

## Popular Dogs: Lhasa Apsos

**Alert but tranquil, confident but cautious, circumspect in demeanor, the Lhasa Apso doesn't seem all that far from its roots in the Himalayas of Tibet.**

*Eve Adamson*

Moderation in All Things Just as Tibetan Buddhists quoted Buddha himself as he preached moderation in all things, so the Lhasa Apso is a small dog of essentially moderate proportion. "Overall, for a Lhasa Apso to exhibit correct Tibetan type, the Lhasa should be moderate and natural-looking, not artificial, and with no exaggeration of one body part over another," Baumann says. "This does not mean that the Lhasa Apso should not be pretty! Our best dogs display the balance and grace of an accomplished athlete."

The breed standard states that the Lhasa's size is "variable, but about 10 or 11 inches at the shoulder for dogs, bitches slightly smaller." The use of the words "variable" and "about" keep Lhasas from becoming subjected to size restrictions in favor of other aspects of quality, as the breed had to be healthy, sturdy and agile to survive in the rugged and unforgiving Tibetan climate. "Today you see some variation in height, some smaller or taller regionally, but we don't have any 15-inch dogs or any 6-inch dogs, and most important is a balanced overall appearance with no sign of big bone or fine bone," Keen-Fernandes says.

The Lhasa should also be muscled enough to traverse rugged mountainous terrain without tiring. "The dogs should be well muscled so they are light on their feet, quick and agile," Baumann says. Dr. Marley adds, "You cannot carry around any unnecessary weight at that altitude!"

Coat of Many Colors The Lhasa's coat had to be harsh and weather-resistant. Today's show Lhasa has a long, draping double coat (an inner and outer coat) of straight hair, parted down the middle of its spine from nose to tail. The harsh Tibetan climate demanded a coat that could shield the Lhasa from both heat and cold by conserving inner heat, insulating from the elements and reflecting the sun's radiation. "In Tibet, you couldn't have a soft, silky, light, wispy coat," Keen-Fernandes says. "The Lhasa Apso's coat should be hard and strong; insulating and protective; of good length; and very dense, straight and humanlike."

According to Dr. Marley, some of today's Lhasas may have coats that would be too soft to survive for long in Tibet. "Some Lhasas tend to have the soft, voluminous coat dog-show handlers love so much, but they could never run around over rough terrain or they'd rip the soft coat to pieces, and these coats wouldn't survive in Tibet because they mat," Dr. Marley says.

Yet the American breed standard also states that the Lhasa coat should be "heavy, straight, hard, not woolly or silky, of good length and very dense." The heaviness of the coat originally served to protect the Lhasa. The fact that handlers can groom the coat to look luxurious in the show ring is simply a matter of opportunity, according to Keen-Fernandes: "They didn't have blow dryers in Tibetan monasteries!" Many pet owners choose to keep their Lhasas in more practical pet trims to avoid the high-maintenance grooming requirements.

No Shih Tzu Zone: The Lhasa Head Even though it is often mistaken for the Shih Tzu, and a few Shih Tzu were added to Lhasa breeding stock shortly after World War II, the Lhasa Apso shouldn't have the flat face of some of the Oriental toy breeds. Instead, the standard describes the Lhasa's muzzle as of medium length. The practice of interbreeding with Shih Tzu was quickly halted after it caused a controversy. The AKC decided that the Lhasa Apso was a Tibetan and not a Chinese breed.

"The head should never resemble a Shih Tzu or a Tibetan Terrier," Keen-Fernandes says. The Lhasa should have less muzzle than the Tibetan Terrier, with a level or "slightly undershot bite" coming together into a neat reverse scissors bite (top teeth close against the back of the bottom teeth), rather than a drastically undershot bite, in which the teeth are visible when the mouth is closed. "They shouldn't have bites like Bulldogs," Dr. Marley says.

A regular scissors bite (top teeth close against the front of the back teeth) isn't considered desirable for the breed, according to show breeders, but is also not considered a serious fault. "Breeders have worked hard to breed for the distinct reverse scissors bite and to breed away from an undershot bite with protruding teeth," Keen-Fernandes says. "We've seen a great improvement in the bite of this breed."

