

The Mystery of the Sphynx Revealed

by David Mare, CFA Allbreed Judge & Arden Gatlin-Andrews

Editor's note: Sphynx have been called a lot of things over the years -- some of them not so nice. Ever wonder how our magnificent breed came to be called Sphynx? In this candid interview with CFA Allbreed Judge, David Mare, the mystery of the Sphynx name is finally revealed. I must admit that when I read about the first encounter between David and the Sphynx I got a lump in my throat. It's a *must read* for any Sphynx history buff. But, before we get to the exciting details of how Sphynx became Sphynx, let's take a deeper look into the story of our hero, David Mare.

David's interest in the cat fancy started pretty early. As a 17-year-old husband and father in 1961, he and his wife, Sue, purchased a blue point Siamese kitten. The kitten was bought as a mutual Christmas present by the couple, "... for the seemingly astronomical price of \$35." Soon afterwards, they decided to try their hand at the cat fancy.

"We read an ad about a cat show in Albany, NY. It was a CFA Show with 3 rings, and the judges were Rita Swenson, a very young Richard Gebhardt, and Blanche Smith. Our blue point female happened to be the only Novice blue point female entered, and she competed against 12 other blue point females in the *open* category for the single Winners Ribbon. In every case, the Winners Ribbon went to one of the other "opens," but my 17-year-old logic, seeing that 9 of the opens received no ribbons at all and our beauty got a blue ribbon EVERY time, reasoned that she was the best one. Well, it made perfect sense to me at age 17! Unaware that our female's crossed eyes and visibly kinked tail would ensure that she would never win a Winner's Ribbon, Sue and I were undaunted. Two weeks later, we entered this same cat in a show in Rochester, NY. People were kinder to one another in those days (at least in the cat fancy), and some wonderful Siamese breeders took pity on these two teenage kids with barely two nickels to rub together who were showing this hopeless Siamese. They arranged to let us have one of their bred females 'that they didn't have room for any longer' (very big wink)."

David registered his cattery name not long after the Rochester show. He called it Mar-Ray, which is a phonetic-like spelling of his last name in Italian. His first litter from the gift queen produced 8 kittens, 5 of whom grandded. Several of these kittens were *Best In Show* at Madison Square Garden. Suddenly this now 18-year-old kid from upstate New York was on the map! Several months later, David was invited to attend a meeting of the Albany Cat Fanciers. After only two meetings, the President and Show Manager, having

run the show for years, announced they were moving to Florida, and that David would take their place.

David never looked back. "I put on successful shows for several years, and was invited to attend some CFA Board Meetings, which I did. Jean Rose and Richard Gebhardt determined I should be fast-tracked to prominence in CFA. So, in 1967 (at the tender age of 23), the Board elected me to the seat of Secretary of CFA." David also became a member of the CFA Executive Committee. He was accepted into the CFA Judging Program, and in 1968 became one of CFA's youngest Allbreed Judges.

During his tenure as Secretary of CFA, David got his first glimpse of the Sphynx (then routinely called Hairless Cats).

"We were scheduled to have a Board Meeting in Buffalo, NY, and as CFA Secretary, I received a letter from Mr. & Mrs. Tenhove who asked for time to present these mutations to the CFA Board for Consideration. This would have been [around] the end of 1971. I gave them 20 minutes, thinking that it would probably take less time than that for the Board to wisely reject what I presumed were the ugliest felines in the world."

David continues, "They appeared before the Board at the appointed time with two carriers. The Board Table had a very large U-Shaped form with about 22 people seated around it. I was at the head of the table with the other CFA Officers. Mr. Tenhove removed a male from the carrier and placed him on the table. At that particular moment he was probably 30 feet from me. He told us this was Dutchee's Epi-dermis and there was a near unanimous gasp of seeming disapproval around the table ... but not from me. Epi and I made eye contact and as the Lord is my witness he regally trotted down one side of the u-shaped board table, past about 8 bodies, crossing the entire head table to my position. There he stopped and sat down on his hind legs about 3 feet away from me. Not a single person attempted to touch him the entire trip. He came directly to me and stopped in his tracks. The breed absolutely *owned* me from that moment. I held him and a few of the Board Members came by and gingerly touched him and he did the sales job of a lifetime for the breed. Had it been any other cat with lesser sales skills, we may never have agreed to accept them for Miscellaneous category that very day."

"As Epi sat on the table afterward I was fascinated with his similarity to an Egyptian statue of Bastet, and since I was about to make a motion that CFA accept this fascinating breed for Miscellaneous competition, I felt it needed a better name than *hairless cat*. We already had the Egyptian Mau as a breed, and for a brief moment I considered calling them *Bastets*, but it just didn't roll off my tongue comfortably. In keeping with the Egyptian theme I considered *Sphynx* and that name has stuck with them ever since."



CFA Allbreed Judge, David Mare
(above), statue of Egyptian Goddess
Bastet from the Louvre Museum
(top right).



Continued on page 4



Revealed continued from page 3

"I tried to buy (read *steal*) Epi from the Tenhoves at that meeting to take him home with me but he had been promised to John Royal. As luck would have it 3 weeks later I was to judge a show in Florida and John brought him to the show with the intention of giving him to me. It seemed that the marriage hadn't worked out to his satisfaction, and when he called the Tenhoves to arrange to return him, they suggested he contact me. Epi (Prune's Epidermis of Mar-Ray) owned me until he was almost 20 years old, dying in my arms in 1991."

"Although I bred several Sphynx in the years after they were accepted for Miscellaneous recognition by CFA in the early 1970s, the problems associated with breeding early mutations were heartbreaking and disastrous. I was still on the CFA Board when I recommended that they be dropped from Miscellaneous category until (and if) those breeding problems could be overcome. I also submitted that if these problems could eventually be resolved, CFA *fast-track* the breed to Championship class recognition at a later date."

David's influence on the breed can still be seen today. "I gave some of my coated carriers to several TICA breeders who picked up the ball at that point, experimenting with outcrossing to other breeds. Eventually (and after considerable work) producing the consistently viable Sphynx that we know and love today. While they are no longer the original mutations, they are healthy and vibrant. While they look somewhat different, they reproduce successfully, and are a fabulous addition to the beautiful pallet of breeds." And in the show ring?

"CFA held true to its word, and when they were presented, once again, for Miscellaneous category, they were *fast-tracked* directly to Championship to the surprise of almost everyone. I had hoped this would happen, but was no longer on the CFA Board to push for it. I did, however, remind several Board Members of this history and they, in turn, got the job done. Frankly I can't imagine a world without these beautiful and exquisite creatures. . . nor would I want to."



Prune's Epidermis of Mar-Ray from December 1980 issue of Life magazine (above) and Epi's portrait (right).



"In my 21
years of
shooting
for *Life* I'll
bet this is
the only
nude
centerfold
they'll ever
have!"
*the
Life*
Photographer
told
David Mare.

Please visit our website for more information about Sphynx
and the people that love them.

www.sphynxnewsletter.com

