

CHANGES TO INTERVARIETY BREEDINGS OF THE BELGIAN SHEPHERD DOG in Australia

by Kathryn Winton - January 2013

*EXCERPT FROM THE ANKC LTD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING & BOARD MEETING HELD IN MELBOURNE ON 20TH & 21ST OCTOBER, 2012
At the recent Annual General Meeting of the Australian National Kennel Council Limited held in Melbourne:*

10. Belgian Shepherd Inter-variety breeding

It was resolved that the policy on Belgian Shepherd inter-variety breeding be amended to:

“The ANKC Ltd permits interbreeding between varieties of Belgian Shepherds when needed for promoting health and genetic diversity (in accordance with FCI General Assembly 2011) – avoiding breeding long coated to wire coated or risk of untypical coat texture.

Breeding combinations permitted:

- 1. Groenendael x Tervueren*
- 2. Tervueren x Malinois*
- 3. Laekenois x Malinois*

The progeny of the inter-variety mating is registered in the ANKC Stud Book, each puppy according to its variety.”

This article was written to assist all in understanding the logic and reasoning behind the recent changes to breeding policies of the Belgian Shepherd by the ANKC.

What is an Intervariety Breeding?

As you know, Belgian Shepherds come in 4 varieties – Groenendael, Tervueren, Laekenois and Malinois. According to the breed standard, the only differences between the varieties are their coat length, colour and texture.

An Intervariety Breeding means simply breeding Belgians of two different varieties together, but only under the following allowable combinations as per the 2012 policy.

1. Groenendael x Tervueren
2. Tervueren x Malinois
3. Laekenois x Malinois

Breeding combinations are therefore not “Open slather” or “no holds barred” – there are still restrictions in place, which prevent the creation of black Laekenois and black Malinois being created, which are colour/coat combinations not acceptable by the breed standard.

Intervariety breedings are practiced overseas, and have historically been done to expand gene pools all over the world, including in Australia for about a 10 year period till 2007 when severe restrictions were imposed by the ANKC.

Worldwide change needed.

The catalyst for change to worldwide pedigree dog breeding practices was the very public airing of UK's BBC One TV program in 2008 "Pedigree Dogs Exposed". The program was broadcast in Australia on the ABC in 2009. "Pedigree Dogs Exposed" damned breed standards, judging standards, and breeders for breeding practices that compromised the health of pedigree dogs.

This program was not aimed directly at our breed as Belgian Shepherd Dogs are considered a comparatively healthy breed. However, it was a wakeup call to concerned Belgian breeders across Australia. These concerned breeders began to seek ways to improve breeding practices including the concept of widening the gene pool. Logically, a widened gene pool allows more scope to breed away from undesirable traits within our own Belgian Breed, breeding towards uniformity across the diverging type between the Belgian varieties, and selectively breeding for quality breed traits - regardless of coat colour and texture.

Following this worldwide bad publicity for breeding practices and subsequent public outrage, the FCI (Federation Cynologique Internationale – or World Canine Association), based in Belgium (the country of origin of the Belgian Shepherd), issued a memorandum in 2011 decreeing their support and encouragement of a worldwide intervariety breeding of dogs that had similar varieties, including the Belgian Shepherd.

During 2007-2012 in Australia, it was still permissible to apply to the ANKC (Australian National Kennel Council) seeking approval to undertake an Intervariety Breeding. The ANKC person/s appointed to approve or deny each breeding request were not necessarily Belgian owners, fanciers or breeders, and therefore, did not necessarily have a working knowledge of the full genetic uniqueness of our breed. Sadly, the ANKC refused numerous experienced Belgian breeders from proceeding with each and every Intervariety request that they submitted. This meant that only avenue to expand the gene pool utilizing local dogs was thwarted by the rules in place at the time.

There was need for change locally and nationally, not just overseas.

Background research

A handful of Australian breeders commenced sourcing references, data, supporting documents, and historical records including listings of all prior intervariety breedings done in Australia.

A comparison was done of known disaster mismarked pups compared to known correctly marked pups.

Identified in these historical records were Australian breeders who had previously undertaken intervariety litters, breeders who had bought and bred on with a pup from an intervariety litter, and stud dog owners who had allowed their dogs to be used at stud.

It was evident from this research that a vast majority of historic breeders/stud dog owners had previously embraced Intervariety, with little or no severely mismarked puppies resulting from the breedings.

The survey was born

The next step was to determine exactly how many Australian current breeders and stud dogs owners would be supportive of re-introducing Intervariety Breedings in Australia in accordance with changes to FCI recommendations.

This was a task undertaken by the Belgian Shepherd Dog Club of Queensland Inc, on behalf of individual breeders.

