

Why are some breeds docked or cropped while others are not?

Thirty seven years ago, Ruth McCourt wrote an article outlining why cropping and docking was essential for the working characteristics of various breeds. Each breed is different, and in an attempt to have you understand more fully the importance of these procedures, we have reproduced some of her article. As you may know, all purebred dogs fall into one of seven groups and are classified according to their main performance task: Sporting, Hounds, Working, Non-Sporting, Terrier, Toy and Herding. While McCourt's discussion applies to the AKC standards at the time of writing, the information is still relevant today.

"In the Sporting Group, of the 24 breeds listed, 13 have docked tails of varying lengths, depending on their size, the ground cover in which they work, and the customary distance from the handler. The Spaniels, low to the ground and long coated, have short tails. The Pointers, standing higher on leg, usually have two-fifths to one-third of the tail removed, thus preventing many injuries. All water retrievers retain their heavy tails as rudders, as do Setters, whose tails assist their balance when quartering at great speed. All of these dogs have a hanging ear for the practical purpose of protection from brush, grass and briars.

Of the 19 Hounds listed by AKC, none have either ears trimmed or tail docked... All sight or running hounds need their tails for balance and have light ear leather, which in some cases, are thrown back and folded like the Greyhound. Most scent hounds carry their tails high for visibility in the brush, exceptions are the Basenji, general purpose hunter for the African native; the Dachshund, which goes to the ground after badger, and the Norwegian Elkhound. Elkhound and Basenji have prick ears.

Terriers, meaning "go to ground", are a very interesting group. The largest is the Airedale, approximately 23 inches at the withers, making a good

dog on all game as well as a police and army dog. The remainder of the 20 Terriers vary in size from 8 to 18 inches, and are specifically built to follow their quarry such as badger, fox, otter, rats, rabbits, and vermin into the burrows in which they seek safety. They are fighters and killers of prey, and it depends on the natural habits of the prey whether they are docked. Ten are docked and the following four may be trimmed or untrimmed: American Staffordshire, Standard Manchester, Miniature Schnauzer, and the Norwich, all of which work above ground.

Of the 17 dogs in the Toy Group, only the Affenpinscher and the Miniature Pinscher are both cropped and docked. The Brussels Griffon may be either cropped or uncropped. The Toy Poodle, the Silky and the Yorkie are docked—the rest of the Group remaining natural and governed only by their standards of beauty.

Of the 9 Non-Sporting dogs, only our indigenous Boston Terrier may be cropped, and only the Poodles and the Schipperke are docked. The story on the Schipperke, or "little captain" of Belgium is that in 1609 he had his tail cut off by an angry neighbor, and everyone liked the looks of the dog so much better without his tail, that he has remained that way ever since!

Working dogs fall roughly in the following categories: guardians of person or property; guardians of flocks; drovers; herders; draught and sledge animals. The size, coat, physical and mental requirements of each breed have been delineated by the type of work and the terrain on which it is done—mountains, plains, cold, or under man's direction, or on their own.

Of the 29 breeds in the Working Group, none which fall into the category of sledge, draught or herders, are either docked or cropped, most having prick or semi-prick ears. The drovers and the guard dogs are somewhat interchangeable as to guarding man and his property against depredation by wild animals or man, though each has his specific forte. Three of this group are docked only—the Old English (that is, if the Old English is not already a natural born bobtail. In the case of the Old English, it is preferable that there is no tail at all, but it is not to exceed 1 or 2 inches in grown dogs.), the Rottweiler and the Pembroke Welsh Corgi. Two, the Briard and the Great Dane, may be

cropped but not docked; five breeds are both docked and cropped—the Bouvier, Giant Schnauzer, Boxer, Doberman Pinscher and Standard Schnauzer.

Let us speculate a bit about a few of the last mentioned dogs. The Pembroke Welsh Corgi was no doubt kept as compact as possible, both because of his method of nipping at the heels of cattle, and because he lived in the house with the family as a guard. The Rottweiler, the ancient Roman drover of cattle for the armies and their protector from wild animals, was a protector of the master's purse from thieves—short coated, dock-tailed and strong. The Briard, known since the 12th century in France as a guardian of the stock and farms from wolves and robbers, was also a splendid police and war dog. The Great Dane was created to hunt the incredibly fast and vicious boars, as well as being a guard and watch dog.

Of the five breeds, both docked and cropped, the Bouvier and Giant Schnauzer were drovers and guards; the Boxer, used in bull baiting, and later as a personal guard; the Standard Schnauzer as a general utility guard and rat catcher; the Doberman Pinscher as guard of persons and property. All of these dogs had the strength, spirit, character and intelligence to prove to be excellent police and army dogs. The thread that seems to run through all of this, is that the dogs that were meant for fighting, whether against animal or human, were kept with as few appendages as possible against injury or handhold—unless their native climate or terrain required otherwise."

(Mccourt, www.adpef.org, Reprinted with permission.)

"Has anyone noticed that all wild animals, all mammals, except the elephant, has erect ears? Nature must have felt that one of the basics of survival was good hearing. It follows that the hanging or drop ear must be man-made to suit a purpose, and that man found, as time went on, that in certain cases the prick, or upright ear, served him better, so he trimmed them, where necessary. The hanging ears of dogs, sheep, and pigs are man-made. He applied his practical experience and these changes became incorporated in an evolving standard."

(Mccourt, www.adpef.org.)

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Old English Sheepdog: 6 weeks

Why are dogs' tails docked?

