

CAMPAIGN FOR REAL DOGS

Times
11/3/94

Need one's best friend be a fanciful freak?

Whichever dog is voted best in show amid the yelping and yapping of the 103rd Cruft's show this year, the arguments will not stop with the judges' decision. All proud pet-owners verge on the obsessive, none more so than regular exhibitors at the world's most celebrated dog show. The prestige and vast advertising fees that can be earned from winning rosettes fuel a competitive spirit that has spilt over into attempted bribery, sabotage and even, last year, the poisoning of one champion dog. The real arguments, however, are not about the judges' decisions or even the skewed criteria on which they are based but about the future of dog-breeding in Britain and the dangers that competitive dog shows pose.

Cruft's is a quintessentially English tradition, inevitably cacophonous and somewhat chaotic. Around 20,000 dogs attend. They belong to about 100 breeds — some only barely justifying inclusion in the canine species. The show manages nevertheless to impose its own eccentric traditions and standards on the occasion. The only rules governing entry for male dogs is that "they should have two fully descended testicles" and that "the teeth of upper and lower jaws should meet when they close their mouths". A lack of pedigree is no official bar to entry.

But pedigree is what the show is all about. And this is where serious charges have been levelled against Cruft's and its sponsors, the Kennel Club of Great Britain. Critics, including Beverley Cuddy, editor of *Dogs Today*, say that too much attention is paid by

breeders and judges to the appearance of dogs and not enough to their temperament, health and genetic viability.

The search for pure pedigree means that the characteristics of each breed are often grotesquely exaggerated, leading to dogs that are caricatures of their type, physically impaired and living in constant pain. Basset hounds have ears so long that they step on them, bulldogs have heads so large that the pups have to be delivered by Caesarian section, Irish wolfhounds are so prone to cancer that few live beyond the age of ten. So little regard is now paid to temperament that winning dogs can be bad-tempered, disease-ridden and so highly strung that they are quite unsuitable as family pets.

The Kennel Club is aware of these dangers and has tried to enforce rules insisting on a minimum size of a gene pool before a breed can be registered — so far with limited success. The British, who today own seven million dogs, are universally known as dog-lovers (despite the chilling statistic from the RSPCA that it has to destroy 1,000 dogs a day). Dog-breeding is an old science in Britain, and the country has exported dozens of species, still known by their English names. But Britain's pre-eminence in the canine world is threatened by the deteriorating genetic quality and the development of dogs as fanciful playthings rather than man's best friend. The judges at Cruft's, which can expect 75,000 visitors, have a growing responsibility to curb this dangerous trend.