

Heads You Win, Tails You Lose?

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On April 19, 1998 Anna Bellenger steeled her courage and strode into the ring at the Baltimore County Kennel Club show. The crowd stared in astonishment at her long-tailed Swiss import, Little Tramont Licorice. But then astonishment turned to admiration as the charming six-month old puppy, proudly waving her forbidden appendage, went through her paces. Cori captured not only the onlookers' hearts but Judge Phyllis Haage's as well. It was little Cori's first show and she went home with a big win, a four-point major. The rest of us took home an enduring memory.

Fast forward to 2005. Dr. Kathi Gruss, DVM, writing for the Norwich and Norfolk Terrier Club News noted, "several veterinary associations, including the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)...have recently issued statements that ear cropping and/or tail docking in pets for cosmetic reasons are not medically indicated nor of benefit to the patient... because the procedures cause pain and distress...and are accompanied by inherent risks...." Other researchers have shown the tail to be vital for balance in movement—crucial for agility. AR groups have obviously embraced this thinking.

So, recognizing the changing times and with no little trepidation, the NNTC began looking into amending our breed standard which simply states "Tail, medium docked." The process took over a year with several versions of the revision being sent to the AKC for approval. Finally on July 31st, ballots were sent out to over 700 members. The proposed new tail standard would read "Tail medium docked, strongly preferred..." Hoping to help judges cope with the prospect of a full-tailed exhibit, the new standard would also specify that the tail be: "Straight, set on high.... Not a squirrel tail."

Implicit in the wording was a slight acceptance of natural tails in the ring. Some might argue that by stating "strongly preferred," the club is being brought to the altar as a very reluctant bride indeed. True. But at least it was a step toward recognition of what has been characterized by Dr. James Holt, the AKC federal legislative liaison, as a very powerful movement whose aim is the outright banning of ear cropping and tail docking. Legislative skirmishes over these practices have become commonplace. Case in point, just a year ago, NY Assemblywoman Sandy Galef introduced bill A. 11242 which would have made ear cropping/tail docking a misdemeanor punishable by fines up to \$500 and/or jail sentences of up to a year. This trend will continue and so the issue will not go away.

The NNTC balloting procedure is straight-forward. A measure will pass if it garners two-thirds of the votes returned by members in good standing. The Constitution specifies as well that the polling must be conducted by mail. According to Robert Lachman who shepherded the initiative, (spending more than a month of his time overall, in the process), there was an overwhelming response. The results are as follows: in Norwich 216 for the resolution/139 against (235 were needed for passage). In Norfolk, 214 affirmatives were needed to pass. Results: 204 For/117 Against.

So while the revision won the popular vote, it failed to achieve the necessary 2/3's margin. But it was very close. In fact, the revisions might have passed were it not for voter error. Twenty-five votes were rejected on a procedural basis: strong opinions were written right on the ballot; a few others were disqualified for failure to follow instructions regarding placing ballots in the correct envelopes.

This is a parliamentary lesson to keep in mind. We will most certainly again be facing the issue of division in the near future. The time to comment is now—not on the ballot. If you wish your vote to be counted, follow the instructions exactly. It may mean all the difference. Thank you Robert Lachman, Barbara Miller, and Board members—all who worked to bring this initiative to a vote including the vote counters: Ed Dum, Robin Schneider and Joan Kefeli.

Back in 1998, it took Anna Bellenger eight months to get beautiful Cori finished. It took so long because judges really didn't know quite what to do with her. The standard says "medium docked." It doesn't say, "undocked tail disallowed." So as things stand, it will be just as hard today to finish a long-tailed Norwich or Norfolk but probably possible. In the final analysis, breeders must ask themselves: when will it be time to look at the tail issue again? Given the legislative climate, we might not have the luxury.

— Leandra Little, AKC Gazette Breed Columnist

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