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The Modern Kennel Conundrum

By JON MOOALLEM

In the proud and punctilious history of purebred dog breeding — which has policed the sex lives of dogs with unbending vigilance since the Victorian era — the mongrel has been regarded as, at best, an unfortunate accident and, at worst, a disgrace. Yet one rainy morning last fall, Wallace Havens walked the long aisles of his kennel, introducing me to his newest mutts as though enumerating miracles.

Unlatching a cage door, Havens would cradle a puppy against his fuchsia cowboy shirt and announce: “Well, here’s a Shih Tzu crossed with a Havanese” or “Here’s a silky crossed with a Yorkie.” Then he would put the puppy back with its litter mates and mom and, through scattered bursts of barking, move on.

It took awhile. The dim, 4,300-square-foot building housed about 400 dogs, most of them puppies, in 120 elevated cages. It is one of three whelping houses at the Puppy Haven Kennel, the 1,600-dog compound that Havens has built up over the last 30 years in the outlands north of Madison, Wis. Nearby, an affable elderly couple hosed feces from slats below the cages, and their daughter, another of Havens’s 14 paid employees, swiftly handled one squeaking pup at a time, issuing dewormer. Here was a “bichon-poo.” There was a “schnoodle.”

Havens moved on, like some strange Noah touring his ark — in which every tidy two-by-two had been split apart, jumbled and recombined into a single animal: “That’s a Chihuahua-bichon . . . here’s a half-American Eskimo and half-Lhasa apso” — his voice lifting each time as if to ask, What will they think of next? But he had dreamed up a lot of these things himself.

Havens, a towering man of 70, has spent much of his career breeding cattle and owns a chain of Play Haven day-care centers. He is best known as the originator of the puggle, a pug-beagle cross with an irresistibly wrinkled muzzle, forlorn eyes and suitable dimensions for cramped city apartments. He first marketed puggles 20 years ago, but by late 2005, the dog suddenly had a cadre of celebrity owners, four-figure price tags and a brimming portfolio of magazine write-ups and morning-TV appearances. Puggle-emblazoned messenger bags and ladies’ track suits followed. For a time, in New York especially, you couldn’t swing a cat without hitting a puggle.

So-called designer dogs became popular a decade ago, beginning with the Labradoodle and other poodle crosses that sought to affix the poodle’s relatively nonshedding coat to other breeds. But the puggle, a designer dog with no clear design objective, seems to have set off an almost unintelligible free-for-all. Pugs alone are now being bred to Yorkshire terriers, Shih Tzus, bichon frisés, Pekingese, rat terriers,

Boston terriers, dachshunds, Jack Russell terriers and Chihuahuas to create, respectively, Pugshires, Pug-Zus, Pushons, Puginese, Puggats, Pugstons, Daug, Jugs and Chugs. Beagles mount Bostons. Chihuhauas do Yorkies. Beagles and basset hounds are making Bagels; bassets and Shar-Peis are making Sharp Assets — “a more laid-back dog that says, ‘If you don’t feel like taking me for a walk, no big deal,’ ” Havens’s Web site claims. Poodles are being pushed further into a goofy taxonomy of portmanteau labels: Maltipoos, Eskipoos, Doodleman Pinschers.

Given the roughly 350 inherited disorders littering the dog genome, crossing two purebreds and expanding their gene pools can be “a phenomenally good idea,” according to one canine geneticist — if it is done conscientiously. Still, past canine fads, like the run on purebred Dalmatians after the movie “101 Dalmatians,” have ramped up production at inhumane, large-scale “puppy mills.” And fickle owners often end up abandoning those dogs once the trend passes. Thus, for show breeders who have spent much of their lives studying and refining a single pure breed — like the men and women congregating next week at Madison Square Garden for the 131st annual Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show — the rise of mutts as commodities has been bewildering and embittering. Many traditionalists see mixing breeds as somehow irresponsible in and of itself. As one pug breeder with a two-time, No. 1 show bitch to her credit told me: “There was only one really perfect thing on the face of this earth, and he was crucified. To us, the pug is pure.”

Bob Vetere, president of the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, told me, “You’re going to have a real battle here” between hybrid dog breeders and “the purists who say this is all 25th-century voodoo science.” The rift seems to epitomize a peculiarly American tension: between tradition and improvisation, institutions and fads. The American Canine Hybrid Club, one of a growing number of hybrid dog registries, will soon recognize its 400th different kind of purebred-to-purebred cross. There are meanwhile roughly only 400 pure breeds of dog in the world, and the American Kennel Club, the world’s largest purebred registry, has recognized only 155 of them so far in its 123 year-history. It will not be registering Poovanese or Cavoodles any time soon. “What would our registration stand for then?” a spokeswoman told me. “Anyone could make up a dog and say, ‘This is a dog!’ ”

Dogs have always been a product of their times. Designer dogs may only promise what dog breeding always has: the chance to create a custom-designed ideal, a more convenient, useful animal suited to our needs, whatever they happen to be. So, then, to what extent are these new mutts a remedy for what’s wrong with our old dogs and to what extent are they a symptom of what’s wrong with us?

