

Hanging in the Balance

Jim Engel March 14, 2026.



As my family was becoming involved in canine affairs in the late 1970s the purebred dog in general and the Bouvier des Flanders in particular were at the cusp of an era of enormous prosperity which would persist through the turn of the century.

Yet today the entire canine world—the purebred paradigm—is in such precipitous decline that long term viability is seriously problematic. Having fallen out of the top 100 AKC breeds with similar traumatic decline throughout Europe the Bouvier is in dire straits, verges on trivialization if not outright extinction.

How did this unforeseeable, cataclysmic decline come to pass? What, if anything, can be done to restore vitality?

In the Beginning

In the era prior to the Internet and routine middle class international travel there was a propensity to idealize European breeding practice and selection, to believe that the various breeds in their nations of origin maintained proficiency in their nominal service, that structure and stride were guided accordingly, that working character was a serious matter. It was taken for granted that grotesque fashion driven appearance was an American aberration, that these Europeans took their dogs much more seriously. They were of course incessantly proactive in the promotion of this mythology. Little did we know.

Such were my expectations as I embarked on my first European

tour with Eric Houttuin in the spring of 1984. At that time Dutch annual Bouvier des Flandres registrations were running just shy of ten thousand a year and at the club match in Hilversum—the Dutch confirmation specialty—there were four or five hundred entries in six concurrent rings, a literal six ring circus. But last year, in 2024, there were only two hundred Dutch Bouviers registered in the entire year. Thus difficult as it may be to grasp forty years ago there were two to three times as many entries in a single dog show as are currently registered in an entire year. This decline is worldwide in scope, involves most breeds and has prevailed for a quarter of a century. The purebred sky is indeed falling.

In 1985 there were 1860 American registrations and when I served as confirmation judge at the robust and prosperous Southern California Club match there were numerous entries in all classes. When I judged for the Michigan club a few months later similar prosperity

Bouvier des Flandres by Year

	Holland	Belgium	France	USA
1970	1575	211	226	348
1975	9082	680	483	834
1980	5939	895	758	1389
1983	9564	1201	730	1903
1984	9939	981	781	1827
1990	3786	837	718	1748
1995	2609	1185	559	1875
2000	1348	683	574	1211
2005	734	848	455	851
2010	592	317	375	621
2015	366	250	288	
2020	330			
2024	200	*140	144	*120

The AKC ceased publishing registration statistics in 2011. The Belgians did the same in 2019.

* Statistical projections.

Click here for complete data:

[Bouvier Annual Registrations](#)

prevailed. Southern California and the Detroit area, including adjacent Ontario, were hotbeds of activity.

Although the AKC ceased publication of registration statistics in 2011 because it had become so humiliating and embarrassing and since in 2024 the Bouvier des Flandres ranked 101 among the breeds, as opposed to about fifty in the 1980s, current annual registrations can be projected at approximately 120. (The table presents this data with a five year cycle.) The American Club has access to the actual numbers and never outright refuses to divulge them but also never quite runs out of excuses and delays.

Thus current yearly registrations are 200 for the Dutch, about 140 for the Belgians, 144 for the French and approximately 120 in America for a total of a little over 600. This is so far below minimum viable population—critical mass—that the breed verges on trivialization if not outright extinction. Although the Bouvier is in particularly steep decline and peril this is but one manifestation of the general purebred collapse prevailing since the mid-1990s.

Breed evolution and stability in terms of physique and character are of necessity guided by a few elite and senior breeders such as Chastel or Semler. In order for such long term programs to prosper a certain minimum of ongoing activity is necessary, but we have done little more than tread water for several generations. We are thus in imminent danger of going under.

The Southern California and other regional clubs totter on the brink of extinction and there were a paltry four entries at the supposedly prestigious Westminster Kennel Club show in New York. The North American working club, NAWBA, crashed and burned at the advent of the 21st century and by 2015 was long since dead in the water with no publications or events in many years.

Causative factors in this decline are complex and convoluted. The predominant proximate cause was the ongoing worldwide purebred collapse in which the historically protective heritage breeds such as the Doberman Pinscher and German Shepherd were especially hard hit.

Additionally there were and are several festering Bouvier specific issues. In particular the increasingly long, soft and profuse coat with flowing beards has rendered maintenance for both the effete show dogs and family companions an ongoing burden and expense. Such coats have become a significant hindrance on trial fields and on the street. The originating working stock coats were much rougher and shorter; who can imagine these rustic herdsman abandoning the cattle to load their herding dogs in the wagon for a routine Saturday morning town trip for a two hour grooming session?

Another very serious factor was the European bans on ear cropping and tail docking which have had devastating consequences for breeds such as the Doberman Pincher and the Bouvier des Flanders.

While there is a residual base of serious working stock, particularly in the Netherlands, the breed as a whole has become soft and lethargic. On a more positive note a small but resolute cadre of French ring competitors has emerged, but the numbers are small.

Premonitions

In the spring of 1993, almost a decade after my original tour with Eric, with doubt and concern in my mind, I resolved to once more return to Europe with new eyes. These are my commentaries:

Premonitions of a Traveler

Although some of the issues and concerns in this thirty year old report may seem obscure or irrelevant I have presented the complete original text to more fully project the prevailing aura of the era.

American Experience

In the aftermath of the First World War the protective heritage German breeds—beginning with the German Shepherd—came to have enormous prosperity in America and the rest of the world. Over many decades the police dog persona was the wellspring of the allure driving the enormous American prosperity of these German breeds such as the Doberman Pinscher.

Largely as a consequence of the brutal German occupation during the war corresponding Belgian breeds withered on the vine. Although the Bouvier began a tentative American emergence in the 1950s the Belgian Malinois remained virtually unknown until the eve of the twenty first century. It is for these reasons the German breeds predominated until the emergence of the Malinois in the 1990s.

Although in the American perception Bouvier police persona may not be as universal or as pronounced as it is for these German breeds this was historically primarily a matter of more effective German promotional and public relations prowess, particularly that of von Stephanitz. At the turn of the 21st century the Belgian Malinois was virtually unknown in America yet today outshines the German Shepherd in many aspects of police and military service as in the role played in the apprehension of Osama bin Laden. On Dutch KNPV police dog trial fields the Bouvier was for decades second only to the Malinois.

The purebred foundation mythology was that each breed was to be an elite realization of a noble and definitive functional service. The existential cause of the ongoing collapse has been the general realization that the hunting dogs no longer hunt, the herding dogs are no longer patrol meadows and fields and the protection dogs are akin to prosaic Detroit sedans with painted on racing stripes pretending to be street ready racing cars .

Abraham Lincoln's principle that "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time" applies here. In the purebred world some of the time turned out to be a hell of a long time, but the advent of the Internet in the 1990s finally and precipitously initiated the ongoing collapse of the purebred establishment. This is ultimately the consequence of the unrelenting compulsion to evolve ever more grotesque style while utterly abandoning any shred of the original breed defining function.

It is said that all good things come to an end. As difficult as it is to comprehend and accept the heartbreaking reality is that in view of all of this it is most difficult to conceive of a way forward, to see how the breed can endure as any sort of viable working dog.

Jim Engel Marengo March, 2026

Conacts & References

Bouvier Annual Registrations

Bouvier Breeders List

Angel's Lair Bouvier

Angel's Lair All Breed

Schutzhund America

The Police Dog: Evolution, History and Service

Schutzhund