

How to keep inspired

The future of Chow breeding

The future of pedigree dogs is not looking good. Animal rights and consumer rights challenge cynology. Other developments in society have their impact on pedigree dog breeding as well. This article outlines the background of the pure bred dog situation.

It doesn't seem to be an exaggeration to say that cynology is in dire straits at the moment in some countries and probably, in time, will be in others. Although it is not yet clear how the future will look like, preservation of the pure bred dog will benefit from understanding the comments from society and adapting to them.

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Dog fanciers are interested in breeds because of their beauty and working abilities. The qualities of a breed refer to its history. Breeds have a function. The story of their coexistence and cooperation with humans gives every breed its special charm and inspiration.

A breed is cultural heritage. Cynologists support the preservation of that heritage. This is the driving force behind the fascination for breeding pedigree dogs.

BREEDING

Breeding means respecting the standard. Such a blueprint for the breed is written at the moment a breed enters cynology. For the Chow this happened as early as 1895, in the UK.

The standard describes the traits characterizing the breed. It is a historic document, meant to be essentially untouchable. Only with great caution can a standard sometimes be adapted to modern developments. But



Photo Dennis Kleijer



Photo Dennis Kleijer

basically it is considered to be 'holy'.

Breeding is preserving the breed by keeping to the standard. In respecting the past, the breed is brought to the future.

Pups are genetic 'jewellery boxes', in which breeders have packed all their knowledge and skills which they have to offer in the breed.

Placing a puppy is, from the breeder's point of view, entrusting a treasure, a precious creation, to a person who will, in taking the best care for the puppy, cherish the breed and its history and the contribution the breeder has made to the breed.

Placing a puppy is an act of love and warmth. Even though the new owner pays for the puppy, a breeder experiences the transfer as giving, entrusting, cooperation, connecting, even of becoming family.

SALE

How differently the transfer of a puppy is seen by society today. The distinctive concepts here are: sale and purchase. The precious sweet puppy becomes legally a 'product' at the moment the breeder hands it over. A product that has to meet requirements and about which guarantees have to be given.

The breeder delivers, the puppy buyer pays and this is a transaction ruled by consumer law. Consumers are well protected these days. Consumer law takes care for the interest of the weak individual against a strong business which is producing or selling the product.

In order to allow the consumer to make a good choice, a business has the obligation to provide the consumer with information about the most important characteristics of the product, the price, the method of payment, the delivery and the manual. It must also be clear what the business will do if the product does not function or turns out to be incorrect in the eyes of the consumer anyway, and how the agreement can be dissolved.

How do we see producer, product and customer in cynology?

PRODUCER

Although according to customer law breeders are the producer and so the strong party against whom the puppy buyer must be protected, in the cynological reality breeders are difficult to compare to commercial producers or traders.

Breeders are 'strong' in the sense they decide about to whom a puppy will be sold. But the production process of a living being is more uncontrollable than that of a machine. So in that sense a dog breeder is not that strong. Breeding with animals who can give genetic illnesses to their offspring is forbidden according to animal law. But it is impossible to prevent every unpleasant surprise, because all round knowledge about the presence and the



Photo Ineke van Beekum

interference of genes in each individual animal is not available.

Most pedigree dog breeders consider themselves to be a hobbyist. They breed for the sake of the breed, and spend time and money to serve the breed. They get more satisfaction from breeding a beautiful dog than from selling it. The drive for their activity is creating 'cynological value', not earning money.

In modern times however a breeder has to act as a trader and place the puppy with a purchase agreement in which rights and obligations of seller and buyer are equally divided. In this agreement, the breeder explains what has been done to prevent a puppy from being born with a hereditary condition and what claims are possible for the purchaser, if it still has an issue.

PRODUCT

Dogs are not machines or furniture, and as mentioned earlier, their 'production' is of a different kind. For a living creature it is rather difficult to define production specifications and give quality guarantees. That is because the construction material for living creatures are genes. Even though more and more is known about genes these days, there is still more that is unknown. Genes can do unexpected things, which are beyond the



Photo Caren Barnhoorn

control of the breeder. To keep the chances of nasty surprises as small as possible the breeder gathers as much information as possible about the parents of a combination and the generations behind them, studying health and confirmation and aspects the partners share and those in which they differ. The decision for a combination is made based on an estimation of opportunities and risks.

After the mating it is 'nature' which divides the genes of the parents over the offspring. This is out of control of the breeder. To make things even more complicated, together with 'nature', the genetic starter kit, 'nurture' also plays a role in determining the end product, the adult dog.

