

The Joy of Burmese

by Erika Graf-Webster

Bring a Burmese into your house, and you've brought an extra dollop of joy into your life. While a rich, glossy brown coat and big gold eyes might be the first things that attract you to the breed, it is the Burmese personality that gets you hooked for life. Simply put, Burmese will love you intensely, totally, and with every fiber of their being.

Burmese are the ultimate companion cats. They love being with people, playing with them, and keeping them entertained. They crave close physical contact with THEIR people - some of us call them "velcro cats" because they seem to want to stick to your skin. They abhor an empty lap, will follow you from room to room, and want to sleep in bed with you, preferably under the covers cuddled on or right next to you. The love of a Burmese is not blind devotion, however. They are very intelligent and have very strong personalities, often showing considerable stubbornness. When they play, they often seem to try to entertain their human. They will literally turn around to see if you are watching some of their crazy antics. When they make up their minds that they want something, they simply don't take "no" for an answer, and usually figure out a way to get what they want. This can sometimes turn into a real battle of wills between you and your Burmese. A classic example of this behavior is the battle over where a mom is going to deliver her kittens. You want her to deliver the babies in a nice kitting box that you have set up in a corner of your bedroom. She wants to deliver the kittens in the middle of your bed. I've played this game numerous times, and have never scored a clear victory. The best compromise is to move the kitting box onto the bed and then move each kitten into the box as it is born. Eventually, mom realizes that her babies are in this box, and she gets into the box. Generally, I still have to keep the box on the bed for the first day or two or face mom's moving the babies out of the box back onto the bed. I'm convinced that the reason for this behavior is that mom has an overwhelming need to be close to me, as well as close to the babies. Therefore, the babies get moved to where I (mom's owned person) am.

The bottom line is that what you get with a Burmese is lots of love, but it's not bland or boring love. It's like living with a small person who very much has a mind of her own, but loves you to distraction anyway. It is a breed to be cherished because it has given such joy to those of us who breed and show these cats, and to the many pet owners who have shared their lives with these captivating creatures.

The Joy of Breeding and Showing Burmese

Breeding Burmese is a rewarding experience. A number of breeders have developed very consistent quality lines (these are discussed later in the article). Getting such breeding stock means that your chance of getting good quality kittens right from the start is fairly high. As Dr. Rosemonde Peltz says in her 1978 Yearbook article, "The Burmese Cat": "Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Burmese breed is that the majority of the cats are such good ones."

Contrary to the belief of some, the Burmese breed is not suffering from an unusually small or very restricted gene pool. An early result of the Feline Genome Project currently being done by the National Cancer Institute was the finding that the Burmese breed appears to have plenty of genetic diversity. There is no danger of the breed becoming frail or endangered due to an inbred, small gene

pool. In general, Burmese are healthy and sturdy cats, with many living well into their late teens.

Burmese females generally are very good mothers. They tend to deliver the kittens with ease - Cesarean sections are quite rare. While the show ring rewards the bigger, heftier cats, the smaller, more slender females tend to be the best breeders. Burmese studs tend to be easy-going and gentle with the females. Unlike some other breeds, it is not necessary to hold off using a young male as a stud fearing that this will be detrimental to his behavior in the show ring. Burmese males are the Teddy Bears of the show ring, and being an active stud usually has very little effect on their personality. Burmese males also love kittens and will baby sit them happily when given the chance. Perhaps the best-kept secret of the Burmese breeders is that it is so easy and rewarding to sell the kittens. Pet kittens generally command quite a high price, and the demand is always greater than the supply. We could easily sell many more kittens than we are able to breed. The greatest reward of breeding is knowing how much joy you are bringing to those who buy your kittens. We often get photos and Christmas cards from the happy buyer for years after the kitten has gone to its new home. Inevitably you hear, "this is just the best cat we've ever had," and "we'll always have a Burmese."

Showing Burmese is rewarding and outright fun. Show condition is built from inside out with an excellent diet to ensure peak physical condition and that exquisite shiny coat. Show grooming consists of a bath with good quality shampoo and coat conditioner done a couple of days before the show. After the bath, the cat is left to dry in a warm room. Blow drying is not only not necessary, but counter productive because it would leave the coat too fluffy. Burmese generally are well behaved in the show ring, and love to play on the judging table. One of the common breed traits, however, is a dislike of restraint. Burmese females tend to voice their complaint about this in the show ring. This complaining is in no way aggressive, just indicative of their strong, stubborn personality.

