

Pale beyond the pail

Docking for cosmetic reasons will soon be banned – but killing puppies for cosmetic reasons continues, with dogs being culled just because of the colour of their coat

VIEWING A LITTER of newborn Boxer pups just a couple of months ago, a potential owner noticed that one pup was away from the rest of the litter. She asked why the pup was separate and if it was okay. The breeder replied, "It'll live or die - it depends whether it can get over there," nodding to where the dam was, with the rest of her pups. The breeder refused to help the puppy in distress.

Horrified, the owner bought the pup for £250, and took it home at just four days of age.

Why had the breeder been so uncaring towards the defenceless puppy? Because it was white.

The pup's new owner later contacted the White Boxer Rescue Centre, and related the story to its founder, Sheila Dawson, who wasn't at all surprised by the tale. In the 15 years that she's been running White Boxer Rescue, she's seen the very worst cruelty towards the breed she loves - just because of coat colour - and has hand-reared many a newborn pup that would otherwise have been culled.

Sheila founded the White Boxer Rescue Centre in 1991. She had initially been involved in showing red Boxers, which opened her eyes to what was going on behind the scenes, in many breeders' homes. She says, "I suddenly realised that white pups were being destroyed or left out in the cold to die, as people didn't want the expense of vet fees to put them to sleep, or couldn't bring themselves to drown the pups."

"At the time, most of the Boxer rescues were affiliated to clubs, and it was in the rules - and still is - that white Boxers should be destroyed at

birth, so even the rescues wouldn't get involved."

Indeed, the Boxer Breed Council code of conduct still states that white puppies should be destroyed at birth, and this was only recently amended (in March 1995) to include the word 'humanely' - now reading: "White puppies should be humanely destroyed at birth." There is at least a recognition that some people won't destroy the pups, with a statement saying that, if they are retained, they should be checked carefully for deafness, and if they are deaf, they should not be sold.

Breed club members were duty bound by the rules, and those that couldn't face putting healthy - but white - pups to sleep, had nowhere to turn, so Sheila set up the White Boxer Rescue Centre. The early days were very stressful, with Sheila regularly receiving threats and abuse for going against the established status quo. Breeders who wanted their white pups to live would phone anonymously and arrange to meet Sheila in dark country lanes, handing over tiny, tiny pups for her to hand-raise. "I would usually insist that at the very least the pups would have their mothers' milk for at least three days," says Sheila, "but the breeders wanted shot of them early, in case people saw they had them."

Silent witness

Needless to say, Sheila's own show career was over because of her stance, "It was a no-go," she says. "What I was doing was deemed so controversial at the time that no judge would have placed me."

Luckily, 15 years on, there is much less hostility towards her and white Boxers in general. However, researching this article has been very difficult, as no one I tried to speak to would agree to be quoted and lips were shut tight. "As club members, we have to accept the rules," was the general comment made by those contacted.

I could find no one who would publicly defend the ruling that white dogs should be destroyed; nor would any club member criticise the rule. I encountered just silence - a closed



shop - and eventually had to admit defeat. Perhaps I was naïve to think that if people believed something to be right, they would be open about defending their position. Maybe there is an element of shame associated with the procedure - otherwise, why would people be reluctant to talk? But the shame clearly hasn't reached the point of demanding change and revoking the rule. Are people too scared to rock the boat by speaking out?

Researching the breed's history, it seems most peculiar that there is a modern antithesis against white dogs. Early photos of Boxers, dating back to the 1890s, show successful white dogs (and black-coated ones, and white with brindle/fawn patches) at the German Boxer Club shows. In fact, a founding sire of the breed, an English Bulldog called Tom, was white with fawn patches. His litter with Alt Schecken, a white Bullenbeisser-type with brindle, produced Flocki in 1895, the first Boxer registered in the German stud book.

The breed flourished and was used extensively in the First World War, guarding prisoners of war and also taking communication cables between trenches. White dogs could easily be spotted, of course, so dark-coated ones were favoured, as they were less conspicuous.

Post-war, in the early 1920s, a new breed standard was adopted, banning

white dogs or those with heavy white markings, as it was considered that guard dogs should be dark.

Now, more than 80 years on, tradition continues, even though the Boxer can hardly be considered as a working breed - primarily he is a show dog and a popular pet.

To the rescue

All around the world, the white Boxer is vilified. Across the Atlantic, the American Boxer Club's Code of Ethics state: "The Boxer Standard defines the following disqualifications: Boxers that are any colour other than fawn or brindle. Boxers with a total of white markings exceeding one-third of the entire coat" and the infractions include registering a Boxer who is not of the approved colour, or even selling such a pup. Rehoming to a rescue organisation is also forbidden - if the dog will be sold on to a new owner from the centre.

Fortunately this is not the case in the UK: breeders that ignore the ruling that white pups must be destroyed can - and do - now sell pups or hand them to breed rescue, many of which now liaise with the White Boxer Rescue Centre.

Boxers generally have quite large litters - and Sheila says that an average litter will have between one and three white pups. Luckily, many now are given the chance of life. "The overall mood in the breed has definitely changed since

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