2. ‘Instant Life’

In the late 1980s, an Australian dog breeder crossed a standard poodle with a Labrador retriever, struggling to fashion a capable guide dog for the blind with the poodle’s more hypoallergenic coat. He called the puppies Labradoodles. In 1998, a small partnership began exporting loping, shaggy-headed pet Labradoodles to the United States for upward of \$2,500 each. Before long, Macy’s and Lord & Taylor sold thousands of Labradoodle stuffed animals to benefit cancer research; last year, [Tiger Woods](#) got a Labradoodle, and a metal Labradoodle replaced the Scottish terrier game piece in a special edition of

Monopoly.

The Australians selling these dogs had spent a decade breeding Labradoodles to Labradoodles, occasionally mixing in other breeds to hone the dogs' coat textures and temperaments in each successive generation. In the same way any breed is established, they were manipulating and then fixing the exact traits they wanted so that their line would "breed true" — i.e., two Labradoodles could reliably produce Labradoodles with those same traits. But the throng of enterprising American breeders picking up on the dog's sudden profitability simply began crossing purebred Labradors to purebred poodles and selling each litter. Their Labradoodles, like virtually all designer dogs that followed, were thus not actually a breed but first-generation hybrids, the result of a one-time-only bout of breed-on-breed action. Hybrids do not breed true. To yield relatively uniform results, every puggle, for example, must be bred from scratch, by crossing one pug and one beagle. Crossing two puggles produces an undistinguished hodgepodge of largely dissimilar things.

Designer dogs rewrote the logic of the small-scale breeders who have speckled the Midwest and South since the market for purebred pet dogs exploded after World War II. Some of these semiprofessionals, who might keep a half-dozen or several dozen dogs in their homes or kennels, had been breeding a few hybrids, like the cockapoo, for decades. But many I spoke to had never considered crossing two of their purebreds until they saw a designer dog on TV or until someone — often someone from a city — found their Web sites and called asking for one.

The appeal of these new mutts is often chalked up to "cuteness" or "uniqueness," surely two commanding advantages but ones also possessed by many purebreds and, moreover, by many of the roughly seven million dogs and cats we surrender to shelters each year. Michele Markham, who breeds purebreds and hybrids in her home in central Florida, concedes this point. "People are so influenced by the idiot box," she says. "They can't think for themselves. They want whatever they see is hip and cool on TV. Right now, the big fad is designer dogs. And it's just a fad." But a fad that is healthy and amiable and zips across the linoleum when you call it, Markham argues, works just as well as any animal buttressed by centuries of stately tradition.

A Kentucky woman breeding Maltese and Yorkshire terriers told me that Yorkies never struck her as ideal family pets anyway; they're intelligent but overly bossy. She also breeds Morkies now and was pleased to find "the smartness of the Yorkie and the sweetness of the Maltese." Markham distills this widespread, if terribly suspect, opinion on her Web site, this idea that with hybrids we can have it all: "Designer dogs usually possess the best traits from each breed and combine them together."

A breeder named Candace Humphrey, meanwhile, didn't talk about hybrids as a chance to combine the virtues of two breeds. Rather, she said, hybrids are a way for people to "settle" on a dog after being able to pinpoint, however superficially, something wrong with various breeds. "I've seen people say, Well, I'm not having a Chihuahua because my best friend had a Chihuahua, and it was a wreck," Humphrey told me in her ebullient drawl when I visited the small and tidy kennel she has built behind her home east of Nashville. A former veterinary assistant, Humphrey has bred poodles for 21 years. But after finding that

she couldn't sell a toy poodle for even \$200, she has also been crossing those poodles to Chihuahuas, Shih Tzus, Maltese, Pomeranians and Pekingese. "I think the majority of the poodle problem is not the poodle itself," she told me. "It's the froufrou coat. It's the haircut. Poodles are great dogs. But it's hard to sell a poodle to a man." Typically, she adds, a husband will want something like a beagle. "But the woman says, 'Well I'm not buying that slick-haired dog, that beagle, because they're not fuzzy and cute.'"

Havens's granddaughter, who works at Puppy Haven, says she receives apprehensive phone calls from men, pleading for a small, apartment-friendly dog that will please their wives without being too poofy. They end up with puggles, she said. The breeds that satisfy these same criteria, like the Brussels Griffon, have seen some of the highest spikes in A.K.C. registrations over the last decade, as have smaller breeds in general. Everyone seems to be chasing the next small thing. Dedicated breeders have shrunk the Alaskan husky into a raccoonlike throw pillow, breeding it true and naming it the Alaskan Klee Kai. Even the puggle is now being superseded by the "pocket" puggle.

"People don't have the space they had before," Bob Vetere of the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association told me. "Maybe you've moved from a 30-acre ranch into a two-room, fifth-floor walkup. Maybe you love the look of a mastiff, but want a 20-pound version of that." Studies show that adults retain strong loyalty to breeds they've grown up with. And baby boomers, Vetere said, are unwilling to abandon the idea of pets as they retire. "Now," he speculated, "maybe you could wind up being able to crossbreed the dog, to calm the dog down, to make it a little more friendly, a little more manageable."

We may see in designer dogs the potential, however real or empty, of making dog ownership easier. In the '80s, Vetere noted, the number of pet cats in America exceeded the number of dogs for the first time, after scoopable litters hit the market. People were working longer days; more families were two-income. Cats, already equated with self-sufficiency, could now be left all day without us having to muss with that box as frequently or with such fetid intimacy. An equally hassle-free arrangement with your dog meant hiring a pet sitter.

