

WHAT BREEDERS WON'T TELL YOU

Let's face it: even the top champions have their faults. Call them weaknesses. Imperfections. But there are things that many a breeder might admit (if only to themselves) that he or she would change in their top dogs, if given the chance. They might be little details. They might be major. But whatever they are, rest assured that you, as a potential puppy buyer, will never hear them mentioned.

If you are a newcomer to the breed, considering your first Frenchie purchase, do not be deterred. The vast majority of French Bulldogs are happy, healthy, and live long lives. But there is a tendency in any breed for certain problems to occur. (Frenchie's are not afflicted by nearly as many as some breeds!) If you know what these potential problems are, you will be better equipped to choose a puppy and avoid problems later in its life.

In general, French bulldogs are great companion dogs, but as with all flat-faced (brachycephalic) breeds, they have certain limitations. They are not marathon runners, and will not deal well with long walks. They also do not handle hot weather well. Their small lung capacity and reduced ability to cool themselves effectively by panting make overheating a major concern. Other than that, there is the other flat-face problem: they injure their eyes more easily by running into things.

Genetically, there are a variety of conditions that show up in Frenchie's. Some are insignificant. Others are important to understand. There are different levels of problems:

- those that impact the show quality of an individual Frenchie;
- those that affect the general well-being and comfort of the dog;
- and those that can threaten the life and survival of the dog.

Let us look at some of these, and how they relate to the puppy you might be considering.

CONDITIONS IMPACTING SHOW QUALITY

COLOR

Some colors are not allowable for showing purposes, although they have no impact on the health and well-being of the dog. Some of the offending colors occur only rarely. Others appear more frequently.

Black: The biggest problem with Frenchies is the occurrence of black dogs. This also includes black and white, or white and black (pied). Black is all right, as long as it contains some hint of brindling. If not, it is a disqualification from showing.

Brindling is a pattern of lighter color (blond, red or similar, but not white) in stripes or lines running through the base color. How much constitutes "brindling" has been hotly debated within the breed for many years. It has been accepted that even a few lighter hairs somewhere on a dog constitutes brindling. Bear in mind that if you are purchasing a Frenchie for show, the darker the dog, and the sparser the brindling, the more likely that the offspring of that dog will be black. Predominantly black dogs are acceptable, but when it comes to breeding them, careful choices must be made so as not to double up on dark genes.

Remember this: brindling is not a color, it is a pattern. Therefore, you should be able to detect at least a little on a dog that resembles a pattern in the base color. If you are talking "just a few hairs", that really doesn't constitute a pattern. If you are buying a Frenchie for show, you might want to stay away from a black dog with just a few hairs of brindling. Unless you enjoy arguing in the ring with judges as to whether your dog has enough light hairs to be legal.

Black and White: If a dog is predominantly black, but marked with white (Boston marked, or with white on its chest, throat or feet), the same rule still applies. There has to be brindling.

White and Black: With pied dogs, the areas of black must have some brindling within them, or it is a disqualification.

Liver: It is very unlikely that you will ever see a liver-colored Frenchie. The color is probably best described as the color of a red Doberman. It would be expected that a liver-colored Frenchie would have a lighter-colored nose.

Black and Tan: As rare as this color combination is in the breed, it has been seen. It comes from the terrier background. The color is predominantly black with tan

highlights, as is seen on a Manchester terrier or a Rottweiler. Because of its rarity in the breed, it is not a major concern.

"Mouse": One of the great mysteries of the Breed Standard is exactly what a "mouse"-colored Frenchie would look like. Generally, it is understood to be a blue-grey color, such as is found on some Greyhounds. White with patches of blue-grey would be similarly disqualified.

All other colors are allowable in the breed. Red, fawn, cream, white. The only real concern is a black dog without brindling. Breeders have been known to hide black dogs, or highlight them with hair color, for showing purposes. A breeder doesn't want it known that their lines are producing black dogs.

A color footnote: for showing purposes, the judges are supposed to follow the Standard. However, judges do show color preferences. These preferences tend to go through changes, according to fashion. For example, in the 1960's and 1970's, brindle Frenchies were the most popular with the show judges. More recently, cream Frenchies have been the big winners. If you are looking to be highly competitive in the ring, it might be good to check to see what colors are the biggest winners. Beware, though, because individual judges may have tastes that go against the mainstream.