Nurture is partly done at the breeder's, during the pregnancy of the bitch and during litter time. But soon the puppy buyer takes over.

CUSTOMER

The puppy is bought from the breeder, usually at the age of eight to nine weeks. From that moment onwards the puppy buyer molds his puppy into an adult dog by the way he feeds, exercises and trains the pup. The correct breeder will inform the puppy buyer about all aspects of importance in this respect, but the puppy buyer has to do the job. So in dogs, the customer is partly responsible for the product. The joint effort of breeder and puppy buyer results in a dog that may or may not meet expectations, into a 'product' which fulfills, or does not fulfill, the initial expectations of the puppy buyer.

This means the guarantee for a dog that 'works' can not be given in the sense it could be given for a machine.

The fact that joint effort contributes to achieving the end result makes it clear that when buying a dog, the consumer should think differently than when buying a refrigerator.

Like the breeder, the person who buys a dog must be able to cope with estimation of opportunities and risks.

In sales of animals it is normal to ask for an understanding that there can be no guarantee. But general law has problems with this nuance.

The purchase agreement must make clear in which cases the puppy buyer is entitled to invoke the warranty and when not (anymore).



Photo Annette Hagemeijer

There was a time that breeders were shocked by the advice that it would be better if they sold their pups with a purchase agreement. Placing pups was a matter of trust. In case of there being no trust, an agreement would not help, they said. True as it may be that placing a puppy is still a case of trust, in modern times the agreement has to be made. Not only for the sake of the customer, but for that of the producer as well, to prevent nasty claims.

CHANGES IN BREEDERS

At the start of cynology, around 1900, breeding pedigree dogs was done in kennels owned by wealthy people with a lot of space and money to hire staff to take care of the dogs. After World War II, breeding was practiced by broader sections of the population. In that period there have been large kennels, but also breeders who kept only a few dogs at home. Several of these breeders became respected pillars of their breed. By keeping archives, studying, mentoring and publishing. They had a kennel type, were successful at shows, had an international network and exported quality stock to breeders abroad. Some were so skilled that they have made their country a leader in breeding during a certain period. Amongst them were committee members of the breed club and judges.

The number of this type of breeder goes down, in all breeds. The generation who devoted them self to breeding as a life purpose has already retired, or soon will. They seem not to be followed up.

Modern breeders have another approach. The economy of most families depends on two incomes. This means often that during (parts of) the day nobody is home. And home is, most times, a house or apartment in an urban environment, with at the best a modest garden. Usually, even with two jobs in the family, people have a lot of free time. But those hours still have a purpose, for leisure: sport, activities with the children, holiday.

These aspects of modern family life are not easily reconciled with breeding dogs, even with keeping them. Breeding which must fit in the busy agenda of the modern family can become no more than an incidental or at its best an occasional activity.

Breeding could be a great time for retirees. But even in that case it is problematic to acquire sufficient practical professional skills. To master a craft, about 10.000 hours of practice is needed. Becoming a skilled breeder in the traditional way is difficult, both for those who have a litter now and then as for those who start late.

It seems necessary that other entities should offer support to provide the knowledge that breeders previously used to have or could request from more experienced colleagues. But this desirability meets the same problems as those of the breeders: are there still skilled people available for this type of volunteer work? These people are also dying out.



Photo Patricia Zwarts-Matlung

CHANGES AT SHOWS

The events we now know as shows, were originally intended as exhibitions. Meetings to allow breeders and the public to evaluate breeding stock and breeding results, with the dogs gathered in a ring and checked against the standard by an expert judge.

The element of competition, which soon becomes part of every get-together of UK origin, has gained importance over the years, leaving the original purpose of viewing and comparing less important.

The show as a source of exaggeration has been dismissed. Judges are instructed to penalise ill health.

These days professional presentation is paramount and is often rewarded above breed representative quality. Shows are increasingly taking on the character of an exciting sporting pastime for a limited audience. Dogs can still be compared at the show of course, but whether you get a picture of the current population is not always the case, if only because of the small number of entries. Which means breeders can no longer learn as much at a show as was previously the case. Only the annual Club Show still maintains a tradition of exposing a larger group of dogs.

Not only the number of participants, but also the number of visitors is decreasing. People no longer come to shows to inform themselves about a breed. They research their information via the internet.

CHANGES IN CUSTOMER ATTITUDE

Modern people are used to being treated as customers. If a customer wants something, he looks for (online) offers, shops for the best price and buys. Select, pay and get what you want, with service 24/7, that is the norm.

