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What About Bobs?

By J. ANNE HELGREN

Short on tail and long on charm, the American Bobtail is the cat's meow, say fanciers. And if you're looking for a native American, this breed, with its untamed appearance and docile disposition, has a look that's born-in-the-USA.

Bobtail Beginnings

Not yet recognized by many of the U.S. cat associations, the American Bobtail, nevertheless, has been hobbling around the country since the 1960s. It's taken these cats many years to overcome their up-and-down beginnings and find acceptance in the hearts of cat-lovers and asso-

ciations. But just hold one, say owners of this short-tail breed, and you'll know why breeders have remained passionate about this cat through years of adversity.

Although still rare, the breed has been accepted for many years in The International Cat Association's New Breed And Color (NBC) category. In September 1998, breeders are hoping the American Bobtail will qualify to take the long-awaited step into the TICA championship ring. "If not this year, it definitely will be next year," says TICA's breed committee chairperson Michelle French of the Stillriver Cattery in East Douglas, Mass.

American Bobtails even have popped up in American Cat Fancier Association (ACFA) shows as an "exhibition-only" breed (they're not accepted for registration with ACFA). But breeders report attention from judges and fanciers is on the rise. "We're seeing a real resurgence in interest in the American Bobtail," says

Maranda Hull of Red River Bobis Cattery in Boswell, Okla.

When you consider the murky depths of the Bobtail gene pool, perhaps it's not so surprising that the breed isn't better known. Stories abound regarding its origins, but the best known account says the breed began in the 1960s when a kitten named Yodie was allegedly dumped at an Arizona motel by a child from a nearby American Indian reservation. There were no other cats around to give hints of Yodie's lineage, but his brown-tabby markings and his short tail fueled rumors of a bobcat and domestic-cat tryst.

While this account is quite fascinating, it very likely is wrong. Domestic cats have been known to mate with cats of other species (cats in love aren't very choosy about their prospective mates); however, the first and sometimes second generation males of such matings are usually sterile. And sterile Yodie definitely was not, as he

soon proved at his new Midwestern home. Vacationers John and Brenda Sanders of Clinton County, Iowa, were impressed with Yodie's spunk and personality and returned home with a four-legged souvenir.

In due time, Yodie romanced Mishi, the Sanders' female Seal Point Siamese. The two lovecats produced—surprise!—bobtail kittens. Some had long tails like their mother, some had short tails like their father, and all sported either black or tabby coats. Because their mother was Siamese, all of the kittens carried the colorpoint gene, but none exhibited the pattern because the recessive gene must come from both parents in order for kittens to wear the colorpoint coat.

On the other hand, the tail-length gene obviously was dominant because some of the offspring had short tails. Only one copy of this gene is necessary for the trait to be exhibited, and only cats exhibiting the trait can pass it along to future generations.

Before they were altered, Yodie and Mishi produced several litters. The Sanders found homes for some of the kittens, and the others occupied luxurious quarters in the couple's barn. Because the offspring weren't altered right away, a neighborhood tom soon came calling on Yodie's daughters. This tom was quite a handsome fellow with a cream-point pattern, white markings, and white boots. The girls fell head over paws for him, and in just 65 days, give or take a day, several of the bobtail daughters gave birth to bouncing baby bobs. Because both the daughters and the cream-point tom possessed the recessive Siamese pattern, some of the kittens had the Siamese pattern, plus blue eyes, white markings and white boots to boot. And some had Yodie's short tail. At that point, the Sanders and their friends decided these pretty kitties could become a bonafide breed.

In the early 1970s, Sanders' neighbor Mindy Schultz wrote a provisional standard for the American Bobtail that called for a pointed-pattern cat with white mittens, a white facial blaze, blue eyes and a short tail. Schultz and other breeders began mating the Bobtail to other domestic cats and breeds, such as Ragdolls, Birmans, Himalayans and Siamese.

Although there's no proof that the Manx was used in these pairings, the appearance of American Bobtails with tails of varying

lengths, and some with no tails at all, indicates the possible presence of a Manx-like gene. Manx tail types are broken into four classifications: rumpy, rumpy-riser, stumpy and longy. Rumpies are completely tailless; rumpy-risers have a short knob of a tail; stumpies have a short tail stump that's often curved or kinked; and longies have tails almost as long as an average cat's. This variety in tail length exists in the American Bobtail lines as well.

Over the next 10 years, the hair of the American Bobtail grew longer due to the Himalayan, Ragdoll and Birman influence, and the breed, which had started out with large, healthy, random-bred domestics, grew smaller and less-healthy as the cats became increasingly inbred. The difficulty of getting a new breed



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established, combined with exacting conformation requirements, made breeders lose interest in the American Bobtail. At one point, virtually all that remained of the original breed was the name.

New & Improved

In the mid 1980s, a fresh group of Bobtail breeders and bloodlines revived the breed, and took it in a new direction. Lisa Black and Reaha Evans, two organized and active breeders at that time,

started the movement to re-establish the breed. Instead of colorpoint cats with bobbed tails, they began to breed cats more like the original Yodie, a large, feral-looking tabby with a stubby tail. "We are breeding for cats that look as much like the bobcat as possible, but are completely domestic and are as sweet-tempered as possible," Black said in a 1993 interview. Although not breeding Bobtails today, Black was instrumental in re-establishing the breed.