"Manufacturers asked themselves, 'What's a pet sitter really doing?'" Vetere went on. "He's feeding your pet and letting your pet out. Well, we could do that." Over the last decade, the industry has devised an almost Jetsonian, automated existence for our dogs, and the outpouring of products alone suggests how eager we have been to resolve a number of curious problems. Dogs can be attended by timed, refrigerated feeders and water fountains, monitored by Webcam or consoled through PetsCell cellular telephones around their necks. Cutout kitchen doggie doors were good, but new doggie doors — like the motorized Power Pet, triggered by a sensor in the dog's collar — are better, since homeowners worried thieves might shimmy through. The Power Pet slides up and swiftly deadbolts shut again ("Your pet will think it's on the Starship Enterprise!" the manufacturer claims), permitting dogs to safely exit and relieve themselves, perhaps on the specialty sod patches now replenished each week by delivery services. Small dogs are increasingly being litter-trained. Minefields of mildly electrified mats keep curious ones off of furniture. "Now," Vetere said, "if you want to keep your dog and still want your freedom, there are things you can do."

Katherine C. Grier, a cultural historian and author of “Pets in America,” told me: “The dogness of dogs has become problematic. We want an animal that is, in some respects, not really an animal. You’d never have to take it out. It doesn’t shed. It doesn’t bark. It doesn’t do stuff.” I found even the maker of Amazing Live Sea-Monkeys, which launched its tiny crustaceans in 1960 with the slogan “Instant Life,” now forcefully rebranding itself, targeting parents who refuse “to get stuck with caring for another living thing.”

3. A history of making distinctions

While it is easy to mock the faddishness of designer dogs, it bears remembering that many of our haughtiest purebred lines are themselves recent human inventions, willed into being amid a surge of similar excitement. The purebred pug itself may have been the first, real American canine craze. Though its origins are older, the pug toddled its way to distinction in the 1870s, appearing on calendars, trading cars and as stubby-faced ceramic tchotchkes. Its celebrity owners included the queen of England.

The purebred dog as we know it was still a relatively new idea at the time. Dogs had long been grouped loosely according to the work they did. But it is not altogether clear what exactly people meant by “breed” before a new class of Victorian dog breeders began shaping the species with unprecedented intensity. With the advent of dog shows and centralized, recorded pedigrees in the late 1800s, the dog fancy — the culture of competitive show breeders — pushed for strict physical uniformity within breeds and complete segregation between them. They made more and more finely honed distinctions until even their kennel clubs’ own, once-sufficient categories (“Black and Tan Terrier Dogs Not Exceeding 11 Pounds Weight”) splintered into far more individuated ones.

At the same time, they were founding legions of new breeds: crossing existing ones and selectively inbreeding only the puppies they liked until the line bred true. Descriptions of what each breed’s ideal specimen would look like were written in “breed standards,” a measure against which dogs could be judged in the show ring. Since winning dog shows is the goal of dog fancying, the standards remain “the word pattern breeders are striving to create in living flesh,” as the A.K.C. puts it. In retrospect, the difference between regularizing an existing breed and inventing a new one can be foggy, particularly since fanciers, anxious about their own social status, scrambled to distinguish their lines with estimable back stories. Breeders of the Spinone Italiano, finally admitted by the A.K.C. in 2000, trace their breed to a fifth-century-B.C. description of a bristly haired pointer with good endurance.

Not every Victorian was pleased by the fanciers’ work. The old guard, accustomed to hunting or working with dogs rather than parading them around as showpieces, dismissed these new concoctions as “modern fakes.” An 1877 New York Times article denigrated Dandie Dinmont terriers — a small, fluffy-headed companion — as “long-legged, long-tailed, long-backed rickety looking homely beasts.” A tittering luxury class, an article in *The Century Magazine* charged, had “ransacked” the species “to pander to its bizarre and eccentric longing for novelty.” The growing cast of new and distinctive-looking canine characters whipped up a tumult of silly consumerism. A well-bred St. Bernard might cost \$5,000, there were frequent canine weddings and tea parties and even by 1884 there were 1,500 different styles of dog collar for sale in Manhattan, including the “Langtry.” One entrepreneur sent tailors uptown two or three times

every week to fit “aristocratic pugs” with satin-lined garments.

The new middle class spoke explicitly of “civilizing” the dog so it might better reflect its master. Cities were tidying themselves up, pushing unsavory things like abattoirs and coal-burning plants farther out of sight. Why not reform the dog as well? Grier describes fanciers crossing the sort of slobbering bruisers being bet on in pub-basement dogfights, then shrinking each successive generation and painstakingly standardizing its markings. Eventually, they unveiled the Boston terrier, which resembles, Grier notes, “a spiffy little black-and-white fellow in a tuxedo.” It was swiftly promoted as “the American dog.”

Breeds are thus less found in nature than arduously hewn from it. Arbitrariness must be squelched. When two golden retrievers mate, they will make exceptionally similar-looking golden retrievers only if, genetically speaking, we leave them little choice. (Between two human relatives, there is a 29 percent chance a given gene will be identical; between two dogs of certain breeds, it is 96 percent.) Moreover, once each unique and self-perpetuating shape has been conjured, it must be vigilantly maintained. Otherwise it could sink back into the muck.

