

Another tale about the tail

Dirk Vandecasteele

I was a bit surprised when I was asked to write an article on the Rottweiler-tail. As I'm not sure what I'm expected to write about, I'll just let some of my thoughts roam "freely".

I do hope however not having to go into the heated but since long obsolete discussions that rose when in 2000 the FCI-breed standard was changed? In Europe as in most parts of the world where I have judged, with the exception only of countries that have own national breed standards that still demands a docked tail as f.i. New Zealand or USA-ARC, this issue has long since been solved and the tail has simply been accepted as a part the Rottweiler is born with. Conversations from people that still long for the Rottweiler with a docked tail are likely to be listened to as useless and annoying and will usually end with even the taleteller nodding when referred to how much quicker pups are on their feet, how much better and easier the Rottweiler now runs and jumps, even how much more convincing the undocked dog answers the attack during the courage test and especially ... how few reasons we could find to start docking again. One can even ask for how long these other more and more isolated views can and will be maintained now that reality has proven that not docking those "extra" few vertebrae that the dog was born with, does indeed not change his nature, does not take away his identity and certainly does not change his breed specific characteristics nor his type. All over the world, more and more, Rottweilers with a docked tail will become a rarity.

Going deeper in on the legal side of the matter would be difficult and pointless as legislation differs in each country. Fact is that in many European countries docking the tail is forbidden by law (Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries,) and even where this is not the case and then especially (but not only) in FCI-countries, serious breeders follow the FCI-breed standard and dock no more. Worth mentioning might be that even in countries where docking is forbidden by law and lawbreakers can be penalized, jurisdiction can differ and will sometimes permit dogs originating from other countries where docking is still allowed to participate trials and shows while native dogs with a docked tail can't (cfr. the Netherlands) whereas in other countries (cfr. Belgium) all dogs born after a certain date and that are docked – regardless of the country of birth – are no longer allowed participating canine activities.

Seen through the eyes of the ethologist, the tail is of course extremely important as a means of communication. Every owner/breeder/handler "reads" his dog and knows how well a dog can "talk" or communicate by using his tail. As reading about canine behavior and communication quickly learns how many facets there are to this, much more than just simply understanding the high held tail as a sign of aggression or dominance, the low held tail as a sign of fear or submission, the wagging as a sign of happiness or the result of contradictory feelings, etc. ... , I shall leave this topic to those more specialized and scientifically educated to elaborate on (which will then probably take a book and not an article in a magazine).

From a cynological view, the issue does not seem very complicated as the Rottweiler-tail is not breed-specific or in other words not specific for this breed alone. Its set and form indeed does not differ from the tails that we are familiar with in other breeds!

The tail of the Rottweiler has always been described in his breed standards. In the book "Rottweiler", written by Mr. A. Pienkoss, former ADRK-president and founder of the IFR (recently re-edited by the IFR, cfr. www.ifrottweilerfriends.org), we can find historical documentation on this. In the first known breed standard of the Rottweiler (Albert Kull, September 1901) we find that a congenital stub-tail was to be preferred or else a medium long, strong tail that was carried high and strongly curled (*"Angeborener Stummelschwanz sehr häufig und stets bevorzugt; sonst kräftig, mittellang, mit starker Bürste und hoch, stark gebogen getragen"*).

