

Dogs Like Us

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THE 130th Westminster Dog Show comes to New York today, with its thousands of contestants, ranging in size from two-pound Chihuahuas to 120-pound Great Danes. As the highly groomed dogs prance down the runways of Madison Square Garden — the floor-length coats of the Afghan hounds swaying, the teased coiffures of the poodles bouncing — it's hard not to think of a fashion show.

In the case of dog shows, a given breed's parent club sets the standard for the breed's look or style. These standards describe an ideal specimen and are supposed to relate a dog's form to the original function it performed. But given that dogs are the most plastic of species, and people are inventive, some remarkable varieties of dogs have been created to serve our notions of beauty, novelty, companionship and service.

Unfortunately, in some breeds, form has trumped function. The Pekingese and the bulldog, whose flattened faces make breathing difficult, are two examples. Such design flaws — often perpetuated by breeders trying to produce a dog with a unique look — have enduring consequences for individual dogs, their progeny and the people who love them.

Of the 180 breeds listed on one popular Web site for choosing purebred puppies, 42 percent have chronic health problems: skin diseases, stomach disorders, a high incidence of cancers, the inability to bear young without Caesareans, shortened life spans. The list is as disturbing as it is long,

and poses a question: dazzled by the uniqueness of many of the breeds we've created, have we — the dog-owning public — turned a blind eye to the development of a host of dysfunctional animals?

Fifteen years ago, I was just such a starry-eyed dog buyer, poring over dog magazines and litters of pups registered with the American Kennel Club. Fate intervened. While kayaking on the San Juan River in Utah, I met a 10-month-old pup roaming free and making his own living in the desert. He wore no collar and looked to be a cross between a yellow Lab and who knew what — a golden retriever, a redbone coonhound, a Rhodesian ridgeback — a dog who seemed to shape-shift before my eyes. It was love at first sight.

He jumped into my truck at the end of the trip, and I brought him home to Wyoming, named him Merle and gave him his own dog door so he could come and go as he wished. His mixed genes and native intelligence took care of the rest. Merle would never have won a dog show, but his vigor and steadiness demonstrated what good genes can do, whether under the influence of a skillful human breeder or that oldest breeder of all — chance and natural selection.

On the other hand, buying a purebred dog from a reputable breeder is no guarantee of a healthy dog, since the existing guidelines for purebred dogs are highly subjective. Consider the German shepherd. Current American Kennel Club show standards favor those with

extremely low-slung back ends. But photographs of German shepherds from earlier in the 20th century show a dog with a high rear end, one that even a lay person would call a normal-looking dog. The makeover was done to create a German shepherd that certain breeders believed would have strong forward propulsion while being aesthetically pleasing. Unfortunately, as many experts have noted, such low-slung dogs have nagging balance problems and look crippled. Dog buyers who want a shepherd — or many other Kennel Club-recognized breeds — must sort through such biomechanical and stylistic disagreements among breeders.

So if the pageantry of Westminster moves you to bring a new pup into the household, here's a few tips that can save you some heartache and vet bills, particularly if the dog you have in mind is purebred. Investigate the track records of breeders. Meet both parents of the prospective pup. Talk with people who have bought from the breeder. And learn about the idiosyncrasies of one's chosen breed.

If every dog buyer did such research, it would also help shut down the 5,000 puppy mills that, according to the Humane Society, provide most of the half-million purebred dogs sold through pet stores and the Internet. Poorly regulated, unsanitary factories in which females are imprisoned their entire lives, puppy mills survive because people get charmed by that puppy in the window.

Unlike the wrong computer or an automobile, however, faulty dogs can't be readily exchanged or resold. They can be "given up" to an animal shelter, and they are, at the rate of about four million dogs each year, this soothing phrase disguising the end of 50 percent of them — a gas chamber or a lethal injection.

We owe our dogs more than this. After all, it is we who have shaped them. Even when we err, they continue to put their trust and their lives in our hands.