



# High Energy Aby

By J. ANNE HELGREN

**A**byssinians aren't for everyone. They aren't for people who want decorative cats content to lounge around looking lovely. They aren't for those who like their cats a bit on the slow side—both in activity level and alertness. And they most certainly aren't for those who like dinnertime to be quiet and cat-free.

The Aby may not be for everyone, but Abys rank second only to the Siamese in popularity among short-hair breeds. They obviously are the right breed for many people.

## CATS ON THE MOVE

Who are the ideal human companions for an Abyssinian? Folks who want a cat that will keep them entertained with their antics. Courageous, curious and high spirited, Abys are shoulder perchers, sunbeam chasers, curtain climbers and toe pouncers. On an activity scale of one to 10 (one being catatonic and 10 being warp speed), the Aby is an action-packed 11. Abys show an almost insatiable love of play, even in their older years. To them, play is a basic need, almost as important as a dish full of food and a caress from a loving hand.

Abys are intelligent cats, particularly adept at problem solving. When they aren't flying around the room or tripping you up, they're figuring out how to open the food cupboard or the drawer where you keep the catnip.

"My Aby Charlie is the most lovable,



impossible, drive-you-nuts cat in the world," says fancier Alice Webster. "He can steal your heart and your dinner all at the same time. 'No' is the only word he doesn't understand. Abys need lots and lots of attention and love, but they always give back the love double."

You can trust Abys to follow you from room to room, just to keep an eye on you and make sure you don't need any help. Whether you're making the bed or doing the dishes, they'll be there to lend a paw. Abys show great gusto at dinnertime. After all, nimble leaping and toe pouncing burn a lot of calories. If you don't want a crabby Aby, provide food pronto. They have long memories, too. Feed an Aby from your plate just once, and for the rest of your life you'll be elbowing your ruddy buddy away from your plate every time you sit down to eat.

One thing the Aby is not, however, is vocal. Abyssinians rarely talk unless they're hungry, and even then their voices are soft and inobtrusive (but they do purr with

great enthusiasm). Abyssinians meow only as a last resort; they have other ways of making their desires known. "My Aby has found the perfect way to get me to feed her," says Robin Mosher-Kennedy. "As soon as I wake up in the morning, she stands on my chest, purring loudly and drooling. Sort of a reverse Pavlov's dog effect—she's learned that salivating on me produces food. And believe me, it works."

Abys are definitely for people who like agile, athletic cats. No cat tree is too high nor railing too narrow for the nimble paws of an agile Aby. "Our Abys are interior decorators," says breeder Mary Ann Stansfield. "Imagine our surprise when we came home from work one sunny day and the sheer curtains were down in the living room and eight Aby kittens were perched in the sun on top of the couch!"

And Abys are for folks who want an affectionate cat. When restrained by their human companions, Abys become struggling bundles of fur with more than the usual number of elbows, but this doesn't

mean they're not affectionate. They just like to shower you with affection on their own terms. They'll perch on your shoulder, sleep by your side, curl next to you on the couch and lavish you with "forehead kisses" (pressing their foreheads against yours as signs of their affection).

"Abys are in tune with their human's moods in a way I've never seen before," says fancier Darlene Shaper. "Do cats have souls? I can't look into my Aby's eyes and doubt it. Something looks back at me that's hard to describe. A certain wisdom, a spark of life force...."

## COUCH COUGAR

Natural grace and regal bearing are responsible for some of the breed's current popularity—it's rather like having a miniature mountain lion in your house. The Aby's coat coloration and loose-shouldered, hunter-like walk resemble its larger cougar cousin. "My Abyssinian doesn't seem quite domesticated," says

## SACRED CAT OF EGYPT?

So where did this amazing cat come from? No one knows for sure, but several theories circulate about Aby origins. The first is by far the best known and most fun. Supposedly, today's Abyssinian is a direct descendant of the sacred cats worshiped as the physical manifestations of the gods of ancient Egyptians some 4,000 years ago. Abys do look remarkably like the cats depicted in Egyptian murals and sculptures, and some mummified remains resemble the Abyssinian in bone structure and coat color. Abys also resemble the African Wildcat (*Felis silvestris lybica*), the species thought to be the progenitor of all domestic cats. The African Wildcat has been identified as one of the species mummified by the Egyptians during the time of the cat cult.