The only health concern involved in colors is the link between white or nearly all-white dogs and deafness. This linkage occurs in other breeds, as well. There is an incidence of deafness occurring in pied Frenchies with minimal markings, or in white dogs. If you are considering a pied or near-white puppy, check its hearing.

As in other breeds, white or light-colored dogs may be more prone to skin problems. They may also be more susceptible to sunburn.

NOSE COLOR

The good thing about nose color is that anyone can see it. It is as plain as the nose on a dog's face. Sometimes, in the rush to purchase a puppy, a buyer will miss something obvious. If you are buying for show, look at noses. The breed standard specifies that the nose color must be black, and that non-black noses are a disqualification...except in lighter colored dogs, where lighter noses are allowable (but not preferred).

There are two nose conditions that are not acceptable:

"Dudley" Nose: Some breeds of dog have a reddish or "liver"-colored nose. Although the Breed Standard allows for lighter noses on lighter dogs, a Dudley nose is just too noticeable.

"Butterfly" Nose: Especially on pied dogs, a dark nose may be marked with pink. This is not allowable. But: light patches on a puppy's nose may darken as the dog matures. Question is: are you willing to take the risk?

Another nose issue not mentioned in the Breed Standard is known as "stenotic nares". That is where the nares, the openings in the nose, are pinched and narrow. This creates a breathing problem. Narrow nares occur with some frequency in the breed. If a breathing problem is present, it will probably not be noticeable until the dog is an adult. If you are looking at a puppy, it may be hard to distinguish if the nares are wide or narrow, unless you know what you are looking at. Check the parents, if they are available. That may give you some clue.

EARS

The breed standard makes it clear that only a "bat" ear is acceptable in the breed. Since the ears are the breed's hallmark, this only stands to reason. There is talk of ears being too pointed or of the wrong form to be bat ears. But in truth, if they are standing up, and are not "rose" ears, as would be found on an English bulldog, then they are considered to be correct.

There is a lot said about "earset". While not a disqualification, a bad earset is a fault. Ears should be placed high up on the head, and when the dog is at alert, the ears should be at a position resembling "eleven o'clock and one o'clock". The old saying is "ten and two will not do!"

If you are looking at puppies, you should understand that they are born with their ears down. Their ears can come up as early as five weeks of age, but may take as long as fifteen weeks to come up. At the time when the puppies are ready to go to their new homes, their ears should be up. At that point, you should be able to judge the correctness of their earsets. One observation: a puppy with ears that come up late is more likely to have a lazy earset in adulthood.

Size of ears is another factor that greatly affects the appearance of the dog. A puppy should look like a rabbit. If its ears are too much in proportion with its head when it is small, they will appear too small when the dog is grown. While ear size is not a disqualification, and is merely a matter of preference, larger is generally better.

WEIGHT

The Breed Standard specifies that "weight over 28 pounds is a disqualification." There is a tendency in males, in particular, to push the envelope as far as weight. For showing, a dog should be small enough that it is still under 28 pounds when it is in good

weight. If you have to keep a dog on a diet to keep it within the weight standard, it will look undernourished in the ring.

When looking at puppies, it is hard for an outsider to guess how big they will be at adulthood. Even different bloodlines develop differently. One indication is to look at the parents. If they are large, then the tendency will be that the offspring will be large as well. Since European standards allow for larger Frenchies, anything with European bloodlines could carry a tendency to get larger.

Also, don't think that buying the runt of the litter will help. While that individual may remain smaller, there is no guarantee that it will not put on a late spurt of growth. For breeding purposes, such a small individual will still tend to produce offspring more like its larger forebears.

There is no minimum weight standard. But a male French Bulldog much under 17 pounds is going to look like a runt when held up against the others in the breed ring. A small bitch can get by more easily than a small dog.

ALTERATIONS

While many breeds have cropped ears or docked tails, once a French Bulldog is born, it is pretty much as it should be. The Breed Standard states "Any alteration other than removal of dewclaws is a disqualification."

The only real concern with Frenchies is work done on the tail. Some Frenchies have more tail than others. Some have just a button, or a screw tail that lays down. But if it screws so it sticks up, or it is straight, the breeder may have it altered or reduced in size. If the judge can detect this, it is a disqualification.

If an over-obvious tail is docked, an astute person can tell by feeling the tip of the tail. The last tail bone should be pointed. If it is not, then there is a likelihood that some of the tail has been removed.

