

Cats

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**THE MONTHLY
MAGAZINE FOR
CAT PEOPLE**

Photo—Louise Hughes



LAST MONTH WE left off our analysis of the Abyssinian standard in the midst of a discussion on the size of cats in general as well as Abyssinians in particular. We were in the process of noting that the first instinctive reaction to the portion of the description under "Body" which states that the proportion and general balance are more to be desired than mere size is to jump to the conclusion that a large cat is what is wanted but that a smaller one of harmonious proportions would be preferable to a large one less perfectly balanced. Then we remember that it is stipulated earlier in the standard that the Aby is to be of *medium* size, so we are forced to the conclusion that either a large cat or a small one, if well balanced, should be preferred over the proper medium size if it is less well put together.

This brings us to another point. Traditionally the Abyssinian was the largest of the Foreign Shorthair breeds, presumably as large as the Domestic Shorthair but appearing smaller because of the finer bone structure and more lissome in outline. It would seem from the present standard that this ideal has been abandoned or at least watered down in favor of a smaller cat. Does this mean that the Aby is, slowly and little by little, going to go the way of so many of our Siamese into effete-ness? After all, a cat need not be undersized, delicate and fragile in order to have "foreign shorthair" type, for type is a matter of proportion, not of size.

SIZING UP ANOTHER BREED OR TWO

Here I am going to digress a little into some general thoughts on size. When it is specified that the preference is for a medium size, but that greater stress is to be placed on proportion and balance than on mere size, leeway is given to go either direction to find a specimen of excellent balance. For some reason, when such leeway is afforded, the preference always seems to lean toward the smaller animal rather than the larger on the grounds that it is "more refined." As in anything else, though, ultra-refinement can deteriorate into decadence and this may not always be the wisest approach, especially from the point of view of the future.

Take, for instance, the word "cobby" used to describe Persian type. This was taken directly from the type of horse known as a "cob." The dictionary definition of that type of horse is "short-legged, thickset horse." Note that this definition refers *only* to shape and makes absolutely no mention of size. The shortness of legs can be determined only through their relation to the size and shape of the body to which they are attached. "Thickset" is also a relative term. These two designations may be equally applicable

AND SOMETHING ABOUT SIZE IN GENERAL -

MORE ON THE HAPPY MEDIUM ABYSSINIAN

by Jane S. Martinke

to a very large or a very small animal. The Persian standard calls for it to be "large or medium in size." Note that "large" is placed first and so may be taken to mean it is the first choice. Traditionally Persians were the largest of any recognized breed, larger even than the basic domestic shorthair. Little by little over the years they have been bred down in direct contravention of the standard's specification for size into a "small to medium" size with preference given to the smaller so long as it is short-legged and thickset - even sometimes, if the truth be known, when it is not thickset, meaning heavy-boned. The change has been wrought, as always, because of that magic word "refinement," yet why should we feel that small size in itself constitutes refinement? A very large Persian, provided only that it is cobby, *i.e.*, short-legged and thickset, and meets the further requirements of a *massive* head and being equally *massive* across shoulders and rump, will certainly fit the standard as presently written better than even a medium cat, much less a small one. How can one possibly reconcile the word "massive" with small size? Yes, we have the well-meant stipulation in this same standard that quality is to be the determining consideration rather than size. Because, if not true cobbiness, at least the apparent semblance of it, is easier to achieve in a small cat than a large one, more and more the smaller cats have been chosen over the large ones until now most of the younger breeders and judges have almost completely overlooked the fact that the Persian cat is

to be a large cat with a *massive* head, etc., provided only that the physical characteristics and balance are correct as laid down in the standard.

Faced with two cats of equally excellent proportions, one large and the other small, most people now assume that the small cat is more refined and so the better choice. Have they read their standards lately? All else being equal, it is the larger cat which meets the standard better than the smaller one. In short, the small Persian cat is not really "more refined" in the sense that refinement means moving closer to perfection since the standard has always stipulated and still does that the Persian is a "large" cat, even "medium" being placed in a secondary position to "large."

The Persian cats' health and stamina have been materially lessened by breeding for the smaller size. If we want to rattle a few old skeletons in closets, this change, this habitual disregard of what is called for in the standard, came about because some well-known and influential breeders found their catteries producing small cats and "sold" the public and the judges on the idea that this constituted refinement until now most people express surprise when confronted with the standard's provision which, by implication, indicates that small size is exactly contrary to the ideal. Sometimes it is a good idea to go back and read and analyze the standard of one's own chosen breed as though seeing it for the first time instead of the usual skimming through it by rote and without thought.

