



SA WINGSHOOTERS FACT SHEET

Policy Statement on Tail Docking in Gundogs

Summary

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.

It is important to bear in mind that, in breeds where tail docking has been done for a hundred year and more, there has been no selection for shorter or stubbier tails. The tails of such dogs (example boxers) are unusually long and floppy and thus exceptionally prone to injury (see photo).

Docking is a humane procedure that, when properly carried out, prevents serious injury and distress. Unlike neutering, tail docking is far less stressful with no hormonal or other side effects. Wingshooters, breeders of working dogs, field trial clubs and veterinarians who own gundogs agree that If tail docking is banned, the dogs would suffer and that failure



Fig 1. An undocked German Shorthaired Pointer tail. Compare the carriage and length in proportion to the body with that of the English Pointer (Fig 2).



Fig 2. English Pointer tails are not docked, mainly as a result of a relatively short tail and the terrain in which they work. Still, they sustain serious injuries in South Africa (fig 4).

to dock constitutes animal cruelty. This position is endorsed by the SA Wingshooters Association, the Hunt, Point and Retrieve Field Trial Association, the Working Spaniel Association, the Weimaraner Club and the Field Trial Liaison Council of KUSA which represents all gundog field trial organisations in South Africa.

Reason for Docking

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 which result in a high risk of injury (Fig. 1). 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. (Tails covered with thick hair, often with an undercoat, such as those of the wolf, fox or the retriever breeds are far less susceptible to tail injuries).

The risk of injury of the shorthaired Pointer breeds is further worsened by the working mode of these dogs, which run at high speed through the veldt with a fast tail action. Often these dogs do more than 100km 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, which 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.

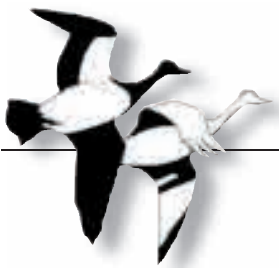


Fig 3. English Pointer tail injury at the Border Field Trials in 2002 after 10 minutes working in grassveld. The blurred image is as a result of the constant movement of the tail that keeps worsening the injury.



Fig 4. English Pointer injury at the Natal Field Trials in 2001 after a 10-minute round in mainly grassveld. Notice the blood spattered trousers of the owner as a result of the constant tail movement.

Statistics

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, indicate 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 (Fig 2).



Despite the African thorn-veldt, photos of Spaniels with injured tails in South Africa could not be obtained, because their tails are docked. Here are photographs from Europe showing injuries to Spaniels with undocked tails. The severity and the repetitive, chronic nature of the injuries should not be underestimated.



Fig 5. A properly docked tail of a German Shorthaired Pointer.



Fig 6. Tail injury in an English Pointer exacerbated by constant licking and banging against objects

Nevertheless, the English Pointer suffers regularly from tail injuries, especially when worked in thorny bushveld areas. Figures three and four indicate 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 in gundogs

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 of the tail (Fig 5). This leaves enough length to cover the genitalia and also for communicational behaviour and balance.

Is docking cruel?

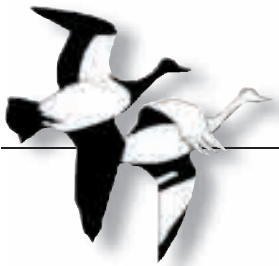
Docking is carried out when puppies are tiny. Their eyes are not yet open and long experience indicates that carried out correctly, the procedure causes little or no pain or discomfort. Most puppies give only one yelp at docking and will immediately return to their dam to feed or sleep, and there is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

Pain threshold in puppies

Since the classic research by Adolph Portman (1944/1990), which verified the work of Herder, Gehlen and Plessner, the validity of the Altricial/Precocial differentiation in animals has become a well-established scientific fact. More recently, this gained new attention with research on artificial intelligence in information-processing systems ('Altricial self-organising information-processing systems', Aaron Sloman & Jackie Chappell, School of Biosciences, University of Birmingham, UK).

Briefly, 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 significantly less intrusive than toe-clipping in rodents for laboratory identification. In the event the procedure is to be undertaken on other than neonatal animals, there must be a strong scientific reason for using this technique and the procedure must be done on an anesthetized animal (Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1996). Tail docking in neo-natal puppies is certainly 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.



It cannot be contested that the docking of tails on small lambs and pigs and the castration of young pigs, goats and calves during their first days of life will cause considerable pain even after anaesthesia has worn off (if any had been administered). In the absence of anaesthesia, such procedures can certainly be regarded as painful and cruel. 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.

A docking ban is no cure at all

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 (Fig 6). 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.

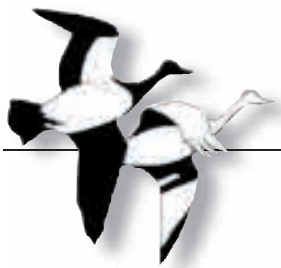
It's not just working dogs

Sweden banned tail docking over ten years ago. **Swedish veterinary reports indicate that 17% of Boxers are**



Swedish veterinary reports indicated that 17% of Boxers are sustaining tail injuries in and around the home environment. Wagging tails cannot be immobilised, and these injuries frequently result in tail amputation.





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% still highly significant.

The damage range from broken tips to total fractures further up the tail, just distal to the point where docking would normally be carried out. Because treatment of the injury does not address the aetiology, the injuries keep recurring and frequently end up requiring amputation.

Conclusion

Tail docking of the gundog breeds is practised not for cosmetic reasons but to prevent serious injury. Field working is a human induced activity for which we must accept the responsibility. It is our duty to prevent distress in our animals.

From the veterinary point of view, no scientific studies have been submitted to show why the docking of gundogs' tails are 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:

Prophylaxis.

Policy Statement

It is the policy of the undersigned organisations that

1. From a professional veterinary point of view, failure to dock and clip in the prescribed manner the tails and dew-claws 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.

— By P.J. Viljoen DSc

This document is endorsed as a Statement of Policy by:

The SA Wingshooters Association
The Hunt, Point and Retrieve Field Trial Association
The Working Spaniel Association
The Weimaraner Club
KUSA Field Trial Liaison Council (FTLC)

References:

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