

Breeder's Notebook: Good Omens, Bad Omens

How an unexpected fault sparked discussion among breeders.

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For the past several years, I've shared my portrait at the top of this page with one of my Salukis, Omen. At the time it was taken, he was not my first choice for a photo partner. I had top winners, Salukis with glamorous feathering and even a cute puppy to choose from. Each managed to look like I was pulling its toenails out to make it pose for a picture.

But there was Omen – light-pigmented, short-feathered and with a bad bite – moving in front of the camera every time the chosen model looked photogenic. As the deadline loomed, "Get out of the way, Omen!" finally changed to, "Fine, get in the picture." So my only non-show dog became my representative for a breeding column. As it turned out, I couldn't have made a better choice.

The jinx factor

Breeding dogs involves genetics, reproduction, responsibility, emotion and just a little superstition. I had already learned not to declare, "I've never had that problem in my dogs," when expecting a new litter. However, just a week before Omen's birth, I inadvertently uttered that phrase when discussing severe overbites. The puppies were born, and I'd forgotten about my blunder until Omen's baby teeth came in and I saw the perfect example of a severe overbite.

The technical term is a brachygnathism, but breeders commonly call it overshot, or if it's so extreme that the upper canines are in front of the lower canines (like Omen's were), a parrot mouth, shark mouth or pig jaw. There's no way to fix the condition.

Correct occlusion (the way the upper and lower teeth fit together) depends on the interlock of the canine teeth to essentially guide and pull the lower jaw to approximately the same length as the upper jaw. Once the canine teeth are on the wrong side of each other, even extracting the deciduous (baby) canines to get the upper ones out of the way is to no avail.

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