



THE IMPORTANCE OF SELECTION - Gregory Beach

I am presently mentoring a new breeder, and wrote this article about selection for her. After I was done with it, I decided it might be beneficial to other newer breeders, and decided to publish it in the newsletter:

The most important aspect of any breeding program is selection. Selection of what you buy, mate, keep and sell is the absolute foundation of all successful breeding programs. That said, in order to apply selection wisely, you must first develop a thorough understanding of the breed standard, and know how it applies to the actual cat. Not all people are good at this, and I don't know why. I've known breeders who develop "an eye" for recognizing a cat that meets the standard easily, and know breeders who have been going along for several years that still don't have that ability. I suspect it is just like everything else in life, where all things are not equal --even things that appear to be similar.

The first thing to know about our standard is that it is not written in black and white. The standard describes the ideal Birman, yet is intentionally vague in some areas, leaving room for individual interpretation, and this will become important a little later in this article.

For now, let's focus on what is written in the standard. The first thing to consider is the weight the standard gives to each feature of the cat. Head, body, type and coat are valued at 65 points. Color, including body color, point color, eye color and gloving are valued at 35 points. It does not take much thought to realize then that there is little value in breeding a cat that has poor type, but who has good color. The foundation, or type of the cat, is more important than the icing or color. It is far easier in breeding to improve poor color on a cat with type than it is to improve type on a cat with color. I firmly believe that before any breeder sets out to specialize in a color that they must first have cats with solid type. A beautiful Birman in any color can always be admired.

When considering the weight our breed standard gives to individual features of the cat, it must be noted that the head, including boning, nose, jaw, chin, profile, ear and eye shape and set, is valued at 30 points. Our standard places more weight on the head of the Birman than any other feature, and that, in my opinion, makes it the most important, which is why it is the first thing I look at. I do not feel cats with poor head type belong in breeding programs. Let me clarify, I'm not saying a Birman's head must be perfect to be used in a breeding program. Perhaps one cat could have a better ear set. Perhaps another needs a better chin, and yet another could have a stronger roman nose. I believe we can correct these things through selective breeding. What I am saying though, I also think we should not forgive too much. It is important that head type conform as closely as possible to the standard. For example, if a particular Birman could use a better ear set, stronger roman nose and a better chin that cat is a pet, in my opinion.

When considering type the next feature to consider is body type, including boning, stockiness elongation, legs and tail. 25 points are given to body type, which is valued in the standard as being the 2nd most important consideration. This, again, is an area where I do not feel we, as breeders, should forgive too much. Personally, I only consider body type if I first like head type. If I rule a cat out based on poor head type even outstanding body type becomes irrelevant to me. When looking at head and body type some breeders look for a combined balance, I don't. The reason is because a cat that has poor head and poor body type, a long muzzle on tall skinny legs for example, would be in balance, meaning that one part would fit right in with the next. A cat with good head and body type will also be in balance. So, I evaluate head and body type separately, knowing that if all is right balance will exist, but do not step back and specifically look for balance because in doing so the eye can be fooled into believing that where balance exists all must be right, and that simply isn't the case.

The last feature that is considered under this section of the standard is coat, including length, texture and ruff --10 points are given to this area. *...continued on next page*



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For showing a good coat provides that little extra magic in the ring, and not just on good cats. A nice coat can, and does, cover up many other flaws on the cat. For this reason I don't put a lot of emphasis on coat. In fact, if you really want to know how well your Birman conforms to the standard look at it while it's wet. When you can look at a wet cat and like what you see you are looking at one well put together Birman. Please don't get me wrong, I'm not saying coat is unimportant. I love a Birman with a great coat. But on a cat with excellent head and body type I can, and do, easily forgive a poor coat. It also helps to realize coat is a lot easier to correct through selective breeding than type, which explains why there are not nearly as many points attached to it.

Now, let's look at what follows everything that is written above: Color, including eye color, body color, point color and gloving. Our standard gives all of these features combined 35 points, which is just a little over half of the value it places on type. Again, here the standard confirms: head and body type are more important than color! Why then anyone would ever breed a cat with poor type that has excellent color is beyond me, but some people do. I'm not saying that color is unimportant. For showing it is quite important, although it becomes a little less important for breeding because like coat it is easier to correct through selective breeding. Of the 35 points that are given to color 15 of them are allocated to body, point and eye color. One thing that I do find hard to forgive is tabby barring in the point color of our traditional pointed color cats, and while I prefer a light body the most important consideration I give to body color is that it is even in color if lightly shaded.

The remaining 20 points of the standard go towards gloving, including front and rear gloves, laces and symmetry. For showing gloving is important. It is probably one of the least important considerations for breeding though. Some cats will consistently give well marked kittens. Some cats will consistently produce kittens with high or low white. Well marked cats can and do often have poorly gloved babies, and poorly marked cats often produce well gloved kittens. I am reminded of my friend, Victory Peterson, who had the good fortune of producing many cats that had excellent gloving. The foundation cat she used that was behind most all of those well gloved cats had a missing lace. I will say this, I'm not trouble at all breeding a cat with low or missing white on their feet, but I do not like working with cats with high white. For some reason cats with runners tend to reproduce kittens with runners, too -- but not always.

One thing I have tried to avoid talking specifically about what the standard says about each individual feature of the Birman. Instead, I've tried to remain focused on the weight the standard gives to combined features. I feel we can all go and read the standard, and this is where the fine art of interpretation comes into play. Some areas are also a little vague. What is medium? I see the word medium used in some standards for other breeds that if applied to the Birman could be considered long. This is one example of where our standard leaves the breeder some room for individual interpretation, as mentioned at the beginning of this article. There are other areas of the standard that are also open to individual interpretation.

This brings us back to what I first spoke of in this article, and that is the importance of selection. To be successful, in addition to understanding what is written in our standard, you also must have a firm resolve for what you like to see in a Birman, for those areas where individual interpretation comes into play, and you need to know what lines produce the look you like. Once you begin to put all of this together selection becomes easy. Without this knowledge you are not really actively participating in the fine art of breeding, though your cats may be having babies that you show, breed and sell. The true rewards of breeding are never realized in producing kittens, but come from the pride of having produced a line of cats that meet the standard well, and that all comes through selection.

My very best advise to anyone starting out give the standard a good read. Go to as many shows as possible, so that you see many Birmans. *...continued on next page*



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As you look at what is out being shown, ask the owners if you may handle their cats. As you do this evaluate the cat. Don't just ask to handle Birmans that you like, look at those you are not as crazy about, too. In that way you can begin to put your finger on what it is you like and don't like, by looking at the cats closely. Go ahead and ask the breeder or owner what they like and don't like about their cat. See how their interpretation of how their cats meets the standard meets yours, and don't be surprised if it doesn't because we have a wide range of type being shown, and just as wide of range of breeder interpretation. Once you begin to figure out what it is you like to see in a Birman be true to it. For example, one thing I can't forgive is a cat with light boning. If there is a surprise when I pick up a cat then I prefer it be that the cat feels more substantial than I thought it might. It is always a huge disappointment to me when a good coat causes a cat to look more substantial than it is, and the cat practically floats out of my hand when I pick it up.

The breeder must always remember, while our cats are also our pets, the selection in the breeding program must never be based on emotion. For breeding you must have a plan, and the cats you are working with either fit into that plan or they don't. I've never understood the logic of someone continuing to breed a cat that does not produce well just because they have it and love it --you can love it the same spayed or neutered, but if you continue to breed the cat it can undermine the long term goals of your breeding program.

