

Cats

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**THE
ALL-AMERICAN
AWARDS ISSUE**

Photo—Smart Set



ABYSSINIANS - THE HAPPY MEDIUM

by Jane S. Martinke

PART I

AS WE CONTINUE our analysis of the standards of the various breeds I find myself approaching the next one, the Abyssinians, with a considerable amount of trepidation for a number of reasons.

Probably there is no other breed which is quite so difficult to "pin down" in clear wording. An adequate standard, after all, is not just a thumbnail sketch of the features of the cat to be used as a general guideline for expert breeders and judges. It must also, without becoming verbose, describe in complete detail not only the salient features which set it apart as a breed, but also the fine points whose conformity to the standard can mark the difference between a merely good cat and a truly great one. All of this must be pinpointed so perfectly that even someone unfamiliar with the breed, confronted with a representative specimen of it and armed with a copy of the standard, can unerringly identify it as a cat of that breed and, within reason-

able limits, make a fair assay of its quality.

Most good things somewhere somehow have the defects of their virtues and, since the dominating feature of the Abyssinian breed which has brought it down to us thus far as a very viable breed and which can, if not interfered with unthinkingly, preserve it in a healthy and sound state for future generations, is the very lack of the deviant characteristics found in most breeds around which we can focus their written standards, it is not an easy thing to produce for it an adequate standard which cannot be misconstrued. It is, therefore, not with criticism but with deep sympathy and understanding that I say that so far this basic need for a clear and unequivocal standard which will convey something close to the same mental image to everyone reading it has not been achieved.

On all sides - from novices, from experts, from judges - I hear the same somewhat plaintive complaint that the present Aby standard can be used to justify whatever type of cat any in-

dividual or group chooses to believe is the perfect Abyssinian cat. Obviously this complaint is justified, for if it were not we would not find two major types of Aby being bred for, as we do, not to mention the variations within these two types defended by smaller groups. One is left with the impression that the breeders are, with a high degree of kennel-blindness, reading into the standard authority for the particular type of cat which the genes of their own bloodlines are producing for them. This is a very human trait and it would do no harm *if* - and this is a very big "if" - the standard were worded with such precision that the flaws in the arguments on either side could be pointed out and backed up by the standard. Unfortunately, this is not the case at present.

Pity, then, the poor judges. They are bound by the standard. They *must* render their decisions solely on the basis of the standards and without regard to their own personal preferences, prejudices and beliefs or what they might wish the standard to convey. When they are confronted, as in this case, with a standard which can be made to be all things to all people, they are in a very real dilemma. They must make a firm decision in each and every class, regardless of breed, and here they find themselves with one for which there is nothing undeniable and undebatable that they can cite as an absolute and incontrovertible basis for their decisions and rest their case. It is small wonder then that some judges are even hesitant to select cats of this breed to place in the top finals.

On the one hand we find the breeders who want a type of cat which comes perilously close to looking like a Siamese wearing a different uniform. On the other we find those who feel that the best Abyssinian is something not very far removed from the type of an American Shorthair - an honest one uncontaminated by Persian, to be sure, but still an American Shorthair.

There are those who want the coat to be not only springy, but so heavy and so long as to give rise to whispered hints that this is evidence of crossbreeding with Persians - which at one time was occasionally indulged in without its appearing on the records for the specific purpose of retaining the type of coat which is the proud hallmark of the Abyssinian and is found in no other breed. Others, who have acquired their bloodlines from forebears imported from Sweden or elsewhere in Europe, where there was deliberate outcrossing with Siamese reflected in the short slick coats, prefer that type of coat. Why not? That is what they have.

