

Vive la Difference

Allan Reznik

JULY 22, 2009, 8:35 P.M. EDT

I've just returned from visiting a breeder-exhibitor friend in Northern California who, after many years of showing a large, athletic sighthound breed with great success, is down to just a pair of sighthounds. She and her husband have discovered the joys of living with two much smaller breeds that require less coat care, less exercise and less dog-show paraphernalia to haul around in the van every weekend.

Breeders take on a different breed for several reasons. Often, it's health related. Many breeders who work as professional groomers eventually come down with carpal tunnel syndrome or arthritis. It seems to be an occupational hazard.

A few pro groomers I know have downsized from Airedales to Norwich, Lakeland or Welsh Terriers. Similarly, there are many Poodle people who have gone from the large Standard variety to Miniatures and Toys. For those who couldn't live without a wire-coated breed or deny themselves the artistic expression of carving out a Poodle trim, choosing a smaller, related breed or variety is the perfect solution.

Living space can be an issue; so can energy level – ours! As we get older, we might be seeking the same look and temperament in a breed we can take around the ring at a brisk walk rather than a marathon run.

So we have Akita breeders turning to Shibas; Old English Sheepdog and Bearded Collie people flipping for Tibetan Terriers; Collie fans falling for Shelties; and even Portuguese Water Dog exhibitors discovering the Lowchen, significantly smaller but sporting the same lion clip.

For years now, many Afghan Hound exhibitors have been smitten by the Chinese Crested, which has an elegant, statuesque, "sighthound in miniature" look about it. In Great Britain, huge numbers of Cavalier breeders also own their "cousins," English Toy Spaniels (called "King Charles Spaniels" over there), a related breed that comes in the same four colors but with a more extreme, short-faced appearance. A handful of North American Cavalier breeder-exhibitors have also succumbed to the charms of the "Charlie," often importing them from the same British friends they've bought Cavaliers from.

If it isn't possible, for reasons of space or numbers, to house a dog or two of a second breed, fanciers can explore co-ownership arrangements (where the dog lives with his "other mother"), or even handle or groom a dog of a different breed at shows.

I had a memorable weekend last year being pressed into service by a couple of friends – with ring conflicts and bad feet! – to show a Saluki, a Tibetan Mastiff and a Cavalier within the space of a few short hours. What fun to test your mettle showing dogs of such different temperaments and sizes. Each is also shown in a different manner and moved at a different speed.

Whether you're going from coated to hairless or giant to tiny – or, for some of us, tiny to giant – it's an enjoyable challenge to take on a new breed, whether permanently or temporarily.

- Read more of The Dog Insider blog -