

# Charting the Rise of the Designer Dog

By Sean O'Meara



Poodle

*The world is seeing a huge increase in demand for 'designer dogs' such as the Puggle (Beagle-cross-Pug), the Cockerpoo (Cocker-cross-Poodle) and many others with equally fanciful names.*

With more and more 'designer' or hybrid dogs making the headlines featuring the likes of Puggles, Golden Doodles, Cockerpoos, Pome-Pekes and other elaborately titled canine crosses, it prompted us to wonder exactly how did we arrive at Afghans, Airedales and Alaskan Malamutes when all we started with was the good, old-fashioned wolf? What precisely is a dog breed and how on earth does one go about creating one?

People most commonly use the word 'breed' to describe a type of dog that displays characteristics interrelated to its name. But the concept of breed is far more complex than simply applying a label to a dog that looks a certain way.

The ancestry of the dog can be traced back as far as 60 million years. A weasel-like creature called the Miatis is thought to have demonstrated the first characteristics of the animal now recognised as *Canis lupus familiaris*, or plain-old pet dog to you and me. It is thought that this creature evolved into the early wolf.

All the canine subspecies are scavengers by nature, like the jackal and coyote. This was certainly the case with the wolf. It is thought the wolf discovered easy pickings in and around the waste dumps established near human settlements. As people began to see certain characteristics in the wolf which they thought would be of great help to their development as a race, attempts were made to domesticate the animal and use a selection of his most desirable character traits to man's advantage.

Once wolves and humans became comfortable in each other's presence, the wolf began to readily accept his subdominant role within the partnership and thus domestication as we know it began in earnest.

Certain wolves would display particular character traits such as an instinct for guarding. Those which displayed the physical characteristics to make them a force to be reckoned with would be selected for breeding in order to produce strong, confident offspring capable of protection. This is probably the earliest example of selective breeding of the dogs we know and love today.

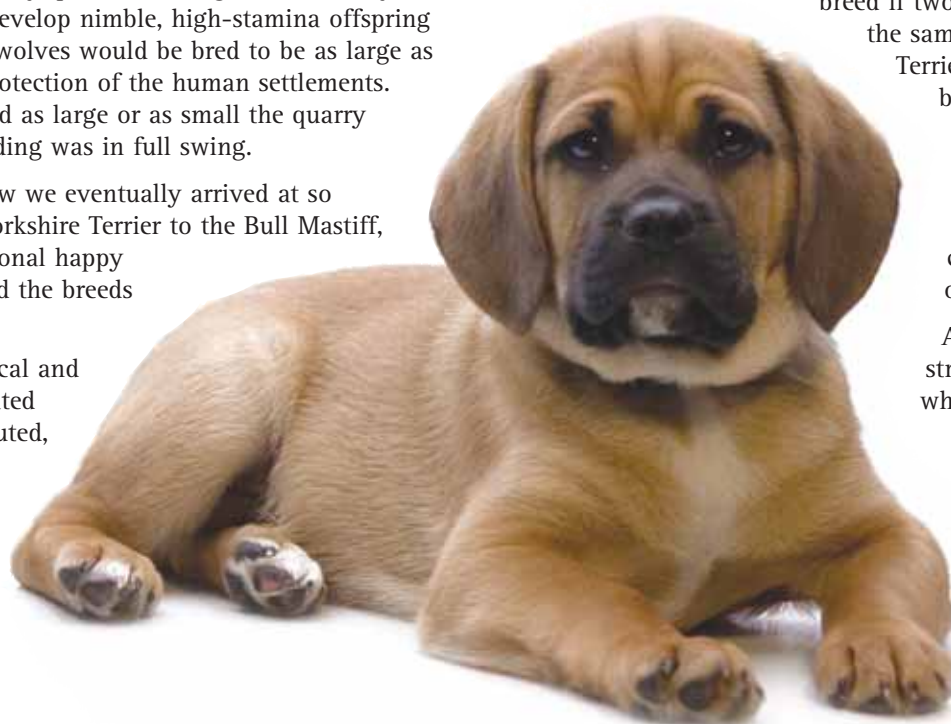
As the selective breeding processes became more widely practiced by humans, certain characteristics were developed to aid them. Dogs were bred for three main purposes: to hunt, guard and herd. As these functional breeds of dog were becoming more established, cross-breeding was taking place in order to refine certain necessary attributes further.

A large wolf which happens to be particularly quick over long distances may be bred with a smaller example in an attempt to develop nimble, high-stamina offspring for use when hunting. Overtly aggressive wolves would be bred to be as large as possible to produce effective guards for protection of the human settlements. Naturally instinctive hunters would be bred as large or as small the quarry they'd be expected to hunt. Selective breeding was in full swing.

This early form of selective breeding is how we eventually arrived at so many different breeds of dog. From the Yorkshire Terrier to the Bull Mastiff, selection by humans, as well as the occasional happy accident, has been the driving force behind the breeds we know and love today.

As selective breeding continued, the physical and character traits of the originally domesticated wolves were becoming more and more diluted, although every dog, even today, possesses wolf-like characteristics.

Certain breeds have evolved to perform certain functions for humans. Although nowadays dogs are more commonly kept as pets, many breeds retain the original characteristics for which they were bred.



