

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON NORFOLK TERRIER BITES

By *Christine Calcinari*

Having bred and owned several breeds from the Sporting and Hound Groups over my 35 years in dogs, as well as Norfolk Terriers, has given me experience with several breeds in reference to bites. I have also judged the Sporting and Hound Groups, BIS and some Non-Sporting breeds since 1998.

What I have seen first-hand as a judge is that neglecting a trend with respect to bites, be it overshot, undershot, dropped incisors, small teeth or poor occlusion, will with time grow into a larger problem. This seems to be a larger problem than even missing teeth. We know from studies of ancient remains that even those ancient dogs had the possibility of several missing molars, but the incisors and canines still remained strong, with correct placement for hunting.

What I have witnessed in some sporting breeds is that as the heads became more stylized, narrower and smaller with the fashion and trend of the time, it is the incisors, size of teeth and the placement of incisors that suffers, throwing the occlusion off of the whole bite. This is partly due to the national breed club instructing judges to allow some leniency in their judging for a slightly off bite, being undershot, overshot or level, this was never done on paper, but at seminars this is how judges are instructed. What is slightly off to one judge may be too much to another judge. This is how the problem grows and then it becomes difficult to turn the tide. Today many Cocker Spaniels have bites that are totally misaligned or awry with very tiny teeth.

In my original breed, the Golden Retriever, I think we can all agree the breed has evolved over the past thirty years. One of the areas that has changed, and not for the better, is bites. Thirty years ago, you could scarcely find a Golden with a bad bite, or anything misaligned. If you had one it was sold as a pet and never bred. Now we see every manner of mouth problems, many having to do with incisors. When the muzzle got narrower and shallower, the incisors, starting with the center two, dropped forward. It is now very hard to find a Golden without dropped incisors in the front, many have slightly dropped incisors that cause the rest of the bite to be level, even though the center incisors are undershot, leaving the rest of the molars not meeting at all.

In scent hounds breeds it seems only the beagle, which has been affected by the pet market and demand for "cute," has had an affect on the jawline. The change is not as severe, they are more apt to have an overshot bite than anything else. What is seen in the majority of sighthounds is a very strong jaw with no misalignment of incisors, mostly missing molars or an overshot or perfect reverse scissor bite. Important to note however, that the Standards for these breeds are old and have never changed. The breeds themselves have maintained soundness of their heads and bites for centuries out of hunting necessity.

The Norfolk Terrier genetic pool is somewhat small and the potential for heart (mitral valve) problems exists. Consider that the health of the mouth and teeth are a very real threat to the longevity of the a Norfolk Terrier. I have known some Norfolks with wonderful bites but horrible gums, with teeth that require constant care, necessitating extractions to keep the mouth free from infection and abscess. The heart can be implicated where gum disease exists.

Just ask any Cavalier King Charles Breeder, they take very good care of the mouths of their dogs for this reason. "Bite – a perfect, regular and complete scissors bite is preferred, i.e. the upper teeth closely overlapping the lower teeth and set square into the jaws. Faults – undershot bite, weak or crooked teeth, crooked jaws." – Official AKC Standard. That said, allowing less than an ideal scissor bite would begin a slippery slope of misaligned teeth and poor occlusion in a breed that already has some bad teeth and gum issues. Having this weakness, one could surmise that this is why the bite shifts on many of these dogs well into their fourth year. Perhaps breeding a stronger jawline giving teeth a better foundation in general would alleviate some of the misalignment problems.

For the reasons I have stated, I believe we should continue to require a scissors bite in our breed Standard. I think it is crucial to maintaining not only the conformation of the head and expression that we love so much, but it is also necessary for the health of the Norfolk terrier. The future of the breed can be impacted severely over time. I agree with Geir Flyckt Pedersen, if we allow ourselves to lower our high standards, we are just adjusting our AKC Standard to the faults that some of our breeders are breeding.