

Breed Article: Somali

The Somali Cat: 30 Years and Going Strong!
by Kathy Black



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What comes to mind when we think of the Somali? A longhaired Abyssinian? A cat that resembles a fox? A colorful cat with squirrel markings? Many colorful adjectives could be used to describe the Somali, but I think that the Somali breeders/owners themselves express it the best. Recently at the CFA International Cat Show in Kansas City, I asked some of them to describe the Somali, using the first thought that came to mind. Here are their responses: very loving, lively, playful, large bushy tail, into everything, softest fur ever felt, the king, busy, ready for action, foxy, ornery, strikingly beautiful, lifetime companion, active, mischievous, and colorful.

The Somali is a combination of beauty and personality. The first thing that captures your attention is the beauty and uniqueness of the Somali. They are very striking cats, with their colorful coats, bushy tails, facial markings and alert personalities.

They come in four recognized colors: ruddy, red, blue and fawn. The combination of ticked, dramatic colored fur, facial markings, large ears, full ruff, dark hocks and bushy tail and britches is what gives the Somali its wild feral look - and is what immediately draws fascinated attention to the breed.

As you can see described above, however, the Somali's personality is what their breeders and owners prize the most. Somalis are intelligent cats, very playful and active. They are "people cats" in the truest sense, in that they seek out the attention of their owners. They involve themselves in everything that is going on around them. In fact, many times I have heard spectators at shows comment on how alert they are. The word "alert" is even written into the standard for the breed. Somalis have "bursts" of energy several times a day, at which time they will take off running through the house, jumping into the air. They love to fetch and bring toys to you, to play chase through the house and bring back the toys to play again. Tail plumed and back arched, the Somali will run sideways like a monkey, and even hold objects and food the way a monkey does. Adept at opening cupboards and drawers, Somalis sometimes get inside these secret areas. Many Somalis can manipulate faucets, and they love to play with water. As playful as they are, they are also very loving. Kneading (or "making biscuits"), head butting and the "hair dresser gene" are also very common traits of the Somali. They will seek out all the attention that their caregivers are willing to give, and then some!

How did this wonderful breed come into being? The Somali is a longhair Abyssinian, first originating as an undesirable product of a recessive gene in the Abyssinian cat. How this gene was introduced into the Abyssinian gene pool is of much speculation. After World War II, there were few Abyssinian cats to be found. In fact, some estimates are that less than 12 Abyssinians remained after World War II. Many of the resulting litters during this time show cats of unknown parentage. With these unknown cats in the background of cats from England and other areas, it makes sense that a longhair gene could have been introduced. Since the gene for short hair is dominant, unless both parents carry the longhair gene, only shorthair kittens will be produced. The recessive longhair gene, even if present in both parents, does not always produce a longhair cat. Two shorthair cats can produce a longhair kitten, if both carry the longhair gene, but two longhairs can never produce a shorthair kitten. It was not until two related British Abyssinians produced some of the first longhair Abyssinians that this was fully discovered. "Raby Chuffa of Selene," from Canada/United States, and "Bruerne Achilles" from Australia/New Zealand, were two of the first cats identified as longhair carriers. Can you imagine the reaction of the Abyssinian breeders to have longhair kittens in their litters? These "undesirable" kittens were petted out or otherwise "swept under the carpet," and many Aby breeders refused to admit having them; but others went on to produce more longhair kittens. We may never be able to pinpoint the way that the longhair gene was introduced into the Abyssinian gene pool, but the result was our beautiful Somali cats. We are very thankful to these first breeders!



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Photo: © Chanan

Many different areas of the world were producing these longhair Abys, but these were isolated breeders. In the United States, Evelyn Mague began working with Somalis, after finding that two of her Abyssinians, Lynn-Lee's Lord Dublin and Lo-Mi-R's Trill-By, carried the longhair gene. "Trilly," as she was called by Evelyn, was the beginning of the United States Somali breed. She was born May 25, 1965 and died May 12, 1981. Evelyn wrote: "Rest in peace,

Trilly, mother of the Somali movement around the world. Your job on earth was well done. Without you there would have been no little George who was to start a revolutionary movement in the Cat Fancy." "George" was the first longhair Abyssinian cat from Evelyn's bloodlines. From that time on, Evelyn worked diligently for recognition and development of the Somali breed. Evelyn had the distinct honor of naming the breed. She picked a name of equal stature to the one derived from Abyssinia - she chose to call them Somalis after Somalia, the neighboring country of ancient Abyssinia.