Immediately afterwards, the author Richard Strebel described the same congenital stub-tail but details its carriage slightly otherwise in “Die Deutsche Hunde” (1901/1905) as being “*Sehr häufig geborener Stummel, hoch angesetzt, verlängert die Rückenlinie in waagerechter Forsetzung, biegt sich dann säbelförmig auf mit an der Unterseite verlängerter Haaren*” or freely translated : often born with a stub-tail, high set, lengthens the topline in horizontal extension and then rises as a sable-tail with longer hair on the underside ! The reference to a congenital stub-tail can again be found in the breed standard of the “Deutsche Rottweiler-Klub” – DRK, founded in 1907 - describing the tail as short, high set and level in extension of the upper line. The same description could be found in the breed standard of the “Süd-Deutsche Rottweilerklub” (1913) but for the first time adding that although the Rottweiler was often born with the said stub-tail, the tail was to be docked. More detailed but confirming that the short tail could be obtained by docking, the “Internationale Rottweiler-Klub” (IRK – founded in 1907) defined in its breed standard of 1913 the tail as ‘*Mit der Rückenlinie in gleicher gerader Linie liegend, darf si nicht zu dünn, aber auch nich zu klobig sein, stets kurz kupiert. Angeborener Stummelsschwänze sehr häufig un sehr erwünscht*’ (or freely translated: lying in the extension of the topline, the tail should not be too thin but neither too bulky, always shortly docked. Congenital stub-tails are very common and very desirable.) In 1921 the ADRK was founded and its breed standard (still published in May 1965 by the FCI under number 147a) read: *Die Rute wird möglichst waagrecht getragen. Sie ist kurz, hoch angesetzt, verlängert die Rückenlinie in waagerechter Richtung. Häufig ist die Stummelrute, auch Mutzschwanz genannt, angeboren; sie ist nachzukupieren wenn sie zu lang ist.* (Free translation: the tail is to be carried level. It is short, high set and level in extension of the topline. Often the dog is born with a stub-tail that is to be docked when it is too long.) The same description was repeated in a later (never deposited at the FCI) draft of 1960 (*Die Rute – Stummelrute - wird möglichst waagrecht getragen. Sie ist Kurz, stark, nicht tief angesetzt. Häufig ist die Stummelrute angeboren und muss, wenn zu lang, nachkupert werden.*) And in the later version of the breed standard of 1970 (FCI nr. 147 b, dated 25.03.1970) where one still finds a reference to a congenital stub-tail that, if too long, was to be docked: “*Rute : sie wird waagrecht getragen, ist kurz und stark. Angeborener Mutzschwanz muss, wenn zu lang, nachkupert werden.*” Realizing that the congenital stub-tail – I find references to a length up to maximum 7 vertebrae - was not only no longer common but had become rare and also that such short-born tails were seldom of the same and/or desired length, ADRK took in 1981 the internal decision (cfr. Pienkoss, Rottweiler, oc, p. 209) that all tails should be docked short. This was reflected in the later published standards of 15.02.1988 (FCI nr. 147 f : “*Kurtz kupiert, wobei ein oder zwei Rutenwirbel sichtbar erhalten bleiben*” or freely translated : short docked, leaving one or two vertebrae visible) and 16.01.1996, the latter demanding a short docked tail (2 vertebrae versus the congenital stub of up to max. 7 vertebrae and the normal 20 – 23 vertebrae of the tail in natural condition), unless the dog came from a country where docking was forbidden by law in which case, by exception, the tail could remain in natural condition.

