

Talking the Talk

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All sports have their unique lingo, the shorthand that allows participants to communicate quickly and efficiently, and ours is no exception.

Since many dog breed names can be long and unwieldy, shortened versions are common. However, the most likely nickname – to a non-conformation person – isn't necessarily the nickname dog people use. What may seem "arbitrary" to you is "tradition" to us ... and as much of a giveaway as referring to a female of the species as a ... well, "female" ... and the Dachshund as a wiener dog.

Breed nicknames are, by definition, short, yet they are also precise, which is why no serious dog person will refer to an Old English Sheepdog as a sheepdog or a Siberian Husky as a husky. There are scads of sheepdog and husky breeds so we use the shortened "Old English" or the initials "OES" and "Siberian" or "Sibe."

Other breeds for which we use initials include GSD (German Shepherd Dog), GSP (German Shorthaired Pointer) and PBGV (Petit Basset Griffon Vendeen), the latter also sometimes referred to as the "Petit."

Yet two breeds with four words in their names, Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier and Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, are never referred to as SCWT or CKCS. We use "Wheaten" and "Cavalier." The public tends to refer to the latter breed as a King Charles Spaniel, which is inaccurate because there is actually another breed known throughout the world – except for the USA and Canada – as the King Charles Spaniel. On this continent, it is called the English Toy Spaniel (shortened to English Toy, ETS or ET). It has the flat face, short nose and bulging eyes of a Pekingese or Pug so it looks nothing like a Cavalier.

Some dog people further shorten Cavalier to "Cav" but to many owners and fanciers (including me) that just doesn't sound dignified enough for a royal breed ... so Cavalier is as short a nickname as we'll accept. (For the same reason, I cringe when some owners call their Afghan Hounds "Afs" or "Affies." I know it's meant affectionately but it just sounds too cutesy and common. Not regal enough for this king of dogs. Call me a purist.)

Speaking of common phrases, "close but no cigar" could certainly apply to the oft-times arbitrary nature of breed nicknames. Take the four Tibetan breeds, for example. The Tibetan Terrier, Tibetan Spaniel and Tibetan Mastiff are shortened to TT, Tibbie and TM, respectively. The fourth breed, Lhasa Apso, is by comparison much less tricky: Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet. It's interesting that Lhasa is universally accepted since Brussels Griffon and Rhodesian Ridgeback people cannot abide their breeds being referred to as Brussels and Rhodesians. It is Griffons and Ridgebacks, please.

Years ago, a junior editor at a dog magazine I used to edit was working on a Tibetan Terrier column and thought she would save space and show the writer how familiar she was with doggie parlance by shortening all the Tibetan Terrier references to "Tibbie." Well, you guessed it: No one caught the shorthand and the writer went ballistic. Why is the Tibetan Terrier TT while the equally Tibetan Spaniel can correctly be shortened to Tibbie? It just is. And knowing the subtle difference can catapult you to head of the class in Doggie Shorthand 101 versus wearing the pointy hat in Doggie Duncespeak.

Although the much-maligned American Pit Bull Terrier and its brethren are referred to generically as the "bully" breeds, the one breed specifically entitled to use that moniker is the Bull Terrier. The American Staffordshire Terrier is shortened to "AmStaff" while the Staffordshire Bull Terrier is "Stafford" or "Staffie."

As with the Tibetan breeds, it is important to know which of several breeds gets to use a given nickname. Which is officially the "Mal," the Alaskan Malamute or the Belgian Malinois? If you guessed the Malamute, you're right. For the Malinois, dropping the Belgian must suffice. And while most people are familiar enough with the Australian Shepherd to recognize "Aussie" as its nickname, have you ever heard of the Australian Terrier? It's a great little breed but it doesn't get to be called the Aussie ... even though the Australian Terrier is from Australia and the Australian Shepherd is not.

Speaking of terriers from Australia, here is another peculiarity to ponder. Why is the Silky Terrier, which is shortened to

Silky, pluralized as Silkys rather than Silkies?

Hold that thought! Another installment of “Talking the Talk” coming soon.

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