“Frankly a pug is a recessive gene,” says the show breeder Jutta Beard. “The entire pug. If they’re left to their own devices, or you don’t breed carefully, they won’t keep their flat faces.” Beard recently bred one of her bitches and, out of six puppies, found only one close enough to standard to keep. “They all had ugly pug heads,” she says. “They didn’t have good nose rolls.” It is not uncommon to keep none. Generally, show breeders label these rejects “pet quality” and sell them to us, who aren’t likely to notice their esoteric shortcomings. Fanciers’ contracts with pet buyers require that the puppies be spayed or neutered. “We don’t want anybody breeding any dogs that we don’t think are worthy of breeding,” Beard explains.

Selective breeding has long been our only way of making sense of dogs. It is how we shaped our entourage of hunters and herders from what was previously a muddle, a way of coping with the dogness of dogs by organizing the raw materials of their genome into utilitarian packages. A breed, particularly the more stringent idea of one modern fanciers strive for, may really be a kind of well-branded, trustworthy consumer product.

“Predictability is what you pay for when you buy a purebred dog,” says Daisy Okas, assistant vice president for communications at the A.K.C. “Are you really active? Do you need a running partner? Then you might want to look at getting a border collie. But do you live in a 500-square-foot apartment in Manhattan and work all day? Then a border collie, for you, is going to be a disaster. That’s why they cost hundreds or thousands of dollars. Because groups of people over decades or even centuries have been carefully breeding that dog to have certain characteristics and a certain temperament.”

But keeping each breed the way we like it requires not only tremendous effort but also tremendous cooperation. A breed is exasperatingly democratic: a fluid and often unforgiving amalgam of the tastes and skills of every person breeding it. For example, the A.K.C. has no choice but to register anything that’s the product of two registered German shepherds as a German shepherd. And yet Mark Neff, a canine geneticist at the [University of California](http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/) at Davis, says, “I can go out and find the most bizarre German

shepherds in the world, and I can start crossing and inbreeding them,” selecting for, rather than against, their eccentricities. Gradually, he could produce some deviant dogs. They could be lithe and spotted. They could be dwarfs. “I would be despised,” Neff said, but his dogs would be German shepherds by virtue of their all-German shepherd pedigrees.

For better or worse, we’ve turned the dog into a record of our priorities, of everything we actively select for and against, but also of what creeps in and we don’t bother to expel, including, of course, genetic diseases. “You’ve removed natural selection and replaced it with artificial selection,” Neff says. “Dogs are now subject to the whims of humans. And as soon as humans get involved, all hell breaks loose.”

In the 1990s, Mark Derr, author of “Dog’s Best Friend,” led a burst of criticism against the A.K.C., railing against the “appalling human practice of breeding mutant animals for ego satisfaction.” (Notably, this was just as the Labradoodle, and the potential for an altogether different kind of dog we chose to see in it, was first rearing its nonshedding head.) After a century of breeding dogs chiefly for looks and not sufficiently controlling for health, Derr reported that 25 percent of dogs of A.K.C.-recognized breeds suffered at least one genetic disorder. The litany of defects and degenerative conditions starts at bad hips and stretches toward the absurd: bull terriers with a particular neurological disorder can spend 80 percent of their time chasing their own tails.

One way for animal breeders to blot out such troublesome recessive genes is to make careful and calculated crosses with other breeds and then breed those hybrid dogs back to dogs in the original pedigree. But dedicated fanciers have resisted compromising the integrity of their pedigrees. Instead, they have been financing genetic research through the A.K.C.’s Canine Health Foundation and sending cheek swabs and other DNA samples to labs in the hopes of discovering markers for these conditions or curing them outright. Already, breeders have the tools to identify probable carriers of certain defects and refrain from breeding those dogs — if they choose to. Again, it is a matter of priorities, and purging pug dog encephalitis and preserving a line’s faultless nose rolls can be two conflicting ones. In rare instances, the whole rigmarole boils down to a freakishly direct, “Sophie’s Choice”-like scenario. Recently geneticists discovered that the mutation contributing to widespread deafness in Dalmatians is the same mutation that creates its signature spots.

4. Purebred paradise

On opening night of the Pug Dog Club of America’s National Specialty, a week of pug-only competitions held this fall at the Olympia Resort in Oconomowoc, Wis., white picket fences divided the hotel ballroom into show rings. Vendors of pug clothing and pug portraiture lined one wall, and a hundred pug puppies capered over the flowered carpet, waiting to be judged in the annual Puppy Match. A gaggle of far more motley human shapes looked on.

Ray Kolesar, a wiry, uncommonly excitable fellow in suspenders and a Puppy Match T-shirt, offered to show me around. Ray and his wife, Patt, editors of Pug Talk Magazine, breed pugs on five acres in northern Wisconsin with a “training building” and treadmills for winter. “I’m thinking about putting a

swimming pool in for the dogs,” he told me shortly after I arrived. “This hydrotherapy thing is big right now.”

Kolesar got an exquisite kick out of telling everyone he introduced me to that I had come to talk about designer dogs. The subject inspired zero enthusiasm. “It’s a mixed-breed dog,” many told me, either with disgust, bafflement or disinterested aplomb, but always, it seemed, with the conviction that this was a sufficient rejoinder. A 78-year-old Southerner chatted at length about puggles, then ushered me back into the crowd with a good-natured: “Good luck! I hope no one whips you before you leave!”

