



THE KEVIN COLWILL COLUMN

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Breeding: is it a moral choice?

to. The great majority of us are in breeds that will never be accused of being too big, too small, too heavy, too wrinkly, too long too short or in any way... too much. We can safely leave this sort of question to the experts in those breeds that have fallen under scrutiny for being exaggerated in some way. Live and let live, show and let show, breed and let breed.

It's fair enough. I've long argued the idea of one big dog breeding and dog showing community is deeply flawed. Each breed is its own unique little, or not so little, community. Most of us don't worry about breeds we're not actively involved in. We just breathe a big sigh of relief that issues of exaggeration are somebody else's problem.

Nothing wrong

Should they be? I'm sure the breeders of those toad like American Bullies, Tea Cup toy dogs or stupid crosses don't think they're doing anything wrong. Some are undoubtedly driven by nothing more than greed but I'm sure there are others who love their dogs and see nothing whatsoever wrong with their extreme breeding practices. If we can't just leave it to the breeders in the most obviously extreme of cases, maybe it's equally dangerous to leave everything up to the breeders in mainstream breeds.

There's a great deal of debate about the health effects of ultra-flat faces. You know the arguments as well as I do. On one hand are those who say- breeding dogs with little or no

muscle is an unacceptable risk to health and welfare and, on the other hand, there are the videos of almost muzzle-less dogs running, jumping and swimming like a hero. Is there a definitive answer? I'm not at all sure there is.

I don't think you'd find a reputable vet or genetic scientist who'd say it was impossible to breed flat faced dogs that dodged the bullet and led happy, healthy lives. If that same reputable vet or scientist was being totally honest, they'd also admit breeding for very flat aces continues to be a massive risk

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to health and welfare. We're left with an impasse. Further studies will give us clearer and clearer information on the risks, but science will only ever be able to take us so far. In the end we're left with a value judgement. A moral choice.

The key question is who makes that moral choice. Traditionally it's been left to breed clubs and

individual breeders. The Kennel Club has is not exactly sort of rules, regulations, guidelines and advice but when it comes to the crunch the way a breed looks is largely left to the breeders. It takes a great deal for the KC step in to change breed Standards or even push for a different interpretation of those Standards without the support of the breed clubs.

Modest

The Kennel Club's Brachycephalic Working Group recently proposed changes in the

are retained. On the plus side, they propose moderate eyes and specifically state they must not be protruding. What about the key feature of the muscle, or lack thereof? The proposed changes do spell out the need for more open airways and for there to be something of a muscle when the dog's head is viewed in profile. All well and good and yet still very subjective. It's notable that the BWG does not propose going down the path of the CFR or craniofacial ratio.

CFR is a simple concept, if not a totally straightforward measurement. Measure the dog's muscle from the tip of the nose back to the stop. Then measure from that point at the base of the muscle up between the ears to the base of the skull Divide the muscle length by the cranium size and you get the CFR. The Dutch are introducing a lower limit of 0.3 and a target of 0.5. These figures have not been plucked from the air. There is some evidence to suggest higher CFR significantly reduce the risk of BOAS.

To put those figures into context many brachycephalic breeds currently have typical CFR's of less than 0.1, their muscle is less than a tenth the length of the cranium. The Dutch minimum would be a third and the desired length a half. It would be an end of brachycephalic dogs as we have come to know them.

There would certainly be an outcry from breeders and breed clubs if the KC made similar proposals here. Breed clubs present themselves as the custodians of breed history

and the guardians of the breed character and type.... But are they? I believe they are all too often the custodians of a tot of myth and misinformation about their breeds. A simple flick through the photographic and film archive is often enough to disprove many a breed creation myth.

Look back at images from a century ago and most brachycephalic breeds had much more muscle. There might be an occasional image of a really flat faced dog, but these are more the exception than the rule. The photographic record shows breeds from Pugs to Pekingese to Bulldogs had CFRs of 0.3 or more. Breed clubs aren't defending the time-honoured look of the breed. They're defending a relatively modest interpretation of how their breed should look.

Critics claim it is counterproductive for Kennel Clubs to insist on radical changes to the way brachycephalic breeds look. If the public want flat-faced dogs, and it appears they very much do, then they'll be bred Outside the KC system where they can be as exaggerated as the breeder's conscience allows. I don't accept that argument. If the KC lay down a benchmark it's more likely government will respond by making similar rules the law of the land.

It's time to take some serious steps to undo the exaggerations that have crept into our breeds. The brachycephalic breeds are a good place to start but I fear the KC must be much more hardnosed in confronting breed clubs and insisting on change.