Compared to most other breeds, Burmese tend to do very well in the show ring. A significant percentage of the cats shown become grand champions or grand premiers, and they garner their fair share of national wins (or, according to some, an actually unfair share of such wins). Judy Lawson writes about this in the July 1992 Almanac, discussing the national kitten winners for that year. In terms of the percentage of national winners compared to the number of cats shown, Burmese did six times better than Persians! In recent years, Burmese have been especially successful in premiership. Both in 1995 and in 1996, three Burmese placed in the top 15 nationally (see list of national winners), and that trend may be continued in 1997. This may be due to the importance of condition in the show cat. As whole (unaltered) cats, Burmese have a hefty dose of hormones. Females cycle frequently and males are ever ready to help them out. Food is not a high priority for the breeding Burmese; so, even though the underlying body structure is there, the weight often is not. Once altered, the weight comes, and peak show condition is easily achieved.

The National Alliance of Burmese Breeders (NABB), a CFA-affiliated breed club, was founded in 1978 to serve as a focal point and information source for Burmese breeders and those interested in the breed. The club seeks to encourage new breeders, and has recently instituted a formal mentoring program to help potential breeders in getting started.

The Genesis of the Burmese Breed

The Burmese breed as we know it today was developed in the U.S. from a single cat, Wong Mau, who, as Dr. Rosemonde Peltz reports in the 1968 CFA Yearbook, was "unlike any other breed in the

U.S. or Europe.” Wong Mau was brought from the Orient to New Orleans by a sailor, and was given to Dr. Joseph G. Thompson of San Francisco in 1930. Wong Mau was described as “a rather small cat, fine boned, but with a more compact body than that of a Siamese, with shorter tail, a rounded, short-muzzled head, with greater width between rounded eyes.” Her color was described as walnut-brown, with darker brown points.

Dr. Thompson was so taken with Wong Mau that he decided to enlist an interested group of scientists and experienced breeders to establish a breeding program that would isolate the distinguishing characteristics of Wong Mau, and consistently reproduce cats of a similar appearance. With the help of Virginia Cobb (Newton cattery), Billie Gerst (Gerstdale cattery), and Dr. Clyde E. Keeler, such a breeding program was developed. The Siamese were considered to be the closest in appearance. As Dr. Peltz states: “It is important to point out that in the 1930s Siamese and Burmese were quite similar in conformation. It is the Siamese, through years of breeding, that has changed the most in body (and head) type.”

The original breeding program was established along strictly scientific lines, and, after two generations, resulted in kittens with three distinct colorations: some looked just like Siamese, some looked like Wong Mau (with medium brown body color and darker points), and some were a solid, dark-chocolate brown color. These latter were considered to be the most attractive, and the breeding program then was aimed at isolating the genetic makeup of this phenotype. It was found that these dark brown cats would indeed breed true, consistently producing dark brown cats, while the walnut brown variety, such as Wong Mau herself, continued to produce kittens in the three variations on coloration. Wong Mau was therefore proven to be the first Tonkinese - a hybrid of the Siamese and the Burmese genetic coloration. The results of the original experimental breeding program were published in the April 1943 Journal of Heredity in the article, “Genetics of the Burmese Cat.” Thus was born the Burmese breed in this country. They were proposed to CFA as a new breed in 1934, and were accepted for stud book registration in 1936.

Given the manner in which the breed was developed in the United States, it is tempting to consider the Burmese as a synthetic breed, created “out of whole cloth.” This is not the case. They do in fact occur naturally on the Malay Peninsula, though they are quite rare. Stories abound of these cats being highly prized and honored. They were said to live in temples, being the personal pets of the head priest, and were referred to as “Rajah” cats. They were loved and honored by the old Burmese kings, and were exhibited in India as prize treasures. During the Second World War they were seen by Army officers in Thai temples, and three of them were brought back to the U.S. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, other native Burmese were imported to the U.S. However, most of us still trace our pedigrees proudly back to Wong Mau. Luckily, she was a healthy and fertile cat who produced lots of kittens! Early Burmese in the late '30s and early '40s caused quite a stir in the show circuit, and gained considerable popularity. There was a great demand for kittens. Breeders continued to use Siamese to increase the very limited breeding stock, thereby producing a large number of hybrids. Eventually, CFA put a stop to this, and suspended registration of Burmese in 1947. CFA ruled that there had to be three generations of pure Burmese (not hybrids) in the pedigree to be registered as “Burmese.” This was quite disheartening because of the great difficulty in maintaining breeding stock. However, the serious breeders took this to heart, stopped using the hybrids, and concentrated on breeding the type of cat that made the Burmese unique. Achieving the three-generation “pure” pedigree was slow, but it was finally accomplished for three cats in 1956. By late 1957 there were sufficient numbers that CFA resumed registration of Burmese.