“We’ve worked so hard with our pugs,” one man said. He talked about tackling genetic health problems, sending in the brains of your dead dog for autopsy. “These are tough things to do,” he stammered. “As a breeder, you dedicate your life to the breed, and to see it corrupted, it just grinds you.”

While designer-dog sellers often claim to combine only the most functional and lovable qualities of each breed, here I was being told just the opposite: that mixing breeds would create an intractable slop house of each breed’s most problematic traits. “A pug has no doggie sense whatsoever,” said Jutta Beard, who had driven to Oconomowoc from Maryland in her motor home with one husband and 13 pugs. “You put this dog out on the next street over, and it will never find its way home. Now a beagle has wanderlust. It’s a little hound breed. It puts its nose to the ground and just goes. So now you’ve got a dog with wanderlust and no doggie sense.”

Many offered the same analysis. (One woman projected a “confused” puggle: “He wants to run, but he doesn’t know why he wants to run, and he doesn’t know how to get home.”) The back and forth can seem endless. Virtually noseless by now, purebred pugs are prone to belabored breathing, sensitivity to heat (they couldn’t survive outside air-conditioning in parts of the country) and a pitiable propensity to bash their eyes into whatever they’re trying to smell. Puggle enthusiasts praise their hybrid as elongating the smooshed-in snout we have bred onto the pug. But Patt Kolesar managed to dispute even this seemingly self-evident improvement. In a recent Pug Talk editorial, she claimed that the puggle shortens the nose on a beagle. And beagles need powerful noses since they are hard-wired to sprint.

What everyone seemed to dread is that a newfangled dog that looks cute as a puppy can ambush owners with unanticipated health or behavioral issues. The presumed predictability of a breed allows breeders to educate prospective buyers about its idiosyncratic snares — and to judge who should be trusted with them. One woman said that she interviews a buyer for six weeks and conducts at least one home visit before she will relinquish a pug. The purebred Siberian Husky Club of America, meanwhile, devotes a portion of its Web site to outlining why Siberians make difficult pets and why you probably shouldn’t get one. As further insurance, fanciers operate breed-specific “rescue” organizations, resettling pets that ultimately can’t be cared for to keep them out of shelters. But Pug Rescue, Beard said, is strictly for pugs, not puggles. “Who’s going to take care of that dog when the fad fades?” she asked. She went on, detailing the pug’s worst qualities, transitioning into the beagle’s and concluding, finally, that the puggle must be “a shedding, snorting wanderlust dog that’s going to pee all over your house.”

5. Hybrid haven

“People who raise pugs have called me and chewed me out real good,” Wallace Havens told me one morning. We were making the long drive to Puppy Haven, soon infiltrating Amish country. “It’s like a sin to them,” he said. “They’ve strived all their lives to breed the perfect pug, with all those things that they want in a pug” — the perfect furrowed face, the big infant eyes. Then here he comes and makes something else out of it. “It hurts their feelings,” he said with a kind of plaintive sincerity. “I understand that.”

Havens’s creation has similarly been pirated. One of every four litters that the American Canine Hybrid Club now registers is a litter of puggles. There are 40 breeders registering at least one puggle litter with the organization every month. As ads for puggles have proliferated on the Internet, some people, Havens said — people who don’t know better — are now breeding pugs to any old foxhound and selling them as puggles, at puggle prices. Some are crossing puggles with puggles and passing off those disorderly second-generations as puggles. “It’s giving the puggle a bad name,” he said.

Havens has since diversified. He is now doing 35 different hybrids, as well as many purebreds, selling about 3,000 puppies annually. He has also worked out multigenerational formulas for combining five or six different undisclosed breeds. He gives them deliberately uninformative names like the Tiny Mite, the Pee Wee and the Miniature St. Bernard, which has no St. Bernard in it whatsoever. The problem with puggles, after all, was that the recipe for making them was right there in the name.

Crossing dogs is as much an art as pure-breeding them, Havens insisted: it takes judgment. In fact, genetics teaches that purebred breeding and hybrid breeding are both time-tested ways to order nature into predictable products. But the promise of each can easily be ruined by the sloppiness of human nature. A group of very similar schnauzers and a group of very similar poodles will make an equally consistent crop of schnoodles. But there is substantial variation in dogs registered in the same A.K.C. breed. And that variation is only exacerbated by the variations in shrewdness and good sense of the people picking out which individual dogs to cross. Mixing breeds doesn’t guarantee the puppies won’t inherit genetic defects or other troubles. An epileptic schnauzer and a ravenously misanthropic poodle will only yield so genial of a schnoodle. And how adequately is that schnoodle socialized during puppyhood? Is it raised with the close human contact and vacuum-cleaner roars it will encounter in a home? Will it contract a virus in cross-country transit or in an overcrowded kennel or pet store and die?

