

## Dog Fancy Breed Profile Bichon Frise

**Bichon Frise IN BRIEF** Country of origin: France is often cited, although the breed's wider-flung roots are in the Mediterranean, including the Canary Islands.

Group: Non-Sporting (AKC); Companion (UKC).

Life span: 14 to 16 years.

Color: White.

Grooming: Intensive. Like human hair, the double coat mats easily, and requires a thorough brushing once a week, as well as a monthly visit to the groomer.

Height/weight: 9 to 12 inches; 10 to 18 pounds.

Trainability: Moderate.

Activity level: Moderate.

Known health problems: Allergy-related skin problems, juvenile cataracts, kidney stones, and luxating patellas (kneecaps that slip out of place).

Best home: With an owner who is home much of the day.

Good with children: Yes, with adult supervision.

Good with other pets: Yes.

National breed club: The Bichon Frise Club of America <http://www.bichon.org/>

Rescue: BFCA Rescue <http://www.bichonrescue.org/>

Bichon Frise

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Bichon Frise: Bright as day

The charming Bichon Frise enjoys abundant companionship.

By Denise Flaim

Mimi Winkler doesn't need the Weather Channel. She has Effie the Bichon Frise.

Effie's meteorological leanings surfaced at the tender age of 9 weeks, when she approached the sliding glass doors to the backyard for her morning potty break.

"She stuck one paw out, looked up at the sky, and said, 'Nope, it's a little damp out — my hair will frizz,'" remembers Winkler, a 17-year breeder in New Rochelle, N.Y. Turning on her heels, Effie trotted to the laundry room and seemed to wait pointedly for Winkler to put down a housetraining pad.

It's a weatherwise ritual repeated every day since for the last nine years — although in fairness to Effie, she does go outside on balmy days.

Some owners might tire of such diva-like demands. But the Bichon Frise, with his powder-puff good looks and personality as bright as the family crystal, simply charms them into acquiescence.

Developed during the Middle Ages in the Mediterranean area, these irresistible little white dogs were scooped up by sailors as bartering chits, eventually finding their way into the Renaissance palaces of Italy and France. But the powdered-wig and scepter set is fickle, and by the Victorian era, the Bichon Frise (pronounced "Bee-shawn free-zay," not "bee-john freeze") was recast as a street performer, walking tightropes in circus acts and panhandling passersby.

Look for pups of good cheer

More than a century later, in 2001, a Bichon Frise named Ch. Special Times Just Right — "J.R." for short — drew on those watch-me roots when he won dogdom's highest honor, Best in Show at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Jumping into the silver-plated trophy, J.R. pumped his front legs excitedly, as if waving to the spectators who had cheered for him.

Winkler felt the win's reverberations almost immediately. "The phone was ringing off the wall," she says. "Everyone wanted a Bichon."

While public interest has quelled since J.R.'s Madison Square Garden moment, reputable breeders still feel the aftereffects of the popularity jolt.

“The tragic part is that a lot of people decided to breed who shouldn’t be breeding,” says long-time breeder Barbara Stubbs of La Jolla, Calif., author of *The Complete Bichon* (Howell, 1990) and a Bichon Frise owner since 1966. While the Bichon Frise breed standard emphasizes that “a cheerful attitude is the hallmark of the breed and one should settle for nothing less,” many fanciers have noted poor temperaments in dogs produced by commercial puppy mills. These mass-produced Bichon Frises are inadequately socialized and sold far earlier than 10 to 12 weeks old, the minimum age at which most Bichon Frise breeders will let puppies go to their new homes.

A Bichon Frise with the right temperament is “cheerful and pleasant to be around,” says Nancy Muklewicz of Schiller Park, Ill., who writes the Bichon Frise breed column in the *American Kennel Club Gazette* and also does Bichon Frise rescue in the Chicago area.

Generally gregarious with other animals, Bichons Frises usually also do well with children, and many are surprisingly gentle with even the smallest baby. Diminutive humans may not reciprocate in kind, however, and for that reason many breeders will not sell dogs to families with very young children.

#### Time commitment required

If the Bichon Frise’s cordial manner and playfulness sound too good to be true, there are some challenges amid the white fluff. For example, those who value their Aubusson rugs might think twice.

“Bichons are very difficult to housebreak,” Winkler says, noting that it is the primary reason they are relinquished to rescue groups.

Compounding the Bichon Frise’s mental block about proper potty procedure is a supernaturally strong need to be with humans. “They are very much a companion dog and do not like being left at home alone,” Muklewicz says. While this doesn’t mean that Bichon Frises can never be left unattended, they are not suited to solitude for long periods.

Like many reputable Bichon Frise breeders, Stubbs will not sell to a household where all the adults work full time. “It doesn’t work, because the dogs will either destroy themselves or the house,” she says. “All they want is to be with people.”

Potential owners should also plan to devote regular time to grooming. “They need to be bathed and brushed out at least once a week,” says Kathleen Loynachan of Chariton, Iowa, president of the Bichon Frise Club of America and a Bichon Frise owner since 1978. “A lot of people can do the bathing themselves, but the dogs need to be professionally groomed and scissored once a month.” With naturally curly hair like a Poodle’s, a Bichon Frise requires blow-drying to achieve that plush, cotton-ball-like silhouette.

A bright side to the Bichon Frise’s time-consuming double coat: “They’re considered one of the best breeds for people with allergies,” says Muklewicz, who has allergies and asthma. But no breed is truly hypoallergenic, so prospective owners should spend time with both adult and juvenile dogs to see if they induce a reaction.

Bichons Frises themselves are prone to allergies, which manifest as skin problems. Other health concerns are juvenile cataracts, kidney stones, and luxating patellas (kneecaps that slip out of place). “Don’t even think about buying a Bichon Frise from someone who doesn’t do any health testing,” Winkler warns. Also steer clear of breeders who breed for extremely small dogs.

Above all, remember that a good breeder recognizes the unique requirements of these contact-craving creatures. “They’re just bubbly guys that are full of energy,” Stubbs concludes.

Denise Flaim is a DOG FANCY contributing editor, the pets columnist at *Newsday*, and author of *The Holistic Dog Book: Canine Care for the 21st Century* (Howell, 2003, \$16.99). She lives in Sea Cliff, N.Y.

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