EYES

The eyes are the centerpiece of a dog's expression. The Breed Standard makes the statement that the eyes should be dark (lighter color allowable in lighter colored dogs),

and that when the dog is looking straight at you, you shouldn't be able to see any white. The eyes should also be round, not almond-shaped or squinty.

When looking at very young puppies, you will probably observe a deep bluish eye color that some breeders refer to as "puppy eye". As the puppy grows up, the natural eye color will develop. You want the eye color to be as dark as possible, even on a lighter colored puppy. However, if the puppy does have lighter eyes, they may darken some in the first year as the puppy matures. Still, the darker the eyes, the better.

One thing not mentioned in the Breed Standard is that both eyes should be able to look at you at the same time. "Wall-eye" (where the left eye looks to the left and the right eye to the right) is a fault, and reduces the show value of a Frenchie.

When Frenchie puppies first open their eyes (somewhere around ten days of age), they may appear wall-eyed. By the time they are five weeks old, the eyes should be coming around. If they are still wall-eyed at eight to twelve weeks of age (when many puppies are sold), then there is a likelihood they will stay that way.

MOUTH

In describing the bite of a French Bulldog, the Standard states that it should be "well under". A scissors bite or an overbite are considered a fault. Looking at the bite in an 8-week old puppy will only give you an indication. The jaw relationship will continue to change until the head has reached its adult size. In males, the bite may continue to change up to about 2 years of age.

Although the bite is supposed to be "well under", the Standard makes it clear that no teeth are supposed to show when the mouth is closed. If a puppy has an extreme underbite, the possibility of it showing teeth as an adult is increased.

The bite is also supposed to be even. Being tilted to the left or the right is referred to as "wry mouth", and is a serious fault. This is a common fault in French Bulldogs. It takes a trained eye to spot a slight tip of the jaw in a puppy. If there is a misalignment, it will only get worse as the puppy matures.

Uneven teeth are also common in the breed. While not as attractive as a straight line of teeth, it is not a major fault. Judges will usually overlook a tooth out of position, as long as the jaw itself is aligned correctly.

Protruding tongue is also a common problem in the breed. Flat-faced breeds have greater difficulty containing a tongue that is larger. If the tongue protrudes to one side or the other, it could indicate underlying problems with jaw alignment. If it sticks straight

out, then there is just too much tongue for the mouth. Tongue can be a major drawback in a show dog, as it is visible from a great distance. If it is minor, the dog can be taught to keep it in while being shown. If it is major, there is little hope.

In puppies, teething can cause the tongue to protrude due to gum swelling and discomfort. Since teething continues intermittently until the puppy is about a year old, intermittent protruding tongue might be because of this. It is difficult to differentiate between teething tongue and permanent protruding tongue. Check inside the mouth of the pup to see if teeth are missing (especially in front). If they are all there, it is possible that the tongue problem will be permanent. Most permanent tongue problems are apparent from eight weeks of age. The difficulty is in figuring out what is permanent and what is transitional.

NECK

The neck needs to be thick and well arched, to allow the head to be carried properly. If the neck is too short, it will affect the mobility of the head. While puppies (particularly males) will not have the bulk and fill they will have at adulthood, you should be able to look at the general proportions of the body to tell how the neck relates to the rest. Make sure the head is carried proudly, and that there is a definite arch from the back of the ears down to the shoulders.

TOPLINE

The upper outline of a Frenchie body may be hard to determine in a puppy. A lot of things change with adolescence. Nonetheless, there should be a slight fall close behind the shoulders, and the rear should be somewhat higher. Correct topline should minimize problems with movement. One complication is that very short-backed dogs may not show a clear "roach" back. And very long-backed Frenchies may have a pronounced "roach", but may not win very much in the ring.

There is much discussion about toplines, and it is advisable that you know what a good topline should look like. As with other characteristics, look at the toplines of the parents as an indication of where the offspring should go.

HINDQUARTERS

Several things can go on with the hindquarters. There should be good "rear angulation", meaning the dogleg curve of the hind leg. If the back leg is very straight, it is less attractive and is more likely to produce poor movement. It may also indicate problems in the joints. "Straight stifle" is very common in the breed, and is visible once the puppy is up on its feet.

When looking at Frenchie puppies, you need to know that they are a little slow to get their rear legs under them. There is a tendency for the rear legs to stick out at an angle until the thigh muscles strengthen up. So weakness back there is not a major concern, and will right itself with exercise.