However, other evidence exists indicating that the Abyssinian is not from Egypt, nor from Abyssinia. Cat historian Dr. Gordon Staples, in his 1874 book, "Cats, Their Points, Etc.," writes about a cat named Zula who was transported from his native Abyssinia (now called Ethiopia) to England at the end of the Abyssinian War in 1868. As proof, the book features a lithograph of a cat with a ticked coat with this description: "Zula, the property of Mrs. Captain Barrett-Lennard. This cat was brought from Abyssinia at the conclusion of the war." Because the British troops left Abyssinia in May 1868, presumably Zula and his other Aby cousins entered England around that time. Hence, the breed was dubbed the Abyssinian for its supposed country of origin.

No written records exist to trace these early Abys, and for that reason many British breeders maintain the original lines died out and the breed was recreated by breeders who crossed silver and brown tabbies with British ticked "Bunny" cats (so named because of their resemblance to a native rabbit in that region).

However, recent genetic studies indicate the Abyssinian was not a created breed, but rather a natural breed that originated from the coastal areas around the Indian Ocean and in parts of Southeast

Asia. The skin of a small, ticked cat considered the earliest identifiable Aby is displayed in Holland's Leiden Zoological Museum. Around 1834, the museum purchased the skin (which looks very much like the modern ruddy Abyssinian) from a supplier of wildcat exhibits; the museum founder labeled the exhibit a domestic cat of India.

It appears that, while the Abyssinian was developed and refined in Britain, it was not created there, but rather may have been transported to Britain by merchants who had stopped in Calcutta, a major Indian Ocean's port. According to Abyssinian breeder Tord Svenson, approximately 37 percent of the cats in Calcutta today are Abyssinian types, but no Abyssinian types can be found in Egypt or Ethiopia. Svenson recently imported wild Abys from the jungles of Singapore, and in the 1990 issue of "Incats," he writes, "These cats exhibit the marvelously friendly, outgoing personalities that American Abys are deservedly famous for, [and] the jungle Abys do have the wild markings, including bars on the legs and neck that are characteristic of the natural gene pool."

Regardless of origin, the Abyssinian made an early grand entrance to the fancy. It was one of the breeds shown at the first modern-day cat show held in London's Crystal Palace in 1871. This show was staged by Harrison Weir, a noted cat enthusiast regarded by many as the father of the cat fancy. The Abyssinian female placed third out of approximately 160 entries, demonstrating that even in the cat fancy's early days the Aby was appreciated for its beauty, poise and personality.

Two Abys arrived in North America in the early 1900s and were first exhibited in 1909, but active breeding in this country didn't begin until the mid-1930s when several high-quality Abys were imported from Britain. These cats became the foundation for today's American breeding program. The Abyssinian is the fourth most popular breed in the U.S., according to the Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) registration totals.

## FELINE FIRE RESCUE

We know Abys are an intelligent and courageous breed, but can one save your life? Kyle Leibach's 6-pound female Abyssinian Dolores meant the difference between his life and death.

On May 10, 1997, after Leibach had fallen asleep for the night, fire broke out in his Pittsburgh apartment building. A deep sleeper, Leibach didn't awaken, even when the apartment filled with deadly black smoke. Dolores leaped on the bed and began frantically scratching Leibach's face, very unusual behavior for this gentle and loving cat. Leibach awoke in a panic. He couldn't see and could barely breathe. All of the windows were covered with security bars, so Leibach headed for the only exit—the back door. Leibach felt his way down the hall and Dolores stayed close to his feet.

Reaching the door, Leibach pulled the knob—only to have it come off in his hand, leaving him no way out of the burning building. Overcome with smoke inhalation, Leibach collapsed. Again, Dolores frantically scratched Leibach awake.

Knowing this was his last chance, he stood up and threw his full weight at the door, breaking it down. He had escaped the inferno. But looking back, he saw Dolores was no longer with him. "I started yelling for help," says Leibach, "saying that my baby was still inside." Paramedics arrived with the fire crew and Leibach got medical attention for his injuries. He watched the firefighters battle the blaze, praying they'd find Dolores alive and knowing that every passing moment made it more and more unlikely.