The Lhasa head should be heavily furnished with a heavy fall of hair over the eyes and a substantial beard. The skull should be narrow, "falling away behind the eyes in a marked degree, not quite flat, but not domed or apple-shaped,"

according to the standard. The standard also specifies, per the 1978 revision, that the "length from tip of nose to eye be roughly about one-third of the total length from nose to back of skull."

The shape of the Lhasa Apso head is one of the key elements that make the Lhasa look like a Lhasa. "The correct head elements all contribute to the proper Lhasa Apso expression," Baumann says. The heavy head furnishings and ears set at eye level, heavily feathered and hanging like pendants, accentuate the narrowness of the head. The Lhasa should have a shallow stop (the point at which muzzle meets head), meaning the muzzle meets the skull at a moderate angle. Again, in the Lhasa Apso head, moderation is key.

Dark skin pigmentation in the nose, eye rims and lips also add to the Lhasa's characteristic expression, as do dark-brown eyes of moderate size. "The correct dark eye is important to the Lhasa's keen, intelligent, deep expression, and the heavy furnishings over the eyes protected the dog in Tibet from glare and weather," Keen-Fernandes says.

The Lhasa's eyes shouldn't be round and large like the Shih Tzu, and certainly not protruding. "Large, bulging eyes would never have survived in Tibet, and breeders have made a conscious effort to preserve the eyes the way they have always been," Keen-Fernandes says. The standard supports this notion of moderation yet again: "Eyes dark brown, neither very large and full nor very small and sunk." Although the word oval isn't in the standard, most breeders agree that the eye should be oval, rather than round or narrow.

In the show ring, the Lhasa should never have a tied-up topknot like a Shih Tzu, although pet owners often tie back the Lhasa's hair in a ribbon or barrette to help the Lhasa see. The hair can be parted and brushed to the side to enhance vision, but its guard-dog past made hearing a more important function than sight. "Their keen sense of hearing was one of the most important of their senses, more important than sight, so a coat protecting the eyes worked well," Keen-Fernandes says.

**Body Mechanics**The Lhasa's body shape is classically rectangular with legs that are short and sturdy-not dwarfed, but with no legginess that would result in inefficient movement or excessive heat or energy loss when traversing the uneven Himalayan landscape. Although some Lhasas today are taller and more square in appearance, the longer body gave the original Lhasa more breathing room, as well as agility, and remains the correct body shape.

"The breed should be rectangular with the ribcage extending well back," Baumann says. "The well-developed quarters and thighs should provide good impulsion so the dogs cover ground smoothly and effortlessly with balanced reach and drive."

In addition, the Lhasa should be hard in flesh, well muscled and elegantly balanced, with strong, cat-shaped feet, according to Keen-Fernandes: "This well-balanced, rectangular shape with lean muscle was important for the Lhasa's survival, for balance, agility, maneuverability and stamina."

Other aspects of the Lhasa's structure also enhance efficient movement. The Lhasa's front legs should be straight, and the length from the point of the shoulder to the elbow should be equal to the length from the point of the shoulder to the withers (the top of the shoulder blade). The feet may turn out slightly, and the Lhasa's rear legs should be angled just enough to promote good reach and drive, with hocks (the dog's off-the-ground ankle joint) perpendicular to the ground and reaching out slightly behind the rear end.

Finally, the Lhasa's tail should also be covered with lots of feathery coat and "carried well over its back." This heavy extra coat on the back (from the tail being carried over the back) also served to protect the Lhasa from both cold and sun. A bored Lhasa may sometimes drop its tail, but in normal alert circumstances, that tail should remain up and over the back. Lhasa Apso tails sometimes contain a kink, which breeders consider perfectly normal and acceptable.

The Lhasa's brief breed standard may today result in some variation between Lhasas from different breeder lines, and Lhasas in different countries may not look quite as similar as they once did, but the ALAC has no desire to change or add to the breed standard. "Fads come and go, popular sires create trends in the breed, but pay attention to what is real about this creature, what it was meant to do and where it was meant to live," Dr. Marley says.

Breeders eager to preserve the Lhasa agree that adding to the standard will only complicate the situation. Says Keen-Fernandes, "It's a small dog from Tibet with this kind of bite, this kind of coat and straight legs. It's that simple."