

# BRACHYCEPHALIC DOG BREEDS, AN UPDATE IN JUNE 2020



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## A FOREWORD

There are problems in dog breeding.

Breeders might say that the Club should solve the problems.

The Club might say that the national umbrella organization should do so.

The national umbrella organization might say that the world federation should do so.

The world federation might say that scientists should do so.

The scientists might say that the breeders should do so.

If we are not careful, we will be considerably set back by shifting responsibility and by a lack of constructive cooperation.

## THE PROBLEM AREA

Even in the midst of the corona crisis and given that under the present conditions of reduced capacity kennel clubs have little room to manoeuvre, there is an increasing tendency in some countries to impose strict conditions on dogs with short muzzles. Nine months ago, I informed the members of the VDH clubs in great detail about this important complex of topics, and today I would like to outline briefly what has happened in the meantime and how things might continue in the relatively near future not only in Germany but also in the entire area of validity covered by the Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI).

Among brachycephalic dog breeds, i.e. those with short heads in their overall appearance, short muzzles in relation to the length of their cranium, a relatively small muzzle volume and an overall somewhat rounded head shape, there

are some which are more often and increasingly affected by certain health problems compared to others. In particular, a few relatively small representatives of brachycephalic breeds have become the focus of critical interest, because the so-called Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome (BOAS) occurs in their ranks. This term covers a whole complex of serious problems in the upper airways. Depending on the breed, further unpleasant deviations from the norm (for example in the area of the visual or the nervous system) have been reported and attributed to the shape of the head. It is not exactly clear with which relative frequency all these disorders occur in the breeds in question (1) in general, (2) in their FCI populations compared to non-organised breeding and (3) in VDH populations. However, it cannot be denied that the extent of their spread in individual breeds is relatively large; and that this must not

only be taken seriously, but also makes it essential to take countermeasures. In other brachycephalic breeds, health risks do not exceed the normal level of a mammalian population. This means that there is no indication for special head shape-related breeding measures or other restrictions in these breeds.

## ACTUAL OR IMPENDING NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

With our memberships in the VDH and the FCI we have all voluntarily committed ourselves to breed only with healthy and, within the scope of what is recognizable, genetically safe dogs. Not being allowed to breed a wheezing male or a bitch with bulging eyes is therefore not a negative consequence of a government measure, but rather a matter of course based on our own free will.

That said, some of the official regulations that have been imposed more or less suddenly in some places are anything but self-chosen. Many radical forces are calling for a ban on any breeding of brachycephalic dogs, while at the same time continuing to allow the purchase and keeping of these dogs, and inadequate monitoring of unscrupulous mass breeders and importers.

No less dramatic and no less drastic would be an obligation to use at least one breeding partner with characteristics that are not compatible with the standard of the breed concerned. For example, the requirement that at least either the stud dog or the mother bitch in a pug mating must have a relatively long muzzle would be tantamount to banning the breed and would lead either to the extinction of this type of dog or to the creation of another breed that would be a little similar to the previous one, but at the same time very different.

At the moment the ripples are probably highest in the Netherlands. There the law obliges the Raad van Beheer Kennel Club to take radical measures with the following twelve breeds: Affenpinscher, Boston Terrier, Bulldog, French Bulldog, Griffon Belge, Griffon Bruxellois, Petit Brabancon, Japanese Spaniel, King Charles Spaniel, Pug, Pekingese and Shih Tzu. In turn the Raad van Beheer Club has assured the government of its cooperation. In relation to the different characteristics of the dogs, a green area („agreed“), a yellow area („unsatisfactory“) and a red area („not agreed“) have been defined. In short: green may be mated with green or yellow. Yellow may not be mated with yellow. And red is excluded from breeding. One example:

Green in the Dutch category system:

The muzzle length („m“ for muzzle length) is divided by



the cranial length („c“ for cranial length) and the result is 0.5 or more (= the muzzle length is at least one third of the length of the entire head). (Instead of Muzzle Cranium Ratio, we can also speak synonymously of Craniofacial Ratio).

Yellow in the Dutch category system:  
m/c is greater than 0.3 and less than 0.5

Red in the Dutch category system:  
m/c is 0.3 or less

The Raad van Beheer Club has applied for an exemption from the muzzle length regulation and a reduced requirement for the worse of the two breeding partners.

Other variables included in the Dutch „traffic light system“ are the breathing sounds at rest, the width of the nostrils, the nasal fold(s), the visual appearance of the eye, the closure of the eyelid with pharmaceutically suppressed eyelid closure reflex, and an only very slightly standardised fitness test.