Three hours passed and Leibach lost hope. Dolores couldn't have survived for so long. Suddenly, a fireman appeared carrying something wrapped in a towel. "I was never happier in my life than when I looked down and saw it was Dolores," says Leibach. Dolores's eyes

were seared closed and her hair was singed, but she was alive.

Leibach learned that Dolores had lost consciousness just inside the back door, and a fireman had stumbled over her when he entered the apartment. The emergency medical technicians on the scene performed CPR and administered oxygen to Dolores for an hour before they reunited the two lucky survivors. Leibach had lost everything in the fire—everything, that is, except the cat who saved his life.

Although it was touch and go for the first four days, Dolores survived her injuries, and the Western Pennsylvania Humane Society in Pittsburgh nominated Dolores for the American Humane Association's national William O. Stillman Award for bravery (see "Sources"). This award, which originated in 1900, is given to animals who, in the face of danger, have saved human lives. It also is presented to humans who have rescued animals at great risk to themselves. Over the years, the award has been given to 142 animals and 117 humans. Last summer, Dolores was honored with the award.

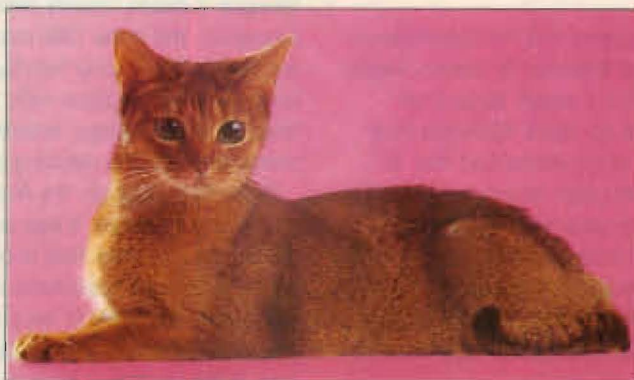
Life hasn't changed much for Dolores and Leibach—the award didn't go to her head. However, the incident has brought them closer together. Before the fire, Dolores didn't enjoy being touched, but now she cuddles into Leibach's lap to be petted. "I may have lost everything I own," says Leibach, "but I didn't lose the most important things—my life and the life of my baby."



fancier Robert Wade, "although he's as sweet and gentle as anyone could hope for. But the way he moves suggests something wild and untamed."

The Abyssinian's body is medium long, lithe and graceful, but also shows the cat's well developed muscular strength, needed for those power jumps to the top of curtain rods. The breed's conformation is middle of the road—the body type falls midway between the boxy cobby breeds such as the Persian and the long, svelte breeds such as the Siamese. A lithe body type, plus grace and strength give this breed a regal appearance in keeping with its divine status in ancient times. The Aby's head is a slightly rounded wedge shape with a muzzle that's neither sharply pointed like the Siamese, nor squared like the American Shorthair. The ears are large, alert and set as though listening. Large, expressive eyes in gold, copper, green or hazel, like glowing, golden jewels, adorn the cat's face. The eyes are accentuated by a ring of dark

color which is encircled by a light-colored area. Dark lines extend from the eyes and brows; the forehead possesses the classic tabby "M." The long, graceful tail is broad at the base and tapers to a black tip.



But what really sets the Abyssinian apart is its coat pattern. The breed's distinctive look comes from bands of colors on each hair shaft called ticking. The lighter or ground color lies closest to the skin and the hair shafts are decorated with dark-colored bands contrasted with lighter-colored bands, ending with a dark

tip. Known as the Agouti pattern, this coloring is effective camouflage, allowing the cat to blend in with its native environment in the same way the cougar can slink by unseen.

Abyssinians are generally healthy, but some lines are known to be susceptible to gingivitis and tooth decay. Regular toothbrushing, cleaning, check-ups, fluoride application and, if needed, vet-prescribed antibiotics can control dental problems. Owners of Abys afflicted with these problems must be diligent about feline dental health or by middle age their Abys will have few teeth left.

### SOURCES

**Abyssinian Cat Club Of America** (CFA, ACFA and TICA affiliated), Dept. CM, 4050 Croaker Lane, Woodbridge, VA 22193.

**American Humane Association**, Animal Protection Division, American Humane Association, Dept. CM, Box 1266, Denver, CO 80201, (303) 792-9900.