

Every Dog Has His Day

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by Ted Kerasote

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Stump, the winner of this year's Westminster Kennel Club dog show, is definitely a good example of what brain research has been revealing: that engaging work keeps both older dogs and humans mentally sharp. But in the rush to extol Stump's geriatric win, almost everyone has overlooked an important fact: He may not be that old of a dog.

Stump and the winner's cup. The reason that most everyone thinks he's ancient is that our notions about the life spans of dogs have been skewed downward by so many dogs dying young, often of cancer. More and more veterinarians believe that this heartbreaking toll is caused by four factors: inbreeding that passes on genetic defects; environmental pollutants such as automobile exhausts

and lawn chemicals that dogs vacuum up as they sniff along; commercial dog foods that are full of oats, soy, corn and wheat, a diet unsuitable for an animal who is still genetically a wolf; and, perhaps most important, the annual vaccinations we give our dogs, which unnecessarily challenge their immune systems. In fact, more and more vets believe that a single puppyhood vaccination of parvovirus, distemper and rabies will provide a dog with lifetime immunity.

Dogs who aren't inbred, who eat home-prepared meals, who exercise often and have few vaccinations tend to live longer than the average life span for their breed. Even large dogs like Labrador retrievers can live healthy lives to 17, and many smaller breeds can live into their early 20s.

These sorts of life spans, which could become more common if we revised how we care for our dogs, cast Stump in a different light. He's really 40-something, not a septuagenarian. Hopefully, his win will help people see that 10-year-old dogs might be considered middle-aged, with a career and active years still ahead of them.