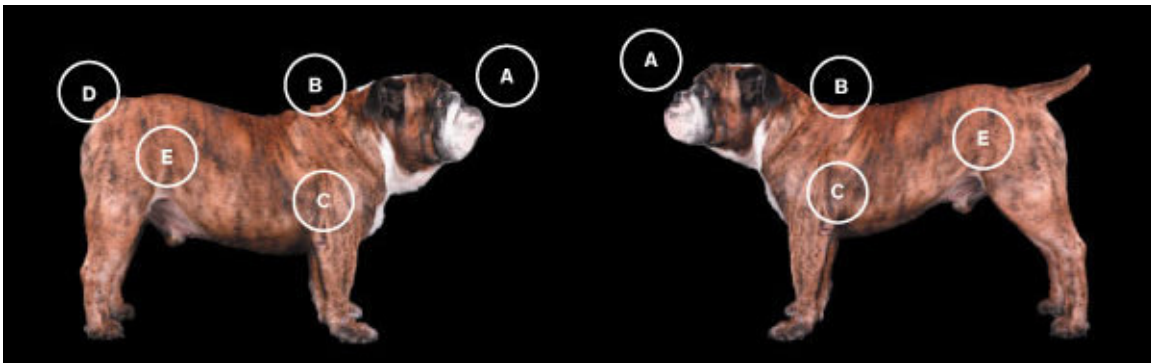


Can the Bulldog Be Saved?

Photograph by Andrew Bettles for The New York Times. Photo illustration, right, by Picturehouse.



A rendering, at right, of what a healthier breed of bulldog might look like, based on input from veterinarians: A) short snout made longer; B) skin folds reduced; C) body made leaner; D) tail elongated; E) hips widened. More Photos »

By BENOIT DENIZET-LEWIS

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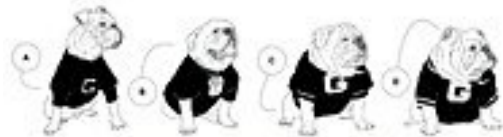
In the first half of Georgia's football game against South Carolina in 2009, Uga VII, who had been dozing on a bag of ice in his air-conditioned sideline doghouse, was cajoled onto the field to pose for pictures with some cheerleaders and Gov. Sonny Perdue. Uga (pronounced UGH-uh) wore his trademark red Georgia jersey and spiked red leather collar, and he looked bored as an ESPN cameraman shoved a camera in his wrinkly, smooshed bulldog face.

Pity the Bulldog?



Bulldogs vying for best of breed at a show in Albuquerque.

Illustration by Agnese Bicocchi.



A) Uga I, 1956-66. B) Uga III, 1972-81. C) Uga V, 1990-99. D) Uga VIII, 2010-11.

His modeling complete, the country's most famous dog mascot appeared ready to nap again. "Sometimes he thinks he's a lap dog," explained his owner, Sonny Seiler, a prominent Savannah lawyer and the mercurial 78-year-old owner of the University of Georgia bulldog mascot dynasty. Seiler bears a striking resemblance to the Georgia bulldogs he has cared for since 1956. He has a round, droopy face and wide, slumping shoulders, and his courtroom antics are often described in words associated with

bulldogs: Georgia Magazine said he possessed a “barrel-chested bravura,” while John Berendt wrote that Seiler “thunders and growls” in his best-selling nonfiction book, “Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil,” in which Seiler defended a wealthy antiques dealer charged with the murder of a young hustler.

Before the game, I sat with Seiler in the front of his S.U.V., which was parked in its usual spot near the west end of Sanford Stadium. The car’s rear door was open, allowing fans a close-up look at the state’s most famous pooch. Not that there was much to see. Flanked by two headset-wearing security guards, Uga VII lounged in his crate with his eyes closed, seemingly oblivious to the chaos around him. “Over here Uga!” “Say cheese!” “Uga’s da man!” screamed a throng of fans, who snapped pictures and video of the sleeping all-white dog. (Each Uga has been a white male, leaving Seiler open to the occasional charge of doggy sexism and racism.)

