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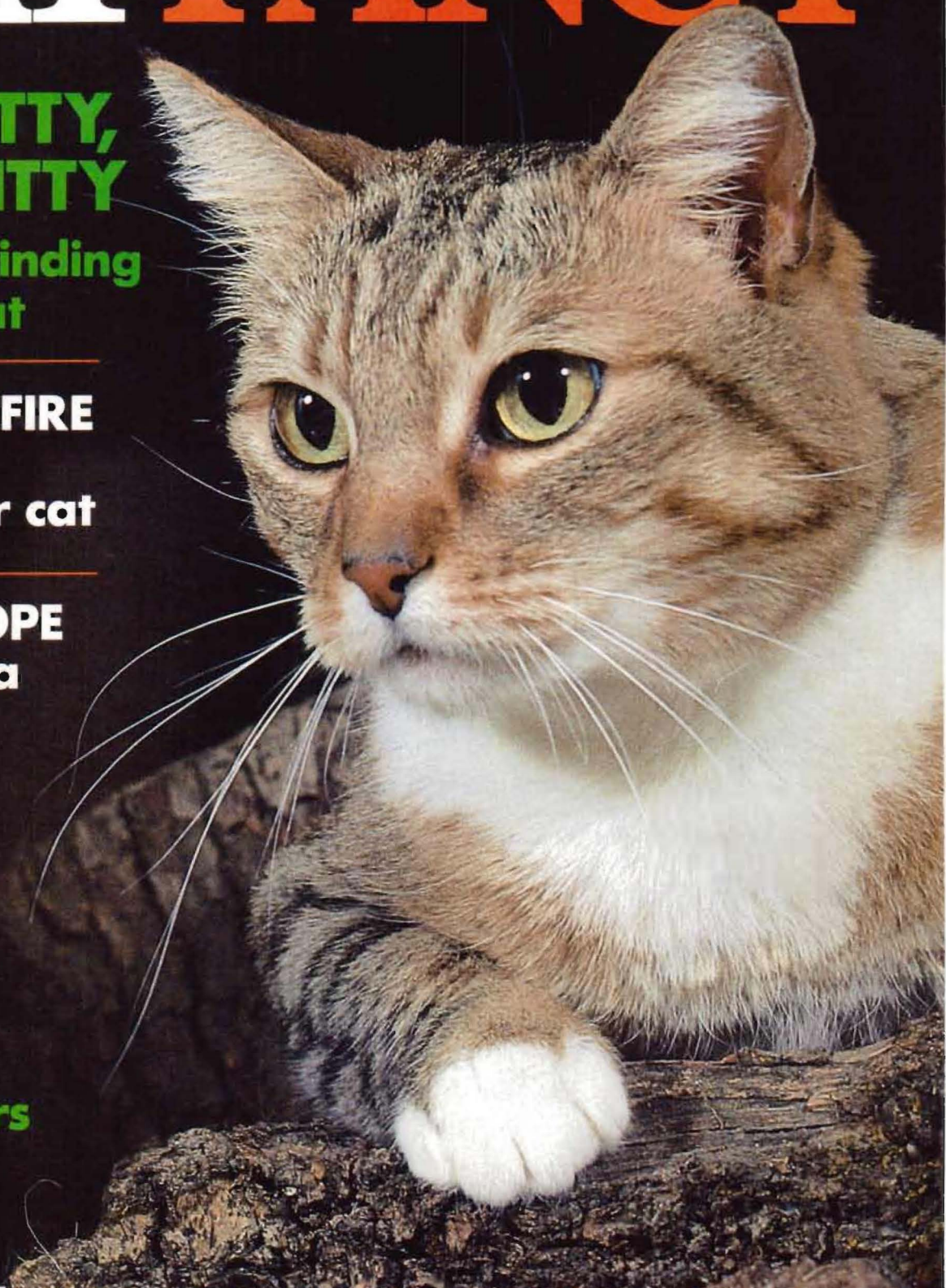
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The Athletes of Eris

At this cattery, the Abyssinians insist on being part of everything.

