

The Changing Face of Abys

By

Eileen Pittaway

One of the reasons why Karel and I show our cats under different judges is to gain their independent assessments of them. Karel and I don't always agree with the judges' evaluations, but mostly we respect them and take their views on board as one never stops learning. I have therefore thought long and hard before putting my thoughts into writing regarding the significant changes I have noticed mainly in the Tawny Abys over almost 40 years we have been breeding Abyssinians. I would like to stress these are my own personal observations.

Many of these changes are for the betterment of the breed, but there are a few that I feel have completely changed the look of the Aby. These have taken place very gradually, but when you look back at the older photos the "wild look" most Abys had, has practically disappeared. Undoubtedly, we have come a very long way in their evolution so I'm not suggesting for one moment that we breed Abys like we did years ago. However, it would be desirable to retain *some* of these wild features that Abys once had and our current standard actually still requires. I have noticed too, that Abys vary from State to State and this is noticeable when we all show together at TAB show. I understand that this also applies in the USA and it's obvious too that their style differs from the west to the east coast of America.

The most significant and welcome change to me has been colour. Most colours are now much richer and more vibrant. In Tawnies this is often due to having dark brown ticking rather than black. The dark brown ticking crept in very gradually and this literally makes the Aby outwardly glow. The middle band of ticking too is richer but because it blends more with brown ticking is frequently less distinctive. The older Abys with their dark black ticking often presented with a paler middle band. This cooler middle band made ticking more conspicuous, but it also gave the coat an overall cooler appearance. Undercoat colour has changed too. Once grey undercoats were occasionally seen throughout the coat, now it's rare for an Aby to be

exhibited with these faults today, though grey on the shoulders, head, elbows and flanks still appears once in a while. The base coat colour has also altered. It was not uncommon to see a Tawny Aby with a really bright rich orange undercoat. Today's base colour often leans more towards a muddy brown with bright orange only featuring occasionally.

Another positive, coat faults have improved considerably and Abys have a much cleaner appearance to the coat these days. The chest and onto the tummy in particular has lost the overall ticking giving the neck and chest a much cleaner, richer and less dull appearance. We rarely see the heavy necklaces (just light tabbing occasionally) and heavy leg bars of years ago. This is a credit to the hard work of breeders eliminating these faults. Not so positive though, coats have generally become shorter and in some cases seem hardly long enough to display adequate bands of ticking. In contrast some coats still have the length, but are flatter with less ticking and lacking the resilience that the standard requires. Several years ago judges were commenting on the lack of white they were seeing on Abys' throats and under the nose. While other judges preferred to see a slight contrast others praised the lack of white. Recently, I have observed the reappearance of too much white again in some lines, regularly coming down well onto the chest and frequently having a greyish tinged to the white.

In an effort to achieve clarity and eliminate undesirable coat faults, features such as thumb prints on the back of ears have sadly all but disappeared. Strong dark facial features appear to have been replaced by a blander look. Facial marks have a great impact on the "wild look" of the Aby and are essential to retain in my opinion. Black hocks are rarely seen and yet judges always look for them. I personally like to see them and find they often present when a cat has strong facial markings and black ticking. Ear tufts have all but vanished but as the ears now have a less pointed look and most have rounded tops, tufts sometimes look rather strange as

though stuck on as an afterthought Also, where has the turned up smile to the corner of the mouth gone? And when did the straighter corners of the mouth (often down turning) creep in?

Several Aby lines have produced much smaller cats over the years and they often fit the description of being a “small” cat rather than medium as the standard requires. Because of their refinement, distinguishing a male from a female occasionally becomes, difficult.

The older Abys were deeper in the chest and shorter in body and legs. They had broader chests and shorter thicker necks. These features have definitely been refined and improved greatly. Abys are far more elegant with finer lengthier bodies, longer legs and this coupled with longer necks and narrower chests has given the Aby a more elegant look. In contrast, some are becoming overly extreme in head and body and their type is often described as too “Siamesy”. If we were to alter the standard to accept these features, they could become even more extreme and the whole overall look of the Aby would change completely – a feature I would be unhappy to see

The standard calls for heads that should be softly rounded with no flat planes. Many currently have flatter cheeks and are flat between the ears rather than having the desired doming. Profiles tend to be straighter, frequently lacking the correct gentle nose



dip. Feet are generally becoming more elongated, losing that neat round “tippy toe” appearance that Abys were noted for and is still required in the Aby standard.

Ears are larger and generally better positioned with a rounder look to the top. Rare is the narrower pointed appearance of years ago. However, some ears tend to bulge out at the base with less cupping and are no longer set slightly forward in the listening position as the standard requires.

At one stage eyes started to become rounder rather than almond shape, but I’m pleased to note that many are gradually returning to the desired almond shape.

As mentioned previously, these comments are my personal observations over the years, but something to consider if we were to make any major changes to our current standard in the future. If anyone would like to see the changes we have encountered over the 40 years we have been breeding please visit www.hotkey.net.au/~aby/abyevolution.doc. The document takes a little time to load so please be patient.

[To underscore Eileen’s words, I have added two of my photos to her article, showing our first Abyssinian, born in 1970, and a current cat, born in 2010. I believe that the colour reproductions are accurate – Ed.]

