

The Price of Perfection

How Grooming Contributed to the Fall of the Purebred Dog World—and What We Can Do About It

By Sasha Riess

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This isn't just an article. It's a confession.

What began as a functional practice to enhance a working dog's performance—trimming the coat to keep it out of the eyes, cleaning up the feet to avoid matting in the field—has, over the decades, transformed into something else entirely. Grooming became performance. Performance became prestige. And prestige? It began to cost us something far greater than ribbons.

It began to cost us the dogs.

The Fall Hidden in the Flourish

As the show ring glittered with meticulously groomed specimens, a darker reality was quietly taking root beneath the fluff. Breeds once defined by function became defined by silhouette. The Poodle, once a water retriever with a practical cut, now parades in stylized clips so rigid they disqualify dogs who deviate from the rulebook. The Shih Tzu, once a hardy temple guardian, must now drag a floor-length coat simply to be eligible for the podium.

We, the groomers, became both artists and enablers.

We raised the bar so high that only a select few could clear it—dogs who could tolerate hours of pre-ring preparation, and handlers who could sculpt perfection. And as these winners became the breeding stock for the next generation, we didn't just influence fashion—we influenced genetics. We helped normalize styles that made coats harder for dogs to live with, rewarded exaggerated outlines that didn't reflect comfort or function, and turned presentation into a goal in itself—sometimes at the expense of the dog's well-being.

Beauty Over Biology

In celebrating grooming excellence, we unintentionally helped promote exaggerated features. While breeders shape genetics, groomers have shaped perception. Our combs and shears haven't just sculpted coats—they've influenced public desire. We turned grooming from preparation into presentation, and the show ring rewarded it. We mastered the art of camouflage: hiding faults, enhancing silhouettes, balancing proportions to suggest perfection. In doing so, we contributed to a standard of appearance that often overlooked function, comfort, and long-term well-being. What was once a finishing touch became a defining factor—one that quietly redirected the course of expectations, not only in the ring but in everyday dogs.

When Did Function Stop Mattering?

Let's remember: function creates form. The retriever had a waterproof coat for a reason. The terrier's wiry texture helped him navigate through brush. These weren't aesthetic choices—they were evolutionary ones. But in the pursuit of aesthetic "perfection," we've reversed the equation, breeding form without a job. Dogs were never meant to be static statues; they were meant to live, breathe, run, think, and feel.

So here's the hard truth: grooming helped glamorize a version of the purebred dog that no longer serves the dog.

And it's time we own it.

My Part in this Fall

I've stood in the world's most prestigious rings. I've groomed legends. I've sculpted silhouettes that earned gasps from the crowd and bows from judges. I've handled dogs with million-dollar careers—icons of their breed. And yes—I finished over 800 champions across 33 breeds.

But here's the truth only time, regret, and self-reflection can reveal:
I helped create the illusion that led to the decline of the very dogs I swore I loved.

And worse—I was paid well to do it.

Working with the most demanding clients in the world meant I couldn't just be a great groomer—I had to be a strategist, a fixer, a magician. They expected results, and I delivered them. I didn't just groom dogs—I went the extra mile. I studied harder, looked deeper, traveled further. I handpicked my mentors and surrendered to their teachings and discipline. I merged their knowledge with my own instincts I found ways to stay one thoughtful step ahead in the highly competitive environment of the show world.

And in time, I realized something dangerous:
It was even more *exciting* to win with a dog that wasn't meant to win.

The adrenaline rush was stronger. The applause meant more. It became a personal challenge to out-style, out-think, and outmaneuver everyone. While my original commitment was to groom and present great dogs, I found myself building winners out of charisma and flaws. I knew how to hide what shouldn't be seen and highlight what couldn't be ignored. I became a master of illusion.

Of the 800+ champions I helped craft, fewer than 20% were born for greatness—structurally sound, anatomically correct, truly brilliant. The rest? They had charm. Maybe a spark. But mostly... they had me. My hands. My eye. My talent for storytelling through scissors. And an owner who were willing to pay for that.

