

Inbreeding: A Force for Good – or a Skeleton in Our Closet?

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A lot of people in Great Britain heaved a deep sigh of relief when they realized that our Westminster Best in Show winner, the feisty Affenpinscher GCh. Banana Joe v. Tani Kazari, would not be going to Crufts this year. This had nothing to do with anyone being afraid of the competition: I have no idea what the preferences of the breed and Group judges might have been, but I'm sure everyone – British and Americans alike – would have enjoyed watching Joe put on his usual show in the big ring at Crufts. (If he got that far, of course; last year, when he traveled across the pond to be shown in Birmingham, Joe won Best of Breed, but didn't place in the Toy Group.)

No, my British friends' concern was of a completely different nature. They worried that if a high profile dog like Joe had been present at Crufts, mainstream media would somehow learn that Joe is the result of a breeding practice that is presently banned in Britain, as well as in several other European countries, and this would have given rise to even more bashing of purebred dogs and dog shows than already took place. This activity seems to have become a popular pastime among journalists looking for a story, and regardless of how healthy and happy and in every way "normal" little Joe is, the fact that he's the result of inbreeding – father to daughter, no less – would, according to my British informants, be enough to send the mainstream press into a foaming rage.

Although I don't doubt that this is true, it's rather depressing to find that this is the kind of reaction you must expect in Great Britain today. This is the country where the modern concept of purebred livestock originated a couple of hundred years ago; where the breeding of fine livestock, horses, sheep, poultry, and of course dogs, has reached an unsurpassed apex. It all started in the late 1700s, when Robert Bakewell (1725-1795) was the first to implement systematic selective breeding of livestock, as opposed to the mostly random breeding methods that had previously governed animal breeding. (This all had to do with the then revolutionary idea that you shouldn't slaughter and eat the fattest pig – you saved it for breeding, and thereby produced more of the same.) Bakewell mainly focused on sheep and cattle, but once his ideas had taken root in the 1800s they were put to good use in "purebred" dogs as well, with the result that by the 1860s the sport of dog shows, kennel clubs and modern breeding got off the ground... and we've been on a roll ever since.



Great Britain gave rise to the modern concept of purebred livestock, implementing systematic selective breeding practices in horses, sheep, poultry and dogs that include linebreeding and inbreeding. Photo by Gbphotostock/[Dreamstime](#).

The Victorians, although much more delicate than we are in many ways, were certainly not squeamish about using close inbreeding in dogs to set the characteristics they wanted to “fix” and thereby create a breed. Without strong inbreeding and linebreeding, we simply wouldn’t have all the breeds we have, and they would never have been able to consistently reproduce the qualities (of both character and conformation) that define them today.

The Same Names, Over and Over...

It’s unfortunate that so few breed fanciers study their breed’s origins in depth. You might be surprised by what you would find. In many cases the foundation stock from which every single dog of a breed descends consisted of just a handful of individuals, and if you extend the pedigrees backward you tend to return to the same few names, over and over and over again. It’s not quite like Adam and Eve, and not nearly as far back as that either, but it’s common to come across the same dog many hundreds, even thousands, of times if you go back far enough.

Behind that there’s darkness: some breeds have documented pedigrees for just a few decades, others for over a century, but eventually you’ll come across the dreaded “pedigree unknown.” Ultimately, of course, all purebreds are mutts, in the sense that at some point you can no longer prove “pure” ancestry, and that’s something I wish we’d all accept. (I also wish we’d be able to find a less loaded term than “pure breeding” for what we do, but that’s a different subject.)

Let’s not get too involved in the intricacies of genetics here. I’m not a geneticist, but every dog breeder has to know a little bit of practical genetics. What we do know is that if you double up on a characteristic within the same family, you are likely to get it in spades. That’s great, provided it’s a desirable feature; what’s not so great is that the same is true of less desirable characteristics. A lot that’s hidden under the surface may also come to light when you inbreed, and there are, of course, those who believe that inbreeding, in and of itself, is “bad.” (At least some of the latter, I think, is a natural human aversion to a taboo subject. I’m wondering if we feel more strongly about this these days when our dogs have increasingly become family members, even our “children,” and we are therefore more concerned by their sexual habits, as well as everything else they do, than in the past when “dogs were just dogs.” It’s a thought.)