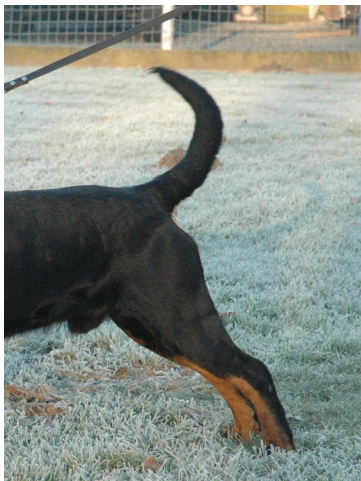


Photo: sable-tail

Nowadays, our Rottweilers are seldom if ever born with such a stub-tail and all have tails of a “normal” length, comparable to other known breeds. How can this be explained if a congenital stub-tail was supposed to be naturally and breed characteristic? Should this not mean that the genetic information for the stub-tail would even nowadays still be present in our breed and be reflected in its geno-type? Might the stub-tail in reality not have been a genetic recessive anomaly that was lost when there was no longer the need to breed for such a tail as docking was accepted or imposed to bring the tail to the wanted length? Was it really a characteristic of the breed ... or more likely a genetic “defect” that was deliberately bred in by selecting only dogs showing this “anomaly” while they later could not show this anymore in their pheno-type because of the docking, thus making a selection on the basis of the pheno-type no longer possible nor necessary ... ? In “Rottweiler” by A. Pianos, Auflage Helga Brökeland Verlag, Essen, 2008, p.209) one will find references to studies (done until in the sixties) that led to the conclusion that the stub-tail was not caused by a recessive factor (in which case the stub-tail appears in the pheno-type only if both parents are homozygote for this factor or with other words carry no other genetic information and thus both have a stub-tail) but is caused by a dominant factor (independent of the sex of the dog) with an incomplete penetrance, thus still allowing deviations in the phenotype. In the homozygote dog (carrying only information for the stub-tail), this dominant gene was found to be a lethal factor, implying only heterozygote dogs could survive, carrying genetic information for both the normal as for the stub-tail and as such explaining why dogs could be born with longer tails. I’m clearly not a scientist and certainly not highly educated in genetics ..., but would this conclusion not mean that this dominant factor, if still present in our dogs, should still have an important influence in defining the pheno-type while in reality it hardly ever does? When and how this dominant genetic information was lost or was its entrance so weakened? Might the most plausible explanation be that the number of pups with stub-tails has always been smaller –and thus their influence on the breed much more limited- than suggested in the first breed standards? Maybe one of your readers can enlighten us in a later edition of your magazine? In practice, once docking was allowed and even imposed to bring the tail to the desired length, breeders of course no longer had to pay attention to such questions: all tails were simply docked.

When as of 01.06.1998 because German legislation forbade the docking of tails, the German Rottweiler Club (ADRK) did not accept that the Rottweiler would worldwide remain a docked breed while in his own mother country the Rottweiler would be undocked, no longer the leading example but an exception allowed by the breed standard. Therefore the ADRK asked for a change of the standard, which was according to FCI-regulations her prerogative as “the breed standard belongs to the country of origin of the breed” and which was granted. On 06.04.2000 the FCI-breed standard was changed to:

TAIL: *In natural condition, level in extension of the upper line; at ease may be hanging.*



“At ease may be hanging” (foto : munanis)



“Level in extension of the body” (foto Munanis)

Basically, exception made for the disappeared reference to a congenital stub-tail, this breed standard still defines the carriage of the tail the same way as it did a hundred year ago: level in extension of the upper line.

Some will say this change was not necessary under the then valid breed standard and that it was only inspired by a fall back in the sale of German puppies. There may be truth in this but I think it is wiser to say the mother-country of a breed should take the lead and show the example or, at the very least, that this change was a wise anticipation of a continent-wide legislation based on a strongly growing social conviction.

Every deviation from the description in the breed standard is to be seen as faulty: ringtail, tails set too high or too low, etc. ... even the sable-tail although this proud dominant carriage is usually – even by the first breed standards – accepted and not penalized.

The desired set and carriage of the tail is not to be seen on itself but in correlation with (amongst others as f.i. the set, length, weight and strength of the tail) the angulations of the hipbone. For example, a correctly tilted hipbone (croup) will allow the tail to be carried level in extension of the upper line or hanging down when at ease while a too tilted hipbone will affect the possibility to carry the tail in extension of the top-line and/or as a sable tail but will force the tail more downwards.

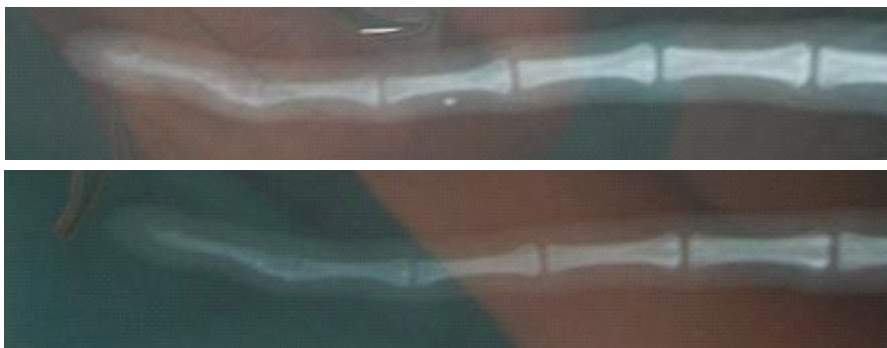
Important is that in the breed standard of 2000, the list of eliminating faults was completed with:

Tail: Kink tail, ring-tail, with strong lateral deviation.