“Uga is a celebrity,” Seiler explained to me as he cracked open a beer. “If we let him out right now, it would start a damn riot. He’s the dog version of Michael Jackson. People go crazy when they see him.” People also try to kidnap him. Dog mascots are a favorite target of fraternity brothers from rival schools; Uga I was nabbed twice in the 1950s and ’60s.

At the time of my visit, though, Seiler was less concerned with people trying to take Uga than he was with people trying to change him. In January 2009, Adam Goldfarb of the Humane Society of the United States told The Augusta Chronicle that bulldogs, often referred to as English bulldogs, are the “poster child for breeding gone awry.” The article came in response to a scathing British documentary, “Pedigree Dogs Exposed,” that highlighted the health and welfare problems of purebred dogs and claimed that breeders and the Kennel Club (the British equivalent of the American Kennel Club) were in denial about the extent of the problem.

Broadcast on the BBC, “Exposed” spawned three independent reports into purebred breeding, each finding that some modern breeding practices — including inbreeding and breeding for “extreme traits,” like the massive and short-faced head of the bulldog — are detrimental to the health and welfare of dogs. Bulldogs were noted in all three reports as a breed in need of an intervention, with one going so far as to question whether it is ethically defensible to continue breeding them at all.

“There is little doubt that the anatomy of the English bulldog has considerable capacity to cause suffering,” Dr. Nicola Rooney and Dr. David Sargan concluded in one of the reports, “Pedigree Dog Breeding in the U.K.: A Major Welfare Concern?” “The breed is noted to have locomotion difficulties, breathing problems, an inability to mate or give birth without assistance. . . . Many would question whether the breed’s quality of life is so compromised that its breeding should be banned.”

In the United States, some veterinarians, breeders and animal-welfare experts are beginning to wonder the same thing. Last spring, the Humane Society organized its first conference on the topic of purebred-dog health and welfare. The society’s chief

executive, Wayne Pacelle, told me the conference signaled the beginning of a new era for his organization, which until recently has been focused on what he calls “more obvious” forms of animal cruelty. “Inbreeding and other reckless breeding practices may not be as bloody as dogfighting or as painful to look at as puppy mills, but they may ultimately cause even more harm to the well-being of dogs,” he said.

Though a number of breeds were discussed at the conference (including the Cavalier King Charles spaniel, which is beset with severe heart and neurological diseases), the bulldog stole the show. “It is the most extreme example of genetic manipulation in the dog-breeding world that results in congenital and hereditary problems,” Pacelle said.

Brenda Bonnett, a consulting veterinary epidemiologist and a speaker at the conference, outlined the results of her study of Swedish dog-insurance data from 1995 to 2006. She told conference attendees that bulldogs are significantly more likely than other dogs to suffer from a wide range of health issues, including ear and eye problems, skin infections, respiratory issues, immunological and neurological problems and locomotor challenges. (Statistics released in 2010 by the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals revealed that bulldogs have the highest rate of hip dysplasia of any breed.)

A few months after the Humane Society conference, *The Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine* published a study of breed-related causes of death in American dogs. Researchers found that bulldogs are the most likely to die from respiratory illness and the second-most likely to die from congenital disease.

Though there is no recent comprehensive study in this country comparing the life spans of different breeds, a 2010 British study published in *The Journal of Small Animal Practice* reported that the typical bulldog lives only slightly longer than six years. “The bulldog is unique for the sheer breadth of its health problems,” says Brian Adams, formerly the head of media-relations at M.S.P.C.A.-Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston. “A typical breed will have one or two common problem areas. The bulldog has so many. When I first started working at Angell, the joke was that these dogs are a \$5,000 check just waiting to happen. But the joke gets old fast, because many of these dogs are suffering.”

A few months before my trip to Georgia, the British Kennel Club announced that it was revising the bulldog standard (a written template for the look and temperament of a breed) in an effort to make bulldogs sleeker and healthier. The new bulldog standard in England calls for a “relatively” short face, a slightly smaller head and less-pronounced facial wrinkling.

But the Bulldog Club of America (B.C.A.), which owns the copyright to the American standard, says it has no plans to follow suit. The American standard still calls for the breed to have a “massive, short-faced head,” a “heavy, thick-set, low-swung body,” a “very short” face and muzzle and a “massive” and “undershot” jaw.