In 1958, the newly formed United Burmese Cat Fanciers set a goal of developing a single standard for Burmese that would be accepted by all the cat fancier organizations. The standard was adopted by CFA in 1959 (also by the other associations in the same time frame), and has stood essentially unchanged since then. Quoting from this original standard: “The head should be pleasingly rounded, without flat planes, whether viewed from front or side. Face should be full, with considerable breadth between the eyes, tapering slightly to a short, well-developed muzzle.” The body was to be medium, muscular, compact, with an ample, rounded chest. From the outset, then, the vision of the Burmese was based on the notion of roundness. Reporting on the state of the breed in the 1968 CFA Yearbook, Dr. Peltz explains “No breeder of Burmese is yet satisfied. As a group, they still want the round head, round in the sense that a Persian breeder means roundÉ” (It needs to be noted that Persians in 1968 were considerably less extreme than they are now.) “The head should be round with a dome like crown, the eyes large and round without bulging... The profile short without being peke-like.” This vision of the Burmese as a round cat has been maintained unchanged throughout the years.

Some of the early Burmese already showed outstanding type. For example, photos of Prince Pogo of Regal, born in 1958, show him to be a hefty, large cat with heavy boning, a broad chest, and a very broad, rounded head with excellent ear-set. Mizpah’s Clancy, born in 1959, was very successful in the show ring, becoming the first Burmese to earn the title of Best Shorthaired Cat (in those days, the CFA National Awards consisted of Top Five Longhaired Cats and Top Five Shorthaired Cats). Mizpah cattery became known for producing outstanding Burmese, many of whom became the foundation stock of other successful catteries such as Hill House and Briarwood.

The ’60s produced a number of outstanding Burmese which serve as the foundation of the cats today. Included in this group are (all grands) Mizpah’s Fernand of Briarwood, Hill House Daniella of Shawnee, Shawnee Casey Jones of Phi Line, Fongin Chop Soy, and Burma Road’s Detour of Senshu. Burmese were much sought after, and acquitted themselves very well in the show ring. For example, in 1968 Burmese took two out of five of the national win shorthair slots, with Casey Jones being named as Best Shorthair, and Detour as Second Best Shorthair.

The 1970s were probably the most successful decade for Burmese. They were enormously popular and were, in fact, the third most popular breed behind Persians and Siamese for a few years. Classes of 20 to 30 Burmese were common in the shows, and they became consistent winners in the finals. Burmese also garnered a goodly share of the national wins. Early in the decade, GC Tok-Lat’s Little Awful Arnie was 5th Best Cat in 1973, GC Kemlen Keowee was Best Cat in 1974. Six Burmese achieved national wins in 1975, four in the Top 20 in Championship: GC Kemlen Chango - 4th Best Cat, GC Catlin Ariadne of Sangazure - 7th, GC Tok-Lat’s Stanley Owen Buchanan - 11th, and GC Music Man’s Bel Canto - 18th. In addition, GP Crestview Heather of Colchester was Best Cat in Premiership, and CH, GP Burma-Dean’s Abilene of Cha-Ming was 4th Best Cat in Premiership. For a breed which had started in the U.S. with one cat in 1930, the Burmese had solidly established themselves as highly popular and very successful members of the cat fancy.

The Heads Get Rounder

From the beginning of the breed, certain Burmese seemed to have rounder heads. Cats like “Detour,”

his son, GC Motet's Troubador of Senshu, Shawnee Casey Jones and Little Awful Arnie are such examples. Chirn Sa-Hai Cattery in Florida, during the late '60s and into the '70s, established a line with striking, round head-type. Few photographs of the early Chirn Sa-Hai cats are available today, but when you run across such a photo, as I did in an old United Burmese Cat Fanciers Newsletter, it's almost shocking - you'd swear you're looking at the head of a top show winner from today. When the top males of the 1970s were combined with the Chirn Sa-Hai line, a consistently rounder-headed style of Burmese was produced. It is this style, termed "Contemporary" Burmese by some breeders, that has dominated the show ring since the mid '70s.

Though the new head-style seemed like a sudden revolution, it had actually been building in succeeding generations for some time. One clear continuous line of the rounder head goes through Ch Phi Line Uncas of Day-Ho. He is the son of "Troubador," and grandson of both Detour and Shawnee Casey Jones. Pictures of "Uncas" show a cat with an almost perfectly round head, and a beautiful, rounded dome (no flat spot there!), with ears set well on the side of the head. Uncas was bred to CH Morningside Fudge of Day-Ho, who is the daughter of Ch Chirn Sa-Hi Kil-O-Wat. This produced GC Day-Ho Hobo of Sangazure, DM, who sired (among many other great cats) GC Good Fortune Fortunatas, DM. The strikingly rounder head was here to stay. Morningside and Chinquapin catteries combined to produce another such line through GC Morningside Attsi (also a Chirn Sa-Hai descendent). Some of the Chinquapin females were later bred to GC Day-Ho Hobo of Sangazure, DM, and they are behind the great Chinquapin national winners of the '70s and '80s.