So much for the conditions in our neighbouring country. Other variations are conceivable. Imagine that every dog from a critically observed breed would have to be checked

before entry by veterinary experts on the day of an international pedigree dog show, to see whether it has any predispositions to risk, and that dogs with negative characteristics would be denied access to the show. Let us not beat about the bush. This would bring the show to a standstill and the veterinary profession would be exposed to ridicule. Whereas a responsible diagnosis in a well-equipped veterinary practice usually requires a lot of time and considerable expenditure, a superficial slapdash procedure would be carried out without quality standards. The result would be unreliable judgments, an organizational and logistical chaos and the collapse not only of the show section, but indirectly also of the economic activities of the major professional sponsors on the exhibition sites.

Biologically speaking, gene losses would be a negative development that should not be underestimated. And who knows how many of these would only be threatened if we were to accept unthought-out bans hastily. Would then the Dogue de Bordeaux, the Boxer and the Bull Mastiff soon be in existential trouble? Or would it affect livestock guard dogs (flock guardians)? We must react calmly and constructively, but not with blind obedience, to what we are confronted with; in part for understandable reasons and in part for completely unjustifiable reasons.

## EXACERBATING CIRCUMSTANCES

Why has this problem existed for so long and not been solved? At least seven all too human factors have had a negative influence. Identifying them and taking them into account is the prerequisite for developing and applying promising breeding programmes and action strategies.

1. Even within the large community of dog lovers organized in pedigree dog breeding clubs, ideals and subjective tolerance limits occasionally diverge. It can happen that the constitution of a dog in the honorary ring of a CACIB show is praised by a part of the audience and frowned upon by another. If we want to defend our interests with vigour, we must motivate people with very different opinions to act together.

2. The situation is confusing. Breeders are verbally attacked. Dog breeds are threatened. Occasionally long-standing personal goals can suddenly no longer be achieved. And what is the inevitable result? Stress! Scores of dog lovers are frustrated, tense and angry. Common forms of stress management are to repress or even deny problems, to idly lament the wickedness of the world and to turn to enemy images and aggression. We need to counteract such neg-

ative stress management strategies and establish more promising ones.

3. A quadruped with symptoms of illness and lack of functionality is a case for the veterinary surgeon. Populations in which the percentage of such quadrupeds is significantly higher than the norm are a case for veterinary research. Medicine and medical prevention are a blessing. However, this blessing comes with conventions that are typical for all areas of scientific knowledge. These include the existence of controversial views within a single discipline on one and the same object of investigation. In the domain of brachycephaly, for example, this means that there are qualified scientists who see the muzzle length as the cause of the BOAS and others, also qualified scientists, who instead consider internal anatomical structures, which in principle can occur in both short-nosed and long-nosed dogs, to be pathogenic. Scientific controversies are part of academic life. They sometimes make life difficult for us, because it is often not possible for outsiders to know for sure who is right and who is wrong.

4. Dog breeding is a multinational activity nowadays. For most breeds there are not 80 populations in 80 countries, but a single population covering 80 countries. This has many advantages. For example, the ubiquitous demand for genetic diversity can be well accommodated. In the context of the brachycephaly debate, however, this state of affairs has its risks, because in some countries brachycephalic dogs are viewed highly critically by the government and in others they are considered completely harmless. In one place there is the threat of bans, and in another the world seems to be in order. How should dog breeding organisations react to this? Should they leave everything as it is and let the breeders in some countries be put to the sword? Should they change breeding measures on a large scale and also compel breeders to make reforms when such measures are not criticised at all in their home country? Or should they look for other options?

5. At the top of the hit parade of unfortunate complications is the fact that breeding jurisdiction (breeding authority), i.e. the responsibility for creating and monitoring compliance with breeding regulations, never lies solely with the FCI, frequently with national kennel clubs and in some places with clubs that only deal with one breed. The FCI's general rules set certain limits, but do not clarify details. Tamás Jakkel, the president of the FCI, will certainly have his own ideas about breeding habits, breeding strategies and breeding programmes, but he has no authority over the clubs that have their own breeding rules. This can sometimes be a disadvantage. As President of the VDH, I feel the same way within the Federal Republic of Germany. Taking this into account, I should like to inform

the VDH member clubs concerned about the options for action that I see, and which ones I prefer. For this purpose and to substantiate my views, I am writing articles like the one you are reading right now and hope that those who have the authority to breed their respective breed will as a result take up and implement ideas of their own accord.

