these populations stem from this self-contained development, and to what extent are they inherent in the breed?

Consequently, how much does this problem concern France and the other countries that breed French Bulldogs? Is it legitimate to advocate drastic measures applicable to all countries with the goal of repairing the damage caused by just a few?

Recommendations to improve the situation

Concerning judges

1) To ensure compliance with the standard, judges need scales and a height rod. They bring their own height rod, whereas the scales are provided by the organiser. This requirement is currently respected in most championship shows, national breed club shows, specialty shows and regional breed club shows, despite regular lapses²². It should be extended to include all shows, whether national (awarding the CACS - Certificat d’Aptitude au Championnat) or international (awarding the CACS and the CACIB - Certificat d’Aptitude au Championnat International de Beauté de la FCI).

2) Within the framework of its action aimed at preventing hypertypes and fostering good practice, the SCC is expected to organise and finance information and training sessions for judges, in order to familiarise them with the new standard.

Concerning confirmation

Checking the weight and the height at the withers should take place at confirmation, to ensure non-standard dogs are prevented from breeding as early as possible. Confirmation should be refused if the height and weight measurements are not included in the form. It should evolve into a sort of breeding authorisation examination, including health checks to be defined.

Concerning the veterinary certificate

With regard to the mandatory veterinary certificate, the text²³ of decree n° 2008-1216 of 25 November 2008 published in the French Official Journal n°0276 of 27 November 2008, page 18083, stipulates that “the veterinarian shall provide a diagnosis of the dog’s health”.

Currently, this examination does not engage the responsibility of the veterinarian. Would it not be a good thing if this were to change, in the interest of dogs, breeders and future owners? The CBF would like this document to become legally binding in the context of a possible dispute.

²² For example, the dog is weighed, but the judge forgets to measure it, or vice versa. Or the judge begins to note measurements on judging forms, then, as more and more dogs are shown, this requirement is forgotten. Or these measurements are taken during a given show at one judge’s table, and forgotten elsewhere. Not to mention judges who weigh and measure “on sight” and those who refuse to take these measurements.

²³ <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000019808378&categorieLien=id>

Concerning the study of health problems in the French Bulldog

The CBF, taking inspiration from the questionnaire produced by the English breed club and the one published by the SCC in its booklet entitled "*Lutte contre les hypertypes: Guide des bonnes pratiques*" (The struggle against hypertypes: A guide to good practice), will undertake an analysis of judging forms in order to establish a list of all departures from the standard that have an impact on health in dogs.

Concerning LOF registration

In France at present, the French Bulldog is not a breed with a limited gene pool. Moreover, we are aware that initial registration requests (in the appendix to the Stud Book) are purely for profit, to increase the monetary value of non-pedigree animals bought at a low price.

The CBF therefore requests the closure of the French Stud Book .

In conclusion

For many years, the CBF has been fulfilling its mission to protect and promote the standard for the French Bulldog. It has always fought against the conflicting extremes of lack of type and hypertype.

It remains constantly at the disposal of those who, for the love of animals in general, want their health and well-being to be taken into consideration, without sacrificing these to the potentially unreasonable demands of aesthetics, and also of those who, for love of the French bulldog, refuse to see this breed disfigured or denatured by inappropriate measures.

The true friends of the French Bulldog are those who can ensure the breed evolves without disappearing.