The road from those small beginnings to acceptance in the showhall was a long and arduous road for the breeders and the exhibitors who chose to show Somalis. They were ridiculed, shunned, and treated deplorably by many of the Abyssinian breeders and the judges of their associations. Many were discouraged by the actions of others, and finding people interested and willing to take on this task of developing the Somali breed became increasingly difficult. Evelyn found hope in many Canadian breeders, who were also working with the longhair Aby - and thus the breed was born. All Somali breeders owe their thanks to those pioneers, who had the stamina and the fortitude to show their Somalis, and to get them accepted for championship status. Some of those beginning Somali catteries were: Lynn-Lee, Foxtails, Homespun, Purrkin's, Purrpots, Rookwood, Tri-Na-Nog, and Nephriani. Evelyn eventually found an Abyssinian breeder very interested in the Somali, Ann Kimball, who showed the first Somalis on the West Coast.

After their acceptance into The Cat Fanciers' Association in 1979, the Somali cats marked that year with a loud and resounding "We're Here!!" GC, NW Foxtail's Rio Grande, a ruddy male bred and exhibited by Patricia Nell Warren, was the first CFA Somali Grand Champion. "Rio" achieved his Grand on Saturday of the show; but, the very next day, CFA had its second Somali Grand Champion with GC Nephriani's Kubla Khan, a red male bred and owned by Ruth and Robert Morris. Both of these males competed throughout the show season, with Rio Grande achieving a national win, placing as 19th Best Cat that show season. In 1985, CFA had its second Somali national winner with GC, NW Murex's Sunrise, a ruddy male bred and owned by Richard and Karen Smith. In 1991, GC, NW Mabuhay's Wind Warrior of Zarpa, a ruddy male, was CFA's 19th Best Cat. He was bred by Carla Bizzell and owned by Dick and Nell Foster.



Photo: © Jim Brown

The Somali breed continued to grow in both awards and recognition. In the 1991-1992 show season there were three national winning Somalis! GC, NW Silkpaws Raj, a red male bred and owned by Bruce and Debbie Bobbins, was CFA's 3rd Best Cat. GP, NW Mabuhay Copper Blaze of Foxykats, a ruddy neuter bred by Carla Bizzell and owned by Kathy Black, was 12th Best Cat in Premiership, and GP, NW Roadrace's Ferrari Dino of Bemy, a red neuter bred by Carolyn Marriner and owned by Bettijane Myjak and Carolyn Marriner, was 14th Best Cat in Premiership,

In 1995, GC, GP, NW Silkpaws Repeat Performance, a red neuter, was CFA's 3rd Best Cat in Premiership. Bruce and Debbie Bobbins did indeed "repeat" their performance with this red Somali! It was a long drought until the next national winning Somali, which occurred just this past season (1998-99). GP, NW Zzaby's El Nino, a ruddy neuter, was CFA's 4th Best Cat in Premiership. "El Nino" was bred by Karyn Dillard and Kathy Black and owned and shown by Janice and Lisa Pitelka.



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This author feels the most significant event demonstrating the continued improvement of the Somali breed is the number of regional kitten winners. The Somali can be a very slow maturing breed, often taking up to 18 months to reach its full maturity in color and ticking. The first Somali regional kitten winners were from Japan. In 1994, GC, RW Libemiauen Fire Michael, a ruddy male, was Japan's 13th Best Kitten and 23rd Best Cat. In 1995, a red female, GC, RW Foxykats Ashli of Nekobayashi was 20th Best Kitten and 4th Best Cat. Two red males were kitten

