

## **ANIMAL PROFILE: THE AKITA**

**by Barbara Bouyet**

**Reprinted from "Animal Review", October 1984**

This noble breed had its beginnings many hundreds of years ago on Akita Prefecture, a small region on the northernmost tip of Honshu Island in Japan. The area gave the breed its name and us, this marvelous breed. In Japan, the dog is called "Akita Inu". "Inu" is dog in Japanese.

At one time, the Akita was owned only by shoguns, those imperial leaders of a bygone era. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Akita was crossed with the Tosa, a large fighting dog, and the resultant strain was used for dog fighting. This instinct to fight is still one of the major problems with these dogs today.

In 1931, the Akita was officially named a Japanese national monument, but during World War II, the Akita faced extinction because of food and clothing shortages. Many were clubbed to death and, had not a few concerned owners hid their dogs, the breed would probably have become extinct. Why was this magnificent Japanese national monument attacked so viciously? They were the largest breed of dog and food was scarce. Their pelts were used for clothing.

Helen Keller was responsible for bringing the Akita to this country. In 1937, while on a trip to Japan, she expressed a desire to own an Akita and she was presented with a three month old puppy named "Kamikaze". He became her constant companion until he died from distemper at only eight months. A determined Miss Keller wrote to Japan and received a littermate to her beloved "Kami", "Kensan-go", who lived with his mistress at her estate in New York until his death in 1945.

No history of the Akita would be complete without the story of "Hachi-ko", a purebred belonging to Professor Elisabaru Ueno of Tokyo. In the early 1920's, the professor commuted by train to his work. Each day, the two of them walked to the station where Professor Ueno boarded the train each morning and arrived each evening to "Hachi-ko", who waited at the station. On May 21, 1925, "Hachi-ko" was waiting, but the professor never arrived. Hours earlier, he'd died of a stroke. Relatives took care of "Hachi-ko", but each day the dog faithfully waited at the Shibuya station for his master's return. He continued to wait, in vain, until his death in 1934, at the age of 11 years. Because of his devotion and faithfulness, a bronze statue of "Hachi-ko" stands today at the Shibuya station, a monument to a forever faithful AKITA.

Serious breeding of the AKITA in this country began in the 1950's and 1960's. Today the breed is found in nearly every state, but California is where the breed started. The American Kennel Club recognized the AKITA in 1973, and sadly, the AKITA has now become the "fad dog" of the 80's.

A DOG OF STRENGTH AND SUBSTANCE "Large, powerful and alert, with much substance and heavy bone" is the way the AKITA standard describes the breed. The average female AKITA of good breeding will stand at approximately 24 inches or more and weigh about 80 pounds. Males are a third larger, usually 26 to 27 inches or more and weigh 100 pounds at maturity. A dog of such size and strength must be controlled early, before they ever attain their great size and the AKITA MUST BE CONTROLLED!

An adult Akita is dignified, aloof and aggressive, while an Akita puppy is playful, affectionate and adorable, resembling a bear cub. Because they are friendly and open to socialization as puppies, all Akita puppies must be well socialized so they can grow into calm, well adjusted adults. You cannot simply put an Akita puppy into a yard, feed him and ignore him, as many people wrongly do with other breeds. Akita puppies must be taken out for walks to shopping centers, through parking lots, parks and busy streets. Allow strangers to pet and fuss over them, always assuring the experience is positive. Invite friends and relatives into your home and allow them to play with and pet the youngster. As the Akita puppy grows, he will seek these relationships less and less. His aloofness will increase with age, so it's vitally important that the puppy be well socialized.

THE AKITA'S FIGHTING INSTINCT MUST BE TEMPERED WITH OBEDIENCE TRAINING As early as four months old, the Akita puppy should be entered into an obedience class with other dogs, a perfect opportunity to set up situations where you can correct your dog's aggression towards other dogs. The Akita's instinct to fight is never fully overcome, but you can control him to some degree with training.

Kuma, a very large five year old male lives in the Akita Rescue kennel. Kuma was turned into Akita Rescue by his owner, who claimed that Kuma regularly sailed over his fence to kill every dog within a three mile radius of his home. At first, he could not be kenneled near another dog and the kennels on either side of him were left empty. After months of working with him, he permitted a female to live near him. This big, powerful Akita loves people, but his instinct to fight was never tempered, controlled or corrected and he became a killer.

Usually Akitas will demand submission from another dog and let it go at that, but some are interested only in fighting. Two males rarely live harmoniously together and two females are just as difficult, unless one is the daughter of the other. A male will live with a female but the male must be dominant and establishing his dominance can lead to some noisy but harmless arguments between the pair -- rather like husbands and wives!

