

Bouvier des Flandres in Decline

Jim Engel April 12, 2026



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

Yet today the entire canine world—the prevailing purebred paradigm—is in such precipitous decline that long term viability is 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 general propensity to idealize the European canine establishment, to believe that the various breeds in their nations of origin scrupulously maintained proficiency in their historic and modern partnership roles, that structure and stride evolved accordingly, that vigorous working character was fundamental. It was implicitly assumed that grotesque fashion driven appearance was an American aberration, that these Europeans took their dogs much more seriously. We were so incredibly naïve.

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	
2019	422	242	221	
2020	330		216	
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](#)

Such were my expectations as I embarked on my first European tour with Eric Houuttuin 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 at the Expo Hall 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 bizarre as it may seem today 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 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 above table presents this data with a five year cycle.) The American Club has 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 serious decline and peril this is but one manifestation of the general purebred collapse prevailing worldwide since the mid-1990s.

Breed evolution and stability in terms of physique and character tend to be under the influence of select 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 and 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 twenty first century and by 2015 was long since dead in the water with no publications or events in many years. [NAWBA in Retrospect](#)

Causative factors in this decline are complex and convoluted. As mentioned above the predominant 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 herdsmen abandoning the cattle to load the dogs in the wagon for a routine Saturday morning town trip for a grooming session?



Bouvier des Flandres Duko v Mereveld, born 1969. For me this police titled Bouvier is an embodiment of

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 Pinscher 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 tended to 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 journal 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 police style German breeds such as the Doberman Pinscher.

Largely as a consequence of the brutal German occupation during the First World 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 publicity prowess, particularly that of von Stephanitz. At the turn of the twenty first 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 gradual realization by the general public that the hunting dogs no longer actually hunt, the herding dogs 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 service.

The profoundly distressing reality is that after a century of unstinting striving and sacrifice on the part of untold founders and advocates such as Chastel, Semler and Bowles the heritage is flickering out, the Bouvier des Flandres teeters on the brink of irrelevance as a serious working dog.

Jim Engel Marengo April, 2026

An in depth explanation of the background and history of this decline is the subject of of the following chapters of my forthcoming memoirs:

[Bouvier des Flandres, Memoirs of an Advocate](#)

[Chapter 18 Hard Times](#)

[Chapter 19 Purebred Decline](#)

Contacts & References

[NAWBA in Retrospect](#)

[Bouvier Annual Registrations](#)

[Bouvier Breeders List](#)

[Angel's Lair Bouvier](#)

[Angel's Lair All Breed](#)

[Schutzhund America](#)

[The Police Dog: Evolution, History and Service](#)