

What makes it a Miniature Bull Terrier?

By Tracey Butchart

After reading the Breed Standard for the Bull Terrier and the Miniature Bull Terrier, you would be forgiven for thinking that the latter is just a small version of the former. In reality however, the Mini, as it is affectionately known, is genetically distinct from its bigger relative, unlike, for example, the Poodles and Dachshunds with their different size varieties.

It was in the 1860s that James Hinks of Birmingham created the all-white Bull Terrier, which was noticeably different from the motley bunch of "Bull-and-Terriers" that had been around decades and who were so successful in the dog fighting pits of the time. This new "Bull Terrier" was elevated from its dark and violent past emerging as a gentleman's companion. In fact, according to Hinks' biographer, Kevin Kane, it was bred as a fashion accessory for the new middle classes, albeit one which symbolised power and masculinity.

Despite the fact that they all had a distinctive white coat, there was significant variation in size among early Bull Terriers. At the famous International Show of Dogs at Islington in 1864, the Bull Terrier entries were divided into different classes determined by size. There were Bull Terriers under 10lbs and Bull Terriers over 10lbs. This weight limit was adjusted to 15lbs three years later and then to 25lbs another 7 years on. Clearly, the larger Bull Terriers were preferred.

At the turn of the century there were actually three sizes: large (Standard Bull Terriers); medium (Miniature Bull Terriers) and small (Toy Bull Terriers). These last were still registered as Miniatures and as they barely resembled their bigger cousins, they rapidly fell out of favour. In fact, all Miniature Bull Terrier numbers dwindled to such a degree that the breed was deregistered by the Kennel Club in 1918.

Significantly, while the larger Bull Terriers claimed all the attention and interest in the show ring, the Miniatures were still the first choice of the country landowner. These quick and gutsy little terriers were no match for foxes and badgers and their ratting skills were prized in competitive sporting activities. They were cross-bred with Hunt Terriers to add courage and determination. In 1938, a group of Miniature Bull Terrier enthusiasts who had kept the breed active as a working terrier formed the first Miniature Bull Terrier Club and petitioned the Kennel Club to register them again as a breed. But this time, it was decided not to use weight as the distinguishing factor but rather shoulder height, which was not allowed to exceed 14 inches (35,5cm).

The Miniature Bull Terrier still has a small following - with a worldwide population just a fraction of that of the Bull Terrier. This may change though with the world-wide trend towards smaller dogs. As with most breeds, it faces a number of genetic challenges. Like their larger cousins, Miniature Bull Terriers have genetic health complaints with their heart, kidneys, patellae (knees) and of course, deafness. Much more serious is a genetic eye problem called Primary Lens Luxation (PLL) which can cause blindness. PLL is almost unknown in Bull Terriers but is an issue in many small terrier breeds and the occurrence in Miniature Bull Terriers is high. In 2009, a DNA test for PLL was developed and of the worldwide Miniature Bull Terrier population tested so far, 65% carry this abnormal gene. There has been concern for the genetic health of the breed because of this high incidence of the PLL gene but also because of the extremely small gene pool. Interbreeding between Bull Terriers and Miniature Bull Terriers was allowed over the years in some countries in an attempt to 'dilute' the PLL gene but without the DNA test, it unfortunately did little else than produce oversized Miniature Bull Terriers that were still afflicted with PLL. Curiously, a fascinating scientific study of 28 different dog breeds conducted in 2002 at the University of California found that the

genetic diversity in Miniature Bull Terriers is actually much higher than in Standard Bull Terriers despite the fact that their gene pool is so much smaller.

In South Africa, there are only 36 registered Miniature Bull Terriers at present and it is therefore vital for our Miniature Bull Terrier enthusiasts to prioritise genetic health and perform the essential DNA tests. This is the only way to avoid extinction of the local population, as happened in the mid-1970s when the founding imports from the UK to South Africa turned out to be both PLL sufferers. Breeding Miniature Bull Terriers provides additional challenges as infertility in males is common and whelping for females is difficult.

While Bull Terriers and Miniatures share many characteristics and the Breed Standards of both differ only in a height limit in the Miniature, it could be difficult to tell them apart. Particularly because there are both registered Miniature Bull Terriers well over the height limit, and registered Standard Bull Terriers that are small enough to look like Miniatures. Naturally this has created some debate as to what makes a dog a Miniature Bull Terrier. Anyone who has lived with both breeds, as I have, can tell you that like the big Bull Terrier, the Mini is also a comical lap dog – it just takes up less space on your lap and in your bed! But the Mini is more alert, more active and barks more readily with a higher pitch - traits which link to their unique gene pool that diverged from that of the larger Bull Terrier so many decades earlier. The inescapable conclusion one has to come to is that what makes a dog a Miniature Bull Terrier is that piece of paper – its registration certificate – stating the breed as such, that proves its connection to the original small, working terriers – landowners' courageous little companions!

For further information contact:

The Miniature Bull Terrier Network – South Africa

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