The stipulation in the Manx standard for "small or medium" with the ever-growing tendency to breed for small cats in the belief that they are "more refined" has been one of the major contributing factors in the difficulties within that breed and a lessening of the stress on small size and a greater toleration of a larger, sturdier cat, provided always that its proportions are correct, would almost certainly help in easing at least some of these problems. Think back to some of the greats of the Manx breed, notably one who may have been the greatest of all, "Tra-Mar's Sunny." Anyone who had the opportunity to handle him will remember him vividly to the end of his days. Small? Hardly, when considered against what is being given preference today, but superbly healthy and sturdy with hind legs so powerful that an army mule could well envy his kick, yet he was outstanding in type as well. I can vividly remember the days when the Manx cat was considered to be a large and powerful animal and in those days there was less need for the hand-wringing we see today over the breeding problems engendered by the dangerous trend toward miniaturism. A cat need not be tiny to be very short proportionately from shoulders to rump, after all.

The Siamese are being bred smaller and smaller year by year, and year by year they are acquiring more worrisome difficulties and showing less and less stamina, extending even to a general expectation that they are not likely to live to any great age as they once did and that other breeds still do.

SMALL IN SIZE, LARGE IN TROUBLE

In short, breeding for small size inevitably brings trouble in its wake, and this brings me back to the Abyssinians which are our main topic of discussion. In recent years some breeders, disregarding the tradition that they were the largest of the foreign shorthair breeds, seem to be showing a preference not only for the type akin to the Siamese, but also for the size of today's Siamese as well. If this trend continues the Abyss, which should be a superbly healthy breed, could deteriorate seriously as have the other breeds in which too much emphasis has been laid on small size in the mistaken belief that this in itself constitutes refinement. If a small cat with no reserve of strength, with breeding difficulties and all the other weaknesses which tend to accompany small size constitutes "refinement," then let us have a little more vulgarity in the form of larger cats in rude good health. Their type can be just as close to the standard as that of the small cats. A pox on these people who would damn and doom a good breed simply because

their own programs of intense inbreeding designed to "set" type have produced smaller cats and they want their cats to win. Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Come on, cudgel our brains. What is the best way to make the public believe a small cat is better if the standard calls for a larger one? Why, simply say it is "more refined," of course. Go on and say, either pityingly or sneeringly, that the larger ones are coarse, uncouth louts. Down with them! Say it often enough and the brainwashing technique will work. Their cats will win and those who are breeding to the stipulations of the standard and for the future stability and viability of their breed will be looked down on as people "who have not moved with the times."

Once again I have been carried away and have strayed from our Abyss. It might be well to take these object lessons in the other breeds to heart while there is still time to prevent the lovely Abyss from being weakened as those have been. It could be helpful, if this standard is to be rewritten, to make it clear that, even though a medium size cat is still to be considered the ultimate in quality — if this is what the Abyss breeders feel is proper — the well-balanced *larger* cat is to be preferred over a well-balanced smaller cat if equal quality of conformation and balance is not to be found in an entry of medium size which should, of course, be preferred over either when it is available.

Obviously my concern in all this is to preserve the health and stamina, but from the point of view of enlightened self-interest, so should yours be, you Abyss breeders. Good type means little if it is not accompanied by health, vigor, stamina and the ability to reproduce without difficulty.

TO OTHER POINTS

Now back to the standard. The legs are to be "proportionately slim, fine-boned." All well and good, but what is their length to be in relation to the body? Are the back legs to be the same length as the front? We are not told this, nor is it specified that the back is level which would have indicated that all four legs are to be equal in length.

The paws are to be "small, oval and compact...When standing, giving the impression of being on tip-toe. Toes, five in front and four behind." This impression of standing on tip-toe ready to jump up and down in eagerness is not only one of the outstanding characteristics of the Abyssinian breed, but also one of its most endearing ones, so it is well that much be made of it in the standard. An Abyss which gives the impression of standing flat-footed looks simply "blah" and lacks an essential

and distinctive feature of the breed. Again, the number of toes, since we have not yet accepted polydactyls in any breed, is superfluous here and could be better contained in a list of features common to all breeds.

Oh joy! We have come to a description which is complete and adequate. The tail is to be "thick at the base, fairly long and tapering." Yes, some may carp at the word "fairly" since it is imprecise, but it is forgivable here, for one understands that the tail is long rather than short, but not to excess.

The coat is to be "soft, silky, fine-textured, but dense and resilient to the touch with a lustrous sheen. Medium in length but long enough to accommodate two or three bands of ticking." The springiness of the Abyss coat should be so noticeable that, even if one were blindfolded, it would be possible by touch alone to identify the breed. This glorious feature of the Abyss is utterly lost in the Swedish type of Abyss which, as mentioned earlier, show too many traces of their outcrossing to Siamese practiced so widely in Europe a little earlier. Ideally the coat should have a trampoline effect. In short, it bounces.