This does not work for those who want to buy a well-bred pedigree puppy. The request for these pups often is (much) larger than the offer. The offer depends on hobby breeders whose numbers and degree of activity is decreasing (see before). The breeder can select to whom he sells. Nothing can be forced or claimed by the puppy buyer. Waiting is now, usually, part of the process.

This is so contrary to how people are used to being treated today. Some puppy buyers appreciate how carefully breeders place their puppies. But for many the dependence and the waiting is unbearable. High request, low offer: that means opportunities for entrepreneurs. And indeed: several parties have entered the market to meet the demand for a puppy delivered quickly and without conditions.

In some countries people started to breed (pedigree) Chows for sales reasons. They ask fancy prices but there is a public who want to pay. No questions asked at both sides and a non-refundable deposit makes sure the puppy is reserved.

Another trend is import pups. They range from well cared for pedigree puppies bred by skilled people who breed more than the national market demands, to lookalike puppies, out of dams in breeding sheds, sometimes even illegally imported, under age, with false passports. These pups, both the high quality and the poor quality ones and everything inbetween, are offered for sale on the internet and can be reserved online, In some cases they can be booked with delivery to the doorstep being an option.

Compared to cynological breeding the scale of commercial sales can be rather large. This is different per country. In the Netherlands for example annually 150.000 pups are sold and only 35.000 of them are bred by Dutch pedigree breeders.



Photo Patricia Zwarts-Matlung

CHANGES IN IMPORTING

Before the internet, at the time social interaction depended on a real time network, importing was done by breeders as importing was mainly 'breeding driven'. A breeder sought to improve an aspect in their breeding stock or in the broader population and tried to find a male linebred on that aspect with an unrelated pedigree, bred by an expert kennel abroad. So it could be expected the import would improve the trait it was imported for.

Importing might have been expensive, as often the import was a titled adult dog and transport could cost a lot if the dog travelled by plane.

But the costs were often easily earned back by mating fees as a proven good stud was used for many litters, not only in the own kennel. The majority of imports became well known dogs of their time. Their matings benefitted the breed with new genes, but if overdone created a 'popular sire syndrome' case.

How different is import these days. The internet functions as a catalogue for people who want to find a pet with a pedigree as soon as possible. Most of these new owners just look for a companion and have no interest in connecting to breed related themes such as showing or breeding. They do not differ, in that respect, from the majority of puppy buyers. But from the breed point of view, it is a pity that as a result of their lack of interest in connecting, a lot of imports are not reregistered in the national pedigree book. They come and go without being part of the national Chow population.

Importing for breeders is not as rewarding as it had been before. Modern breeding rules often set a limit on the matings of a male. Usually this means a significantly less number of matings than previously considered acceptable and so, often, the import cannot earn itself back, as before. Which means: less import of stud dogs.

TAKE IT SERIOUSLY

We cannot but take society's criticism about pedigree dogs seriously.

Criticism may seem unfair because serious breeders, who



Photo Patricia Zwarts-Matlung



Photo Patricia Zwarts-Matlung

breed as a hobby, spend a lot of time and money to do it well and have to submit to many rules and restrictions, but do not earn respect for their efforts, on the contrary. Those who criticise, do not see the difference between the dedicated world behind pedigree dogs and the commercial one behind lookalikes, which seems so obvious to cynologists. It pains cynologists to hear that the criticism of purebred dogs has no understanding for nuances. So why taking it seriously?

In the dog world we would like to think that criticism comes from either extremist or narrow minded people, or a government interfering in matters where it has no business.

But that does not do justice to today's animal welfare concerns in society. Dog people may share this concern when it comes to animals in factory farming or in entertainment. But they do have problems accepting why something wrong is said about pedigree dogs and dog breeding. It is like with other ethical items: at a certain point a feeling arises in society that something is no longer acceptable, and then there is no turning back. So the genie is out of the bottle. The public discussion will remain, we had better accept that, act accordingly, and control our emotions.

If we are honest, we must admit that not everything in cynology is all sunshine and roses as we would like to believe. There are serious problems and we should not hesitate to tackle them.

Each in his breed should help ensure that the reasons for criticism are removed. Of course, everyone can only do this to the extent of their knowledge, as a breeder, as a puppy buyer, as a club manager. With joined forces, maybe one day it might be possible to prove that pedigree dogs score significantly healthier than the commercially bred ones, because of the careful way of breeding.

INTERPRETATION

Those who criticize pure bred dogs say breed standards are the problem. They reproach pedigree dog people for focusing on conformation and show success alone.



Photo Patricia Zwarts-Merling

Although this does not apply to every breeder, there is sense in their remark that in many breeds type has changed significantly over the years, and by no means always for the better when it comes to health. They ask for updated or new breed standards.