6. We have to react in the short term and think on a long-term basis.

7. Brachycephalic small dog breeds are extremely popular and there has been an extremely high, insatiable demand for them for a long time. To meet this demand, unscrupulous mass propagators and illegal importers are earning enormous sums of money and torturing animals to an indescribable extent. Those governments (and I am not referring to any specific country), which are unilaterally curbing the controlled breeding of pedigree dogs, are not only failing to take effective countermeasures against this mafia, but are also encouraging their despicable business.

## PROBLEM-SOLVING STRATEGIES

To lump together all brachycephalic breeds and subject them to a single simple standard procedure seems wrong to me. Such an approach could only be justified if milder measures had been implemented and no progress had been made. In my view, there are four categories of domestic breeds.

**Category 1:** Breeds which, as they are currently bred, are not unduly affected by disorders.

It goes without saying that additional breeding restrictions are inappropriate for this group of breeds. Here I include Affenpinschers and German Boxers. If breeds in category 1 are discriminated against, then legal action must also be considered. Even politicians do not operate in a legal vacuum.

**Category 2:** Breeds where existing disorders can be brought under control with modified breeding programmes without cross-breeding and where the original breed type can be preserved.

The approach outlined under „Category 2“ must be the focus of our work with regard to brachycephalic breeds and we must also work to convince the wider public. A fitness test in combination with an inspection of the anatomy seems obvious to me, but without a drastic regulation of the muzzle length. I can see the breed type being main-



tained in principle even if the dogs were to be just a little lighter and just a little longer in the muzzle, but still remain within the framework of an exterior that might still be able to receive the rating „excellent“. Extreme features are not required in the breed standards. As far as a fitness test is concerned, it is urgently necessary to choose a scientifically proven, standardised procedure. A method jointly developed by several German universities will be available in practice in the relatively near future. In the article „Zehn Dilemmata brachycephaler Hunderassen“ published in September 2019 you will find more details about this method. Please do not misunderstand this information as creating a competitive situation to the expert Jane Ladlow, who was commissioned by the FCI. It is just the opposite, namely an appeal to get responsible people from different countries around a table, or alternatively, in these times of the corona crisis, to get together in a telephone conference. Only a team solution under the leadership of the FCI and which involves scientists from several countries can help the FCI to solve the problem, nothing else. In organizational terms it would be a step forward if, in this context, a member of the board of the FCI were appointed as the person responsible for breeding issues and this board member were in charge of analyzing the situation and transferring knowledge to the national dog

associations. Despite all the efforts of the FCI and VDH, one gloomy truth remains unchanged: if clubs with their own breeding jurisdiction do not establish (or have not already established) adequate breeding programmes, nobody will be able to help them in the event of government sanctions.

**Category 3:** Breeds in which existing disorders can only be controlled by cross-breeding programmes and where the original breed type can be preserved.

In my opinion, this category is not relevant for brachycephalic dogs, because the necessary conditions for such a procedure are not given with such breeds. It has already been applied to individual hunting dog breeds and a few sighthounds.

**Category 4:** Breeds in which existing disorders can only be brought under control by cross-breeding programmes, but which result in the loss of the original breed type and the emergence of another.

This approach is in line with the Dutch concept. However, such ideas and such regulations could very quickly spread to other countries. I hope I am speaking on behalf of us all when I say that the community of dog lovers in the FCI sees the right way forward in categories 1 and 2 and in rare exceptional cases in category 3. In my opinion, Category 4 can only be discussed if the other approaches do not prove successful, or if they do not even get off the ground. Please note that there are breeds that are under time pressure because the available options have not yet been fully exploited.

If a person nevertheless feels compelled to make crosses that fundamentally change the breed type, he or she must make it clear that this is something like an experimental developmental breeding programme. If „pedigrees“ are documented, which is a legitimate demand, then a confusion with the genealogy of pedigree dogs in the sense of the FCI must strictly be avoided. A separate data management would have to be created for these dogs. Their place is neither in the stud book nor in its appendix register. These remarks are not intended to be directed against those on whom cross-breeding is imposed, but rather to advocate procedural forms that help to counteract social conflicts within the FCI. There are already functioning models for documenting this type of „pedigrees“.

The VDH clubs, the VDH and the FCI have the opportunity to become better and better in breeding brachycephalic breeds and, with optimized quality standards, to distinguish themselves even more positively from non-organized breeders.