Some Thoughts on "The Bite"...
By Elizabeth Hennessy, DVM

I often find myself asking my puppy owners "How is your puppy's bite?" The standard reply is "Oh, just fine. He/she bites a lot, no problem with that bite." This is our first hurdle, the distinction between "bite", "does bite", "is biting" and so on. So I will begin with teeth. Teeth are involved with "bite" regardless of which word form is intended.

The dog (and yes to the disillusionment of some, Bull Terriers are dogs) has the following dental formula: (Think from midnose to angle of jaw)

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<th>I</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>PM</th>
<th>M</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper Jaw</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Jaw</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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X 2 (right and left) = 42 teeth

I : INCISOR- The sharp little teeth in the front, designed to grab and pinch.
C : Canine - Alias “fangs”, designed to rip and tear.
PM : PREMOLAR - Small triangular teeth (except for PM 4. It’s big). They look like shark teeth and can sheer a leash in seconds.
M : MOLAR- Designed for crushing and grinding. Need I say more...

Open your Bull Terrier's mouth (if possible) and count teeth. Good luck. If you don't get 42, you either weren't given enough time, can't add or, more likely, THERE AREN'T 42. Most Bull Terriers don't have all their premolars (equivalent to their status “ with marbles"... ) The teeth did not fall out. They aren't there and never were.

Our standard says nothing about number of teeth. This puts the judges in the precarious position of having to assume what the bite might be with all teeth present, given no time to count. Think about this. We have made no effort to breed for 42 teeth. Missing teeth do not appear to be a problem for our dogs. Bull Terriers don't chew their food anyway!

Back to bites. The "normal" bite for the generic canine is called a SCISSOR bite with correct placement of the canines. This means the upper incisors lock over the lower incisors. The normal position of the lower canine tooth is in front of the upper canine, behind the lateral, or #3 incisor. The tip or crown, should clear the upper gum on the outside. Key word - OUTSIDE.

The Bull Terrier standard calls for a scissor or level bite. Level means the upper and lower incisors meet edge to edge. The canines should be as defined above.
There are two major categories of bite “faults”; the length of the lower jaw in respect to the upper, and the placement of teeth in the jaw.

Veterinary dentistry categorizes bites in terms of major and minor defects. Major defects include those with genetic origin. Two examples: brachygnathism (undershot) where the lower jaw comes out in front of the upper and prognathism (overshot) which is the reverse. An overshot bite is uncommon in Bull Terriers and has been referred to as “pig jaw”.

Minor defects are usually the result of retained baby teeth, minor discrepancies in the rate of jaw growth and trauma. If you read the show critiques you will hear judges refer to canines as “tight” or “inside”. “Tight” means the tip of the lower canine hits the upper gum. The placement is correct but gum clearance is not. “Inside” means the lower canine is inside the upper two teeth. This can result from NO SPACE, meaning the upper canine and #3 incisor are too close together and the lower is physically forced to move inside. Retained baby teeth can contribute to these conditions. To date I don’t believe we have studied enough Bull Terrier mouths to say that these malocclusions result from a “narrow under-jaw”. Perhaps.

If the canine in question is making a hole in the hard palate, minor problems for the dog could result. I have yet to see these conditions impact the use of the “bite”, so to speak.

If the right and left sides of the canine mandible grow at different rates the result may be what is called a “wry mouth”. The technical term is anterior cross-bite. One side may appear to be scissor, the other undershot - from the perspective of the incisors. If you are completely confused get out your canine skeleton and look at the skull - visual aids are helpful. Better yet, look at the front of your dog’s mouth. If the incisor “alignment” is crooked from right to left, you may be looking at an example (providing he/she has all his/her teeth).

Our Bull Terrier standard says the bite should be scissor or level. It does not disqualify “bad” bites. Our judges are faced with a challenge as the degree of “bad” determines the degree of fault. BAD IS A RELATIVE TERM. I have heard numerous adjectives used to describe bites; good, ok, a “thumbnail off level”, bad and (my favorite) “shocking”.

How are we to select and breed correct bites if we don’t understand them? Do we want to? Do we care? The Bull Terriers don’t. As long as we continue to select for a head shape that is a concept NOT found in nature among canines, we will continue to have bite “problems”. The dogs will continue to operate with what they have (or don’t, as the case may be). They wouldn’t survive in “nature” anyway, bite faults or not.

Are bite faults genetically transmitted? Think about the boxer, the pug and the bulldog. The result of selectively shortening the muzzle is not much different than eliminating the “stop” (found in the generic canine) and curving the upper portion of the skull in the opposite direction. If we are looking for a wide, strong under-jaw and effectively shorten the skull, WHERE IS IT TO GO?

If we change the shape of the jaw how do we expect that the teeth will fit in and occlude correctly? Life is a series of compromises.