This is to say, what we label a dog — how we brand it — doesn’t necessarily have much bearing on its quality. Ultimately, the value of any dog, purebred or hybrid, is bound up in the priorities of the people stewarding it through the hazards of nature and nurture. Money spent on a dog may be best justified as a premium paid for knowledge about its human breeder: an investment in how deftly he can shape and distinguish a dog’s bloodline from randomness and how reliably he can tell us what to expect from that dog. Of course, there are doubtless many breeders of both designer dogs and purebreds who churn out animals far inferior to the proverbial mutt down at the pound with three or four breeds haphazardly tangled in it. Nearly half of American dog owners have long possessed this sort of less purposeful mixed breed. Surely, many dogs are breeding just as good, if not better, dogs than a lot of humans.

Havens, for his part, seemed confident in his own practiced intuition. “Most breeders will specialize in golden retrievers, or they’ll specialize in Labs,” he said. “They could tell you the pedigree of a single Lab from 1900 on up and all the champions in its pedigree. I can’t do that. But if they were to cross a particular poodle with that Lab, they wouldn’t know what the heck was going to happen. So I feel like I have it on them there.” I suggested that if dog traits were like words, maybe he was trying to speak, or at least fumble his way through, the whole language. A Lab fancier was endlessly revising a single sentence. Havens liked the analogy and jumped into a story about his frustrations when he was breeding purebred horned Hereford cattle years ago. “It’s not something I learned out of a book,” he said. “I learned it out in a field, from a life’s experience of working with animals. That’s all I’ve ever done.”

All morning, he had been discharging bitter anecdotes about A.K.C. dogs he had bought and been burned on: Samoyeds with hip dysplasia, Westies that went bald. His banker’s schnauzer had relentless diarrhea. Hybrids, he kept insisting, are just healthier. Now he told me: “If you buy a flower, more than likely the most beautiful rose you can find is a hybrid. And the best-tasting tomatoes you can raise are hybrids.” Our beef comes from hybrids and, he added, pointing to the stalks beside the road, so does our corn. He thought a second more. It occurred to me that this may be what makes him immune to the purebred world’s irrational taboo but also why humane societies condemn large-scale operations like his that raise dogs under a more agricultural model. It is what is so constructive and jarring about Havens’s approach: when he looks at a dog, he sees an animal.

Pork, he said finally. Pork comes from hybrids.

6. ‘Show me someone who likes to kill a puppy’

Given the range of beliefs and values we bring to dogs, a not entirely unwarranted paranoia now pervades all of dogdom. Though we live intimately with those animals, dog breeding remains relatively unpoliced and unregulated. Reports of deplorable breeders, small- and large-scale, have shot out of rural America since purebreds first became profitable in the ’50s. Nearly everyone I spoke to, whether partisan to purebreds or hybrids, condemned “puppy mills” and “backyard breeders,” terms carrying tremendous weight but ultimately no real definitions. Breeders with 10 dogs were wary of those with 20; those with 30 feared anyone with 50. Many designer-dog breeders told me they had received phone calls or e-mail messages scolding them for “damaging” breeds or simply spilling more mixed breeds into a world oversaturated with them. In one case, a fancier had offered to pay for a breeder’s dogs to be spayed and neutered immediately.

Havens handed me a stack of comparable e-mail messages one afternoon. “I don’t really get upset,” he said. “They feel like we’re mistreating dogs, and I feel like we aren’t. I feel like all dogs should be bred in a kennel just like mine.”

We had just toured the huge and sundry mob of breeding stock that makes Puppy Haven’s high volume possible: about a thousand adult dogs, housed in a series of long buildings on one half of the farm with

gravelly, chain-link dog runs jutting off in either direction. As Havens's S.U.V. trolled beside a row of pens known as Beagle Alley, perhaps a hundred beagles raced into the rain through their clacking metal doors to bark and challenge us.

The dogs live partitioned into what Havens calls "dog families," gangs of five females and a lone stud. A Chihuahua rooted amid bichons. A Shar-Pei presided over a crowd of beagles like a crumpled-faced shogun. That was an experiment, Havens said, "just to see what happens."

The scene was rather lawless; later that afternoon, I would watch four schnauzers nearly destroy a fifth in a fight before an employee pulled it out of the pen. I happened to spot a poodle stop humping a Shih Tzu and hobble, very painfully it appeared, into the corner on an injured foot. When I pointed it out to Havens, he calmly slid a slip of paper from his shirt pocket and wrote down the pen number, 541, so that someone could check on it after lunch. "Good for you," he told me as though I were learning the business.

Havens was recently suspended by the A.K.C. for 10 years after refusing a follow-up kennel inspection. He claims that the A.K.C. inspector cited him for things long deemed acceptable, to punish him for his promotion of designer dogs and his increasing use of another registry service, thus no longer paying the A.K.C. thousands of dollars in registration fees. The A.K.C. denies any such motivation, saying that it has stepped up enforcement of a care-and-conditions policy over the last decade and is glad to go without registration income from breeders unwilling to comply. Recent U.S.D.A. inspection reports show many incidences of dogs kept with inadequate bedding in near-freezing temperatures at Puppy Haven or with excessively matted hair or insufficient veterinary care. Havens retired 75 adult dogs, no longer useful to him as sires or dams, to the Wisconsin Humane Society over the last year. According to the humane society, many of the dogs had to be treated for debilitating fears of noise or people before they could be adopted. Some animal-welfare advocates, while noting that most large kennels kill older, unproductive dogs, also condemn shipping them off to shelters, seeing it as a shifting of responsibility. In response, Havens says that he prides himself on his unwillingness to put his dogs down and that there is a tremendous demand to adopt the smaller purebreds he uses.

