

TWO ARTICLES... BRAINS & VISION

Text: & photos:
Sigrid van Dort
January 2022

CONTROVERSY?

Over the centuries, the ancestors of the Polish developed more bone material on the vaulted skull. Those who did not have enough brain protection suffered brain damage and ceased to exist. Sufficient bone in the vault of the skull is the reason why crested chickens have survived from the time of the Romans to the present day with such a brain-containing bulge on their heads.

The Silkie did not 'evolve' with such a relatively protected vaulted skull, hence the lack of bone material and no protection of the brain.

Like a chewing gum bubble the skull is 'blown up', the bubble bursts and there is little or no bone tissue left, simply because there is not enough bone material supplied by the chicken skull factory.

Hypothetically, if the Polish and Paduas magically had no vault, their skulls would be the thickness of a bank-safe door compared to your bedroom door.

American (bearded) Silkies are made from Polish and Paduas, relatively recently. In the 1930s Schilling photographed normal Silkies. These were similar to the Silkies that still look like this in Europe today, without overly large crests, with good free vision and medium leg feathers.

Because Silkies live a protected (by us) life because they are practically blind with those large crests and beards and there is no selection for skull fragility, the bone of the skull will not form a relatively unified strong structure, probably not even in 400 years from now.

No one (breeder, judge) can see what is under the crest of their Silkie. If it dies from brain damage or has to be put down because of neurological problems that make life impossible, it has already been used in breeding. This perpetuates the inadequately protected brain under the large crest. It is impossible to select for sufficient and strong bone in the vaulted skull of Silkies.

Because so-called 'beauty' and a 'big pompom' are more important than the welfare of the Silkie, this torture breeding will not stop until the breeders or their organisations (ABA for the USA) ban the vaulted skull and overly large crest.

Even before the 2000's the vaulted skull was banned in Silkies in Europe. As a result, brain injuries in Silkies are almost non-existent.



Sadly, this scourge has returned in Europe with the importation of vaulted American Silkies. Not to mention the lack of vision due to the extreme crests and beards and the increased risk of accidents that this causes. They cannot see danger coming. Another Silkie might land on them and they cannot get away in time. Or they may bump their head in fright because they can't see.

The vaulted skull is an outright form of torture breeding, for one's own self-centred pleasure at the expense of the welfare of the supposedly 'so much loved' Silkies.

As long as judges are unaware of the detrimental consequences of the vaulted, large crested and full bearded blind and brain injury-prone Silkies, they will reward these crippled birds at shows. As one breeder put it: "We breed what wins, and we have the freedom to do so in the USA".

It is, in my opinion, the responsibility of the club and the judges to respect this freedom and to accept the responsibilities that come with it, when breeders don't. For one's freedom ends where another's suffering begins. Willful ignorance is a pest in a society, unless individuals want to win a 'trophy' based on the suffering of their birds. Something I cannot and will not believe is true.

American Silkies are also born without vaults. They win shows too. The vault can be selected out, as was done in Europe about 25 years ago. There are also breeders of American type Silkies who try to get rid of the vault, because they are aware of the suffering and the risk of losing it due to brain damage.

The crests may be or may be not, slightly smaller without Cr2 and Cr3, the gene plus its alleles that cause the vaulted skull. Silkies originally have Cr1, a medium round crest, which can also be 'big enough' if people adjust their standards of 'beauty' to the well-being of the Silkies (and their owners).

MESSY, WILD LARGE (ROUND) CRESTS & STINK EYES

Polish, Padua, American style Silkie, Houdan, Sultan, Crèvecoeur and other breeds with a large round crest (beard) should be able to see to the sides (at least!) and forward too. It is therefore advisable to remove any feathers that obstruct their view of the world.

Remove vision-blocking feathers

Think of the wheel arches of a car. You can see the wheel from the side. You can use nail scissors to cut close to the skin in a safe way. In Europe it is permitted to give these birds a haircut to make this possible. The art is to tweak them invisibly, it is a real skill. You trim the beard and crest so that you can see the eye (as the wheel of the car) when you hold them on your hand at eye level.