winners from Japan in 1996: GC, RW Libemiauen Solomon, 11th Best Kitten and 24th Best Cat, and GC, RW Foxykats Sunrise of Nekobayashi, 20th Best Kitten and 21st Best Cat. In 1998 there were three kitten regional winners: GC, RW Libemiauen Fire, a ruddy male, 7th Best Kitten and 3rd Best Cat in Japan; GC, RW Ciderhouse Lukas of Tamarakatz, a ruddy male, Northwest Region's 10th Best Kitten and 15th Best Cat; and GC, RW Foxykats Non-Deductible, a red male, Gulf Shore Region's 3rd Best Kitten. In 1999, there were also three regional winning kittens: GC, RW Nekobayashi Sunday Silence, a red male - Japan's 4th Best Kitten; GC, RW Imzadi's Tuvok, a ruddy male, North Atlantic Region's 17th Best Kitten and Great Lakes Region's 13th Best Cat; and GC, RW Foxykats Rigel Kentaurus, a ruddy male - Gulf Shore Region's 3rd Best Kitten and 7th Best Cat. Most of these were double regional winners during the same show season, achieving both kitten and championship regional wins. As you can see, Somalis have achieved 10 regional kitten wins in the past six years. I believe that it will not be much longer before we celebrate the first national winning Somali kitten!

The Somali was recognized for championship competition in 1979 in the ruddy and red colors. The blue Somali was accepted in 1986 and the fawn Somali in 1990. The standard is a high bar to achieve, but the Somali breeders have diligently worked to achieve their goals. Beautifully groomed and colorful Somalis are commonly seen in showhalls around the country today. Chart 1 shows the number of Grand Champions and Grand Premiers by year. (The 2000 show season bar represents the number through half of the 1999-2000 show season, the time this article was written.)

The top producing catteries for Grand Champions and Grand Premiers are: Lynn-Lee (32), Thecatgarden (26), Carquinez (24), Foxykats (21), Mittsnpaws (19), Pysabs (16), Silamos (16), Rainkeys (15), Tadofa (15), and Roadrace (14), at the time of this article. Over 40 catteries have produced at least one grand.

The Somali cat is also a very popular breed in Japan. Some of our Japanese Somali catteries are: Nekobayashi, Brunrouge, Libemiauen, and Piaisland.

The dilute colors (blue and fawn) are very difficult colors to work with, and those catteries which breed and show the dilute colors are to be commended. Many times they are forgotten about, and not given recognition for their efforts. Catteries worth mentioning are Yum, Diamondust, Rampageous, Danjera, Foxcroft, Fifala, Foxbrush, Pirouette, Pysabs, Rumpuss, and Tadofa. From 1983 to date there have been 22 blue and seven fawn Grand Champion/Grand Premiers. In 1990, GC Yum Blueberry Cobbler was the first blue Grand Champion - and a female. What an accomplishment! These dedicated breeders working with the dilute lines are to be recognized for their accomplishments. Listed below are the dilute grands so far:



Photo: © Carl Widmer

The goal of all Somali breeders is to be committed to producing blue, fawn, ruddy and red Somalis that are healthy, fun and affectionate. We have dedicated ourselves to make significant and marked improvements in the breed, always striving to achieve the ever elusive "perfect" Somali. More and more people have become aware of these beautiful cats, and have been won over by their unique personalities and stunning looks. We believe there will be a continuing increase in the number of breeders working with these marvelous cats. Once you've lived with a Somali, you've experienced the best!

This article is dedicated to Larry Ritter who passed away December 26, 1999 and his wife Debbie, whom we lost on June 15, 2000. Larry and Debbie were best known for their Silamos cattery (Somalis spelled backwards) and the beautiful cats they produced.

Larry and RCI software were very well known by entry clerks, pedigree line chasers, and fanciers throughout the world. He supported the breed with his pedigree programs and cat databases.

I first met Larry at our regional qualifier in 1990. I still remember seeing him with a Somali on his shoulder, the cat kneading his arm with its full tail and fox-like appearance. I was instantly fascinated. He told me of a little Somali kitten for sale, which I purchased at that show. That little kitten went on to be a National Winner in Premiership.

I think that all of us have been touched by Larry and Debbie and by their dedication to CFA.

We all miss them both.

-- Kathy Black