

Dogged By Design

As Crufts dog show rolls around again, consider that many dogs literally owe their lives to their owners. The pursuit of fashion has taken some breeds so far down the road of specialisation that they cannot survive without human help.

Champion bulldogs, almost all born by caesarian section. Bloodhounds whose melancholy eyes can fester a suppurating mess. Docked tails that prevent a dog expressing itself fully. Hidden defects too, like the collies that slowly lose their sight or the psychotic temperament that turns some breeds into walking, growling time-bombs.

There was a time, not so long ago, when a dog's characteristics were part of its function. The bulldog's fearsome jaw and squashed-in face allowed it to clamp its teeth into a bull while still being able to breathe. Bulldogs were admirably suited to the job of bull baiting, but when the 'sport' was outlawed in 1831 the breed almost became extinct. It was saved by fanciers, who laid down the standards against which all bulldogs were to be judged, and thus created the problem.

The standard used to say that a bulldog's head should be as

large as possible. Alas, it said nothing about the puppy's head being small enough to pass through its mother's pelvis. Hence the need for caesarian sections.

The Kennel Club has now changed the standard. Heads must not now exceed a maximum size. But the bulldog breeders are big-headed enough to reckon they can do without the Kennel Club and Crufts. So what if the best bitches have to suffer a caesarian for every litter?

Not all the defects that dogs are subject to can be laid directly at the door of standards. Some are the result of too much inbreeding from too few winners. But all could be eliminated by more enlightened judges and breeders.

The real difficulty seems to be that for many people dogs have become objects that perform some task - winning prizes, guarding property and person, or whatever - not creatures with whom to share a relationship. It doesn't have to be one or the other. Many working dogs are also boon companions, but if more people would see their dogs as subjects the animals would be much better off.

I have just read all this to Sam, who has a pedigree as long as your arm, and he agrees. •

Jeremy Cherfas