When we study the Chow's look from the early days, through the years, to date, a hundred, a hundred and twenty-five years later, it becomes clear a lot has changed in the Chow's appearance. Those changes were bred into the breed for 'aesthetic' reasons. A number of them did not promote well-being, on the contrary. But they were not due to the standard. The (FCI) Chow standard has hardly changed, and then only in favour of health. It is what people thought or wanted to read in the text. The text itself is not to blame. In other words, like the Bible, the standard text is open to many interpretations on how it suits people (breeders, judges, puppy buyers) best. Exaggeration is intriguing: there are always some who want to explore how far you can go.

Interpretation focussed on health is possible. Therefore nothing has to be changed, the Chow standard itself fits perfectly.

HEALTH AND CHOW

As with many breeds, unfortunately the Chow has some breed specific problems. We all know the well-known four: entropion, cruciate ligament rupture, elbow dysplasia and hip dysplasia. Basically these conditions are not related to (interpretation of) the standard.

But BOAS (Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome) is. The social disapproval of respiratory distress in dogs which brachycephalic breeds have to deal with, is a situation Chow breeders have to become seriously aware of. As respiratory problems occur occasionally in Chows as well. The basic Chows had healthy muzzles and noses. But exaggeration of the head type has introduced malformation in the pharynx, larynx, and/or nasal cavity in our breed. Another undesirable effect of overtypes is an

excess of wrinkles on the scalp. The skin on the forehead can become so heavy that it sinks into the eyes, resulting in entropion of the upper eyelids. Excess of coat can be a problem as well.

WHAT WE CAN DO

It will not be in our power to influence the public opinion about pedigree dogs in general.

The focus point for all breeds who want to survive is: health. What we can do, each of us who breeds and shows, is contributing to a good image, by making sure the Chow breed is as healthy as possible. It will be a challenge to keep our breed untouchable from comment by 'pedigree dog hunters'.

There are several ways which can help to breed for health.

HEALTH SCREENING

The main Chow health issues, as mentioned above, are inherited poly-genetically. Polygenetic issues can (not) yet be diagnosed by DNA tests. As long as such tests are unavailable, screening the phenotype is the way to gain insight in the genotype.

Most kennel clubs offer a research program for hips, elbows and eyes, sometimes for knees (patella luxation) as well. Participating in all four is no luxury for our breed. In some Chow populations about fifty percent scores positive for entropion and the same percentage for elbow dysplasia.

Unfortunately it is not yet common for all Chow breeders to score. Discussing and recording health never was popular among Chowists. A lot of health issues have been taken for granted, as 'belonging to the breed', by breeders, but also by owners. This allowed breeders to get away with health issues in their pups. There was no incentive to adapt.

Screening for breeding can indeed be very unpleasant, if it reveals publicly unwanted truths about breeding stock. No wonder some of the older generation have not yet made the transition to (full) scoring prior to breeding.

But it is shocking to see this same attitude among some of the novice breeders. How is it possible that people act so irresponsibly, to the breed, the puppy buyer but also themselves? Breeding with non-scored parent combinations can be seen as 'Russian roulette'.

Health scores help breeders to make well-informed decisions and to justify these decisions. More dogs being scored means more dogs become available for responsible breeding. Scoring on a large scale as standard reveals the status of the population, allows breeders to aim for 'better than the average' combinations. If a tool is available, using breeding values is possible. Scoring of offspring helps breeders to evaluate their decisions.

Scoring should become the norm in modern breeding.

BREEDING FOR DIVERSITY

The other way which will help to improve and support the health of breeds is to breed purposefully for diversity, which means taking kinship and inbreeding into account, and try to make combinations in which the genes are distributed as varied as possible.

Inbreeding was the technique with which breeds were created, fixing type and other wanted traits. Great results are achieved by selecting for the preferred genes. In recent decades there has been a growing awareness that success also had a price. That price is the loss of genes from dogs that have not been used in breeding, because (descendants of) popular males were preferred.

At this stage of dog breeding, inbreeding is kept responsible for several problems dog breeds meet, as auto immune diseases and reduction and loss of fertility and vitality.

This is not only the opinion of those who say that pedigree dogs are unhealthy, this is a shared insight living widely in cynology.

Techniques are, or will become, available to breeders which in turn will help to decrease the likelihood that genes for an illness, that are present unnoticed in a common ancestor, double up in a puppy which then will be a sufferer. There are several ways to take diversity into account.