In comparison with other large-scale breeders, Havens is exceptionally forthright and proud of his operation. He has done well enough to hire a sizable staff, all of whom seem to authentically enjoy working with dogs. Over lunch at a local diner, I asked them about the reputation of their industry — of facilities like Puppy Haven and of pet stores, to which they sell the bulk of their puppies. Dan White, who was working at Puppy Haven at the time and has owned pet stores himself, answered adamantly. The impression that pet stores kill unsold puppies, for example, is out of touch, White said. Killing a dog is bad business. You drop the price to \$50 if you have to. He went on until Havens, who had been placing classified ads for puggles on his cellphone (they start as low as \$300 now), interrupted so evenly and with such earnestness that the conversation was suddenly over. "And show me someone that likes to kill a puppy," Havens said.

This may be the good intention at the root of all the excruciating politics around our dogs. Evolutionarily speaking, the puppy is a compassion machine. The first domesticated dogs, one theory posits, were

underdogs — softies cast out of the wolf pack who shambled deferentially into the corners of our camps to scavenge crumbs as many as 50,000 years ago. Eventually, we seized upon the best hunters and bred them to be better. We bred those with the cutest, flattest faces to have cuter, flatter faces — until, in breeds like the pug, they were nearly as flat as the faces of our own babies. This kindled an even stronger urge to nurture them, to protect them from the wilderness. By now, we have commandeered the dog so fully that the only thing left to protect it from is ourselves.

7. ‘It takes a village’

After the Pug Dog Club’s Puppy Match wound down, Ray Kolesar was the last to straggle into the Beards’ motor home, not long before midnight. He was holding a can of beer and bag of potato chips. With him was the canine reproduction specialist, whom he had dragged away from her steak and cosmopolitan at the hotel restaurant to oversee tonight’s insemination.

Making purebred pugs is arduous and important business. The pug’s problem is geometrical. A century of selection for the standard’s “square and cobby” body has exaggerated those qualities, rendering many males incapable of positioning themselves on a bitch, of procreating reliably without human assistance. Nor can puppies muscle through the pug’s narrowed birth canal; like many breeds, virtually all pugs must be delivered by C-section. “You’ll never have feral pugs,” one woman told me earlier that night. She said it fondly.

Woody, the Beards’ stud, is older, and his frozen semen had not survived FedExing. So weeks earlier, Patt Kolesar embedded a hormonal implant in her bitch’s vulva to bring her into heat in time for tonight’s scheduled “side by side.”

Kolesar positioned her bitch, Birdie, on the floor. Woody sniffed rambunctiously and mounted. As the dog began his dedicated thrusting, the unlikelihood of him ever managing the transaction on his own was plain. And so, as planned all along, Jutta Beard crouched behind him and concluded things with an expeditious right hand. In an instant, she was holding up a plastic bag with a dime-size clump in its corner.

The reproductive specialist set about confirming the semen’s motility with a microscope and advised Kolesar to tuck the pipette in her cleavage. It is a trick, she said, to keep it warm while they transferred Birdie onto the table and Beard microwaved some skim milk for “extender,” compensating for Woody’s paltry output. “It takes a village,” Kolesar said, exhaling deeply as she got up off the floor.

Kolesar showed me a photograph of Woody’s father, a famous specimen named Captain Snappy. The squat, fawn-colored pug with taut, thin legs stood on a pedestal. Gesturing rapidly, Kolesar praised the gorgeous angle of the dog’s back, the proportions of its face. To describe the compactness of its form, she invoked the Latin phrase “multum in parvo,” or “much in little,” the pug’s unofficial motto. Then she picked up an arresting syringelike instrument. It was filled, via Woody, with some of Captain Snappy’s superlative genes.

Kolesar slid the tool into Birdie. After several minutes, she removed it and seemed satisfied. Then she inserted her bare finger into Birdie's vagina and began to wriggle it, delicately and with great purposefulness. She was "feathering" the dog, stimulating the vaginal walls as a stud would, so that her muscles would contract and draw the semen into her cervix. (The surest method of insemination, Kolesar later explained, and one commonly done, is to surgically expose the bitch's uterus, deposit the semen directly and then sew it back up.) As Kolesar worked, Beard positioned herself near the dog's head, and the Beards' daughter was at center, stroking Birdie's back like a midwife. This seemed to go on for a long time. Then it was done.

Eventually a looser mood filled the motor home. The small crowd shared stories as though after a big meal. Jutta Beard described how years ago, while she was breeding Rottweilers, one of her bitches was accidentally impregnated by a dog of another breed. Great effort had been taken to segregate the bitch, and how the intruder got in and out of the Beards' kennel was a mystery. His identity couldn't even be discerned in the gangling, alien faces of the resulting puppies. Beard had them euthanized.

I asked if no one would have wanted them as pets. "I didn't want them," she said decisively.

"Man may be said to hold toward the domesticated brutes almost the same position that God does toward man," an editorialist at Harper's New Monthly Magazine wrote in 1867, "overruling their natural tendencies by determining the influences which surround them." The purebred-dog fancy intensified and accelerated this process. But many breeders I spoke to seemed to confuse their commitment to breeding their lines to standard — "improving the breed," as they choose to call it — with their other commitments: the less esoteric ones, like financing genetic research, raising puppies lovingly, counseling buyers about the commitment involved and taking back dogs that don't work out. They were, it seems, conflating guiding a breed closer to the ideal physical description they themselves had written for it with something else: virtuousness.

