



Issue Analysis: Dispelling the Myths of Cropped Ears, Docked Tails, Dewclaws, and Debarking



ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL - PHOTO COURTESY AKC PERFORMANCE EVENTS

Purebred dogs are purpose-bred dogs and come in all shapes and sizes. The characteristics that make each of these dogs unique also help them perform the function for which they were bred.

The physical appearance of the dogs illustrates this, and is also an important part of the breed's history. For example, the thick body and heavy fur on a St. Bernard make it the perfect dog for mountain rescue. The long, narrow body of a Dachshund (German for "badger hunter") allows it to burrow underground to hunt badgers.

Many owners of specific breeds wish to maintain their dog's historic practical function by having their puppy's ears cropped, tails docked, or dewclaws removed. While some unfamiliar with the breeds believe that this is purely aesthetic, these procedures actually enhance the dog's ability to perform the tasks it is meant to do.

Debarking is another hotly debated procedure. This is not purely a procedure of convenience, but rather a viable option that allows a dog in certain circumstances to remain in its loving home rather than being sent to a shelter.

Understanding the Procedures

Ear cropping, tail docking, dewclaw removal and debarking are procedures that are increasingly debated in the general public and in public policy. To help gain insight on these issues, let's begin by defining these terms:

Ear cropping is a procedure by which a dog's ears are trimmed, or "cropped", so that they can stand erect rather than flop over. Common examples of dogs with cropped ears are Boston Terriers, Great Danes and Doberman Pinschers. The AKC currently recognizes 20 breeds with cropped ears.

Tail docking refers to the removal of a portion of the tail. The length that is docked varies depending on the breed.

"Ear cropping and tail docking are historical procedures... that help some dogs better and more safely perform the functions for which they are originally bred."

Dogs with docked tails include Cocker Spaniels, Rottweilers, and Yorkshire Terriers. Currently 62 breeds recognized by the AKC have docked tails. Some dogs, such as the Old English Sheepdog and Australian Shepherd, may appear to be docked, but may have actually been born with a "bobtail", or naturally short tail.

Dewclaw removal is a procedure by which the dewclaws, which are essentially extra claws that serve little to no purpose for the majority of dogs, are removed. Most dogs are born with dewclaws.

Tail docking and dewclaw removal are performed shortly after birth, when the puppy's nervous system is not fully developed. As a result, the puppy feels little to no pain, and there are no lasting negative health issues. Some lawmakers have sought to require anesthesia for these procedures. However, since they

are performed so soon after birth, anesthesia should not be required, as this could be life-threatening for the young puppy. Waiting until they are old enough to handle anesthesia would actually result in a more painful and traumatic procedure.

Debarking, or "bark softening" is a veterinary procedure that softens a dog's bark by altering a dog's vocal cords with a laser or biopsy tool. The dog may still bark, but at a softer volume. When performed correctly by a veterinarian, the most common method is non-invasive, takes just a

couple minutes to perform, and again has no lasting negative effects.

Much of the opposition regarding these procedures comes from a misunderstanding of why and how they are performed. Many believe that these procedures are painful, performed purely for convenience or cosmetic reasons and have no value. This is completely false.

In fact, these practices are significantly less painful and much

less physically traumatic for the dogs than common surgeries such as spaying and neutering. Each of these procedures is a safe, humane standard practice that serves a practical purpose, and in the case of ear cropping and tail docking, preserves a dog's ability to perform its historic function.

A Historical Perspective

All dogs recognized by the AKC are placed in one of seven groups based on the tasks they were developed and often continue to perform. These include the Herding, Terrier, Working and Sporting Groups, among others. Ear cropping and tail docking are historical procedures performed in some cases for over 100 years that help some dogs better and more safely perform the functions for which they were originally bred.

The Boxer, for example, is a working

dog that has traditionally been used for a number of important tasks including serving as guard and courier dogs for soldiers and seeing-eye dogs for the blind. The cropped ears help enhance the Boxer's hearing, thereby helping it perform its tasks to the best of its ability.

Other dogs, such as the Brussels Griffon, were historically kept in stables to catch vermin or other pests. Cropping the ears protected them from damaging bites when cornering a rat or another unwelcome animal.

Hunting and sporting breeds such as spaniels often go into thick brush to track game. While some of these breeds (such as a Labrador Retriever) have thick, strong tails or tails with thick hair, other breeds that have weaker tails with often wispy hair are prone to injury when they run through thick brush or brambles.

In the same way, a docked tail on a terrier makes it stronger, which helps an owner more safely and easily pull these burrowing dogs out of holes. For example, the bottom two-thirds of the Airedale Terrier's tail is very strong and may be used to help pull them to safety when they are digging and hunting animals in the ground. The last third, however, is very weak and fragile. When not docked, the tail is prone to breaking, splitting or other serious injuries.

Practical Considerations

Like ear cropping and tail docking, dewclaw removal and debarking serve a practical purpose. These are not procedures of convenience, but rather safe and standard animal husbandry practices designed to protect the safety and welfare of dogs.

For most dogs, a "dewclaw" is essen-



The ears of a Brussels Griffon were traditionally cropped for protection when it cornered unwelcome animals in a stable.

©AKC-MARY BLOOM

tially an extra claw. While a few dogs, such as the Norwegian Lundehund, use them to scale rocky cliffs, the dewclaw serves virtually no purpose for most dogs. Working or other active dogs are prone to getting them caught and torn,

“These are not procedures of convenience, but rather safe and standard animal husbandry practices designed to protect the safety and welfare of dogs.”

causing extreme pain and significant injury. For these cases, it is better for them to be removed shortly after birth, where there is little or no pain, rather than to risk serious injury and infection later.

Debarking is a veterinary procedure that may ultimately prevent a dog from ending up in a shelter or euthanized. Both the AKC and the American Veterinary Medical Association believe that this is a viable veterinary procedure that may be an option for some owners when other efforts to correct excessive barking have failed. This safe, viable procedure will soften the dog's

bark to a level that will not be a disturbance to the neighborhood, thereby allowing an owner to keep a dog whose excessive barking could otherwise be considered a nuisance. The AKC and the AVMA also agree that this procedure should only be performed by a qualified, licensed veterinarian.

Public Policy Considerations

The American Kennel Club and its local dog clubs throughout the country are extremely

concerned about animal cruelty and are dedicated to the breeding and raising of healthy, happy dogs.

We strongly support laws that target irresponsible owners and those who would mistreat or harm animals.

Likewise, it is important that any legislation seeking to protect dogs not prevent these procedures which can protect the dog's safety and welfare. Standard, safe animal husbandry practices that preserve the ability of purpose-bred dogs to excel at the functions for which they were bred should remain safe and legal and never be construed as cruelty.

In the same way, debarking should not be banned. The decision to debark, like other health care decisions, is one best left to the dog's owner in conjunction with their veterinarian, and should not be subject to arbitrary government regulations or restrictions.

Clearly defining animal cruelty, neglect and mistreatment in statute will protect the safety of dogs and hold owners accountable without placing arbitrary restrictions on safe, accepted procedures that allow dogs to excel at the tasks they were bred to perform and, in the case of debarking, allow them to remain in loving homes.