

Lower Jaw Problems

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Numerous articles have been written and many discussions have taken place with regard to the dentition faults within our breed. At one stage or another, nearly all breeders have discussed the inherent problems of missing teeth and the consequent problems that arise, this decreasing the working value of the breed. All judges, whether Show or obedience, are so concerned with this problem that no responsible judge/breeder/owner is prepared to accept any animal with missing teeth. By taking this stand it is hoped that the future of the breed will be assured of improvement with regard to dentition and the jaw.

When we talk about the jaw itself and specifically about the teeth, it is not with the intent of giving the impression that both should be judged independently of each other. The jaw and the teeth together build an inseparable unit and all faults within the jaw eventually result in disturbances in the growth of the teeth.

The Breed Officials of the SV have been for decades taken great care that the jaw does adhere to our breed standard. This is extremely important when one is dealing with a working dog like the German Shepherd Dog. The main weapon of our breed would have to be its mouth, which must be capable of fulfilling definite functions e.g. when capturing a criminal the dog must certainly catch the offender, but he must also be able to release his victim as soon as ordered.

At first this may appear an obvious statement, but there are many different breeds who, can easily grab an offender but are unable, due to the rigid structure of the jaw, to release their victim. Such a situation in a working dog is extremely undesirable as it could be dangerous for both the offender and the dog. At the same time, we can not accept a jaw which is too weak and does not allow the dog to have a secure grip on an article, for sometimes the occasion can arrive where the dog is required to hold an article for quite a lengthy period of time e.g. the SV Obedience Rules contain commands that require a dog to hold an article tightly and then release on command.

A dog bites can only be effective if the lower jaw is sufficiently strong. The upper jaw is a rigid bone and merely acts as a buffer for the lower jaw. The same applies to the human jaw. It is our lower jaw and teeth that move and chew against a fixed upper jaw. It would therefore be ridiculous to have a strong upper jaw and weak lower jaw.

The muscles necessary to chew cannot develop on a weak lower jaw. These muscles require constant use to develop and form a correct jaw line.

An insufficient bite function will also weaken the jaw. Because of this the bite functions should be fostered in both puppies and young dogs. This is easily achieved by playing with young pups and encouraging them to bite firmly e.g. on a towel, old shoe, jute sack etc. Likewise a juicy bone twice a week will also benefit a young dog's jaw. Modern toys made of rubber or plastic while fine for some toy breeds, do not serve the purpose of developing a good enough jaw and bite required by a working dog.

To develop the necessary firm bite, the muzzle should possess sufficient width at the end. Occasionally, we see some dogs with a very pointed “*snipey*” muzzle. If we carefully examine the teeth of these dogs, especially their incisors, we find the majority have very crowded mouths, where it seems these teeth have to fight for space – an irregularity which often results in extra pressure and pain in the jaw. Eventually we will find positional faults which could hinder the dog’s usefulness, as well as discouraging the dog from using its mouth correctly.

Such a bite lacks firmness and these dogs do not perform very well at their combative instincts test releasing the victim or protective clothing far too willingly.

Another fault with the pointy “*snipey*” head is that it destroys the distinctive shepherd like expression of the breed. At one stage it was suggested to set a fixed measurement for the lower jaw distance between both sets of canine teeth. If the measured distance did not comply with the set standard, the dogs head would be judged as *snipey* and therefore incorrect.

In theory this sounds fine, but in practice there are many difficulties to overcome e.g. the actual size of the animal varies even between the same sex as well as between dogs and bitches. Therefore the distance between the canine teeth can be quite variable. Likewise if we were to experiment by feeding our dog’s completely alien food, we could develop an animal where the chew muscles were ill-developed. Consequently the lower jaw would be quite weak, with the roots of the teeth weakened and the entire jaw structure not providing the necessary anchorage.

Eventually the teeth would become smaller and the once normally tight lips would develop into loose, ill-fitting lips which also would contribute to the lack of correct expression in our breed. Often an animal with loose lips, does in fact have a weak lower jaw. This problem can occur rather quickly between generations, however one must be aware of the normal lips which can be compared with a fold. This fold must be present in order to give the dog the opportunity to fully open its mouth for any purpose e.g. yawning, biting.

In conclusion, it is very necessary that every serious shepherd breeder and owner be aware continually of the lower jaw and its associated problems, for the benefit of the breed. Also remember that some lower jaw problems if detected early enough in young dogs, can be corrected with the appropriate treatment.