A spokeswoman for the American Kennel Club told me that it won't pressure the Bulldog Club of America to reconsider its decision. That may be because, despite their health problems, bulldogs have skyrocketed up the A.K.C.'s most popular breed list, from No. 41 in 1973 to No. 6 in 2010, one spot behind golden retrievers. (Bulldogs are the most popular breed in Los Angeles.) The breed is a rare bit of good news for the A.K.C., which is suffering a long-term decline in registrations.

When I visited Sonny Seiler in Georgia, he took partial credit for the breed's increased popularity. "The more people hear about Uga and see him on TV, the more people want a bulldog," he said. Though Seiler conceded that bulldogs aren't for everybody ("They are high-maintenance animals with health problems," he said), he dismissed any efforts to change the distinctive look of the breed. "Change this dog too much, and it won't look like a bulldog anymore," he told me on the sideline during the game against South Carolina. "Besides, Uga gets the best veterinary care, and we do everything to keep him safe. These dogs have a good life."

Maybe so, but Uga VII didn't appear to relish his mascot duties. Unlike his father, Uga VI, who was loud and boisterous and enjoyed chasing after the school's costumed bulldog mascot, Hairy Dawg, Uga VII seemed most comfortable in the back corner of his doghouse — or, better yet, outside the stadium entirely. A few minutes before halftime, Seiler's adult son, Charles, led the dog off the field by a leash to a waiting golf cart. Uga VII hopped on, and a young woman drove us out the stadium's back service entrance, up a hill, around some bends to an unspectacular patch of grass that doubles as the dog's game-day bathroom. When the cart came to a stop, Uga VII bounded off it and spent the next few minutes happily sniffing the grass, urinating on a tree and defecating behind a bush.

When the dog was done, Charles ordered us all back on the cart. "All right, let's go," he said, and before I knew it, we were speeding back toward Sanford Stadium, Uga VII's droppings (Charles didn't pick up after him) a reminder to all that the world's most famous mascot was here — and that celebrity dogs, like their human counterparts, get to play by different rules.

But Uga VII's celebrity life would be short-lived. Six months later, while lounging at home, he died of heart failure. He was 4 years old.

This fall I went to meet Sandra Sawchuk, the chief of primary-care services at the University of Wisconsin School of Veterinary Medicine. Sawchuk is the rare veterinarian who owns a bulldog. "I should know better, but I'm a sucker for this breed," she told me. "I'm also a vet, so I feel I can handle any problems that come up. But if anyone else tells me they want a bulldog, my immediate response is, 'No, you don't.' "

On the day of my visit, Sawchuk's two bulldogs — Bulldozer, an 8-year-old male, and Vanna WhiteTrash, a 7-year-old female — were alternately sleeping and meandering around one of the veterinary clinic's indoor dog runs. I had wondered what kind of person names her pet Vanna WhiteTrash. But then I met the dog. She is overweight,

arthritic and missing part of her left jaw, a result of an operation to remove a tumor. She also has an inverted screw tail that needs daily cleaning, a bald spot and eye issues. (One canine ophthalmologist told me that “bulldogs help keep me in business.”)

Of the four bulldogs Sawchuk has owned during the last decade, only Bulldozer has been in good health. Sawchuk and other vets say that it is possible to breed a healthy bulldog (“Bulldozer is proof of that,” she said), but she tells any new bulldog owner to get pet health insurance. On the day of my visit to the clinic, I met two bulldog owners who were grateful they’d purchased insurance, including a young woman named Sherri Pickett, whose 14-month-old bulldog, Opie, had already been treated for meningitis, aspiration pneumonia, cherry eye and hip dysplasia. “I paid \$2,500 for him from a reputable breeder,” she told me, adding that Opie’s vet bills have totaled more than \$8,000. “I should really have a punch card,” she said.

I asked Sawchuk what attracted her to a breed with so many health issues. She told me the same thing I heard from other bulldog lovers. “They have goofy and lovable personalities that are incredibly endearing,” she said. But she took it a step further, arguing that the breed brings out a particularly strong parenting instinct in many people. “Even as adults, bulldogs look almost infantile — like plump little babies,” she told me in a hospital waiting room as Vanna WhiteTrash rolled on her back offering her belly. “Their flattened faces definitely make them look more human, and I think people probably respond to that in ways they aren’t aware of.”