The reason why these faults lead to disqualification is not based on cosmetic but on health reasons.



4 PHOTOS OF a KINKTAIL



The kink-tail or “knickrute” (sometimes also called hook-tail) shows a bent along its length which is caused by two or more vertebrae grown together and can have many forms (kink-tail, hook-tail, cork-screw). It is a hereditary (genetic defect) physical abnormality in the tail, itself being an extension of the spinal column. If only

present in the tail itself, the kink will seldom bother the dog but the kink can very well develop itself (the kink develops before birth but is sometimes detectable only after a few weeks) in other parts of the spinal column (neck, chest, loins, ...) and can then cause important problems. Literature shows that there can be a correlation between the kink-tail of one of the parent-dogs and serious anomalies in the spinal column and/or even the organic systems of the pups!

The ringtail with strong lateral deviation is not caused by an abnormality of the vertebrae but by a shortening of the tendons or a too strong tension of tendons and/or muscles.

This brings me to the judging of the tail. In itself, judging the Rottweiler's tail should not be difficult as his tail does not differ from those we have always seen on many other breeds and its definition in the breed standard seems simple. Nevertheless, for the following reasons, I would like to bring some aspects about the way the tail has to be judged before the International Committee of Judges of the International Federation of Rottweilerfriends (IFR) and/or before the judges-seminar that the IFR will probably organize next year.

Some still refer to some unwritten rule that *"the tail is not yet to be judged too severely as it is still new in the breed"*. This is hard to understand, especially when about the disqualifying faults. The breed standard dates from 06 April 2000 so after eight years of breeding/showing/judging the Rottweiler with a tail, we can hardly still refer to a lack of experience or knowledge to motivate a lack of interest in judging the tail. Above that, the FCI-breed standard did not make the judging of the tail an option but made it an immediate obligation without a period of transition. As we know how the breed standard wants the tail to be carried and as we know that every tail that deviates from this description is faulty, there is no reason not to take the tail into account. Although homogeneity is of course always to be preferred, I fully understand everybody having his own opinion on the importance of such deviations (sable-tail, ringtail, feathered tail, long, thin, etc. ...) on any individual dog and its implications on the quality (and grading) of that dog. Being a judge myself, I even demand to have this freedom of appreciation!!! Things are different though when speaking about tails that show faults that should lead to disqualification. Here, in my opinion, the judge does not have the freedom to choose to disqualify or not disqualify as the FCI-breed standard imposes this disqualification just as it does when the dog misses one or more teeth.

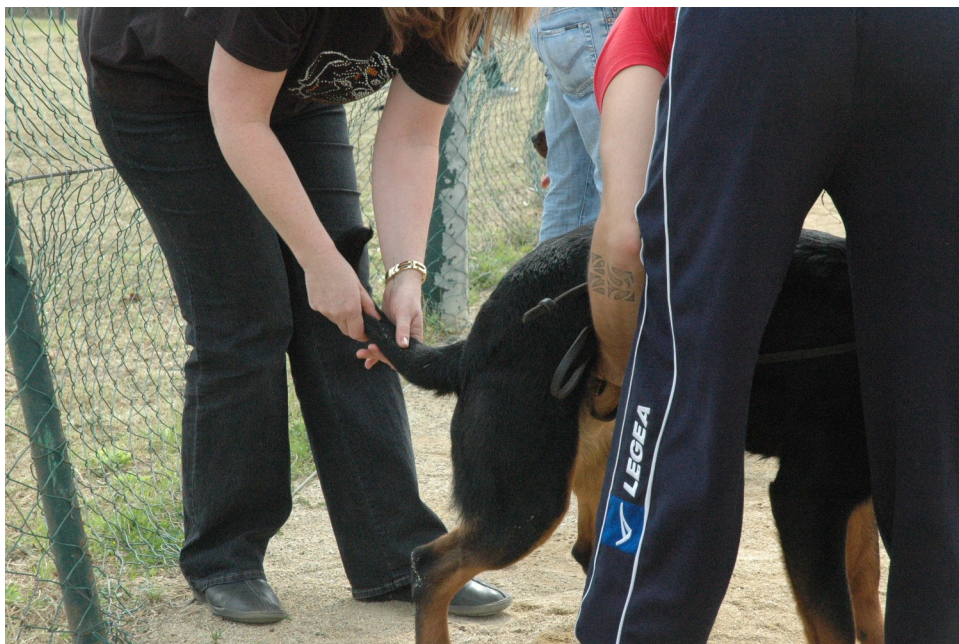


Photo: checking the tail by feeling it.