Photo Sterre Krooshof

DIVERSITY

The very straightforward solution for freshening up the genes of a breed is to cross it with another breed. Although many breeds were once created in this way, and crossing therefore is not completely foreign to cynology, today crossbreeding is a curse in the church for those who devote themselves to keeping the breed pure. It requires a fundamentally new way of thinking and also breeding according to a program in which breeders take part. Loss of autonomy by the breeder is the second major hurdle to take.

However, over the last few years kennel and breed clubs orchestrated this kind of programs in numerically small breeds who are genetically in the danger zone.

The Chow Chow might be numerically rather small in some countries and nowhere a very popular breed, but it is spread worldwide and viewing the differences in type, it can be assumed that there is quite a bit of genetic variety in the breed. So very probably the Chow will not (yet) need crossing with another breed: there must be enough genetic diversity in the breed in general.

Aiming for diversity in breeding can be done based on pedigrees and on DNA.

PEDIGREES

The pedigree check is as old as pedigree breeding. Comparing pedigrees of possible partners, once on paper, can today be done via computer programs. Breed clubs and kennel clubs offer these programs. They might show the coefficient of inbreeding (CoI). If diversity is the aim, the lower the CoI is the better. No inbreeding is 0,0. In Belgium a tool is developed by Arnold Jacques, Pets for life, which indicates the inbreeding safety of a test combination with a green, orange or red road sign.

In practice it might be difficult to find fully unrelated pedigrees in a country's own population but even in those abroad, as the famous breeders of their time sometimes exported worldwide, so the name of their famous stud dog is vested in pedigrees everywhere.

DNA

The pedigree system works on the assumption that sharing a pedigree means that the same genes are also shared. That may be broadly true, but insight into the DNA level might show that littermates can differ from each other.

Major steps have been taken in the DNA field in recent years concerning tests for health issues. These tests are offered by dozens of laboratories worldwide, both profit and non-profit organisations, and still it is a world fully in development.

The same goes for assessing the genetic diversity and inbreeding of individual dogs as well as breeds. A variety of commercial options are available to breeders. The big



Photo Caren Barnhoorn

players here are UC Davis, Embark and MyDogDNA. UC Davis Veterinary Genetics Laboratory offers a test based on microsatellite markers (STR) and MyDogDNA and Embark Vet offer tests using single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNP). SNP technology is the most modern technique and is increasingly used in genomic studies of animals.

Although UC Davis at the moment offers a handy tool for breeders to use diversity in breeding, called BetterBred, which is not yet available in this form by the other firms, it might still be a bit too early to decide which option will be best for the Chow.

All testing costs a lot of money, so it is wise to know where best to invest. At the moment this is not fully clear. But the future is in this technique. In a few years it will become clear where we can best participate.

UNFAIR

Speaking about future investments and thinking about all the investments that have already been made, the idea pops up that it is unfair how pedigree dog breeding is treated, compared to commercial breeding.

Pedigree dogs are fully exposed as unhealthy in general. From the much larger commercial breeding sector only the extremes – illegal importing and selling of sick pups – get public attention. Which does not prevent large groups from buying in that circuit. Apparently, the social aversion to bad breeding is not that great. Look-alikes are more easily sold than purebreds. And to make it completely incomprehensible to the purebred dog breeder, crossbreeds – we would call them mongrels – are sold for higher prices than properly bred purebred dogs.

True as this unfair situation might be, pedigree dog breeders do not compare. They would do better to take courage and not to feel wronged by those who clearly breed badly and who will unfortunately escape public judgment. If there is ever to be government measures, they will eventually also affect this sector. But these measures will not deeply hurt the person breeding for money. They will choose another breed to make money from.

It will be the true fanciers who will pay the toll and whose passion will be attacked. So for them it is of the utmost importance for keeping the breed out of the danger zone. They are the ones who are paying the utmost attention to health.

Let us hope that the International Partnership for Dogs (IPFD, DogWellNet.com) succeed in their mission to facilitate collaboration and sharing of resources to enhance the health, well-being and welfare of pedigree dogs and all dogs worldwide.



Photo Ineke van Beekum

In the meantime the Chow people could enhance health, wellbeing and welfare of the Chow by banning exaggeration of any type, monitoring health of breeding stock by scoring, and aiming for diversity.

Breeding, based on scores and data obtained with tools was not what appealed to old school Chow breeders. Who knows, it may be precisely the way the new generation will find its way.

Never let breeders forget that the standard guideline can remain. A healthy Chow and a beautiful Chow: it should be the same.

Whatever happens to dog breeding, what difficult times lie ahead: to make the world a better place because we share it with Chows will remain the driving force for breeding. To be able to witness the magical moments when Chow and owner enjoy each other as life companions, that is and will always stay as our inspiration.