That echoed something I heard from James Serpell, the director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at the University of Pennsylvania. Serpell says that our human tendency toward anthropomorphic selection — which he defines as “selection in favor of physical and behavioral traits that facilitate the attribution of human mental states to animals” — is partly responsible for the modern bulldog’s predicament. He argues that we’ve bred dogs like the bulldog (and other short-faced “brachycephalic” breeds, including the pug and the French bulldog) to play up the cute effect.

“We have, to some extent, accentuated physical characteristics of the breed to make it look more human, although essentially more like caricatures of humans, and specifically of children,” he told me. “We’ve bred bulldogs for their flat face, big eyes, huge mouth in relation to head size and huge smiling face.” (Advertisers and animators have long recognized that giving an animal big eyes and a big head is a surefire way to endear it to humans. When Walt Disney created Bambi, the studio wanted the character to be an accurate depiction of a deer. But when the original Bambi sketches were deemed not “cute” enough, Disney shortened Bambi’s muzzle and made his head and eyes bigger.)

In an essay in the anthology “Thinking With Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism,” Serpell wrote that “if bulldogs were the product of genetic engineering by agripharmaceutical corporations, there would be protest demonstrations throughout the Western world, and rightly so. But because they have been generated by anthropomorphic selection, their handicaps are not only overlooked but even, in some quarters, applauded.”

Serpell told me that those handicaps can be easily masked by an outgoing, playful personality. “Bulldog breeders will insist that their dogs are happy and have a very good life,” Serpell said. “But a dog can love its owner and be happy at times, but that doesn’t mean his life isn’t needlessly compromised. In many ways, dogs are their own worst enemy. They don’t complain. They just kind of plod along, trying to make the best of things. That’s how I see many bulldogs. They are severely handicapped because of what we have done to them, but they still have these amazing personalities that shine through despite it all.”

When I visited the Angell Animal Medical Center in Boston, Dr. William Rosenblad, a canine-tooth expert, pulled up a picture of a bulldog skull — with its severely undershot jaw — on his computer screen. Then he shook his head.

“We’ve shortened the face of this breed so much,” he explained, “that there’s just not enough space for everything to fit. The tongue, the palate, it’s all compressed. The teeth often look like they’ve been thrown in there. They have little tiny nostrils. The end result of all the compression is that many bulldogs can barely breathe.”

Dr. John Lewis, an assistant professor of dentistry and oral surgery at Ryan Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, says the human equivalent to breathing the way some bulldogs do “would be if we walked around with our mouth or nose closed and breathed through a straw.” Lewis says that bulldogs are synonymous with brachycephalic airway syndrome, which comprises a series of respiratory abnormalities affecting the throat, nose and mouth. (Other breeds with high rates of B.A.S. include the pug, the Pekingese and the Boston terrier.)

Dogs cool themselves by breathing, so breeds like the bulldog overheat easily. That can make exercising, as well as sitting out in the sun for prolonged periods, dangerous. Air travel is especially risky. More bulldogs have died in flight than any other breed, and some airlines refuse to transport brachycephalic breeds. “Bulldogs clearly would benefit from more snout,” Lewis says.

Even something as basic as eating is complicated by the bulldog’s unusual physique. When I visited the home of Chris and Toddie Getman, owners of the 4-year-old Yale bulldog mascot, Handsome Dan, Toddie stood close watch as the dog noisily scarfed down his dinner, kibbles falling out of his mouth and onto the floor. “When he eats, I have to be ready to burp him, because sometimes he’ll take in too much food and air and throw up,” she said. That could lead to aspiration pneumonia, a serious condition in which vomit — or particles of food — are inhaled back into the dog’s airway. To combat this, the dog-food manufacturer Royal Canin has developed a special bulldog formula with wave-shaped kibbles (they look like Fritos) that make it easier for bulldogs to grasp and chew. The food also boasts “highly digestible proteins,” because bulldogs are the most relentless fartners in the canine world.

Nick Trout, a surgical specialist at Angell, told me during my visit that complicating the bulldog's breathing-related problems is the "state of denial" of some bulldog owners. Trout recounted how he recently treated a bulldog that needed surgery on its elongated soft palate, a common condition for the breed in which the soft tissue at the back of the throat blocks the dog's airways. "The owner didn't seem to realize that his dog's heavy, labored breathing and snoring was a sign that something was seriously wrong," Trout said.