Part 2

The kink-tail is more or less easy to detect but then in my opinion only by feeling the tail ! It is correct that sometimes the kink in the tail is so clear to see that it is impossible to pass it or at least unthinkable not to check it. Such is however not always the case and personally, even on more than one occasion, I have had the displeasure of having to disqualify a dog with an undeniable kink-tail while the same dog had previously obtained excellent show results and/or passed a breed suitability-test under breed specialists ... but who had not examined/judged the dog's tail by feeling it ... ! On the other hand, also more than once, I have checked a dog that at first sight could be suspected of having a kink-tail while feeling the tail learned that the vertebrae were not grown together but cramped by muscles in a form that was more or less a hook but not a "kink" in the sense of the breed standard. Just looking was not enough to know this either !

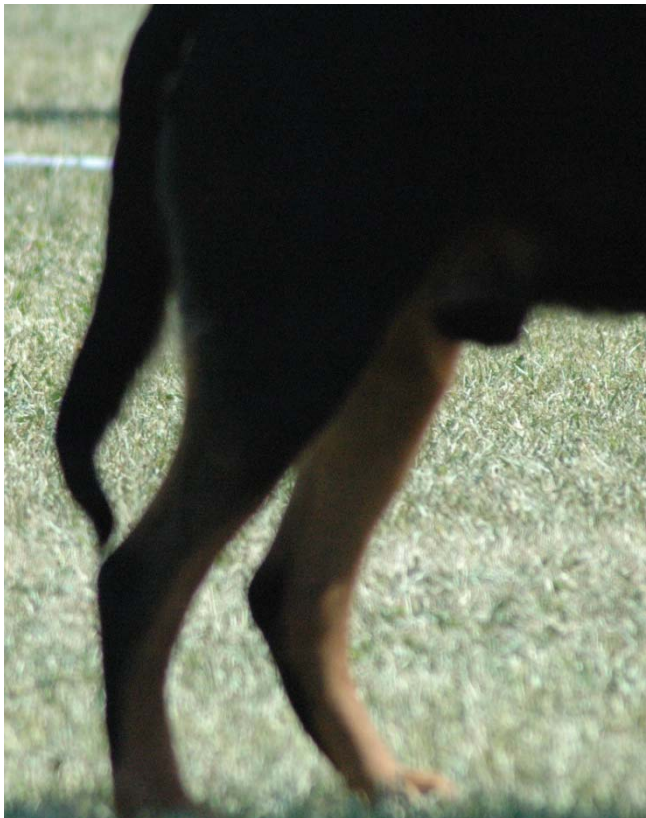


Photo : suspect of kinktail but after feeling : found not guilty !

In my opinion, it is the judges responsibility to be aware of all eliminating faults and thus to actively check the dog for these as they are not always visible by superficial examination. A dog show is more than just about having the most beautiful dog, it is an occasion to select breeding dogs and as such the judges' opinion has implications on the future of the breed. As the kinktail touches the health of the dog and of its further generations, no judge can nor should take this lightly. It is only by feeling the tail that one can make sure of the correctness of it, just as for example it takes feeling to check for both testicles, actively closing the mouth and opening the lips to check the bite, opening the mouth to check the presence of both M3-teeth in the lower jaw, etc. If feeling the tail is not decisive - no judge brings an x-ray scanner with him - the decision belongs to the judge and him alone. Personally I believe in then giving the dog the advantage of the doubt.