The biggest joint problem with Frenchie rears is luxation of the patella. That is slipping of the kneecap. In some individuals, it can move out of position, causing crippling pain. In a puppy, it is hard to detect. While the puppy is standing still, try to gently move each rear limb through its normal range of motion. Feel for any "popping". If a leg pops, there is a possibility of patella problems.

Look at the puppy from the rear. If the feet are rotated inward (pigeon toed) or outward (cow hocked), that may indicate a condition that will not right itself in adulthood. Even though Frenchie puppies are somewhat slow to come up on their rear legs, they should be able to stand with the rear relatively straight in relation to the axis of the body.

MOVEMENT

Watch the puppy moving around, and observe carefully to see if its movement is true. If rear legs cross over, or if the puppy shows any signs of limping, there is a chance of a problem existing. In the front, forepaws should reach straight forward. There should be no "paddling" or "crossing over".

French bulldogs should "double-track". Their rear feet should track inside the span of the front feet. While puppy movement can be inexact, there should be some tendency to move soundly.

Watch also for "crabbing". That is where the rear comes around on the right or the left, as if it is trying to catch up with the front legs. This is common in puppies, but sometimes it does not correct itself. It is not a major fault, but it does spoil the movement of the puppy.

Frenchies should be active and free-moving. If the movement is difficult or "muscle-bound", it will be less attractive to the eye, and less appealing to a judge. Any abnormality of movement should be suspect.

TEMPERAMENT

About the only way a Frenchie can lose in the ring due to temperament is to bite a judge. As loving a breed as it is, a few individuals have shamed their owners in this way. Some judges will pass over a Frenchie with a listless temperament, but that is rare.

A puppy should be alert and intelligent, curious and playful. If it is not, it could be sick. It could also have neurological problems. If a puppy doesn't respond to you immediately and try to make friends, you should be concerned.

Outside the show ring, the most important feature of a French bulldog is its personality. You want one that will be a good companion, agreeable, and affectionate. You don't want one that is hyperactive and difficult to control. You don't want one that is mean. And you don't want one that is lethargic.

Look at the parents, if you can. Are they loving and affectionate? Are they standoffish or timid? Frenchies should come up to you and try to make friends immediately. If they don't, then something is up.

CONDITIONS IMPACTING HEALTH

Occasionally, something shows up that is more serious than something that just impacts show quality. There is a historical track record of some problems in French bulldogs.

Have some tact. A breeder will take offense if you ask if they have had any occurrence of serious genetic problems. And chances are, they would not tell you anyway. Perhaps the best way to approach the issue is to talk of problems other breeders are reported to have had.

Recent work with registries for certain genetic problems indicate that there will be more tracking of these in the future. At present, it is enough that you know the problems are out there.

HYDROCEPHALY

When you are dealing with any breed that is basically dwarfed, you know that certain problems are going to be endemic. One of them that is a constant worry in Frenchies is hydrocephaly.

Hydrocephaly, sometimes known in humans as "water on the brain" is actually an imbalance in the body fluids that results in a buildup and consequent increase in fluid

pressure on the brain. The results are brain and nervous system damage. Most severely affected puppies die, or are put down at birth by responsible breeders. On rare occasion, a moderately affected puppy will make it through.

Such a puppy will have an exaggerated domelike appearance to the head. The head may even be enlarged. Its behavior will not be normal and playful. It may have difficulty standing and walking. What may appear at first to be shyness may actually be nerve damage.

Hydrocephalics have greater chance for a shortened life. Secondary problems usually take them before they are two years old. Veterinary bills can be staggering, and the results will still be early death. If you purchase a puppy that turns out to be hydrocephalic, contact the breeder immediately.

CLEFT PALATE

There is some disagreement as to whether this is a genetic problem or a developmental problem. There are indications that outside factors that affect the mother during pregnancy might influence the closing of the palate.

Whether genetic or developmental, all the bull breeds do suffer a greater incidence of cleft palate. Most breeders put them down at birth, as it is difficult for a cleft palate puppy to feed without aspirating milk. Pneumonia often takes them quickly. There are degrees of cleft, however, and a minor one might go without being detected.

Related to this problem is incomplete closure of the body cavity itself. Whatever factor influences the non-closure of the palate can also cause a more profound non-closure. Such puppies cannot survive.

VON WILLIEBRAND'S DISEASE

This is hemophilia in dogs. There is definitely a genetic cause. So there is not only the concern of whether a puppy is a potential hemophiliac, but also if it is a non-expressing carrier for the factor.