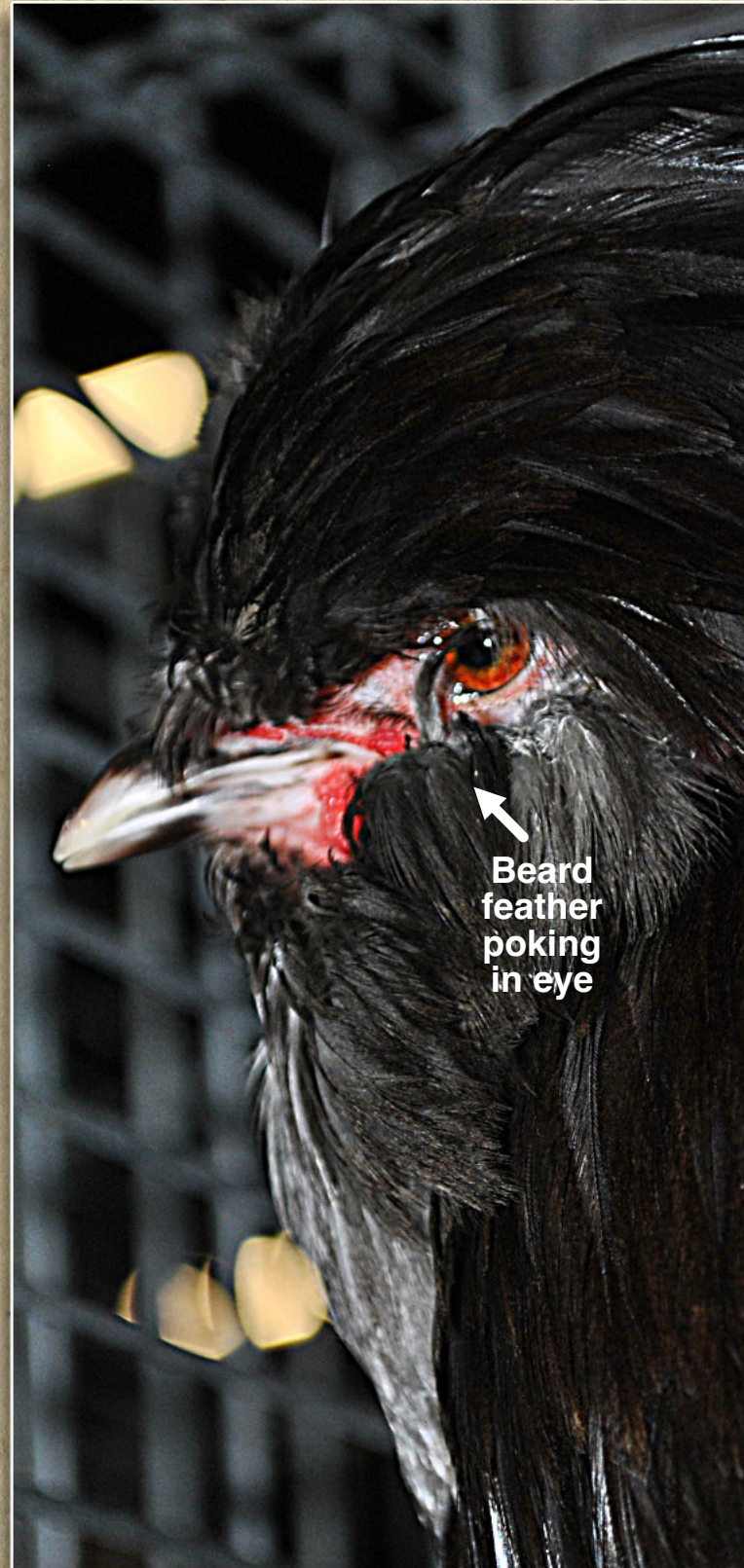
Silkie have a comb, so the crest doesn't start close to the nose, unlike Polish and Paduas, which have no crest of significance, sufficient to keep the crest away from forward vision. Breeds without combs can't look forward because the width of the front feathers block their view. Cocks have an Elvis Presley style crest shape, they should be able to see forward and sideways, the feathers grow up and to the back of the head, away from the face.

Round crested, combless hens have more difficulty keeping an eye on the world around them. For this reason, breeders should select Polish hens with the crest not too far over the nose and more towards the back of the head. The feathers near the nose at the level of the eyes should be shortened if they grow too much to the sides instead of upwards. The direction in which the crest feathers grow (flatter rather than raised) determines how compact a crest is and how much the bird can see.

Stink eye

The problem with a wide and therefore loose crest is that, due to gravity and the fact that the crest feathers are too far forward, sebum, oil from the tail gland, dirt and dandruff collect in the crease just above the eyes (like our upper eyelid), which can lead to infection. From time to time, sniff your crested chicken to see if you smell a foul odour. You can lift the crest a bit and pull the skin taut for to check for dirt in the eye crease above the eye. You then also check for feather lice. These eat the down of the crest feathers first. If you see bare quills without down, put the lice-killing spray on them and destroy those nasty tenants. Don't forget the neck either.

Therefore, the placement of the crest on the skull is important, this can be selected without compromising the breed trait.



Although trimmed well above the nose, there is still a beard feather poking in the eye of this blue Padua cock. Apart of a beautiful eye colour, a feather can easily twist upwards.



This chap is almost blind, the lowest feathers above the nose should be trimmed.

The round crest of an European Silkie bantam pullet. Bantams are smaller than the real Silkie, the size of the American style Silkie, which are considered half bantams weightwise.



On the next page are a few ancient crested chickens, to show the difference between the selected Polish and their ancestors from before hobby breeding or early on...

THE PAST

1785-1789 A white crested cock and a whatever crested hen and a Chabo (Japanese bantam).

Right: from the studio of Melchior d'Hondecoeter, somewhere 1685'ish a white padua hen. It is a part of a painting.

Below, Dead Sultan (called as such today) head, painted in 1669 by Van Aelst.



1929 Padua.

1867, German Polish in white, for a long time the crest of the cock was split in the middle.



Fig. 27. Weiße behaubte Polen.

Right & bottom: white in crests wasn't unusual in the 17th century, Melchior d'Hondecoeter had a hen with white in crest. On some paintings she had a beard on others not.