Pug cross often given a fancy designer dog name

The hound group, for example, consists of two sections. There are sight hounds and scent hounds. Sight hounds are one of the oldest types of dog still endemic today. He is quiet and graceful, he is bred to spot prey from distance, hunt the prey and kill the prey. Hounds which are commonly kept as pets today include Beagles, Greyhounds and Bassett Hounds.

Terriers evolved in Britain from the hound group. Terriers take their name from the Latin 'to go to ground', which is what they were bred to do. Terriers were originally used for hunting small quarry such as badgers, rats and rabbits. Like the hounds, terriers should have a strong thirst for work, a thirst that if not properly quenched can occasionally lead to unruly behaviour.

The toy group is the only group to have breeds which were bred solely for the purpose of companionship. The Shih Tzu was favoured by Chinese emperors in the late nineteenth century as a companion in the palace and it was bred specifically for such purposes as were other toy group members commonly referred to as 'lap dogs'.

The concept of what a breed actually is frequently provokes confusion today, even amongst experts. What constitutes a separate breed if two dogs look the same and were bred for the same purpose? Why are Norwich and Norfolk Terriers classed as separate breeds now when before they were the same? Why do small cosmetic differences such as ear position result in a difference in breed, when something such as major size difference does not? How can purebreds resemble cross-breeds and cross-breeds be passed off as purebreds?

All of these frequently asked questions strengthen the argument that the concept of what a breed is commonly misinterpreted.

A dog breed is probably best described as, "a grouping of descendants categorised using criteria relevant to its behavioural and physical qualities, desirable to those who refined the line of genetic descent." But how does one create a breed?

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The offspring of a mating between two purebred dogs of different breeds is a cross-breed, a mongrel, a mutt, a dog eligible for Scruffs but not Crufts, if you will. Technically speaking, the fact that both parents happen to be established, recognised pedigree breeds makes no difference to the status of the offspring. Often described as first-time cross, the world is seeing a huge increase in demand for 'designer dogs' such as the Puggle (Beagle-cross-Pug), the Cockerpoo (Cocker-cross-Poodle) and many others with equally fanciful names.

So what's new? What traits does a Cockerpoo possess that a purebred Cocker Spaniel or Poodle lacks?

If you or I were charged with the task of creating a dog breed, the criteria being a small- to medium-sized dog with a happy personality and a willingness to work and learn but with a non-shedding coat suitable for people with allergies, where would we start? We'd more than likely look at the Cocker but we'd fall short on the issue of shedding. We'd examine the qualities of the Poodle but we'd find they come in either small or large packages not small to medium, and as a worker they'd be outperformed by many of their gundog counterparts. If only the working qualities of the Cocker could be bundled with the non-shedding coat aspects of the Poodle, everything would be perfe... Wait, I've got it. I see a mating in the offing!

So deliberate cross-breeding is, essentially, selective breeding. There's a problem, though.

It takes several generations to "breed true". Compare yourself to your brother, sister or even your cousins. Do you all have the same looks, the same personality, the same motivations or intelligence levels? The chances are you won't. Each of us has some of the "best" traits of our parents. But they're invariably coupled with the worst traits or, shall we say, less desirable traits. In some cases we may only inherit the less desirable traits of both parents at the expense of any of their best traits. Our own children, however, may be fortunate to pick up the good traits we missed out on. And so it is with dogs.

Generation after generation of selective breeding is required before we establish a new breed. Is that a bad thing? Absolutely not. No-one could argue we should stick with what we have in terms of pedigree dogs and it's a certainty that gene pools can bottleneck to the point where new blood is required.

Should that put you off splashing the cash on a Cockerpoo, a Puggle, a Jackador or a Spoodle? Maybe. Unless you're buying into a dog that is several generations down the line in terms of a selective breeding program, you are effectively purchasing a cross-breed. Cross-breeds come with many, many advantages as pets, but should you be charged \$900 or upwards for one? Well, no, probably not, really, especially when you consider how many fantastic cross and pedigree breeds are desperate for homes in Australia's animal shelters, all of whom have the same qualities to offer. How the price of a dog is determined is a matter of some controversy. If a 'pedigree' Bulldog has a going rate of \$1,200, why shouldn't any other 'breed' be priced according to the 'market rate'?

And here we see the start of this ethical minefield: 'market rate'. We're talking about sentient, lifelong companions here, not designer handbags.

The marketing of dogs is a trend set to continue. It's human nature to aspire to own something a little different, a little fancy or in short supply. It goes without saying, the marketing of dogs is a recipe for disaster and THIS is where the problem lies.

"Oh, what's that unusual dog you have there?"

"It's a Pomapekeapatador" (quite obviously, a Pomeranian mixed with Pekingese and a little Patterdale and Labrador thrown in).

"Incredible, I've never heard of them. Where would I go about finding one?"

"The Internet. But be warned, they're very rare," (and therefore expensive, desirable and I've got one and you haven't).

See how this works? The Pomapekepatador is what many generations refer to, rather cruelly, as a Heinz 57 (a bit of everything). A cross-breed, a mix, a mongrel, a mutt. They are as important, as clever, as giving and as worthy as any pedigree breed and there's more than likely a rescue shelter near you chock-full of them. But don't be fooled, ALL dogs are designer dogs. They all have the same ancestors, remember!

And if you're really keen on modern and trendy then you really need to consider 'ethical' as a lifestyle choice. So if you're inclined to designer, trendy, ethical dogs, you'll struggle to do better than going to your local pound or shelter - no better designer dog than those on offer (in their thousands) at rescue centres all over Australia.

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