The paragraph for condition specifies that the Abyssinian is to be "lithe, hard and muscular, giving the appearance of activity, sound health and general vigor. Well-balanced temperamentally and physically, gentle and amenable to handling." Broadly speaking, here is another specification which should come under the general features common to all breeds. However, because of the history of this breed in the not-yet-forgotten past when, through unwise breeding practices, the disposition and temperament were almost wrecked to the point that most judges would have preferred to risk handling a wild cat rather than an Abyss, one understands the insistence laid on gentleness, temperament and willingness to be handled. The Abyss breeders have worked hard and long to eliminate the undesirable traits of disposition which, although not normal to the breed, had been allowed to creep into it, and now, having succeeded in their aim for the most part, they are naturally unwilling to see their work undone. For this reason there is real justification for the retention of these provisions in the standard itself in this particular breed. After all, the novices coming into the fancy cannot remember, as so many of us do, how great the problems were some years ago, and it is essential that they be alerted not to tolerate anything in the way of poor disposition which could be hereditary in nature.

Awards are to be withheld for "a white locket or white anywhere other than nostrils, chin and upper throat

(Continued on page 25)

MEDIUM

Starts
page 8

area. Kinked or abnormal tail. Dark unbroken necklace. Gray-black hair with no ruddy undercoat. Incorrect number of toes."

If one accepts the premise that causes for withholding awards are desirable in the standards – and, as you already are aware, I do not – then these causes are all ample reason for such withholding. Here some leeway is given the judges in determining where the "upper throat area" ends. However, for the benefit of novices, perhaps it would be well to mention that any area of white, however small, which is separated from the rest of the white of the throat area by dark fur, must be considered a locket and is not acceptable even if placed fairly high. There is another type of white harder to define and pin down – that is the white which hangs down from the white of the upper throat area as though a drop of wet white paint had dribbled down, yet which is still a part of the white and not separated from it. There are varying opinions as to how serious a fault this is and, since the extent of the "drip" can differ so widely, this is probably an area where the decisions must be made for each individual case rather than on an overall basis.

Penalties are to be given for "off-color pads. Long narrow head. Short round head. Barring on legs. Rings on tail. Coldness or gray tones in coat."

Color in the Abyssinian is all-important. There are two recognized colors, Ruddy and Red. I wrote some months ago on the paradox involved in the use of these two color designations, so I will not touch on that again just now. The description for *Ruddy* is: "Coat ruddy brown, ticked with various shades of darker brown or black; the extreme outer tip to be the darkest, with orange-brown undercoat, ruddy to the skin. Darker shading along spine allowed if fully ticked. Tail tipped with black and without rings. The undersides and forelegs (inside) to be a tint to harmonize with the main color. Preference given to UNMARKED orange-brown (burnt-sienna) color. Nose Leather: Tile Red. Paw Pads: Black or brown, with black between toes and extending slightly beyond the paws. Eye Color: Gold or green, the more richness and depth of color the better."

Dark fur next to the skin over wide areas must be considered a very grave fault. However, it is not necessary to state this specifically since it is distinctly required that the coat be "ruddy to the skin" and it is always better that these matters be stated positively rather than negatively.


The standard for *Red* is: "Warm, glowing red, distinctly ticked with chocolate-brown. Deeper shades of red preferred. However, good ticking not to be sacrificed merely for depth of color. Ears and tail tipped with chocolate-brown. Nose Leather: Rosy pink. Paw Pads: Pink, with chocolate-brown between toes, extending slightly beyond paws. Eye Color: Gold or green, the more richness and depth of color the better."

Here we do not have the stipulation of the base color clear to the skin. While dark undercoat has probably not as yet become a hazard in the Reds, it might be well to anticipate that it may become so in time and guard against it by making a positive statement similar to that in the Ruddy standard.

At one time the standard required that awards be withheld for any black hairs on Red Abys. For some reason this was dropped from the standard, whether because it proved to be no problem or whether as a move toward greater leniency in judging this color I am not certain. To a purist, however, black hairs in Red would be, at the very least, unsightly and this might well still be considered a serious color fault.

We have an anomaly in this color standard in that two distinctly different eye colors are sanctioned in each color class. I question the wisdom of this. If the Abyssinian breeders are unwilling to discipline themselves into accepting one eye color and one only, then it would seem to be more fair that there be two classes similar to the three classes of Whites separated on the basis of eye color, but let us not open that can of worms just now.

Even though I have not yet completely "spoken my piece" on the Abyssinians, I am going to stop here. Probably – hopefully – I have said enough to start some thinking, some discussions, possibly even some arguments, and that is the main purpose of this series. Only when attention is focussed on matters lived with so long that familiarity with them has bred contempt – attention resulting in a head-on collision between hot defense of the present wording and crusading zeal for constructive change – can progress come about and, in the case of the Abys, I am playing the role of the gadfly, for there is great need for improving the wording of this standard to make it more precise and definitive. If you have been stung enough, you will take it from here and come up with a standard a novice can breed by and a judge can judge by without hesitancy or doubt – AND we will then begin to see only one type of Abyssinian, whichever type it may prove to be – and that will be determined by the Abyssinian breeders themselves – in the shows.




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