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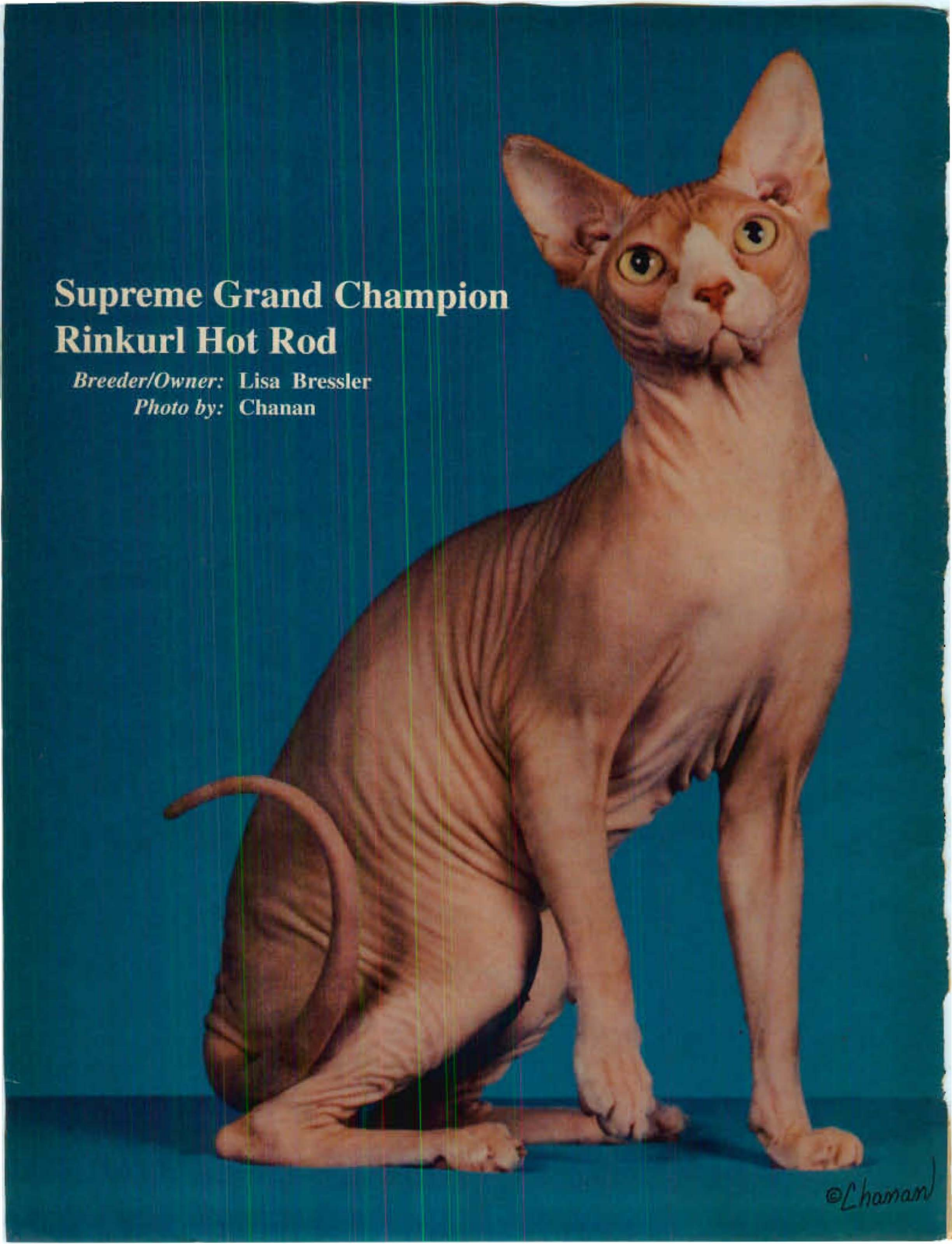

Supreme Grand Champion
Rinkurl Hot Rod

Breeder/Owner: Lisa Bressler
Photo by: Chanan

The Sphynx

by Phil Maggitti

Facts and Figures

- Recognized for championship competition by: The International Cat Association
- May be shown in non-championship classes in: The American Cat Fanciers Association
- Registration figures: Not available

Conformation

Invariably called the hairless cat, the Sphynx is not truly hairless. Its wrinkled-looking skin, described by one observer as feeling like a suede, hot-water bottle, is frequently covered with fine, virtually imperceptible down. What's more, the ears, muzzle, tail, feet, and testicles (on males) may be accented with short, tightly packed, soft hair; and a lionesque puff of hair on the tip of the tail is acceptable.