Though there are surgical options to correct some of the breed's respiratory abnormalities, any operation is complicated by the fact that when a bulldog is under anesthesia, the tissue and muscles in the back of the throat relax and block the dog's airways. "With bulldogs that barely move enough air when they're awake, anesthesia can be dangerous," said Dr. Lisa Moses, Angell's director of pain-medicine service. Moses added that unlike other breeds, bulldogs don't try to spit out the breathing tube after waking up from surgery. "Some look around, happy as can be," she said. "It's almost like they're saying, 'Finally, I can breathe!'"

There is perhaps no dog that seems more out of place at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show than the bulldog. While other breeds practically prance across the show ring, heads held high in a seemingly conscious display of their rarefied status, the waddling bulldog serves as a kind of unintentional comic relief.

The last time a bulldog won best in show at Westminster was 1955, and it has been nearly 30 years since a bulldog made it out of the group competition, which pits it against other nonsporting yet decidedly higher-brow breeds — including what may be the bulldog's aesthetic opposite, the poodle.

Last year's best-of-breed bulldog winner was a relative newcomer — a 2-year-old, 57-pound white bulldog named Brix — who took the top honor despite nearly falling off a ramp after being inspected by a judge in the show ring. Brix's victory wasn't a total surprise; his handler told me the dog was "on a roll" after winning two bulldog-only shows the weekend before Westminster. I attended the latter of the two, which was sponsored by the Bulldog Club of America and held in the main ballroom of the Sheraton Hotel in Edison, N.J.

It was my first time at a bulldog show, and I had a hard time differentiating the champion dogs from the inexperienced newcomers — or the hopelessly outmatched. Some of the more than 60 bulldogs in attendance appeared to move around the show ring better than others, which several show breeders confirmed to me was something that most judges value. (The bulldog standard in America calls for a bulldog's gait to be "unrestrained, free and vigorous" but concedes that the breed's "style and carriage are peculiar.") While I discounted several dogs for appearing overweight, the judge chose one of the larger bulldogs (Brix) as her winner and told me after the competition that she likes bulldogs to be "big and sturdy."

What was clear to me while watching these bulldogs compete was that none could have succeeded at the breed's original purpose. Bulldogs get their name from their role in bull-baiting, arguably the most popular sport of the Elizabethan era. Though the genetic origin of the bulldog is debated, most believe that bull-baiting dogs of that era were descended from a mastiff-type dog. Fighting bulldogs were leaner and higher off the ground than bulldogs today, and their muzzles were longer. They had smaller heads, fewer facial rolls and a long tail. As a respected bulldog breeder conceded to me at the B.C.A. show, "Bulldogs today are not even a figment of what they used to be."

During a bull-bait, the bull would try to stave off attacks from one or more dogs, who hurled themselves at the animal in an attempt to latch onto its tender nose. When the sport was banned in England in 1835, the viciousness that had served the bulldog so well became a liability. In his 1845 book "The Dog," the veterinarian William Youatt dismissed the bulldog in much the way many describe modern pit bulls: he wrote that the breed was "scarcely capable of any education" and "fitted for nothing but ferocity and combat."

The bulldog might have disappeared into obscurity had 19th-century Victorian England not gone dog crazy. By the mid-1800s, there were more than 1.3 million dogs registered in England. For the upper-middle class, owning a mixed breed was not an option. "Nobody who is anybody can afford to be followed about by a mongrel dog," one dog publication claimed at the time.

It is within this context that the bulldog underwent a physical, temperamental and public-relations transformation. In the second half of the 19th century, the famed British dog dealer Bill George, who had worked at a kennel that bred dogs for bull-baiting, turned his attention to breeding and promoting the bulldog as a pleasant household pet and stylish purebred companion. Just how breeders like George succeeded in changing the look and temperament of the bulldog is a debated question. Many believe that the breed was crossed with the pug, creating a friendlier and more compact dog with a brachycephalic skull.