The main reason for docking is to avoid tail damage. Injuries are difficult to heal due to decreased blood circulation in the tail. There is also a few breeds that required docking for hygienic reasons.

"A number of gun dog breeds have to hunt through heavy vegetation and thick brambles, where their fast tail action can easily lead to torn and bleeding tails." ¹ "Terriers bred to hunt below ground for purposes such as fox control have their tails docked to a length which is more practical when working in a confined space." ² And "breeds which have an enthusiastic tail action, are also liable to damage even in the home", and can cause injury to small children. "For long haired, thick coated breeds like the Yorkshire Terrier and Old English Sheepdog, for example, docking avoids the hair around the base of the tail becoming fouled by feces. Even with constant grooming and washing, such fouling is unpleasant. If allowed to get out of hand, it can lead to severe problems of hygiene." ³

"Since docking was banned in Sweden in 1989, there has been a massive increase in tail injuries amongst previously docked breeds. Within the 50 undocked Pointer litters registered in that year with the Swedish Kennel Club, 38% of dogs suffered tail injury before they were 18 months old and in 1991, the number of individuals with tail injuries had increased to 51% of the group." ⁴

Is docking cruel?

Docking, at the age of 2 to 5 days old, causes minimum discomfort because the tailbone is still soft and the nervous system that relays pain signals is undeveloped. Docking causes no more discomfort than ear piercing on humans, is over in seconds, and has a benefit for the life of the dog. Some "puppies are docked while they are asleep and do not even wake up. After docking, puppies will immediately return to their dam to feed, and there is no evidence that development or weight gain is in any way arrested by the docking procedure." ⁵

A common misconception is that a dog, which has been docked as a puppy, will have problems with balance or communication. This is simply not true. If, "however, tail damage occurs during adulthood and docking has to be carried out for therapeutic reasons, normally under anesthetic, a dog can be seriously distressed and the healing process can be painful and protracted." ⁶

Why are ears cropped?

The upright ear is the natural ear on all wild canids (wolves, rabbits, coyotes, foxes, etc.) and their canine cousins. Evolution and the survival of the fittest has seen to it that all wild dogs are equipped with the most effective hearing device: an erect, cupped ear. The dropped ear seen in many purebred dogs does not exist in nature because it is far less efficient in terms of hearing. Cropped ears complete the working dog's "physical equipment to make them an elite family companion" and functional working dog. ⁷

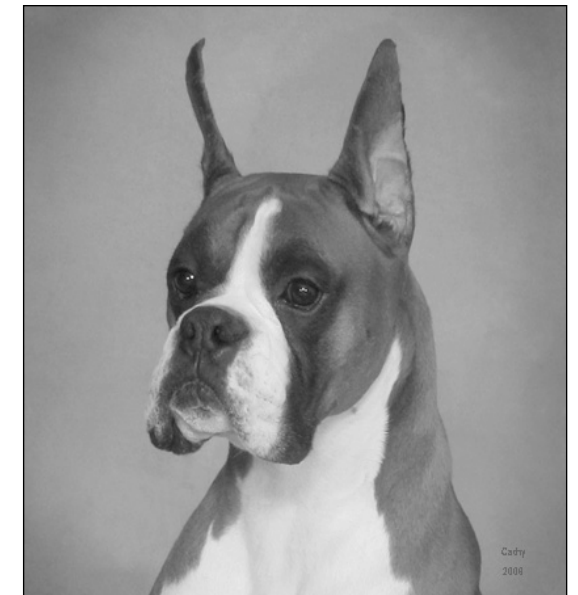
There are functional reasons for cropped ears: Traditionally "a neatly cropped ear was less of a 'handle' for an attacker to hold on to and received less damage in confrontation with other animals." ⁸ "The second has to do with sound localization". ⁹ Ear shape allows for the sound to be more accurately heard. An erect ear "can localize sound to within a 5 degree cone, whereas a dropped ear can only localize to within a 20 degree cone". ¹⁰ Since some working and herding dogs "do SEARCH AND DETECTION as well as SEARCH AND RESCUE, cropped ears have a decided advantage." ¹¹ Most people don't realize that a man made dropped ear comes with some decided disadvantages. There are far less ear infections in erect as opposed to dropped ears. Given that the number one dog insurance claim in the US for 2008 was for ear infections, erect ears have a significant health advantage.

(www.petsugar.com/Top-10-Insurance-Claims-Dogs-Cats-2882052)

What are dew claws and why are they removed?

"Dew claws are like thumbs. They are the first digit on a dog, and unlike digits 2, 3, 4 and 5, are not used for walking. They are located a short distance up the leg on the inside surface. They are usually removed at the same time the tail is docked, at 2 to 5 days of age. At this age, the bones that make up the [dew claws] are tiny and soft... so removal is easy. If the dew claws are not removed at 2-5 days of age, like the tail dock, one should wait until the pup is old enough to anaesthetize safely." ¹²

The Dew Claw is in the evolutionary process of disappearing. If an adult dew claw is snagged and ripped off, it causes a great deal of bleeding which could result in death for dogs working in remote areas or shock from loss of blood. Injury is painful and requires surgery.



Adult Boxer

1, 2, 3 <http://www.cdb.org/case4dock.htm>
 4 <http://www.cdb.org/countries/sweden.htm>
 5, 6 http://www.cdb.org/case4dock.htm#_cruel
 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 <http://www.dpca.org/PublicEd/PEC/PECEars.html>
 12 http://www.cdb.org/what_is.htm