And I know I'm not alone.

Every colleague I've ever spoken to agrees—we all had a few top dogs. But the reality is: every client wants a championship. And our job—unspoken but understood—is to deliver it, no matter what. If you don't do it, someone else will.

And that's how it begins.

A Story I Never Told so Loud

Let me share something I've never spoken about publicly—at least not in writing, and never in the detail I'm about to offer in the context of this article.

It was 1999, during the war in Serbia. My daughter Sara had just been born, and my wife was pregnant with our son Luka. The economy had collapsed, and clients were scarce. It was a slow, uncertain time.

Then one day, a woman walked into my salon with a Black Toy Poodle. She said he was her pride and joy, and she wanted to travel the world with him. “He deserves it,” she said. “And I want you to handle him—because I heard you're the best.”

He was charismatic. Showy. Full of spirit. He wasn't structurally perfect but he had that undeniable *something*. Then I looked in his mouth.

He had only five incisors in the upper jaw. One was missing. A disqualifying fault.

She told me she had already tried an implant. The body rejected it. Then she looked me in the eye and said, “Name your price.”

I knew the rules. I knew what this meant. But I also knew the war had wiped out every opportunity to earn. My family needed support I needed a future. Here was a way out—if I was willing to look away from my values.

And I did.

We began touring the world—from Japan to North and South America, from Finland to Israel. The dog became a sensation. When one judge whispered, “I've heard your dog has five teeth,” I smiled and said, “Let's count together.”

I lifted the lip. I touched one tooth twice, pretending to count six.

The judge looked at me and nodded. “Just a rumor,” he said.

We won again. A legend was born—built on charm, charisma... and my silence.

I did the job I was paid to do, and for a long time, that was enough for me to keep lying to myself—that what I was doing had a purpose. The dog's career skyrocketed. He became an extremely popular breeding stud. That dog took my career even further into the spotlight, and the higher it went, the harder it became to step down. I remember sitting in the prep ring before Best in Shows, silently crying and telling myself, “This is the last one.” That thought lasted—until I wasn't placed, and the client had already laid out the next full agenda of shows. If I hadn't

betrayed my principles, none of those puppies would have been born. But I did it—for survival. For my family. For myself.

Do I regret it? To be completely honest, I'm not sure what I would have done differently in that situation. But I do know that I have to tell the truth now. Because that story wasn't just about one dog—it was a mirror of what our industry became: a world of glamour and pressure, performance and illusion, built on our silence. And to be even more honest, that wasn't the only time. I did it again—many times—with other dogs as well. But that was the first time I truly broke my own moral code. Maybe I lost it for good that day, and from then on, it didn't even matter. I don't know. But maybe this is the cross I'm willing to carry for the rest of my life. And the only excuse I had was this: it was my job to do.

The Groomer's Role in the Fall of the Purebred Dogs

Grooming used to be about preparation—revealing the best of a dog's true nature. But over time, it became something else: performance. Pageantry. Perfection.

We groomers didn't just style coats—we shaped perception. We became the final line before the ring, the last chance to make a flawed dog look like a champion. When we succeeded, that dog got bred. That illusion got passed on.

And no one ever asked how it happened. Because no one knew what we were capable of. Because we never told them.

We were the silent killers of the dog.

A New Way Forward

It's time for groomers to rise.

Whether you groom show dogs or beloved pets, every groomer should have a solid foundation in understanding a dog's structure, physiology, and overall well-being. This knowledge should be at the core of our practice, enabling us to identify and address issues that go beyond mere appearance.

By embracing this educational approach, we position ourselves as trusted partners in the professional dog world. Breeders, owners, and the industry as a whole will look to us for our expertise and insights. We must move beyond being a conduit for companies to sell products or a means to achieve a flawless look. Instead, we should stand as guardians of the dog's health and well-being.

Grooming is more than just aesthetics; it's a crucial part of a dog's holistic care. As groomers, we see dogs more frequently than many other professionals, giving us a unique perspective and the ability to notice subtle changes that others might miss. This puts us in a powerful position to educate owners, advise breeders, and advocate for healthier practices.