By the late 1800s, the bulldog's changing physique piqued the interest of many observers — including Charles Darwin. In his book "The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication," Darwin wrote: "Some of the peculiarities characteristic of the several breeds of the dog have probably arisen suddenly, and, though strictly inherited, may be called monstrosities; for instance, the shape of the head and the under-hanging jaw in the bulldog. . . . A peculiarity suddenly arising, and therefore in one sense deserving to be called a monstrosity, may however be increased and fixed by man's selection."

Many in England and the United States couldn't get enough of the breed. According to A.K.C. registration statistics, the bulldog was the fifth-most popular dog in America between 1910 and 1920. In 1922, the Marine Corps took on the bulldog as its mascot. (A number of universities soon followed suit, and some — including Georgia, Yale (which made the bulldog its mascot in 1889), Butler and Georgetown — still have live bulldog mascots that attend sporting and cultural events on campus.) Though the second bulldog

to hold the Marine Corps mascot honor died of heat exhaustion, the breed was still hailed as strong and heroic. “Tough, muscular, aggressive, fearless and often arrogant,” Marion F. Sturkey wrote in “Warrior Culture of the U.S. Marines,” bulldogs “are the ultimate canine warriors.”

Today bulldogs make for a paradoxical symbol of strength and valor. Diane Judy, a former bulldog breeder from Tennessee who bred the current Yale mascot, told me before her death last year that she “adores” bulldogs but no longer felt comfortable breeding them. “They aren’t athletic or especially healthy,” she said. “Most can’t have sex without help — they’re too short and stocky. Most can’t give birth on their own — their heads are too big. A breed that has trouble doing those two things is, by definition, in trouble.”

But at the B.C.A. show in New Jersey, the breeders I spoke to denied that anything seriously ails the breed. “People who don’t know what they’re talking about like to claim that bulldogs aren’t healthy, but it’s just not true,” said Cody Sickle, a respected bulldog breeder whose dogs have won best of breed at Westminster 12 times.

In an e-mail sent to me by the B.C.A., the organization rejected the idea that the breed is in trouble. “Bulldogs today look good, have excellent temperament and are healthier than in years past as a result of good breeding practices.” During a conference call, B.C.A. representatives insisted that bulldogs are healthier in this country than in England, where the bulldog standard was changed. “As animal lovers, we obviously would not continue perpetuating suffering dogs,” Elizabeth Hugo Milam, a bulldog breeder who was formerly the head of the B.C.A.’s health committee, told me. She added that the B.C.A. “takes any potential health problems seriously,” pointing to the organization’s Charitable Health Fund, which has donated more than \$39,000 to the A.K.C. Canine Health Foundation, as well as to their collaboration with the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals to measure the diameters of tracheae in bulldogs in order to combat brachycephalic airway syndrome.

Patrick Bateson, the author of one of the independent reports in Britain, told me that most breeders are well meaning — and that many are good at what they do. But he is shocked by the inability of some to look critically at their own breed. “They are more than happy to point out problems with other breeds, but many are incapable of seeing anything wrong with theirs,” he told me. “It’s almost like they are blinded by their love for their dogs.”

At the B.C.A. show and at Westminster, just about every breeder described a lifelong love affair with bulldogs. Many grew up with the breed, while those who hadn’t wished they had and usually purchased a bulldog as soon as they could. When asked what they liked most about bulldogs, the breeders I spoke to usually gushed about the breed’s loving, playful temperament.

“This dog is not anything like the bull-baiting dogs, which were really mean,” Connie Chambers, who has been breeding bulldogs for more than 40 years, told me at the B.C.A. show. “Nobody would want those dogs today.”

“But couldn’t breeders have bred out the viciousness of bull-baiting dogs without also drastically changing the physique of the breed?” I asked.

“The physique of bulldogs today is perfect,” she said.

I asked Chambers what she liked most about the look of a bulldog. “I like the short face,” she said. “Their cute, fat faces and bodies.”

“But what if the bulldog’s cute, short face isn’t good for its health?” I asked.

“If you change the look of this dog, it’s not going to look like a bulldog,” she countered.

I heard that again and again from bulldog breeders. At Westminster, a breeder from Mexico even conceded that bulldogs would “probably be healthier” with a longer snout.

“So why not breed them that way?” I asked.