Color Me Pale

Whether inherent in the Burmese breed or introduced via the original Siamese crosses necessary to establish the breed, lighter color kittens were occasionally produced in Burmese litters. The early breeders made a conscious decision during the development of the breed: they preferred the darker, sable coated cats and strove to eliminate the lighter colors along with the darker shadings on the points. Truly, there are few things in nature so beautiful as the deep, rich, sleek, shiny sable brown coat of the Burmese rippling over solid muscle. However, try as the breeders might to prevent it, lighter color kittens kept popping up.

The dilute colors were found to be analogous to the Siamese color spectrum: both blue and chocolate dilution is carried by the Burmese. Those cats with no dilute gene, in effect, are the traditional sable brown color. The blue dilution alone produces a medium-blue coat, with a warm buff undertone (the Burmese blue is not a cold color). The chocolate dilution alone produces the warm honey-beige of the champagne, while both dilution genes working together result in the pale, silvery gray with fawn undertones of the platinum.

These color variations were very attractive, and several breeders began a serious effort to breed for these. To many traditional sable breeders, the colors were anathema: they reminded them of the first generation hybrids that were needed to establish the breed, but then were best forgotten. The "color" issue became highly emotionally charged. Logic dictated that these colors occurred in the breed naturally, from sable parents who also produced sable offspring, and therefore ought to be recognized as part of the breed. The sable-only breeders countered with: "no, we intended to establish the breed as being sable brown only - these other colors are, by definition, not Burmese." After several years of petitioning by the breeders, the CFA Board finally accepted the dilute colors in 1979 as

“Malayans.” GC Voyageur Smells as Sweet (“Rosie”) and GC, GP, NW Sixes Gentlemen-Prefer-Blondes (“Blondie”), became the first two Malayan Grand Champions. By 1984, CFA finally acknowledged that these cats truly were Burmese. Since then, the dilutes have been registered as Burmese, but they compete in the shows in their own “Dilute” Division.

Dilute Burmese have become a real success story. Their numbers have increased dramatically since the mid ‘80s, and they have achieved a number of national wins. GC, GP, NW Sixes Gentlemen Prefer Blondes was the first dilute national winner as 7th Best Cat in Premiership in 1986. GC, NW Mar-Chu Thalia was national 5th Best Kitten in 1988, GC, NW Anoka Jolie Blonde, DM, was 2nd best Kitten in 1991, and GC Caroburn Hey, Paula was 14th Best Cat in 1993.

In 1984, CFA established the 1400 series of numbers as breed designators for the dilute Burmese to separate them from the 0400 series of sables. Sables that may be dilute carriers are also registered with a 1400 number. The popularity of the dilute colors is clearly shown in the number of cats registered. By 1996, 1400-numbered Burmese outnumbered 0400 Burmese by a factor of almost 3 1/2 to 1.

Cornerstone Cats

In all breeds there are a few cats who set their stamp on a breed. They are either so outstanding in their own right that the breeders actually try to copy them and/or they produce offspring of such consistent quality that their progeny spread profusely and come to make up a significant percentage of the breed. In order for a Burmese to be a cornerstone cat, he/she must not only produce outstanding offspring in the first generation, but the quality of the cat must be reflected in succeeding generations as well.

The Great Males

Some of the early cornerstone cats, already mentioned above, were Burma Road’s Detour of Senshu, Shawnee Casey Jones, Fongin Chop Soy and Tok-Lat’s Little Awful Arnie. These males produced the outstanding Burmese of the 1970s.

Since the mid-1970s, the cornerstone Burmese are generally associated with the rounder head. This new head style led to great success in the show-ring, and resulted in these cats being used extensively for breeding. GC Day-Ho Hobo of Sangazure, DM, was the first of these cats. “Hobo” could have retired after his first litter, and would have had his name be part of Burmese annals forever.

That first litter, bred by Evelyn Chapman of Good Fortune cattery, contained three Grands, “Fortunatas”, “Lady Luck,” and Nadada.” However, Hobo also sired GC, NW Lotus Aziza (7th Best Cat in 1979) and is the grandsire of GC, NW Chinquapin Nouveau Riche (“Huey”), thereby starting a chain of Chinquapin national winners. Not only did Hobo sire beautiful cats in his own right, but his progeny turned out to be highly prepotent for producing that round head, and have consistently produced quality offspring. In fact, Hobo heads a line of distinguished merit descendants, which now reaches into the eighth generation.

