



There are people lobbying to ban cosmetic surgery in dogs. Ear cropping, for instance, was recently banned by the statutory SA Veterinary Council. Next on the agenda is tail docking. In certain house dogs, there is good reason to ban such procedures as cosmetic and unethical. But failure to dock the tails of some gundog breeds constitutes cruelty to animals!

The docking of the tails of certain gundog breeds is a practice that has been carried out for centuries in order to prevent injury and pain. These working gundog breeds have to work through heavy vegetation, often thorny, where their fast tail action can easily lead to torn and bleeding tails that are painful and extremely difficult to treat.

Docking is a perfectly humane procedure that, when properly carried out, prevents serious injury and distress. Breeders, gundog owners and informed veterinarians believe that if docking is banned, dogs would suffer and that failure to dock constitutes animal cruelty.

Why are tails docked?

Gundog breeds have been selected for hundreds of years for specific working abilities and conformation but not for tail length, shape or carriage. The result is that undocked tails of

many of the gundog breeds are abnormally long and thick in proportion to the dog's body and often with a low profile, all of which result in a high risk of injury. The shorthaired German pointer breeds such as the German Shorthaired Pointer and Weimaraner with large tails and little hair protection are at particularly high risk.

The risk of injury of the shorthaired Pointer breeds is further worsened by the working mode of these dogs, who run at high speed through the veldt with a fast tail action. Often, these dogs do more than 100 km in a single day through thorny and broken terrain where there is a high risk of injury.

This is in contrast to the retriever breeds, such as the Golden Retriever and Labrador, who have a primary function of retrieving. These dogs normally do not search for birds but only move out when they are required to retrieve. They cover far less ground than the pointing breeds. They also have a tail in proportion to their conformation with a thick coat of hair as protection.

Consequently there was never a need to dock the tails of these breeds.

GUNDOG tail docking

Tail injuries

Because there was no need to investigate tail docking in South Africa in the past, few statistics were kept but the following examples could serve to illustrate the risk of tail injury if docking is banned in South Africa.

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 two years later, by 1991, the number of individuals with tail injuries had **increased to 51%** in the same group (Gunilla Strejffert, Report to the Swedish Breed Council for German Shorthaired Pointers, 1992, Borlange, Sweden). Even more alarming is the finding that only 16% of injury cases had improved, 40% showed no improvement and **more than half of dogs with tail injuries had regressed during the two year period!**

An ad hoc survey amongst owners of English Pointers in South Africa, also a shorthaired breed, indicates that at least one out of five English Pointers suffers from some sort of tail injury during their life. The English Pointer's tail is traditionally not docked mainly because of a relatively short tail in proportion to its body, with a lower risk of tail injury and also because they are normally worked in open grassland areas with little or no thorn bushes.

Nevertheless, the English Pointer suffers regularly from tail injuries, especially when worked in thorny bushveld areas. Such injuries that have been suffered during a ten minute round at field trials and that occurred in relatively thorn-free grassland areas. By contrast, no injuries to the tails of the shorthaired German Pointer breeds, which are normally docked, can be recalled over the past 17 years in South Africa. This can only be ascribed to the fact that the tails of all working German Pointer breeds have been docked up to now.

Docking Techniques

The majority of gundog tails in South Africa are docked using an extremely sharp instrument so that the docking is as fast and painless as possible. The tails are docked at three to five days of age when the nervous system of the puppy is not yet fully developed. In GSPs, tails are docked leaving one half to two fifths of the tail.

Is docking cruel?

Docking is carried out when puppies are tiny. Their eyes are not yet open and long experience indicates that carried out correctly, the procedure causes little or no pain or discomfort. Most puppies give only one yelp at docking and will immediately return to their dam to feed or sleep, and there is no evidence that development or weight gain is in any way arrested by the docking procedure.

Animals belonging to the Altricial group (dogs, cats, some birds, rodents, etc.) are born relatively immature, with a nervous system not fully developed. They have very little feeling of pain during the first five days after birth. The blood circulation and the bones of the tail are relatively undeveloped

or 'primitive'. This is in contrast to animals in the Precocial group (pigs, sheep etc.), which are born fully developed.

Performed on altricial neonatal puppies, 3 days post partum, the procedure is regarded as far less intrusive and painful than the shortening or docking of tails in Precocial pigs and lambs, because the latter have a fully developed threshold of pain.

If tail docking is to be banned for reasons of cruelty, then so must tail clipping in lambs and even castration in calves and pigs. The ethics or the law cannot declare the lesser procedure cruel and not the other.

Banning docking is no cure

If tail damage occurs during adulthood it often does not heal well or does not heal at all. This is mainly due to the injury being constantly banged against objects, poor blood circulation in the tail and constant licking and chewing by the dog. The healing process can be painful and protracted with considerable distress to the dog. Injuries often result in necrosis of the tail tip.

This can sometimes be treated with partial amputation but secondary problems can occur in the healing process, which actually makes it necessary to amputate the tail several times before the healing process is achieved.

Sweden banned tail docking over ten years ago. **Swedish veterinary reports indicate that 17% of Boxers are damaging their long tails in and around the home environment.** While less than the 51% incidence of tail damage sustained by pointer breeds in Sweden following the ban on tail docking, 17% is still highly significant.

Policy of Wingshooters

Tail docking of the gundog breeds is practised not for cosmetic reasons but to prevent serious injury.

From the veterinary point of view, no scientific studies have been submitted to show why the docking of gundogs' tails is beneficial. Indeed, the treatment of tail injuries in adult dogs is a costly, protracted and repetitive process compared to docking — and, in conclusion, infinitely more painful and stressful to the very animal whose welfare we seek to protect. After all, the reason for tail docking is a cornerstone of good medicine and animal care. It is called: **Prevention**. It is therefore policy of SA Wingshooters that

1. **From a professional veterinary point of view, failure to dock and clip in the prescribed manner the tails of specific gundog breeds intended for field work, is considered unethical;** and
2. **From a legal point of view, such failure is regarded as constituting animal cruelty.** — PJ Viljoen DSc

References:

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