

Talking about tails

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After admiring a very comprehensive collection of French Bulldog bronzes spanning the development of the breed, I was intrigued by one similarity...the length of their tails.¹

These dogs had tails much longer than those we see today a fact which prompted me to delve back into the records and find out a little more.

When one looks at the early specimens of Bulldog it is obvious that the tail is in evidence in most pictures Toy Bulldogs were the diminutive specimens development of the French Bulldog.

No doubt Bulldog were selected for breeding that had the shortest tails or that their tails were docked for the following reasons:

- *To avoid tax (docked dogs did not attract tax)
- *To strengthen the back and increase speed
- *To prevent being bitten when ratting or fighting
- *To make better "sport" of bear baiting and dog fighting

It is probably then that longer tails were at one time a natural part of the genes inherited by the Frenchie.² Over time Frenchie breeders have selected for a shorter and shorter tail. Which is in fact selecting and perpetuating a deformity. It would be reasonable to think that a slightly longer straighter tail may give an indication of less deformity in the spine as a whole (a kinked or screwed tail is formed from deformed bones).

The breed standard in 1937 reads "The tail is short, set on low and lying flat on the buttocks, thick at the base, preferably knotted or naturally broken and must be tapering at the ends. A straight tail is permissible" Also in the standard (defects) it mentions "raised or too long tail, which must not reach beyond the thigh". Thus, giving us an indication of an acceptable length of tail. However, by 1950 the wording of the standard relating to the tail read somewhat similar to our current version "Very short, set low thick at the root and tapering quickly towards the tip and either straight or kinked but never curling over the back. A good tail is placed so that it cannot be carried gaily"

The addition of that small word "very" had an obvious effect on the breed, as today it is the norm to see Frenchies with a very very short tail, rarely covering the anus. And not uncommon to see Frenchies with a complete absence of visible tail. Our breed standard today, describes the tails as " undocked, low, thick at root, tapering quickly towards tip, either straight or kinked, never curling over back, nor carried gaily"

To see a Frenchie with a good tail sitting snugly over its bottom covering up the rude bits gives the finishing touch to a perfect picture.³

So how short is "very short"? and have we exaggerated the interpretation of those two words? If we have could this be having an undesirable effect on the health of our Frenchies?

Anatomical considerations

An understanding of the importance of the tail and the conditions to which a lack of tail can predispose is gained by reviewing the anatomy and the physiology of the normal length tail and the pelvic region. The normal canine tail consists of approximately 20 highly mobile vertebrae largely enclosed by very versatile muscles making the various segments, especially the tip capable of finely graded movements. French Bulldogs have an average of 6 or less vertebrae (often deformed) in their tails which are incapable of fine movement.

Locomotion

The tail is important as a means of counter-balance when the dog is carrying out complicated movements such as leaping, walking along narrow structures, or climbing. Tail muscles are also important in stabilising the vertebral column and supporting the action of the extensor muscles of the back as well as those of the croup and buttocks.

Defecation and pelvic diaphragm integrity

During defecation the dog assumes a squatting position with elevation of the tail and subsequent relaxation of muscles. The movement of the tail during the act of defecation has a direct influence in evacuating the fecal bolus. If the tail is removed from an immature puppy the muscles of the tail and pelvis may fail to develop to their full potential. Removal of the tail in the mature dog may lead to atrophy and degeneration of these muscles. An absence of adequate function of these muscles may result in rectal dilatation, rectal sacculation and fecal incontinence.

Any process resulting in fascial weakening, muscle atrophy, or muscle degeneration may predispose to this weakness in the pelvic diaphragm. Burrows and Ellison (1989) recorded a predisposition to perineal hernia in those brachycephalic breeds, which have naturally docked tails.

Communication and canine behaviour

The position of the tail and the way it is moved can signal pleasure, fear, friendliness, dominance, playfulness, defensiveness. Thus, a very short tail can affect the interaction of dog with other animals and man. Some behaviourists believe the absence of a tail may predispose a dog to show unwarranted aggression to other dogs and man, or that they may be the victim of attacks by other dogs due to their failure to communicate.

The tail is not merely an inconsequential appendage. It is an anatomically and physiologically significant structure which has many biological functions that should not be underestimated.



Sources: The French Connection. December 2003. UK
Bulldog and all about them, F. Barrett Fowler. 1925. UK
Handbook FBCofE, 1961. UK
Just Frenchies, winter 2003. USA
Vom Kuenigelberg kennel, Germany