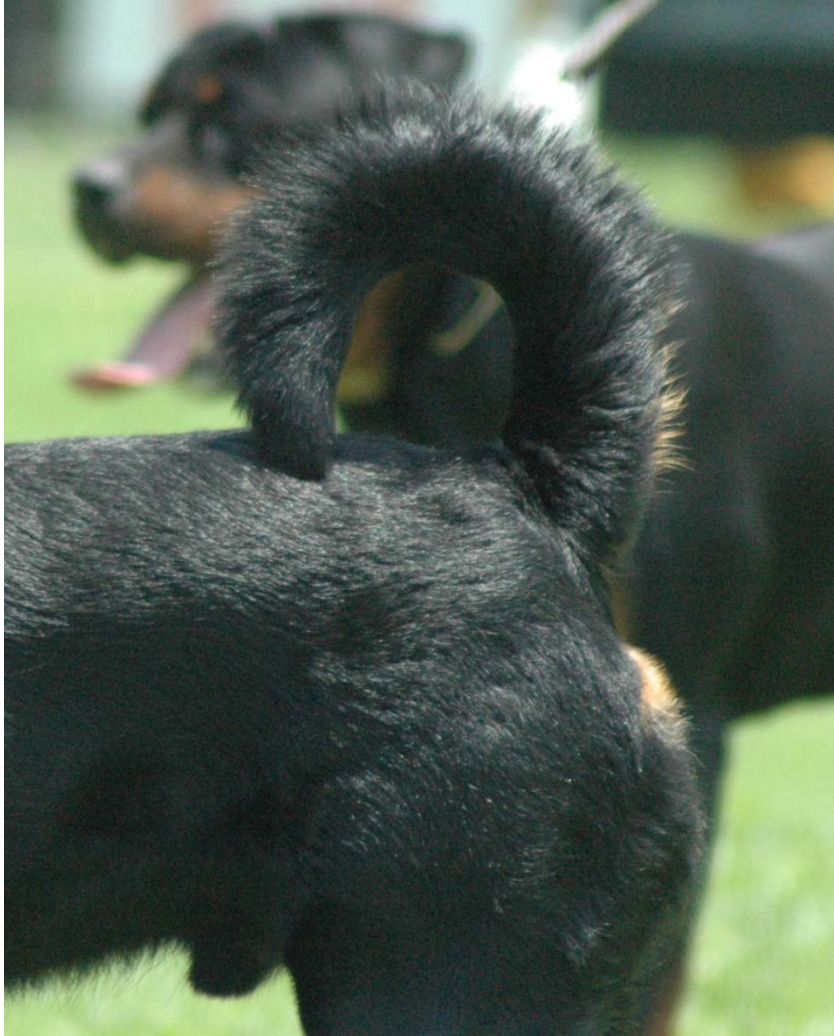


Photo : ringtail



Photo : ringtail

More difficult is the appreciation of what is meant by the eliminating "*ring-tail, with strong lateral deviation*" .

Even abstraction made of the open definition of the word “strong”, the binding text of the breed standard is the German version and I fear that the English and French translations (cfr. www.fci.be) differ somewhat from the German text, a difference that is more than just a nuance (“ring-tail, with strong lateral deviation” versus “*engerollte, stark seitlich zur Rückenlinie getragene Rute*“). I’m indeed not sure the word „ringtail“ covers the exact meaning of „*engerollte*“. A ringtail exists when its tip touches the topline so a closed circle is formed („long tail, all or part of which curls in a circular fashion“ - cfr. www.thekennelclub.org.uk). The German text however does not use the word „*ringel-rute*“ (=ringtail) but „*engerollte rute*“ which can be used for any tail that curls over the body, even if it does not curl as far as a ringtail does ! This means that even the tail that does not reach as far as the dogs topline or the tailroot but just curls over while it is carried with a strong lateral deviation, must lead to disqualification. The FCI-breed standard is then more severe than usually brought into practice !



Photo : *engerollte stark seitlich zur Rückenlinie getragene Rute* – disqualification.

The „lehrtafel“ of the ADRK (cfr. drawing) on the other hand, suggests a definite ringtail, even one that curls almost – but not quite - as much as for example the tail of the Appenzeller Sennenhund, several Spitzhund- and/or polarbreeds, etc. But then again, this one drawing shows just one example of the many imaginable and does not offer a limited definition. The unclear use of vocabulary and/or translation leaves in my opinion (too ?) much room for individual interpretation and will be one of the issues to be put before the Judges Committee of the IFR, hoping the discussion in this committee may lead towards more homogeneity in interpretation and appreciation.