The Sphynx's head, slightly longer than it is wide, is characterized by a well-defined stop at the bridge of the nose, prominent cheekbones, a slight, but definite, whisker break, a strong muzzle, and a firm chin. The eyes are large, round, and lemon shaped and slant toward the outer edge of the ear. They are separated by a distance slightly greater than the width of an eye. The ears, which lack interior hair, are impressively large, open, and wide at the base. They are neither low set nor perched on top of the head.

A long, slender neck and a broad, almost barrel-chested front lend a somewhat anomalous look to the Sphynx. The body is medium long, sturdy, and rounded—as if the Sphynx had just eaten Thanksgiving dinner. Nevertheless, the body is hard and muscular with medium bone and no trace of delicateness.

The legs are long and slender, but not fine boned, with a firm, muscular feel. The tail is long, tapering, and whippy, yet in proportion to the body.

History

A portrait of a Mexican hairless cat named Jesuit appears in C.H. Lane's *Rabbits, Cats, and Cavies*. In his account of "the most rare of any species of domesticated cat," Lane quotes a Mrs. Shuick of Albuquerque, New Mexico. According to Shuick, "These cats were obtained from Indians a few miles from here. The old Jesuit fathers say they are the last of the Aztec race, and [are] known only in New Mexico."

Shuick refers to two cats in her account: a female named Nellie and a male named Dick, who had been killed recently by several dogs. "His loss was very great, and I may never replace him," wrote Shuick. "The Chicago Cat Club valued him at $1000. I have sent all over the country and endeavored to get a male for Nellie, but I fear the breed is extinct."

Writing 36 years later in the *Journal of Heredity*, Ida M. Mellen believed that the immediate ancestor of the New Mexican hairless cats "undoubtedly was a scant-haired cat of South America," described by the German naturalist Johann Rudolph Rengger in his *Natural History of the Mammals of Paraguay, 1830*. This scant-haired cat, said Rengger, was the descendant of house cats taken from Europe to Paraguay in the 1600s. The change in climate, he argued, had gradually effected a change in coat.

Like Shuick before her, Mellen suggested that the hairless cat "may be extinct." Yet other hairless cats appeared in Wilmington, North Carolina in 1936; in Paris, France in the 1930s; and in Ontario, Canada in the 1960s and again in 1978.

With one exception, the parents of hairless cats were domestic shorthairs of no particular particulars. The Paris cats, however, had turned up from time to time in litters born to a certain pair of Siamese. When these French hairless cats or their parents were bred to other Siamese, their kittens had normal coats. Hairless kittens were produced only from repeat breedings between the original Sphynx-producing Siamese or from breedings between two hairless cats. This indicates that the mutation gene responsible for hairlessness is recessive—at least among cats with normal coats. After crossing Sphynx with Devon Rex, modern-day breeders are beginning to suspect that the Sphynx gene may be dominant in Sphynx-Devon crosses.

The Sphynx—its name having evolved from the quaint New Mexican hairless to something more regal sounding and Egyptian—was accepted for championship competition in 1971 by the late CROWN association. (Sphynx had reached provisional status the year before in the Cat Fanciers' Association, but progressed no further due to concern about the breed's genetic difficulties—that is, decreased T-cell function causing an inadequate immune system—a problem not seen in current-day Sphynx.)

The International Cat Association (TICA), founded in 1979, also included the Sphynx among its recognized breeds. Since CROWN no longer sponsors shows, TICA is the only association in North America in which Sphynx enjoy championship status. The American Cat Fanciers' Association registers Sphynx—if both their parents are registered with another association—and allows Sphynx to compete in non-championship New Breed and Color classes.

Personality

As a rule, treatises on breed personalities are fraught with overlapping and baffling generalities. There are more than 40 breeds of cats, and it would be splitting hairs to assert that each has a distinct personality—or that anyone is capable of describing them. But the Sphynx—across decades and continents—has been universally praised for its demeanor. One anonymous Sphynx enthusiast wrote in 1903, "They are the most intelligent and affectionate family pets I have ever met [and] the smartest cats I have ever seen."

The Sphynx, according to the French breed standard, is "part monkey, part dog, part child, and part cat."

"They're wonderful," adds Lisa Bressler, who acquired a Sphynx shortly after seeing one at a show in 1986. "They're loyal; they follow you around; and they use their paws like hands. But you can't really appreciate them until you've had one under the covers with you purring." ■

For additional information see: CATS, January 1989