"When you're breeding a mixed-breed dog, you're only breeding a dog for money," Beard told me. "There's no standard there. There's nothing you're aiming for, other than to put these two dogs together and appeal to a fad." With no set way to police human morals, she seemed to be substituting the only clear-cut rules she had: the ones that spell out what kind of bite, brisket, tail carriage and toenails look prettiest on a dog. The paradox is that adhering to those standards has driven fanciers to outlandish and distressing lengths.

And yet having a detailed and complete picture of a breed, and a tradition behind it, actually seems to help purebred-dog lovers be understanding owners. The pug lovers I spoke to, like lovers of any breed, were able to embrace all of the dog's traits because they were familiar and unique to their breed. They even gushed about what struck me as the pug's humiliating shortcomings: the snoring, the dim-witted laziness. Explaining why one of his puppies had recently gotten its eye banged up while playing, Ray Kolesar affectionately told me, "A regular dog has a nose."

If dog ownership inevitably requires compromise, then this kind of familiarity — the hard-won dependability of carefully bred purebreds or at least their well-established reputations — should be a

tremendous asset to any pet buyer. It should help us make informed decisions, letting us imagine what compromises a given dog will require us to make. But what if we are increasingly disinclined to make any compromises with our dogs at all?

A series of studies at several large British shelters by the animal researcher Rebecca Ledger seems to suggest just this. Ledger found that owners could forgive dogs for growling at visiting strangers, unless the strangers were children. Barking excitedly at the doorbell was acceptable — perhaps touching, even — when the owner returned home from work. But barking at passing cyclists was pathologized as “boisterousness,” one of the most common reasons for surrendering dogs to the shelters. In short, it seems we expect our animals to have decorum.

“Separation anxiety,” characterized by chewing furniture, urinating or howling when left alone during the day, was another frequent deal-breaker. But separation anxiety, Ledger writes, “is usually the result of the owner constantly interacting with the dog by playing with it,” talking to it or sleeping near it. The dog’s missing you is, fundamentally, a corollary of the dog’s appreciating you while you are around. James Serpell, an ethologist who has written extensively about our relationship with dogs, told me that owners “want the higher level of interaction a dog offers but do not want the dog to get upset when they leave it alone.” People are switching back to dogs, but, Serpell added, “they are looking for a dog that is more like a cat.”

Dogs with separation anxiety are now commonly treated with psycho-pharmaceuticals. Maybe re-engineering the dog itself, hybridizing newer models, represents “the last piece of the puzzle,” Bob Vetere says. “Will they reach a level of convenience where you have a postage-stamp-size dog that makes you dinner when you come home and reads the paper to you before you go to bed? I’m not sure that’s going to happen. But certainly someone’s going to try it.” After all, the dog, which we’ve molded into one of the most physically diverse mammalian species on earth, has so far been uncommonly obliging to our needs. Why shouldn’t we be capable of driving the entire species toward its inevitable end, down a millennia-long trajectory from wolf to stuffed animal?

One psychologist characterizes people as taking a “happily ever after” approach to pet selection rather than a “marriages take work” one. If we read a purebred-dog buying manual like Bash Dibra’s “Your Dream Dog: A Guide to Choosing the Right Breed For You” with the expectation of finding an instantly harmonious buddy, we will only end up noticing what should be irrefutably obvious: none of these dogs are perfect. The Havenese is prone to “house soiling;” the Pembroke Welsh corgi to “manipulativeness or dominance.” Beagles bay. Basset hounds are picky eaters. Greyhounds have “phobias.” Sometimes the signals are downright confusing. The Bedlington terrier, Dibra writes, “positively despises all other animals” and “will fight them to the death.” It is also “calm indoors and makes a good apartment pet.”

Conscientious designer-dog breeders are surely creating reliable, healthy, perfectly well-adjusted pets — dogs “truly bred for the work of the family,” as one Labradoodle breeder puts it, rather than for moving a hundred head of cattle, fighting bears or flushing rats from mine shafts. But hybrid breeders are also just offering us new dogs, dogs we don’t know enough about to readily find fault with. If they can’t produce the

perfect dog, they can at least sustain its promise.

The designer dog's greatest charm may therefore be its almost Rorschach-like ability to be whatever we see in it: something less constrained than a purebred, something more distinctive than a mutt. It gives us the possibility of the perfect companion. And if we keep projecting that image of perfection onto all its inevitable flaws, perhaps we'll convince ourselves it actually is.

Recently, I stopped a man in a park to ask about the hulking, long-legged dog struggling to pick up the tennis ball at his feet. "It's a Labradoodle," the man said with a freshness that suggested he had never been asked before — surely an impossibility, though, given the size and strangeness of the thing. I didn't ask where he had bought the dog. It was unlike other Labradoodles I have seen: gawkier, with a very long, straight yet nebulous coat of hair. The man threw the ball. But the Labradoodle only romped and plodded in place. "They're really funny dogs," the man said adoringly, as if he had just now arrived at the right way to explain it.

Jon Mooallem, a contributing writer, last wrote for the magazine about the science of pigeon control.

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