

QUALITY OF COAT IN WEST HIGHLAND WHITE TERRIERS

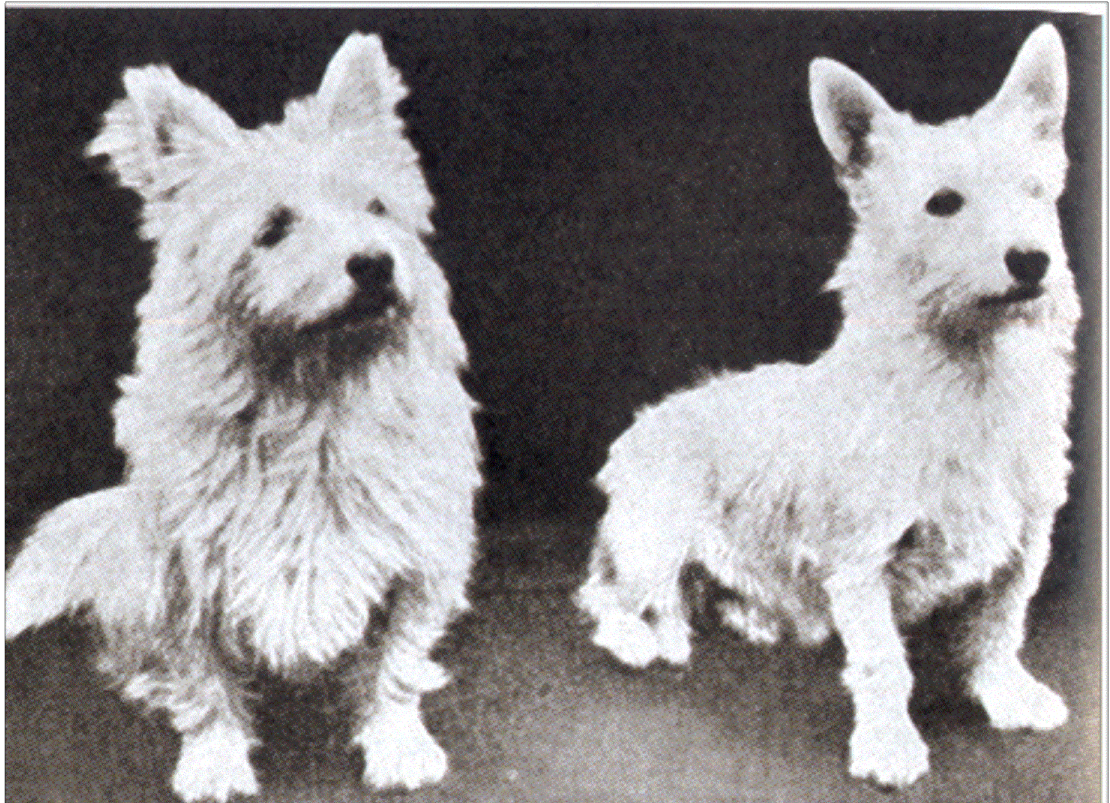
by Tina Sterguljc Krušič

The West Highland White Terrier has been a very popular breed not only in my country Slovenia, but all over Europe in the past 10 to 15 years. In popularity is, if I'm honest gladly, falling in the last years. Massive production of pedigree and non-pedigree puppies has resulted in major issues in the breed, mostly negative. One of the problems and questions for the breed is coat quality, which is reaching its lowest point in our country. A myth has been created by some breeders that trimming is painful, unnecessary and just a show question. But is it?

To answer this question we have to understand the origin of the breed and coat. Westies were originally developed for hunting and ratting, their double coat, with the short and soft undercoat and the wire topcoat

protected them against the sometimes harsh weather conditions in Britain. The topcoat is shedding very little on its own, therefore it needs a proper hand strip to keep the coat in good condition and the skin healthy. The correct hand stripping is often mistaken by the removal of excess undercoat with tools like a coat king. Hand stripping is the removal of topcoat with pulling single or multiple hair by its root. With stripping, the coat is staying healthy and in good condition. Therefore it is not just about the looks of a show dogs. If you simply trim down the hair, shortening it, the old and dead hair is staying in his roots within the follicles of the skin and that, in the worst case scenario, can cause skin irritations and eczema.

As judges we therefore often face the dilemma



Historic Westie, Sonny and Sarah from Col. Malcom, source: <http://www.starlightwesties.com/history.html>



*Olac Moon Pilot, Crufts Best in Show 1990,
source: Pinterest*

of dogs with no typical coat texture that come to our breeding exams. It's impossible to say if the coat texture is wrong due to wrong maintenance and lack of stripping or are severe hereditary issue affecting our breeds. A huge problems is the lack of knowledge in the commercial grooming sector, very few grooming salons offer hand stripping and even fewer do it properly. Of course hand stripping is a longer procedure and mostly cannot be done in the average 60 minutes a groomer is willing to spend on a dog. The primary source for the puppy and dog owner is of course the breeder and the most valuable for the breeds would be, that the breeder

is the one who is teaching new owners the proper conditioning, in this case also the trimming. I can understand that most of the new owners do not have the time and interest of learning to strip on their own, but the sad news is, that also only few breeders still do. So my question is, how can a serious breeder teach new owners, if even s-/he is not taking the time to learn it by himself or at least being aware of the importance of the coat issue? I am positive that most of the issues would be solved if we, the breeders would finally acknowledge this.

The second issue is of course the hereditary issue of coat. In some lines the coat is getting either woolly or silky, this is very highly hereditary and very hard to breed out of the line. Experience is showing that woolly coats are recessive, while silky coat are quite dominant, and almost impossible to breed out. Dogs with this type of coat have to be breed with great carefulness or better left out of our breeding programs.

The third issue I often face in the recent years is the excessive sculpturing of westies at shows. More and more exhibitors are covering important issues like straight angulation behind with Bishon-like sculpturing of the coat. With this the westie is losing his distinctive outline. This is sadly overlooked by many non-specialist judges. But this is not just an issue of westie or the terriers but can be found also in several breeds where the standard is especially emphasizing their natural look. And in my opinion this is not the right path that we should go in the future.



*Burneeze Geordie Girl, Crufts Best in Show 2016;
source: <http://www.dogworld.co.uk/story.php/155670/National%20Terrier%202016%20-%20Best%20in%20show>*