By Dorothy Holby

Harley is a remarkable cat. Not only is he a grand champion Abyssinian, but he will probably soon receive the Distinguished Merit Award from the Cat Fanciers' Association. This honor, which is given to male cats that have sired at least 15 grand champions, will be quite an achievement for a cat who is only 4 years old.

Harley's youth, perfect health and lack of any known genetic defects make him eligible for many more years of stud service. But Harley's owners, Gene and Kitty Rankin of Madison, Wisconsin, plan to have their outstanding Abyssinian neutered in the near future for one simple reason: They believe the time has come for Harley to enjoy life as a pet rather than as a stud cat.

"Harley will be neutered to improve the quality of his life," Gene says.

Love Those Cats

The Rankins' cattery, Eris Abyssinians, boasts several grand champion cats as well as pet cats, and Gene and Kitty love them all equally. Gene explains how he and his wife became attracted to Abyssinians and how they decided to breed them. "I had owned Siamese cats," he says. "Kitty had had a silver tabby American Shorthair. We wanted an intelligent, active cat that fell somewhere between the two breeds."

After acquiring their first Abyssinian, Gene and Kitty knew they had made the right choice. At first, they had no intention of showing their cats, but that changed after they attended one show with one kitten and brought home their first ribbon. Now they exhibit Eris cats at approximately 24 shows each season.

Although Gene and Kitty dearly love their cats, they do not believe the Abyssinian is the appropriate breed for everyone. Abys are natural athletes and are so adept at opening cupboards, closets and dresser drawers that scarcely a square foot in anybody's home is beyond their reach.

The Rankins, for example, keep few houseplants and display no fragile decorative pieces on their mantel. They keep their off-white living room furniture covered and have easy-to-maintain hardwood floors throughout the house. As a further precaution against active, clever Abys, the Rankins installed childproof latches on cabinets containing dangerous or valuable items. Before the couple leaves for work in the morning, they routinely count feline noses before closing any doors.

Gene suggests the following people think twice before selecting an Aby: (1) people who treasure order above anything else; (2) people who want their cats to behave like dogs; (3) people who insist upon having lap cats; (4) people who collect and display fragile little things and expect their cats to leave the things alone.

Special Qualities

If the Abyssinian's energy and curiosity are so challenging to live with, why is this one of the most popular breeds of cats? Gene and Kitty point to the Aby's superior intelligence and extremely affectionate nature, but these qualities can be found in many other breeds. Perhaps the attraction is due to the cat's wild look. The Aby lives up to its nickname, "the miniature cougar," because its coloring is similar to its wilder, larger cousin.

Or perhaps the attraction is due to the cat's unusual qualities. Not many cats are as athletic as the Abyssinian. How many others can jump from the floor to the top of a door and perch there with almost no effort? How many adult cats can fly up to a curtain rod and then leap delicately from window to window?

The Aby also has a voracious appetite. "Our cats eat nearly everything in sight," Gene says. "They'll fight with us for ice cream, sour cream or the steaks off our plates. Only the fact that they can be trained to stay off the table makes eating in their presence possible."

But what is it that motivates owners to forgive their Abys for stealing food from the table and makes them look away when the cats show off their gymnastic skills at inappropriate locations? Is it the sweet and sometimes insistent Abyssinian temperament? Abys are interested in everything their owners do and often enjoy riding around on shoulders. At times, an Aby may demand that reading, sewing, knitting or a phone conversation come to an immediate halt so that it can receive attention.

Gene Rankin explains the attraction another way: "When you look into an Aby's eyes, something looks back. You are always discovering something new about the Aby. Having an Aby kitten crawl into bed with you, carrying its favorite toy and purring madly because it loves being with you, is enough to keep you up extra hours."

