

BREED PROFILE: THE AKITA

by Edith Van der Lyn Dog Fancy Magazine, November 1984

"Tender in heart and strength" is how the Japanese describe their Ichiban (number One), the AKITA. Of the seven purebred Japanese breeds, the Akita is the largest and the most revered by the people of Japan. It has been designated as a national monument by the Japanese Ministry of Education, and in their native land, they are regarded not only as fine pets and companions but also as symbols of good health.

The breed was developed in the 17th century when a nobleman, exiled to Akita Prefecture, the northernmost province of the island of Honshu, Japan, encouraged the land barons there to compete in the breeding of a dog for hunting. He wanted a large, aggressive dog that would be versatile enough to hunt deer and bear. Generations of selective breeding produced the Akita's ancestor (smaller than the modern day Akita), a dog of superior size and frame with versatile hunting abilities.

Once, ownership of an Akita was restricted to the Imperial family and the ruling aristocracy. Instructions for the dog's care and feeding were detailed in elaborate ceremony and special leashes denoted the Akita's rank and the standing of its owner. Each dog had a caretaker who wore an ornate costume in accordance with the Akita's standing.

Several times over the next 300 years, this "good luck charm" of the wealthy was nearly driven to extinction. Periodic favor kept the Akita alive through the Meiji and Taisho eras. But, during the 17th and 18th centuries, dog fighting posed a serious threat to the breed's continuation. Crosses with the Tosa Fighting Dog (a large, mastiff type of dog) from Shikoku Island produced the "Shin-Akita" (New Akita Dog), an animal of imposing size, trigger-like aggression and immense power. With all the interbreeding to produce Shin-Akitas, the original strain was nearly lost.

In 1899, there was a devastating outbreak of rabies in Japan. During the next 30 years, nearly 3,000 cases were reported. Dogs, including many Akitas, were ruthlessly and indiscriminately killed, for fear they might be carriers of this fatal disease.

By the 1900's, Akitas were nearly extinct. In 1927, the Akita Inu Hozankai Society of Japan was established to preserve the purity of the breed. In 1931, the government of Japan designated the Akita breed as a national monument as one of Japan's national treasures. The breed was so highly prized because of its rarity that the government would subsidize food for Akitas when their owners couldn't afford to feed them.

The ancient Japanese word matagi, meaning esteemed hunter, was bestowed on the best hunters in a village. The Akita was known as matagiinu (esteemed hunting dog) by the hunters of the northern Prefecture of Akita, who used pairs of dogs (a male and a female) to hunt deer, bear and wild boar. The animals would hold their prey at bay until the hunters arrived.

Akitas are highly prized because they hunt silently. They also have a "soft mouth" which allows them to retrieve game unharmed. Akitas are even said to have been used to drive fish into waiting nets.

The renowned Helen Keller is accredited with bringing the first Akita to the U.S. Outside of a Tokyo train station there is a statue of Hachiko, faithful pet of Dr. Elisaburo Ueno. The dog waited faithfully each day for his master to debark the train after work. One day the master did not come home, but still Hachiko waited, keeping up his daily vigil for nine years. He was fed by station attendants until his death, and each year a solemn ceremony is held in his honor. Keller was so taken with the story of the dog's fidelity that the Ministry of Education presented her with an Akita puppy named Kamikaze. Later, when the puppy died, the Ministry sent a second Akita to Miss Keller.

The breed's popularity in the U.S. really started when returning servicemen brought the dogs home with them. They were attracted to the dogs' strength and adaptability. The Akita Club was founded in 1956, and the breed was admitted to registration in the American Kennel Club Stud Book in October, 1972, and to regular show classification in 1973.

It is not uncommon for the uninitiated to ask if the Akita is a cross between a dog and a bear. Indeed, its massive head and chest do "bear" a certain resemblance to the larger mammals. One distinctive feature of the Akita is its fine ears: erect, triangular, small ears, set slanting forward and on either side of the head. Another Akita feature you can't miss is its tail, set high and carried in a curve over its back. Its eyes are deep-set and triangular.

The Akita is a liberal combination of kindness, courage and alertness. It is extraordinarily affectionate and tolerant. It is also very protective and will defend itself and its charges against others, particularly other dogs. It is intelligent and retains its lessons very well. It can't be bullied into submissiveness and will resent forceful training methods and nagging.

Akitas will not tolerate physical abuse. They are strong willed dogs with proud egos. They need firm handling, patience and praise. Large breeds like the Akita have a potential for violence and should not be sold to weak-willed or impatient owners. These dogs won't stand for mistreatment and will resent disciplinary training tactics sometimes used on other large breeds. An Akita may live 10 to 12 years and needs love and gentle guidance to prosper. Because of their strength, Akitas in the wrong environment, or without proper training, can be dangerous.

Akita puppies resemble teddy bears as much as older dogs resemble the full-sized, real ones. The Akita litter is usually about 8 to 10 pups. Pet quality pups cost about \$500 to \$700, while show quality ones will cost \$1,500 or more.

At 3 months, an Akita pup might weigh more than 30 pounds, and at 10 months, it is filled out to nearly adult stature. Akitas will adjust to any climate and don't require as

much exercise as other large breeds; however, a large, fenced yard should be considered a necessity.

Akitas mature at 3 to 4 years of age and should be given calcium supplements while growing, if a need is indicated.

Akitas are basically sound with few health problems. Conscientious breeders have their stock x-rayed for hip dysplasia. Bloat is a life threatening condition to watch for that requires immediate veterinary attention. It can be prevented by making sure meals are digested before vigorous exercise and that water is not drunk in excess. Otherwise, regular grooming, veterinary checkups and a good diet will keep the Akita in good condition.

An Akita is an intrepid guardian of its family and property. In Japan, it is often left to baby-sit children while mothers go off to work. It will not bark unless thoroughly alarmed, so it can be kept in close proximity to neighbors. It is an ideal car passenger that won't fuss, drool, or get sick, and it keeps itself fastidiously clean. Akitas shed twice a year, unless kept in a cold climate in which case they shed only once.

They are known for their mild disposition and their ability to "keep their cool" in stressful situations. One bad habit they seem to have is "goosing" people, and being gored from either front or behind by one of these dogs can be embarrassing. The Akita is also inclined to be jealous, so showing affection to other family pets will have to be handled diplomatically.

Akitas are gentle, extremely loyal dogs. They won the heart of their native land with their kind disposition and loving nature, and for a few special owners, they are the only breed to own. In Japan, they are considered good luck and are often given to ill persons or families with newborns to bring good fortune and happiness into their homes. But no matter what country and customs it must adhere to, the Akita is a versatile and revered companion, capable of loving and protecting its family for many years.