

Wheaten Terrier Grooming Challenge

Grooming the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier is a challenge that takes practice to perfect.

By Kathy Salzberg, NCMG

Q. I have three Soft Coated Wheaten Terriers and have tried to groom their legs in the traditional Wheaten method but can't seem to get the hair to fall correctly. I have all the pictures and descriptions but it still looks like I have chopped them. What am I doing wrong?

A. You must do a lot of brushing! Ideally, I recommend daily brushing to keep these cotton-candy coats mat-free. It sounds to me like you can visualize the look you desire but have not been able to execute it. This does not surprise me as scissoring the legs on a Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier is one of the most difficult tasks to master in professional grooming.

Although these playful family favorites started out as the poor man's farm dog back in Ireland several centuries ago, hunting vermin, herding cattle and protecting hearth and home, today's Wheaten is a highly-stylized dog with a rectangular head, trademark "fall" over the eyes and distinctive beard. The Wheaten's body coat should be shorter on the back and seamlessly blended into the legs, which fall like perfect columns to his tightly rounded feet. No pattern lines or "chop marks" should be visible on the finished product. You already know that when it comes to clipper or scissor marks, that trademark soft hair is extremely unforgiving.

To groom your Wheaties at home, try a popular pet trim that will make maintenance between haircuts easier. After brushing out any mats, bathing, conditioning and blow-drying your dogs, use a #4 blade on the back and tightly-trimmed rump and blend into the legs about two inches above the elbow in front and an inch below the thigh muscle in back. (The precise spot to blend varies from dog to dog, depending on build and musculature.)

Blending is accomplished by "feathering off" the blade, lifting it gradually off the coat and "sculpting" with it to leave hair longer as you create the pattern. We also work magic with our thinning shears to blend pattern lines. For best results, you should have single-sided thinners with the teeth only on one side. A 46-tooth pair works well for me.

Once the legs are thoroughly brushed out, use a #2 snap-on comb attached to a #30 blade as your first step in trimming them. Clip lightly in a downward motion. Now mist the coat with water and fluff the legs again, brushing the hair up and out with the air flow. No doubt you will see lots of "chops" that need to be smoothed out with your scissors to shape those leg columns. Vertical scissor strokes work best: Open and close your shears in an even motion rather than bouncing them around.

The proper drying procedure is vital to creating the plush look of the Wheaten coat. You also need good sharp shears that cut through the coat like butter. I assume you have a grooming table with a non-slip top, a floor model electric dryer, dematting tools, curved wire slicker brushes, and a double-sided stainless steel comb to check your brushwork. You might consider having that handsome threesome professionally groomed so you will have real-life models to begin with as you perfect your grooming techniques at home.