Hobo’s great-grandson, GC, NW Kashmirian’s Lord Lovatt, DM, 2nd Best Cat in 1981, rightly takes his place as a cornerstone cat, though perhaps as much for the Bombay breed as for Burmese. His

national winner Burmese children include three Kashmirian grands: GC, GP, NW Kashmirian's Karina (7th Best Cat in 1985), GP, NW Kashmirian's Katie Scarlett (8th Best Kitten in 1982), and GC, GP, NW Kashmirian's Carousel (2nd Best in Premiership in 1989). In addition, "Lovatt" is the sire of Bombay GC, NW Road to Fame's Luv It Black, 1985's 2nd Best Cat, and the grandsire of five other Bombay national winners.

GC Good Fortune Fortunatas, DM, National Best Burmese in 1977, is the ultimate cornerstone cat for the Burmese breed. With 39 grand champion/grand premier children, he is by far the most successful stud of the breed. It almost didn't seem to matter to whom he was bred - most litters contained one or more show quality kittens. His progeny, in turn, have been extraordinarily successful. All except a handful of Burmese national winners since 1978 are descended from Fortunatas. More than any other cat, Fortunatas changed the look of the breed.

Some of Fortunatas' offspring have become cornerstone cats in their own right. GC, NW, Voyageur Pepin, DM, a Fortunatas son and national 16th Best Cat in 1980, is behind national winning sable Burmese GC, NW Voyageur Brown Bear of Kawpaw, GC, GP, NW Renshu's Grizzly Adams of Voyageur, and the four Kawpaw national winners. Perhaps "Pepin's" biggest contribution, however, is that he turned out to carry the champagne gene. He produced the first and second CFA champagne grands, GC Voyageur Smells as Sweet and GC, GP, NW Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. "Blondie" became the first Dilute Burmese to obtain a national win, placing 7th Best in Premiership in 1986.

GC Windflower Solaris of Austriana, DM, is second only to Fortunatas as a successful stud. The sire of 22 grand champions/grand premiers, he is known for the particularly sweet expressions and outstanding body type of his offspring. "Solaris" is behind a number of national winners produced by Austriana, Mar-Chu, Anoka, and Windflower.

The Great Ladies

It's hard for a female to become a cornerstone cat because she simply doesn't have the opportunity to produce as many offspring as a male does. However, we must honor a few of the ladies who have done themselves proud in terms of their progeny.

GC Windflower's Eliza Jane is the mother of 10 grand champions/grand premiers. She got a great start on this in one of her early litters when bred to GC Austriana Aries, DM. This litter of eight kittens (all survived) produced five grands, including GC Windflower Solaris of Austriana, DM. "Eliza Jane" is behind some of the Windflower national winners of recent years.

Razadarit Ran Browyn, DM, mother of nine grand champions/grand premiers, produced four grands in her first litter, when bred to Fortunatas. Two of her sons are of particular importance, GC Maple's Sergeant Pepper of Ti-Moi and GC Maple's Sgr. Gucci of Sangazure, because they are behind some of the winning cats from Austriana and Sangazure catteries, respectively.

GC Wenvarra Chani of Austriana, DM, a Fortunatas granddaughter, properly belongs on this list. Among her grand offspring are two great studs, GC Austriana Aries, DM, and GC Austriana Aldeberan of Windflower, DM. She is the only Burmese to produce two male distinguished merit offspring. Both Aries and Aldeberan carried on the quality of line, and are behind several national winners. In addition, "Chani" heads a line that is now in its fifth successive generation of distinguished merit cats.

The Future

There are always challenges in breeding cats, and Burmese are no exception. Burmese numbers have declined in recent years. It is important for the breeders to attract new people into the breed so that the successes of the past can be built upon in the future. Attention needs to be paid to the continued genetic vitality of the breed. It seems that in recent years a number of breeders have refined their lines in a “closed cattery” situation. While this does indeed provide greater consistency in the quality of the cats they produce, it can also lead to limiting the improvement of the line, e.g., the line can reach its genetic potential, and then cannot be further improved. Judicious outcrossing is essential to maintain progress in the overall quality of the breed. Some of the greatest Burmese in the past were the result of outcross breedings - Detour, Hobo, Fortunatas, Lord Lovatt, Mar-Chu Thalia come to mind. Burmese will always have a devoted following. They will continue to bring joy to those who breed them, those who show them and those who simply live with them. Frankly, they’re addicting.

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