To dominate the female, the male will usually knock her down and sit on her, demand first rights to the water bowl and so on. Akitas of either sex can fit into a home with another breed of dog, just as long as the other is of the opposite sex. There are exceptions. A young two year old Akita lives with and loves a mixed breed shepherd, both are males. The shepherd was there first and welcomed the Akita puppy. Growing up with the male dog, the Akita never considered his docile friend a threat to his territorial rights and they get along well.

**THE AKITA WILL LEAD, IF NOT LED BY HUMAN "PACK LEADER"** Many Akitas challenge their owner for the role of pack leader and if this behavior is not corrected immediately, the challenge will grow in intensity. Usually occurring before the dog is a year old -- in the form of disobeying a command or growling or snapping -- this serious offense should be corrected in accordance. Let the dog win the first challenge and you will not wish to live with him. Expect to deal with it and go on from there. A firm correction at the first display of challenge for leadership and your Akita will rarely repeat the act.

**AKITAS AND CHILDREN, AND CATS.....** As a breed, as different as individual dogs are, they are all very intelligent and devoted to their families. They have a wonderful sense of humor and fun that makes them a joy to live with. They like long walks on a leash and snow (they are often used for pulling sleds) and children when they're raised with them.

An Akita raised with a child is a wonderful companion and loyal defender; Akitas not raised with children should be watched carefully when around children. Because of some tragic incidents, Akita Rescue does not place Akitas over the age of one year in homes with children under the age of 12 years. The fast movements of children will put an Akita on guard which can result in injury to the child. The Akita puppy raised with toddlers is very tolerant and can be trusted completely. As a matter of fact, the child will become the Akita's favorite person even when the dog towers over his small owner.

Akitas are very feline -- they clean their faces after eating and when hunting, they stalk low to the ground in a feline position. Often used in Japan to hunt bear and wild boar, they hunt small animals and that can include the family cat! Raising an Akita puppy with an adult cat is still no guarantee of safety. A six year old Akita, who had been raised with two adult cats, killed one in an unprovoked attack, though she had never shown aggression previously. Yet, I've seen Akitas live to ripe old ages with the family cat as a friend and companion. Each Akita is different, unpredictable.

**BEWARE -- THE PET PROFITEERS HAVE JUMPED ON THE TRENDY BANDWAGON!** For such a relatively new breed in this country, the Akita is already facing some of the breeding problems afflicting other popular breeds. Because Akitas command a high price -- \$250-\$1000 -- there are people who consider the breed for its monetary worth only and when buying a puppy, **BEWARE!** There are some very serious genetic problems in the breed and you could buy a genetic time bomb.

Hip dysplasia is one problem, but some years ago responsible breeders began having breeding stock OFA'd (x-rayed) and the incidence of dysplasia was reduced from 51% to 17%.

Progressive Retinal Atrophy (PRA), which results in blindness, is found and buying a puppy from parents certified free from PRA does not guarantee that your puppy will never have PRA. The certification must be done every six months and since this disease can occur at any age, though parents may be free from PRA when the puppies are born,

they can still develop the disease later on. This means that parents could have passed on the genetic tendency. Certification is not a test for genetic carriers, but an eye examination to determine the presence of the disease.

Glaucoma, epilepsy and auto-immune diseases are also found in the Akita. Stay away from pet stores and backyard, unknowledgeable breeders. The pain of watching your dog suffer from auto-immune diseases or blindness is simply not worth it. Any breeder who will sell to a pet store is more interested in money than in producing healthy, sound animals. Ignorant breeders who own a male and a female which they've bred together (or a female who was bred to a male down-the-street) do not care enough or know enough to research the genetic backgrounds of both lines to determine if the breeding will be a good one. They see puppies with dollar signs on their bodies and you would be ill advised to own one of their puppies.

This noble breed, once companion to shoguns, is dignified, intelligent, loyal, devoted, courageous and aloof. They are large, with breathtaking beauty, but they are also very strong and seek to dominate.

Because of these two latter traits, they require a great deal of work: socialization and training. If the extra work and challenge appeal to you, then you should be owned by an Akita.

Barbara Bouyet lives in Thousand Oaks, California and is, most importantly, the Secretary of the Akita Rescue Society of America. Because of her work with Rescue, this profile takes on special significance. Her hands-on experience with this breed is beyond question.

If you know of anyone who is considering the purchase of an Akita, please show them this profile before they buy! Their Akita will be eternally grateful for a happy and truly permanent home!