We need to shift the industry's focus toward the holistic well-being of the dog. Our role isn't just about making dogs look beautiful—it's about ensuring they lead healthier, happier lives. By doing so, we elevate our profession and make a lasting impact on the industry.

Let's use our skills and knowledge to champion the well-being of the dogs we care for. Let's become the trusted advisors that the dog world relies on. The future of grooming should be built on integrity, compassion, and a commitment to the true welfare of the dog.

Beyond the Ribbon, Back to the Dog

This article isn't just my confession—it's my offering.

We built an industry that revolved around the dog. But somewhere along the way, in the pursuit of perfection, we lost the dog at the center of it all. The entire system grew around helping us mask the faults of the dog—offering colors, coat texturizers, and every imaginable product to conceal imperfections and enhance presentation. Clients were willing to pay for results, and the industry simply took their money. But what was the cost of that richness? In the show world, we became masters of illusion, perfecting the art of hiding flaws. Grooming competitions rewarded the skill of masking, and over time, craft turned into contest.

Yet, here's the reality: only about 1.5% of groomers are involved in showing dogs. The vast majority of us serve pet owners who simply want their dogs to be healthy, happy, and beautiful. These pet groomers are the backbone of our industry. They may admire the show world for its elegance and artistry, but that world is changing—crumbling under the weight of its own illusions.

We need to ask ourselves: where do we draw the line between skill and deception? When does the craft we pride ourselves on become a disservice to the dog? If we claim to love dogs and dedicate our careers to their well-being, then we must prioritize truth over the ability to conceal faults.

There's nothing wrong with helping a beloved pet look its best for its owner. That's an act of kindness. But hiding faults in the show ring to create a false image of perfection—this should give us pause. We must turn our educational focus toward exposing the consequences of poor breeding practices and advocating for the health and integrity of the dog.

If we want to be trusted professionals, if we want to build a future where the dog truly comes first, we need to shift our perspective. Let's use our skills to elevate the well-being of every dog we touch. Let's bring the heart of grooming back to its roots: enhancing the dog's quality of life, not just its appearance.

This isn't about abandoning the show world. It's about transforming it, and transforming ourselves in the process. It's about recognizing that the world we might have once idolized is in need of change—and that change starts with us.

Let's be the generation that speaks the truth, that values the dog over the ribbon, and that leads our industry with integrity and compassion.

Right here. Right now.
With the courage to tell the truth—
And the love to do better.

From Illusion to Influence: The Groomer's Role in Reform

As I proposed in my White Paper: [“ Embracing Dog Show Evolution A Proposal for Reform in Purebred Dog Judging Culture “](#) if we, as groomers, master the Biomechanical Model, Harmony in Dog Structure, and the General Harmonic Net—not only can we understand the "why" and "how" behind what we've been trained to hide, but we can also use that knowledge to lead a fundamental shift. Rather than perpetuating illusions, we can become the trusted interpreters of structure and health.

Groomers stand in a unique position of influence. We know how faults are masked. We know how perception is shaped. And if we choose to shift our tools—from concealing flaws to revealing truth—we can guide the industry toward a more ethical, transparent, and welfare-centered standard.

This isn't just a moral pivot—it's a strategic one. When we become known as the professionals who can see through the illusion and explain what lies beneath, our value skyrockets. We are no longer just stylists—we become structural analysts, educators, and guardians of integrity.

This is our moment. Not to reject our craft, but to elevate it.

Not to abandon the ring, but to purify it.

Not to hide flaws—but to heal the system that created them.

And through that, we will redefine not just how the world sees the dog—but how the dog is allowed to live.

Sasha Riess is an internationally recognized master groomer, educator, and judge with over 35 years of experience and more than 800 champions finished across 33 breeds. A lifelong student of structure, harmony, and canine integrity, Sasha now advocates for a return to truth, function, and dog-centered grooming through his educational platform Dog School for People and the Pure Love and Harmony movement.