

We're Not Brushing Our Dogs' Teeth, but We Are...

By Susan Chaney

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February is Pet Dental Health Month, designed to educate dog owners about the importance of their dogs' teeth and caring for them in much the same way as they do their own.

For a number of years now, brushing dogs' teeth has been promoted as the best way to prevent the development of plaque – a bacterial film – and tartar, which can lead to gingivitis and periodontal disease. In fact, the American Veterinary Dental College says, “Brushing your dog's teeth is the single most effective means to maintain oral health between professional dental examinations. Frequent (ideally daily) brushing is recommended to maintain optimal dental health.”

The American Veterinary Medical Association, which sponsors Pet Dental Health Month, even created a [video](#) demonstrating how to brush a dog's teeth.

However, according to a [recent study](#) contracted by Banfield Hospital, 62 percent of dog owners do nothing to address their pets' bad breath, one sign of dental disease. In addition, of the 500 owners surveyed in January 2013, only 38 percent had their dogs' teeth professionally cleaned.

So, essentially, most of us aren't brushing our dogs' teeth – no matter how much we hear about how important it is, and apparently no matter how much we love our dogs.

What *are* we doing? Well, believe it or not, not every dog that walks into a show ring, even at Westminster, is ready to show off clean, white teeth when the judge opens its mouth. We asked a few owners – Tray Pittman, Mandy Tyler and Bill Shelton – how they manage their multiple dogs' “canines” so that they're pristine every single weekend of the year.



BIS BISS GCh. PaRay's Preferential has the PaRay dental care regimen to thank for his strong, white teeth. Photo by [Chris Lynch Photography](#).

A Cleaning a Week

Tray Pittman of PaRay Shelties and Bichons in Orangevale, Calif., says many owners don't realize how important dental care is, not just for doing well in the show ring, but for their dogs' health. He learned from one of his earliest dogs, Ch. Sterling Rumor Has It, that even regular care at home or in the kennel may not be enough.

"Our first big winner had teeth that required a lot of care," he says. At one time, 'Rumor' was the top living sire in Bichons. "He went sterile temporarily at the age of 12, due to his teeth," Pittman says. "He ended up missing being the top sire of all time by two champions. It made an impact on us about how important teeth are. It taught us to be really careful," he says.

For years now, new PaRay assistants have been trained to use dental tools. Every week, before each dog is put into the tub, "their nails are done, their bodies and ears are checked, and their teeth are cleaned," Tray says. "We have actual dental tools; we have antibiotics for gum infections." The assistants use a scraper to remove plaque. Each dog then goes to Tray or his partner, Paul Flores, for trimming. "The first thing we do is check their nails and teeth," he says. The weekly treatment is "the only way for us to keep up with it and to know that it's being done," Tray says. The scraping the assistants do is "not so severe as a veterinary cleaning," but the weekly treatment, along with an enzyme treatment added to every water bowl every time it's filled up, does the job.

"It just became part of our regimen," he says. "It drives our assistants crazy in the beginning, but they get used to it."

For plaque-fighting treats, PaRay adult dogs get Greenies, and young puppies get apple slices and baby carrots.

With an expanded understanding of the importance of regular dental care, Tray and Paul "started realizing how bad they [some dogs' teeth] are. "Bitches would come in for breeding, and we were kind of shocked and appalled" at the condition of their teeth, Tray says. He's amazed at the number of show dogs he's seen that are "beautiful on the outside, then you open their mouth, and you're horrified."

He adds that he's heard judge Maxine Beam tell an exhibitor in the ring that she was "disappointed" in a dog's teeth and that she considered it "as important as grooming" because of potential effects on the dog's health.

When new dogs or bitches come to PaRay for handling, they're started on the routine right away. "It can be difficult," Tray says, if they're unused to having things done inside their mouths. However, patience and consistency do the job over time. If a dog arrives with tartar, sometimes a veterinary dental cleaning is required to get the teeth clean so that the regimen can work.

Tray only remembers one of his own dogs that ever needed a veterinary cleaning, a daughter of Rumor's. At that point, he and Paul "made a conscious choice about the dogs in our program. We've made a kind of concerted effort for stronger, whiter teeth in Shelties," who often have what he calls "popcorn teeth" that tend to pop out of the jaw and gums easily.



Raw beef knucklebones and small apples are the plaque destroyers of choice at Kerryarc Irish Wolfhounds. Kerryarc Favorite Sin was owner-handled all the way from the Bred-by-Exhibitor class to the Group ring at Westminster this year by Chandler Tyler. Photo by Kayla Bertagnolli/Best In Show Daily.

A Natural Approach

Kerryarc Irish Wolfhounds have seen much success in the show ring, but Mandy Tyler has never used a scaler on any of her – very tall – dogs. Even Ch. Kerryarc Fast Cars, who won the National Specialty in 2008 and 2010, got the usual Kerryarc treatment. He fasts on Sunday nights, meaning he doesn't get his normal dinner, and instead enjoys a raw, beef knucklebone, along with a couple of small apples each week.

