

Roach Backs in Pekingese ... Mountain or Molehill?

By Tony Rosato

The breed standard for Pekingese in all countries requires a level back. But the notion of what falls within one's perception of "level" can be open to interpretation.

Varying degrees of a curved topline, a hunched back or protruding vertebrae is consistent with the dwarf syndrome for brachycephalic breeds like Pekingese and Bulldogs, though roach backs occur in many breeds. There are many kinds of dwarf syndromes in humans, some with spinal curvature, and there's a parallel with spinal anomalies or hunched backs in brachycephalic dwarf horses just as in dogs. In French Bulldogs, another brachycephalic breed, a roach back is a virtue and is required in the breed standard.

Though a flat back is ideal in Pekingese, a few raised vertebrae in the topline are often overlooked or forgiven because it is a common syndrome in the breed and is sometimes difficult to detect through a well packed double coat, especially in the hands of a skilled handler.

When you find a dog with a smooth flat back, you'll find that usually a high tailset goes with it. And when the tailset is very high there is an up-tilted anus. These traits are linked, in the same way a roached topline or rise of a few vertebrae are often linked with a lower set tail in some breeds.

While some consider a few raised vertebrae as a "slight roach," others consider this well within the acceptable limits of a reasonably level topline, because a few slightly raised vertebrae generally do not detract from the dog's health, performance or overall good looks.

In contrast, even though covered with coat, an extreme roach can sometimes be seen from ringside. Care should be taken, however, when evaluating topline on the table because inexperienced or nervous dogs will sometimes present a false impression by hunching their backs unnaturally. To get a true evaluation of actual conformation, the dog should stand squarely on its legs and be at ease. Especially when examining young or inexperienced dogs that may cringe when first put on the table, judges and handlers should allow the dog a moment to relax and stand as they are naturally.

Some judges overlook a roach because judging after all is about comparisons of the entry, and the overall breed type and outline weigh heavily. Many judges will not fault judge. But then, a profuse coat offers a dog and handler an advantage and provides the ability to create or groom an outline. Favorable first impressions may become lasting ones.

Speaking of grooming an outline, it's fairly easy to disguise a low tailset by parting the hair at the back of the tail and brushing it down to cover the anus. This is an acceptable grooming style in our breed, but unfortunately can also hide a low tailset which is often associated with a somewhat unlevel spine. The extension of an inch or so of coat at the back end may add a little bit of length to the profile, but a roach somewhat shortens the perception of length of the spine anyway, so a shorter dog can afford the additional coat at the rear. The overall well defined coated outline can be very appealing, and some handlers know very well how to disguise a roach.

As one top Peke handler in America once said, "You can't see a roached topline on a Peke in the ring like you can on Yorkies, Silkie's or Maltese. It doesn't affect the overall appearance and impression. So what's the big deal?"

Yet some breeders and judges will tolerate nothing less than "an ironing board topline" in Pekingese. That said, we can't forget that there have been some top winning Pekingese in America with roach backs in the past -- even a couple of Number One Pekes years ago that had pronounced roach backs. That should help keep things in perspective. It reminds us that a dog's value to a breed has everything to do with the virtues the dog or bitch has and may pass on despite its faults. It speaks to the importance of focusing on the merits of the overall dog.

It used to be said that roach backs were one of the worst faults in our breed and that any breeder that had roach backs in her/his line would never get them out. It turns out that is not true. Today there are two factors that benefit breeders who want to reduce the incidence of roached toplines in their breeding programs, or breed from a good dog with a roach in hopes of breeding out the trait and passing on the dog's exceptional virtues.

One factor is that breeders today have a better working knowledge of basic genetics than ever before which facilitates breeding out faults. Secondly, the breed is more evolved with very linebred dogs and a smaller gene pool than years ago. We know that a straight topline and high tailset are expressed by recessive genes. When dogs are more linebred in general, and kennels everywhere have dogs that are closely related to each other, and gene pools become smaller as a result, recessive genes rise more easily to the forefront. That is the case today. But it's a double edged sword.

Desirable recessive genes for flat backs, high tailsets and profuse coat are easier to access and maintain in a smaller gene pool. That is why Bulldog breeders complain that undesirable flat backs and higher tailsets are becoming more prevalent in their breed today.

That's the effect of evolved linebreeding and smaller gene pools. At the same time recessive genes for congenital health problems emerge just as easily and can spread everywhere to become commonplace. Many breed communities are grappling with this.

Breeders should try to collect as much accurate and reliable information on all the ancestors of dogs they plan to use for breeding, and breed away from certain problems in the pedigree. We should linebreed to the dogs that are known for short flat topline and produced the trait with fair consistency. In that way, even a dog with a roached topline, who comes from a line or family of dogs with flat backs, or carries a prominent flat backed sire or dam in the pedigree one or more times, is likely to carry the recessive genes for the ideal topline.

Since roach backs seem to be inherited in Pekingese as a dominant trait, the fault bred true more regularly in the days when the gene pool was larger, when there were more breeders, and complete outcrosses were easier to do. Nowadays, nearly all kennels have breeding that share common ancestors that have advanced, linebred pedigrees. That makes breeding for recessive traits like flat backs all the easier to achieve.