ADRK-lehrtafel – drawing of a disqualifying tail



3 Photo's "ringtails with strong lateral deviation - disqualifying faults"

Another issue might be to make judges aware of the harm some people do to their dogs to hide a faulty tail and to learn how to recognize the symptoms of this abuse : cutting sinew or muscle to prevent the tail rising or curling above top-line level (these dogs will wag but never lift their tail again, not even when touched ...) or intentionally causing the so called (extremely painful) “cold-watertail” or “dead tail” that sticks horizontally out for a few inches (up to 1/3 of the length of the tail) and then points straight downwards and will remain like this even when all stress-factors are gone and the tail should relax.

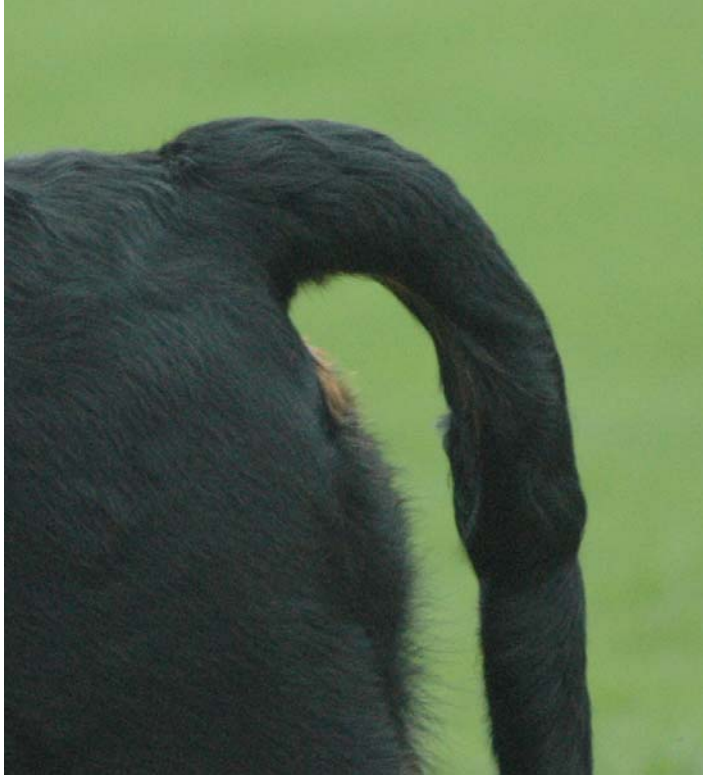


Photo : suspected of having a watertail.

Then I'm still left with the FCI-Show Regulation (01.01.2008) that again leaves some room for interpretation and discussion : *“Dogs with docked tails or cropped ears are to be admitted in accordance with the legal regulations of their home countries and those of the country where the show takes place. The judging of docked and undocked or cropped and uncropped dogs must be done without any discrimination and solely in accordance with the valid breed standard.”* The first sense is only about having to allow docked dogs to participate a show or not. The second part however, is a directive for the judge. One interpretation is that docked and undocked dogs must be judged alike, without discrimination. There is however the additive : *“... solely in accordance with the valid breed standard”* that cannot be overlooked and that suggests that docked and undocked dogs are only to be judged alike when the breed standard allows both docked and undocked tails. This would mean that if, as is the case for the Rottweiler, the breed standard demands the tail to be left in natural condition, the judge must take this into account ! The IFR has until now read this directive in the sense that we should not discriminate between docked and undocked dogs (for ex. : the female IFR-World Champion and Best in Show 2007 was docked) and as the FCI-breed standard does not list the docked tail as a disqualifying deviation, this is also my personal opinion. I admit though, that this can lead to an unpleasant situation and even a blatant discrimination of an undocked dog that is disqualified because of a faulty tail while other dogs in the ring might have shown the same faulty tail ... had they not been docked ! Maybe I'm ending this article with more questions than I started with - but then again, nobody ever said a judges' thoughts (or decisions) should be easy.

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