The survey

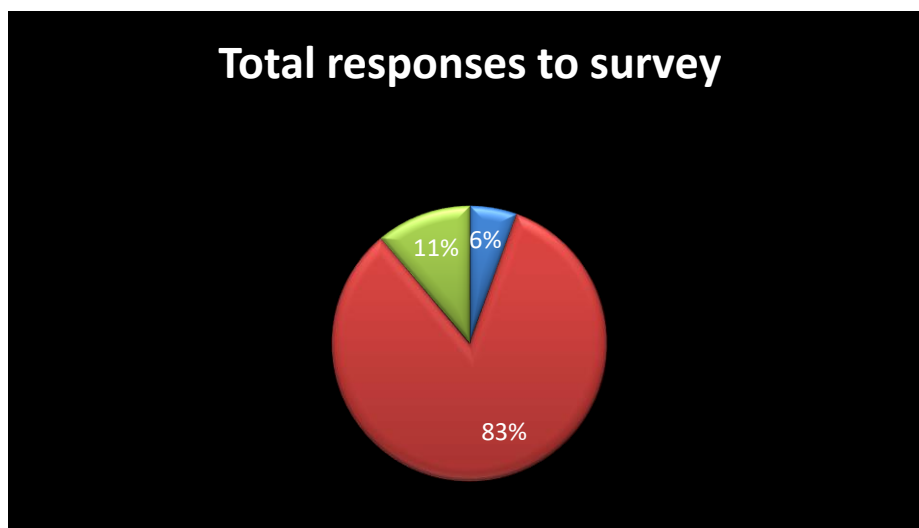
There are three breed clubs in Australia – in NSW, Victoria and Queensland. Some breeders, stud dog owners and exhibitors, while maintaining membership of their appropriate state registering body, are not members of a breed club. Others live in a state where there is no breed club. Others are members of all three clubs.

It was therefore decided to canvass Individuals to obtain a more accurate picture of the current situation than would be gained by asking breed clubs only.

The Belgian Shepherd Dog Club of Queensland Inc identified a total of 72 current Belgian Shepherd breeders, owners of stud dogs and exhibitors throughout Australia.

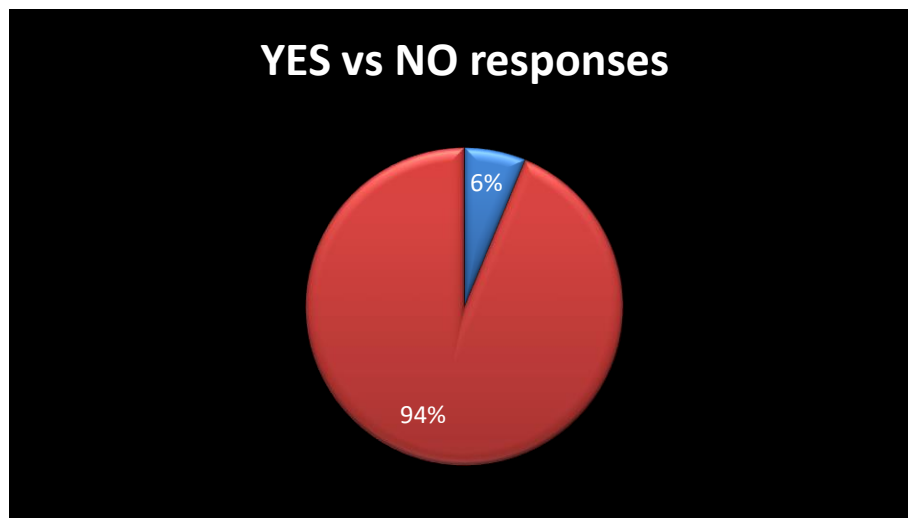
These people were canvassed with a breed survey – by mail, email and at ringside; requiring a written response to support the vote. The possible responses from the survey were “YES I support Intervariety breeding of Groenendael Tervueren, Tervueren x Malinois, Malinois x Laekenois”, or “NO I do not support Intervariety breeding” of Belgian Shepherds.

More than 83% of all known Belgian show breeders have responded to the survey.



Red – YES to Intervariety 60 breeders
Blue – NO to Intervariety 4 breeders
Green – nil response to survey 8 breeders

A landslide majority of **94%** of responses are in support of this reform.



Red – YES to Intervariety 60 breeders
Blue – NO to Intervariety 4 breeders

Australia's most experienced breeders (including, but not limited to, those who are also judges) support Intervariety matings, due to their knowledge that such matings have produced some of the most typical and healthy Belgians in the past and present.