Placing Kittens

The two breeding females at Eris Abyssinians produce no more than →

ATHLETES continued

two litters each per year. Mothers and their newborn kittens are never caged at the Rankin home. The kittens are born in a nest box in the library and are confined to this room and to the adjoining bedroom until they are 4 to 6 weeks old. When they are big enough to cope, they have the run of the house.

When the kittens reach 3 months of age, the Rankins begin screening prospective owners. To learn as much as possible about the people, the Rankins try to do more listening than talking. This way, they say, they get a better sense about the care their kittens will receive. Unless they are convinced that a kitten will receive the kind of care they believe it deserves, they will not turn over the kitten. Their sales contract reflects their standards and the fact that they are not in the cattery business for the sole purpose of selling kittens. Gene, a practicing attorney, wrote the contract himself.

The contract is very explicit, so its clauses are almost impossible to misinterpret. For instance, one clause states, "Buyer agrees that this kitten will never be sold, leased or given to a pet shop, research laboratory or similar facility."

Other clauses in the contract ensure that the buyer will not declaw the kitten, will give it top-notch medical care, will never leave it alone for long periods without human companionship and will not allow it outdoors unless it is leashed and accompanied by a responsible adult. According to the contract, the kitten must be spayed or neutered, never bred or caged, and the breeder's instructions regarding diet, housing and health must be followed.

The buyer must also agree to return the kitten without a refund if any of these terms are disregarded. If the clauses pertaining to spaying or neutering and declawing are disregarded, the buyer must give up the kitten and may be required to pay damages of \$200, plus any court costs and attorney's fees incurred if the contract is litigated.

Gene has not had to take anyone to court for violating the contract, but on two occasions he has reclaimed kittens because the new owners were apparently unprepared for the Abyssinian personality. Both parties com-

plained that the kittens were too active, too venturesome and too excitable. One of these kittens is now living happily with owners who anticipated sharing their lives with a very active cat. The second kitten will remain permanently with the Rankins.

The cattery's sales agreement also includes guarantees regarding a kitten's health. These clauses assure the buyer that his or her new kitten is free of disease and of any genetic defects.

The Rankins carefully guard against genetic defects in their kittens. At one time they were certain that their second Aby male, Louie, would be an ideal stud cat. Among other things, his ear set met their standards of perfection. However, after learning that Louie's father was siring kittens with birth defects, the Rankins immediately had Louie neutered so he would not pass along any defects to future generations. "We'll get his ear set some other way," Gene says. "We do not want any genetic time bombs in our lines."

A Remarkable Future

What happens to the Rankins' show cats and breeding cats once they are spayed or neutered and retired? A cattery can become fairly crowded after a while, so many breeders try to place their older cats, but Gene and Kitty have managed to keep theirs.

"We prefer not to place retirees," Gene explains. "At some point we will reach a maximum number of cats, and then we won't bring in any new ones." If a particular cat appears to be stressed by sharing a home with a large number of cats, the Rankins will attempt to place it in another home. This home will have to be perfect in every way, Gene adds.

Gene and Kitty do not plan to add any breeder cats to Eris Abyssinians. They do not like confining stud cats, as they have had to confine Harley, even though his quarters are quite spacious. Once he has been neutered, the two breeding females will be bred with some of Harley's offspring that live in the area.

Harley, the remarkable stud cat, belongs to some remarkable people. Just when they have achieved an excellent reputation for producing grand champion Abyssinians, the Rankins are cutting back on their breeding program. But to them, the cat is more important than the ribbon—and their commitment to that value makes the Rankins most remarkable indeed. 🐾

