

Black Russian, Anyone?

This unique breed has a cut all its own.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have a 10-month-old Black Russian Terrier and I am unsure about the length to which she should be groomed. I had one groomer for the first couple of times who basically trimmed up the back of the legs and under the neck area and a patch behind her head. Then I tried a different groomer who trimmed her short all over except the legs (very much like an Airedale). Are either of these cuts correct? From pictures I have seen of other BRTs, they seem trimmed but not so tightly.

A. You are right in assuming that neither of these grooming styles was correct for your Black Russian Terrier but I can understand the groomers' dilemma. This magnificent breed was created in post-World War II Russia by the Red Star Kennels, an army-controlled Soviet kennel dedicated to developing special-duty breeds. Powerful, intelligent, fearless and physically hardy in that country's severe weather conditions, it's still relatively new as dog breeds go. Developed as a working dog, the emphasis on its grooming was never about a perfectly manicured style.

To further confuse the matter, the Russians predominantly used the Giant Schnauzer, Rottweiler, Airedale and Newfoundland breeds to concoct their canine creation. In all, a total of 17 breeds went into its unique genetic stew. Used by the military police at border crossings, prisons and military installations, the Red Star Kennel would not release it to private breeders until 1956. The original breed standard was created by the Red Army in 1958 and this dog was internationally accepted by the FCI (Federation Cynologique Internationale) in 1984, coming to prominence in this country when it gained American Kennel Club recognition in 2004 as a member of the Working Group.

Although larger-boned than the Giant Schnauzer and more leggy and athletic than the Bouvier de Flanders, most groomers usually trim it to resemble either one of these two breeds but a properly groomed BRT has its own look. Its massive head is shorn short from just behind the eyebrows, the balance of its facial hair falling over the eyes in a visor-like cap. Sharply-cut, Schnauzer-like eyebrows are not correct. The fringe from the eyebrows is brushed forward, blending with the beard and muzzle. This is an arrestingly handsome dog with its own distinctive curtain of hair over its eyes and face. Viewed from the front, the head should look like a brick; from the side it should resemble a triangle. The ears are shaved inside and out, falling flat against the head. The front of the neck from the throat to the breastbone and top of the shoulders (withers) may be shaved or scissored short while the back of the neck should be left fuller, like a mane. The hair on the back of the rear legs and rump is trimmed short enough to show angulation, making the big dog look as if it's about to "spring."

There really is no one "correct" length for the coat. Left untrimmed, it would be one to three inches in length, but professionally groomed it may be shaved with a snap-on blade attachment to leave a minimum of three-quarters of an inch or so on the back with the legs left somewhat fuller by scissoring. The undercarriage is angled shorter as it approaches the "tuck-up" in the groin area. There should never be a distinct "skirt" nor any marks from either clippers or scissors left on the coat when finished. The look the groomer is trying to achieve should conform to the dog's body outline; neatened but naturally tousled is fine. This is not a finely-manicured Airedale or Poodle.

The wiry, dense coat lies close to the skin and is slightly wavy. This coarse outer coat and the tightly woven undercoat beneath offer weatherproofing protection. These dogs are not heavy shedders but need a thorough brush-out once a week to prevent mats from developing and keep shedding minimal. Since they love to romp outdoors in all kinds of weather, such home maintenance is a must. A visit to the groomer every two months or so will keep them looking great.

Ranging in height from 26 inches to 30 inches, these big fellows weigh between 80 and 130 pounds on average. Black Russian Terriers come in one color only—black—but a few gray hairs are allowable. Massive, robust and high-spirited, they need consistent, firm but loving leadership to keep them from becoming too dominant. Although they are extremely loving and loyal to their families, they are protective and suspicious of strangers. No longer used in large numbers by the Russian Army, today's Black Russian Terrier has a new role as a guardian, companion and cherished family pet.