Unlike the original bloodline, the new Bobtail lines don't come from one foundation cat. The new breeders are using domestic cats who acquired the short-tail gene naturally, says French. Although some breeders claim their cats were products of matings between domestic cats and bobcats, or bobcats and Manx cats, the American Bobtail, according to TICA's standard, isn't a hybrid breed: "The ideal American Bobtail is a naturally occurring short-tailed cat. Being a product of natural selection, it is a hearty breed, with all the intelligence and skill that nature demands of her creatures."

According to many breeders, today's American Bobtail is a domestic cat breed that arose in the domestic gene pool, and the distinctive tail is the product of a spontaneous mutation. "That's basically what our breeding program is," says French. "It states right in our breeding forum

that no individual breeds and other species are to be allowed. No Bengal blood. No bobcat blood. No Persian, no Manx—no nothing!"

"Mixing Manx into the bloodline is the biggest mistake you could make," says ACFA breed chairperson Lynn Benson of Elbee Cattery in Fulton, Ill. "We're trying to eliminate the no-tail gene, so why would you want to turn around and put Manx into the breeding line?"

Tail mutations in domestic cats are well-documented and occur quite often, which gives credibility to the American Bobtail's spontaneous origin. For example, the Manx and Cymric managed to lose their tails without any help from any other species. It seems probable that the short, bobcat-like tail occurred as a spontaneous mutation, but no one knows for sure. "I know of no documented proof of breedings between bobcats and domestic cats," Black says. "TICA has listed us as a natur-

breed profile: American Bobtail

al breed, not a hybrid. [The American Bobtail] could have a Manx-type gene; we do get the very short tails and full tails born in some litters on occasion."

What does seem clear is that several bloodlines have been developed from various cats, and that a great deal depends upon geographic region and the breeder's practices. From one point of view, this is good for the breed's future—it's not likely



to run into the problems with inbreeding that almost ruined the previous bloodline. On the other hand, the different bloodlines will make it more difficult for breeders to achieve a consistent body type and temperament.

"What we need is a way to unify all our thoughts and actions so we can get bigger and stronger," French believes. "We need to work together to achieve TICA championship." One of the tasks of the breed committee will be to contact all American Bobtail breeders and document the tail lengths of all Bobtails and their litters for TICA's genetics committee and board of directors, so the bloodlines and tail types can be properly tracked.

Wild But Mild

The American Bobtail's breed standard calls for a large, brawny cat with a substantial bone structure and a heavily built, muscular body. The cat's head has a distinctive "hunting" look due to the heavy brow; broad, modified-wedge shape; and the deep-set, oval eyes. The ears are wide at the base, alert and decorated with tufts on the tips. The hind legs are slightly longer than the front legs, and the large, round feet are accented with toe tufts. These cats are slow to mature, reaching their prime weight and development somewhere between 2 and 3 years of age.

"We want a wild look but still a sweet face, and definitely a sweet personality,"

says Hull. "One of the reasons that some of us wanted to work with this breed was to create something that looks wild, and has the kind of personality people enjoy." Hull notes that in some parts of the country wild bobcat kittens are sold as pets to unsuspecting cat lovers. When the bobcats grow up, the majority of them end up being euthanized or placed in wildlife preserves because they cannot be domesticated. "The majority of those bobcats don't reach a year old," she says. "This way we can educate people and at the same time provide good companions."

The Bobtail's shaggy, double-coated, semi-long coat has a non-matting, all-weather texture, adding to the wild look of the breed. The coat may



be decorated with a neck ruff and longer hair on the legs, belly and tail. An accepted shorthair version of the breed calls for medium-short hair with a resilient, all-weather texture.

All colors and patterns are accepted, including colorpoint which still appears in some lines. Breeders are currently working with two new colors called Alaskan Snow Bobs and Blue Lynx, which feature longer lynx tipping on the ears.

The Bobtail's most celebrated feature—its abbreviated tail—is carried erect and varies in length. Ideally, the tail is short, reaching halfway to the hock in repose. Straight tails are preferred, but the tail may curve, have bumps or be slightly knotted. However, tails that are so knotted that nat-

ural movement is impaired are penalized in the show ring. Full tails are usually docked (shortened) to make it easier to find homes for the cats.

American Bobtails with no tails (called rumpies) aren't acceptable because of the health problems that can occur due to the foreshortened spine. Congenital abnormalities, such as spina bifida (abnormal closure of the spinal column) and defects of the colon, occur in some lines that produce tailless cats. Cats with no tails and cats that produce any kittens with spina bifida are "petted out" (sold as pets with spay or neuter agreements) or are given away. "Because of these problems, breeders are now very careful," Hull explains. "We outcross to domestic cats to keep the immune system strong."

Although the breed is still developing and may take time to settle down to a consistent pattern of behavior, Bobtail breeders say these cats are intelligent, playful and energetic, with a large dose of affection for their humans. They're not shy about making their feelings known, but aren't as vocal as the more-talkative Siamese. Highly intelligent due to Mother Nature's natural selection process, Bobtails easily learn to fetch, walk on a leash, sit up and shake paws. "Their personality is very dog-like," says French. "They wag their tails, and they're very teachable as far as tricks go."



Getting kitty to perform tricks on command is another thing. Even the people-oriented Bobtail is not above turning a deaf ear when so inclined.

SOURCES

Native American Bob-Tailed Cat Association, Dept. CM, Box 584, Boswell, OK 74727; phone (580) 566-2014.
The Original American Bobtail Association, Dept. CM, 132 West St., Douglas, MA 01516; phone (508) 476-7905.