“Because if you elongate the face, it becomes a different dog,” he said. “It won’t look like a bulldog anymore.”

On the rare occasions that bulldog breeders did admit to serious health problems with their breed, they blamed unscrupulous breeders motivated by the growing popularity of bulldogs. “There are way too many people out there breeding bulldogs who don’t know what they’re doing and are trying to get rich off these dogs,” Sickle told me. “No responsible show breeders I know are happy that this breed is so in fashion right now. Irresponsible breeders are producing unhealthy dogs.”

That is undeniably true, but there remains an unwillingness on the part of Sickle and other bulldog show breeders to acknowledge what I heard from veterinarians across the country. “The main problem with this breed is its basic, fundamental design,” said Nancy Laste, a veterinary cardiologist who helped care for Uga V and VI when she was an intern at the University of Georgia in the early ’90s. “It’s a defective and unworkable design.”

Can the bulldog be redesigned? Last spring, I met Mike Sears, a longtime B.C.A. member who left the organization after the two bulldogs he purchased from respected show breeders had extensive health problems and died (one at 5, the other at 9). Not wanting to “bury a third bulldog in the backyard,” Sears said he asked his vet for advice. His vet told him to look into a breed called the Old English bulldogge. “He said it was closer to what bulldogs used to look like and that they are more athletic and generally healthier than English bulldogs,” Sears recalled.

Sears did some research and eventually reached out to David Leavitt, who began developing the Old English bulldogge breed in 1971. Using a breeding scheme developed for cattle, Leavitt crossed bulldogs with pit bull terriers, bull mastiffs and American

bulldogs. (American bulldogs are strong, well-built dogs commonly mistaken for pit bulls.) The result, Leavitt told me, was an athletic breed that looks similar to the bulldogs of 1820 but also has a friendly temperament. Leavitt now calls his breed the Leavitt bulldog.

At his house in Maryland, Sears introduced me to Ares, his 5-month-old Leavitt bulldog, a muscular, brindle-colored dog with large open nostrils and a medium-length snout. As Sears and I sat on the family's front porch, Ares chased Frisbees and footballs on the lawn.

"If this was an English bulldog, he'd be asleep by now," Sears told me with a chuckle. "This dog can swim — our previous bulldogs would get in the water and basically sink. Our old dogs would pant if they ran for a couple of minutes. This guy can go for hours. When our last bulldog died, some of our bulldog friends were like, 'You sure you don't want another?' We said, 'No, I think we're going to break from the pack here a little.' "

The A.K.C. doesn't recognize the Leavitt or the Old English bulldog as breeds, and the B.C.A. dismisses them as "poor attempts by irresponsible breeders at trying to recreate a bull-baiting dog." When I relayed the B.C.A.'s position to Sears, he shook his head. "They are in denial at just how serious the problems are with bulldogs," he said. "They can't see the forest through the trees. The bulldog is just not a very healthy dog, and I don't think that will change if we just keep breeding them with other bulldogs."

Crossbreeding is not a panacea, but Bateson and Sargan — the authors of two of the three independent dog-breeding reports in England — told me that it would most likely be needed to save the bulldog. Sargan made reference to the Dalmatian, which was beset with kidney stones until it was crossbred with a single pointer and then backcrossed to Dalmatians.

But Dr. Federico Calboli, the co-author of a 2008 study in the journal *Genetics* about the inbreeding of purebred dogs, says the modern bulldog is a very specific — and unfortunate — case. "Many, if not most of the bulldog's health problems are not due to inbreeding but are due to the shape that the dogs are bred," he said. "Bulldogs could be as outbred as mongrel dogs in the streets of Calcutta, but if they keep that phenotype, they are not going very far."

Many critics of bulldog breeding practices say that some of the bulldog's health problems could be alleviated simply by changing the breed standard. Jemima Harrison, the director of "Pedigree Dogs Exposed," told me it is possible to produce a healthier phenotype in most breeds pretty quickly (in three to four generations), because there is always some variation within a breed — for example, bulldogs with slightly longer muzzles or fewer wrinkles. "If breeders were willing to breed to dogs with fewer exaggerated characteristics and judges in the show ring began rewarding those dogs, change could happen," she said. "But the B.C.A. hasn't shown leadership on this issue, and the A.K.C. has its head in the sand and is desperately hoping that the attention that purebred health problems have received in England doesn't translate to America." (The A.K.C. refutes

this. “The American Kennel Club and its breed clubs have worked diligently to improve the health of dogs for decades in our country,” Lisa Peterson, an A.K.C. spokeswoman, said. Peterson also said the A.K.C. trusts the B.C.A. to know “what is best for the breed.”)