The unhappy judge, trying to steer

a perilous course between Scylla and Charybdis and hoping to make a wise and sane decision based on the standard has only two choices. He can declare himself as favoring one type over the other, using the vagueness of the standard to bolster his opinion and make his decisions accordingly. His other recourse is to fall back on his artistic perception and select the cat which looks and feels "right" to him instinctively. In either case he must be wholly consistent in his judgments, choosing always the same general look of cat, else the breeder-exhibitors may rightfully declare that he is capricious in his decisions. Exhibitors being, even as judges, very human, this can lead to charges of favoring certain people, manipulating the wins, etc. No matter which method he uses he will find himself in the unhappy position of being accused by approximately 50% of the exhibitors of having insufficient knowledge of the breed to be entrusted with the judging of it. What is the unfortunate judge to do, pray tell? How can he be expected to decide with certainty that "this, this and no other" is the one and only Abyssinian cat if the breeders themselves have been unable to come together on the standard sufficiently to enable them to furnish one which is genuinely definitive and which cannot be misconstrued or misinterpreted. Don't blame the judge, blame yourselves. The judges do not make the standards. They only follow them.

Let us examine the present CFA standard in detail. Under the heading "General" we find, "the overall impression of the ideal Abyssinian would be a colorful cat of medium size and firm muscle, giving the impression of eager activity and showing a lively interest in all surroundings." This presents no particular problems. One of the outstanding features of the Abyssinian breed is that it never appears phlegmatic but is always agog with interest in what is going on around it. There is some slight difference of opinion on the color which might be mentioned here because of the use of the word "colorful."

No one questions that the undercoat of the Ruddy Aby should be a brilliant rich orange-brown heavily ticked on the tips over the upper portions of the body and that the underportions should be a clear orange-brown completely free of ticking or barring, the more vibrant the tone the better. Some breeders feel that a good Aby cat will, even with the most cursory glance, leave an impression of rather flamboyant brilliance of coloring. Others feel equally strongly that to the casual glance the coat should appear somewhat subdued with the intense brilliance bursting on one as a delight-

ful discovery when the cat moves naturally or is handled. Which is right? They can't both be.

We are told that the head should be, "a modified, slightly rounded wedge without flat planes; the brow, cheek and profile lines all showing a gentle contour. A slight rise from the bridge of the nose to the forehead, which should be of good size with width between the ears and flowing into the arched neck without a break." Exactly what does this really mean? We attempt to picture "a modified, slightly rounded wedge without flat planes." Modified, all right, but modified how? A wedge, yes, but is it a long wedge or a short one? One would assume that since we are given "a slight rise from the bridge of the nose to the forehead" that the profile is not to be straight, but that the division of the nose from the forehead is not sufficiently extreme as to be defined either as a "break" or as a "stop."

Let us take the last sentence of the description again. "A slight rise from the bridge of the nose to the forehead which should be of good size with width between ears and flowing into the arched neck without a break." Which flows into the arched neck without a break, the nose or the forehead? In other words, are we viewing it from the front or from the side? After a careful study of this I am led to the conclusion that this has to mean that, whether viewed fullface or in profile, the top of the head must be at least slightly convex, but this is merely what seems to be an obvious deduction and it is not so stated. It is always helpful to know whether the top of the head is rounded, flat or concave and to what degree. And come to that, exactly what is intended to be conveyed by "an arched neck?"

The muzzle is to be "not sharply pointed. Allowance to be made for jowls in adult males." This would seem to imply that the nose is to be somewhat pointed, but not extremely so. On the other hand, this is a rather vague statement. It might also be interpreted as meaning that the muzzle is somewhat blunt. There might be still other meanings read into this. In any case, it seems to me that this conflicts to some extent with the previous definition of a "modified, slightly rounded wedge without flat planes."

The dictionary definition of a wedge is, "a piece of hard material with the principal faces meeting in a sharply acute angle, for raising, holding or splitting objects by applying a pounding or driving force as from a hammer." The picture which is furnished as an illustration of this definition is that of a five-planed solid with all the angles sharp and one of them acute. Is this really consonant with the concept of

brow, cheek and profile lines all showing a gentle contour? In using the word "wedge" as a description one should consider the entire wedge and not just one of its flat planes. The whole concept of a wedge is endangered by the addition of "modified, slightly rounded." One can only assume that those seeking to adapt the form of a wedge to the shape of a cat's head are thinking only of the frontal plane of the head and one face of the geometrical figure, and that one not the principal one.

Is it really necessary to specify that allowance is to be made for jowls in adult males? After all, males of any breed of cats tend to develop jowls after attaining their full masculine maturity and especially those used frequently for stud purposes. Surely this belongs more properly in a general preface covering all recognized breeds and is unneeded here.