As soon as a litter of Kerryarc puppies is weaned, the tiny – well, maybe not so tiny – dogs join the routine. “It satisfies their need to crunch, their need to chew,” Mandy says. “It keeps their teeth spotless and their breath fresh. We have 9- and 10-year-old Wolfhounds whose teeth are perfectly clean.”

The breeder, whose partners are her 18-year-old daughter, Chandler Tyler, and her 20-year-old son, Carson “Sam” Collier, says she's been following this plan “for as long as I can remember.” The dogs also eat a diet with no corn, wheat or soy. While Mandy admits she has no scientific proof that corn contributes to plaque or tartar, she's positive it does based on “clinical observation.” She was inspired to this feeding practice by the book “Give Your Dog a Bone” (Crosskeys Select Books, 1993), written by the raw-diet proponent Ian Billinghurst, and Juliette de Bairacli Levy, who promoted giving dogs less food long before the study came out in the early 2000s showing that dogs that ate 25 percent less lived longer.

De Bairacli Levy recommends fasting dogs twice each week. Although Mandy says that makes “so much sense,” she adds, “I just couldn't bring myself to do it.” So, it's once a week with a nice, juicy knucklebone from a butcher in Jackson, Calif., who sells every single one he has to Kerryarc for \$2 a pound.

Of course dogs enjoy bones. Who could argue with that? But Mandy says the dogs “really enjoy” their biweekly apples as well. “They play with them, then eat them.”

Although Mandy admits she's "really blessed" that Wolfhounds don't tend to have the dental problems of lots of – mostly smaller – breeds, she says there's "really no excuse" for a dog having dirty, uncared-for teeth. And while "there are a lot of people who think we're absolutely insane, it works for us."

In addition to clean teeth, she says that come Monday morning, her dogs seem "refreshed and satisfied. They're so happy."

Even Kerryarc Favorite Sin, who showed in the Bred-by Exhibitor class, bitches, just this month at Westminster and made it to the Group Ring, got no special dental treatment for the big show. "Three days before we left, she got a bone," Mandy says. And the young bitch was perfectly ready for the judge-veterinarian, Espen Engh, D.V.M., of Norway, who later selected her as Best of Breed.



BIS BISS GCh. Coventry Allure At Wyndstar receives regular dental care including monthly scaling from Coventry's partner Beckie Williams, D.V.M. Photo by Dan Sayers.

A Doctor in the House

Over at [Coventry Corgis](#) in Pomona, Calif., Bill Shelton and Steve Leyerle may have the best setup yet. Their partner, Beckie Williams, D.V.M., is a practicing veterinarian in nearby Anaheim.

"Once a month, I take all the dogs in and have their teeth scaled," Bill says. "Because of that, I don't have any problems," except occasionally in a "very, very old dog."

Despite denying knowing much about dental problems in dogs, he knows, as do most breeders, that some breeds simply get more plaque on their teeth than others. "Certain dogs have a different chemical makeup that allows them to develop more plaque and tartar. It depends on the makeup of the saliva," he says.

Regardless of breed, he says, though, "you do need to keep them scaled. I think it's better to do that than not to do anything." In addition, if a dog does have an issue, "we take care of it."

Before Beckie joined the team in 1999, Bill cleaned the dogs' teeth himself. "I used one of those finger toothbrush things," he says. "It's not so much how hard you brush," but that you reach all the surfaces.

When told about the recent study on owners who do nothing about dental care for their dogs, he says that clients of Coventry's pet resort do buy finger brushes, canine toothpaste, water enzymes and other products to address the issue.

Team Coventry feeds kibble, which some claim helps scrape plaque from teeth. However, Bill soaks the kibble, which likely undoes any potential teeth-cleaning benefits. "But with our breed, we don't have a lot of teeth problems."

"The most important thing is preventive health care, so preventive dental care is the best thing you can do," he says, and he knows of what he speaks. Bill worked in a veterinary clinic when he was younger. "I did a lot of dentals," he says. "Dentals are a result of poor care. It was because people did zero dental care" at home.

Clearly all three of these breeders understand dental care's importance.

"It affects their daily health and happiness," Tray Pittman says. "I think it's an afterthought for many people. I believe that with all my heart."

Tags: [American Veterinary Dental College](#), [American Veterinary Medical Association](#), [Banfield Hospital](#), [Best in Show Daily](#), [Bill Shelton](#), [BISD](#), [Coventry Corgis](#), [Kerryarc Irish Wolfhounds](#), [Mandy Tyler](#), [PaRay Bichons Frises](#), [PaRay Shelties](#), [Pet Dental Health Month](#), [Susan Chaney](#), [Tray Pittman](#)

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