There’s also the well-known fact of “hybrid vigor,” which means that the result of outcrossing, at least in the first generation, often has a tendency to evidence a vitality that’s not necessarily as common in heavily inbred lines.

Inbreeding Versus Linebreeding

How do you distinguish inbreeding from linebreeding? Inbreeding really is an extreme form of linebreeding: mating first-generation relatives, such as sire to daughter, dam to son, and full siblings, would constitute strong inbreeding. Some people would call grandsire to granddaughter combinations, or even the mating of first cousins, a form of inbreeding.

The Kennel Club in England bans the mating of first degree relatives, which means that the progeny from mother to son, father to daughter, and full brother to full sister matings cannot be registered at the Kennel Club. (That’s a direct quote from the Kennel Club. Note that they say “father” and “mother” – not “sire” and “dam,” thereby enhancing the natural discomfort you feel when you compare inbreeding to human incest.)

The above does not mean that inbreeding is going to produce freaks. Like almost everything else, it’s a question of how it’s done, and intelligent breeders can achieve brilliant results by employing selective inbreeding. Nobody who has met Joe, our Westminster winner, could doubt for a second that he’s as healthy, happy and “normal” as any dog with a less inbred pedigree. (I don’t know if there are any skeletons in his closet, of course, although I doubt it very much. I’m only basing my observations on what I’ve seen of Joe, in the extremely high pressure atmosphere at, for example, Westminster, which he handled with greater aplomb and assurance than most!)

You don’t have to do a lot of research to realize that line- and inbreeding are pretty much endemic, as much among British breeders as among Americans. Looking at the pedigrees of the winners at this year’s Crufts, for instance, it’s clear that in- and linebreeding feature prominently among them – at least as strongly as in Joe’s case, although it’s not as clear-cut a case as sire-daughter breeding.

Take the Best in Show winner, for instance – the extrovert, ever-charming Petit Basset Griffon Vendéen Ch. Soletrader Peek A Boo. ‘Jilly,’ as she is called, is the result of her dam having been bred to a son of her litter sister – in other words, nephew to aunt. And since the dam and the aunt are already the results of linebreeding (their granddam is also their great-granddam), there’s a pretty narrow genetic base.

The Terrier Group winner, the Skye Ch. Salena The Special One, is the result of cousin-to-cousin breeding, with the additional twist that one single dog occupies five of the eight spaces in the fourth generation, and apparently even tighter linebreeding before that. The Toy Group winner, the King Charles Spaniel Ch. Maibee Theo, is out of a bitch whose sire is full brother to her granddam, with both also related to several dogs on Theo’s sire’s side. The Labrador Retriever and Tibetan Terrier Group winners appear to be of mostly outcross breeding, at least as far as I could tell from the five-generation pedigrees I have access to.

The Bernese Mountain Dog Ch. Meadowpark Whispers Breeze is sired by an import from Belgium, Goodboy van’t Stokerybos, whose granddams are first cousins. Actually, they are even more closely related than that, since the sire of one of them is also the grandsire of the other.

Breeze’s dam does not appear to be related to her sire, in which case she herself could be termed a “pure outcross.” However, it’s of interest to U.S. breeders to note that Breeze’s dam is at least one quarter American and descends from AKC champions carrying kennel names such as Abbey Road’s, Elmira’s, etc.

The Australian Shepherd Ch. Allmark Fifth Avenue’s pedigree is almost all-American, but not closely linebred. Her U.S. sire Ch. Dazzle’s Bill-A-Bing Bill-A-Bong descends twice from Ch. Arrogance of Heatherhill in the first four generations, and he also appears far back on the dam’s side. There are a number of American Bayshore champions in the pedigree as well, but most of them are only distantly related, at least as far as the five-generation pedigree shows.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is that if the Kennel Club, and some of the other European clubs that follow along the same line, had outlawed inbreeding earlier we would not have the variety of dog breeds we now have. Certainly inbreeding is nothing for a novice dog fancier to be playing with, and it’s a practice that’s risky if you are not deeply aware of all the problems – as well as the virtues – that may lurk beneath the genetic surface of your dogs. But it’s a practice that has been, and can continue to be, extremely beneficial to use in dogs.

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