Other considerations

- Although using imported frozen semen is an option which has been taken up by many breeders, this has limitations, including small litter sizes, many "misses" with no puppies, cost prohibitive for many breeders, and logistical issues for breeders living remotely from AI breeding centres etc. Breeders overseas have very limited access to collection centres and are reluctant to travel to collect their dogs.
- There is a limited gene pool world-wide so the option of importing new dogs/frozen semen of the same variety to Australia does not widen our local gene pool as there is now so little diversity of bloodlines world-wide in each variety of Belgian Shepherd Dog.
- Importing fresh lines from overseas has become cost prohibitive, with quarantine costs increasing by at least 30% in just 5 years. Airlines now charge by cubic meters not weight, so larger dogs are becoming extremely expensive to ship.
- Intervariety breeding is essential in the Laekenois to maintain the correct coat. Breeders with this variety are fully aware of the responsibility to maintain coat texture by using Malinois. Also due to the limited gene pool, breeders all around the world are doing such Intervariety matings to ensure the quality in their breeding programs. Those breed enthusiasts who do not live in

countries where this mating is allowed are forced to import show stock from other countries.

- Issues such as lack of mask, which have been cited as a reason not to allow matings between Groenendael and Tervueren, are now known to be faults carried by the Groenendael but hidden from view. DNA testing can now be done to ensure the Groenendael carries the masking gene prior to mating if necessary. It is also a fault that can usually be seen by 8 weeks of age, and subsequently these puppies can be put onto the Limited Register, or bred on with wisely if other traits are worth perpetuating.
- Benefits of widening the gene pool are to
 - minimise the prevalence of Mendelian genetic disorders currently present in the breed, such as hip dysplasia, epilepsy, cancer and cataracts.
 - minimise the current problems of decreased litter size and semen quality which can be associated with inbreeding
 - improve health, breed type and structure.
- In the USA intervariety matings are forbidden as the four varieties are not considered the same breed. Unfortunately, this has caused the varieties in the USA to “grow apart” with regard to type, proving that it is important to maintain Intervariety matings to maintain consistent type across all four varieties.

The current situation worldwide (Sept 2012)

The FCI encourages interbreeding between varieties when needed for promoting health and genetic diversity (FCI General Assembly 2011) – avoiding breeding long coated to wire coated or risk of untypical coat texture as detailed in their 2011 memorandum. The FCI is based in Belgium, the country of origin of the Belgian Shepherd.

- Subsequent to the 2011 change in FCI policy, Germany has recently approved intervariety breedings with Breed club permission and German breeders have already produced 3 Groenendael x Tervueren litters this year.
- Sweden has reinstated intervariety breedings, effective 1st Jan 2013.
- Finland allows the above requested intervariety breedings with no restrictions. Groenendael to Malinois matings may be allowed with club permission.
- Norway allows the three requested intervariety breedings with club permission.
- The UK allows intervariety matings by permission from representatives from each of the 3 breed clubs. Permission has been granted for several Groenendael x Tervueren matings, one Tervueren x Malinois mating and one Laekenois x Malinois mating.
- Intervariety matings are allowed in Ireland with consultation with the Breed Club. To date there have been four Intervariety matings of Groenendael x Tervueren.

- In France, where the breed is most numerous, the above intervariety breeding combinations are allowed with Breed club permission.
- In Italy unrestricted intervariety matings are allowed.
- In Canada there are no restrictions as to intervariety matings. This system has not produced irresponsible Intervariety matings and the quality of dogs in Canada is equal to those found elsewhere.
- In Australia, as of Oct 2012, we are now allowed only the following intervariety breeding combinations. It is breeder discretion, with no outside person overseeing breeding choices.
 1. Groenendael x Tervueren
 2. Tervueren x Malinois
 3. Laekenois x Malinois

Do I have to do Intervariety breedings?

NO, you don't HAVE to undertake any Intervariety breedings if you don't want to. The best male to compliment your female should always be chosen as the best breeding combination option – but now you have the choice to review other varieties in an attempt to locate the best possible breeding candidates. It would not be wise to undertake “compromise” breedings just to attempt an Intervariety breeding. Always choose the best of the best producers for the parents of each litter you attempt whether you choose same-variety or intervariety breeding stock. You will now not be restricted to anyone else's preferences or limitations, providing that you keep within the above allowable combinations of variety breedings. The breeding combination choices are now widened, with each breeder now able to take full responsibility (and credit) for the outcomes in their own whelping box. The onus of each and every puppy bred now falls back entirely to the breeder, and not to the ANKC appointed person approving the breeding. We are each responsible for every decision made.

Will Intervariety encourage indiscriminate breedings?

NO – indiscriminate breedings occur with or without the ANKC's blessing on Intervariety.

The answer to reducing indiscriminate breedings is educating our breeders to breed wisely. Enlarging the gene pool assists with diversifying the genes that are being bred from, which assists in the longevity of the breed. Poor breeding choices result in substandard puppies. A breeder who plans to produce quality stock will quickly learn to make good breeding choices in selecting suitable breeding stock.