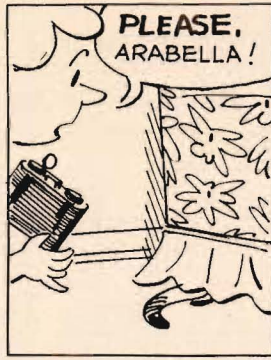
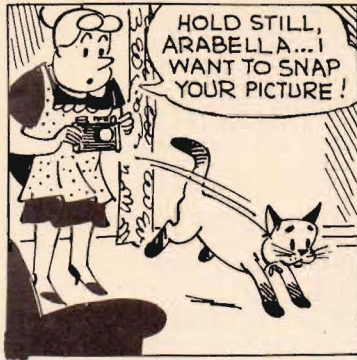
The ears are to be, "alert, large and moderately pointed; broad and cupped at base and set as though listening. Hair on ears very short and close-lying, preferably tipped with black or dark brown." There is no quarrel with this description of the actual shape and placement of the ears. However, the rest of this description may be misplaced and could be more useful elsewhere in the standard, remembering that any description should be placed in the portion most likely to be consulted by someone wishing to check on that particular feature without reading the entire standard. The hair on the ears being very short and close-lying is excellent from a descriptive point of view, but the question is whether it belongs here or under the heading of *Coat*, since the description under ears should be primarily set and placement. However, the black and dark brown tipping which is indicated as being desirable would certainly be far better placed under *Color*. It could be completely overlooked in the present location and a novice might even mistake this desirable feature for a fault since it is not specified under *Color* where he would be most apt to look for some clue on this.

Eyes are to be, "almond-shaped, large, brilliant and expressive. Neither round nor Oriental. Eyes accentuated by dark lidskin, encircled by light-colored area." Here again we have some problems. First, the eyes are described as being almond-shaped, yet they are not to be Oriental in shape. This can be confusing because many people use almond and Oriental synonymously in connection with the shape of eyes, so that the only thing here which is clearly definitive is that they should not be round.

(Continued on page 53)

AUNTY & ARABELLA

by Frank Thomas and Lloyd White



MARTINKE Starts page 11

The stipulation for dark lidskin encircled by light-colored area is again confusing. It is not stated that the light-colored area surrounding the skin is fur rather than skin. Actually, these light-colored rings are the "goggles" which appear in all colors and all breeds of tabbies – and yes, the Aby is really a form of tabby in many respects. Long, long ago when the breed was newly brought to England it was widely and quite openly interbred with the tabby domestic cat of that country and so retains some of those characteristics. In any case, the dark lidskin and the light-colored rings belong with the rest of the color description which is incomplete without this part of the coloration and that of the ears. One should not be expected to assume that portions of the color requirements will be found scattered piecemeal throughout the standard rather than being gathered into one spot under the quite appropriate title *Color*.

The body is to be, "medium long, lithe and graceful, but showing well developed muscular strength without coarseness. Abyssinian conformation strikes a medium between the extremes of the cobby and the svelte lengthy type. Proportion and general balance to be more desired than mere size." Here it is possible to offer heartfelt con-

gratulations on the sanity of using descriptive words to define the proper body outlines rather than falling into the trap of stating that it strikes a medium between the cobbiness of the the Persian and the svelteness of the Siamese (which used to be described as the "foreign shorthair" type) which would have necessitated consulting two other standards in order to determine the meaning of this one. This is a constructive approach.

Then we come to something that might be considered an anomaly. Proportion and general balance are more to be desired than mere size. This would seem to imply that this breed is to be either quite large or quite small, yet we have been informed, as noted earlier, under the heading *General* that this is to be a cat of medium size. Presumably one is intended to infer from this that a large cat OR a small cat perfectly balanced is to be preferred over the stipulated medium cat less well balanced, but this is not the first instinctive reaction to the present wording. One tends to jump initially to the conclusion that a large cat is desired.

I wanted to digress here a little for a general discussion on the size of cats in the various breeds, but I have run out of space, so we will continue our discussion of the Abyssinian standard next month, but begin it with some general thoughts on size.

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