While the British Kennel Club, in addition to changing its breed standards, has banned the registration of puppies from closely related parents, the A.K.C. has refused to follow suit. Wayne Pacelle, the Humane Society C.E.O., told me that if the A.K.C. and breed clubs won’t act, it’s inevitable that animal welfare groups will push for legal standards addressing inbreeding and the physical soundness and genetic health of dogs. “Breeding certainly has a place in the world of dogs, but this mania about achieving what’s considered a ‘perfect’ or desirable outward appearance rather than focusing on the physical soundness of the animal is one of the biggest dog-welfare problems in this country,” he said. “And the emotional and financial cost of these sick dogs to their owners is enormous.”

Pacelle stressed the importance of educating consumers about purebred health problems. “A lot of people buy a breed like the bulldog without realizing just how compromised it is,” he said. “They also have no idea how to differentiate a ‘responsible’ breeder from an irresponsible one.”

I heard the same thing from Laurette Richin of the Long Island Bulldog Rescue. When she opened the doors to her rescue organization in 1999, Richin had 13 bulldogs that needed homes. Last year, she had 218. “This breed is so popular right now, and people fall in love with the dog’s face and buy it on impulse without doing their homework,” she said. “Then, when the dog ends up being too ‘needy’ or too expensive, people give them up.”

I returned to the University of Georgia last November to meet the school’s new mascot, Uga VIII (nicknamed Big Bad Bruce). It had been nearly a year since the death of Uga VII. Like each of his predecessors, he was formally laid to rest in a mausoleum in the southwest corner of Sanford Stadium.

Uga VII’s brother, Russ, served as a temporary mascot while Sonny Seiler decided on a replacement. Seiler is famously secretive about the Uga family line and doesn’t divulge any information about his breeder. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution compared the process of selecting a new Uga — which is determined by “male-preference genealogy and legitimate birth” — to “succession for the British throne.”

Not everyone was happy that Seiler planned to choose another live bulldog as the school’s mascot. PETA wrote a letter to Georgia’s athletic director asking him to use an “animatronic dog” or to rely solely on the school’s costumed bulldog mascot. “It is time for the university to put an end to the cycle of suffering endured by dogs who are brought into the world solely to represent the school’s ‘brand,’ ” Kristie Phelps, of PETA, said at the time.

Seiler ignored the plea and eventually selected Uga VIII, an 11-month-old, 55-pound all-white bulldog, the grandson of Uga VI. “This is a damn good dog,” Seiler told me when I visited. “He’s healthy, and he has all the attributes we look for in a Georgia mascot.”

He was certainly more playful than his predecessor. He appeared to relish the attention of the Georgia cheerleaders, but he had yet to perfect a critical element of a dog mascot’s game-day responsibilities — the speedy halftime bathroom break. “He doesn’t know how to poop on command yet,” Charles Seiler told me as we waited — and waited — for Uga VIII to do his business on the same patch of grass I’d watched his predecessor fertilize the previous year.

Just as the dog began to squat, a couple in their early 20s walked by holding hands. “Is that the real Uga?” the young woman asked me. I nodded. “Oh, my God, we have to take a picture,” she squealed, fumbling through her purse for her cellphone. Her boyfriend rolled his eyes, saying he didn’t really want to watch the dog defecate.

“I totally want to!” she insisted, snapping several dozen pictures as her boyfriend looked down at his shoes. When she was done, she put her phone back in her purse and hopped up and down with excitement. “I love you Uga,” she said as she scampered off to catch up to her boyfriend, who had shuffled away. “I’ll see you next year for homecoming!”

But Uga VIII wouldn’t last that long. Soon after my visit, the 2-year-old bulldog came down with lymphoma. A month later, he died. When I spoke with Sonny Seiler midway through this season, he said the search was on for Uga IX.