Additionally, some apparently poor breeding choices that we are told “will ruin the breed” may simply be selections misunderstood by the rest of us. The breeder may actually have a clearly defined breeding plan to fix, correct or set certain traits, which requires a compromise on one facet of the standard while concentrating on fixing the undesirable trait. Ask the breeder of their intentions before making judgments on their breeding choices.

Finally, if a breeding “does not take” or is a failure in anticipated outcomes – let's all learn from what was produced so that we can move forward all the wiser for the experience.

How do I register a litter of Intervariety bred pups?

Intervariety bred pups are registered as the variety that they are born, regardless of the variety of the parents.

The paperwork is exactly the same as you had previously done for same variety breedings. To help the office staff quickly process your application for a litter with several varieties born, it is suggested to put the different varieties on separate application forms, and staple the forms together. This has been tried and tested with Tervueren puppies born in a litter from two Groenendaels, and for Tervueren puppies born from two Malinois. That way, the staff don't have to know too much about our breed and can quickly and efficiently process the applications correctly without thinking.

But what if I want to maintain “pure” varieties?

That is your choice, and you are welcome to do so. Widening the gene pool is essential – and this encompasses blending bloodlines (intervariety) as well as maintaining “old” original lines in parallel. Please make your uniquely old lines available to other breeders who may be requiring your dog's strengths to counter their dog's weaknesses.

Just remember though, that “pure” Groenendael can only be proven by DNA analysis, regardless of how many generations of black to black breedings precede the dog in question. DNA analysis can identify hidden Tervueren genes or recessive black genes. Same with Malinois carrying hidden long coat genes. 3 generations clear does not make “pure”.

What about missing or poor masks?

Logically, if you can see a good mask, then the dog must be carrying good masking genes. If your dog sports a poor mask, it must be carrying poor masking genes. If your dog is a Groenendael, then you obviously cannot know what masking gene is hidden behind that black coat – but you can DNA test to certify if the dog carries the correct masking genes. Thanks to DNA testing, there is no fear now of accidentally passing on missing masks. It is up to the breeder to DNA test, to know their lines, and to breed wisely. There is now no need to avoid breeding with dogs with missing mask, as you can now test potential breeding candidates before considering breeding to your missing masked stock.

What about mismarked puppies?

Apart from missing or poor masks (covered above), the only other disastrous colour issue faced by our breed historically is the very rarely seen black and tan mismarked pups. By this, we mean the colouring of the Dobermann and Rottweiler. This is NOT caused by Intervariety, but by a genetic anomaly that can be screened for with DNA testing.

What about dilution of the Chinchilla gene?

Historically, we were led to believe that faded colour in Tervueren and Malinois was due to Intervariety breedings causing a dilution of the Chinchilla gene. The 2010 study in Canada by Dr Schmutz proved via DNA analysis that there is NO chinchilla gene in our breed. Another myth busted. Lighter coloured coats than preferred can easily be selectively bred with to remedy colour.

What about red tinged Groenendaels?

It is now known that red tinges in Groenendael coats are either results of environment (sun and surf, or diet and even parasitic infestations etc.) or just genetic to that family line of dogs (much like freckles are a family trait). It is NOT caused by Intervariety. Historically, many experienced breeders have claimed the sought after blue-black Groenendael coats are found more prominently in Intervariety pups than in Groenendael x Groenendael litters.

What about 3 generations clear?

Before DNA testing, the 3 generation theory was accepted by some as a good breeding practice. However, now that testing can ascertain the genetic makeup of a Belgian, there is no reason to need to keep 3 generations clear. There is NO scientific evidence to support the myth of limiting breedings of an Intervariety Bred pup to that of its own variety, let alone isolating breeding choices for three full generations. In fact, this outmoded concept merely severely limits the gene pool to the detriment of the breed.

Finally

During the preceding years, a plethora of technical information regarding Intervariety has been gathered by individuals as well as by the Belgian Shepherd Dog Club of Qld. Many of the topics discussed in this article are simply answered (the Keep It Simple principle) – but can be backed up with technical facts, recent data, correspondence and reports etc. Too much detail is tedious to the majority of us, but is here for anyone who wants to view technical stuff. Please contact secretary@bsdqc.com if you wish to be sent more data.

Belgian breeders in Australia are, on the whole, very responsible with the majority performing all of the available health screening tests on their dogs before they enter the breeding program. We believe that these breeders have the knowledge and ability to determine the best matings for their dogs from the gene pool currently available.

The future of the Belgian Shepherd is in our hands. We are its caretakers, and now we are each responsible for making our own best choices for breeding future generations of Belgians. Let's educate those who are new to breeding &/or new to the breed and encourage responsible breeding practices in line with FCI worldwide policy.

The future is very bright for our beloved Belgian Shepherd breed.

Kathryn Winton (January 2013)