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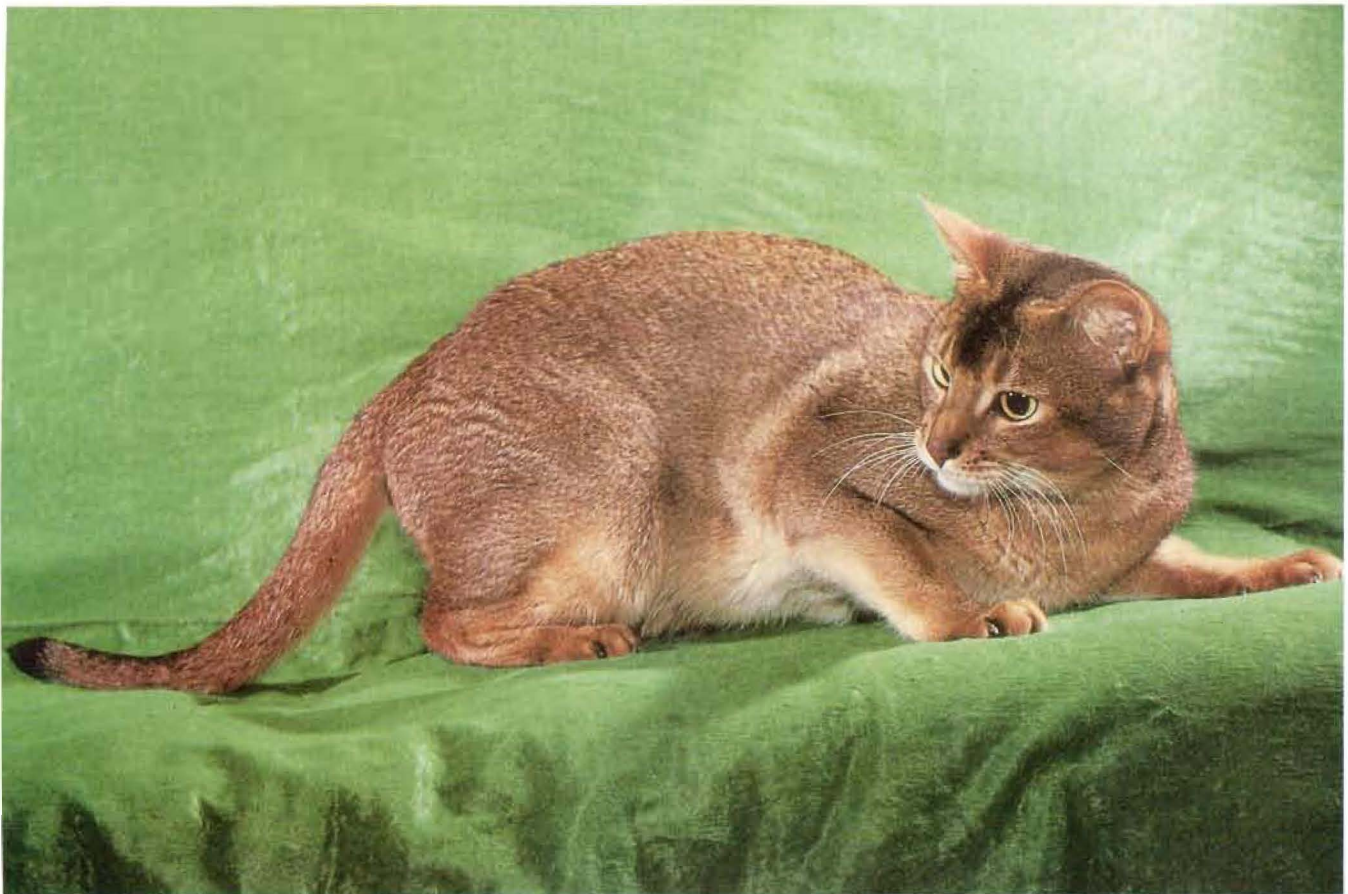
Like others of his breed, CFA Grand Premier Eris Louie Louie is athletic and has a hearty appetite.



CFA grand champion Harlem Shuffle enjoys the antics of one of his kittens.

Whether a kitten or a cat, the Aby can be insistent in its demands for attention.

As these kittens grow up, they will retain their energy and playfulness.



Because the Abyssinian resembles a wild cat, it has earned the nickname “miniature cougar.”