

Norwich Terriers, 2-15

Title: The Pet Norwich Coat: Managing Expectations

The Norwich Terrier section of the benched National Dog Show, hosted by the Kennel Club of Philadelphia, drew the usual crowd of interested spectators researching breeds. Questions about coat care topped the list, prompting my spiel this year about the amount of work required to make a Norwich actually look like the Norwich sitting on the bench. A little Norwich named “Roxy” has been my inspiration for educating potential puppy buyers about hand stripping.

Several years ago, I agreed to examine Roxy’s coat for her owners, a young couple with a baby on the way. They paid a lot of money for a purebred Norwich Terrier and were disappointed because Roxy did not look like a Norwich. Her coat was no longer red of any shade; rather, it was a nondescript greyish-whitish. As I suspected, she had been clipped by a professional groomer.

A Norwich Terrier’s coat should be “hard, wiry and straight, lying close to the body with a definite undercoat”. This double coat has a purpose. The harsh outercoat is nearly weatherproof, and the soft supportive undercoat insulates the body from both heat and cold. Originally bred to be stable ratters and bolt foxes on the hunt, this little working terrier required a protective coat. The natural course of a working day provided the required grooming as longer, loose hairs were removed by briar and brush, allowing the coat to replenish.

Because the natural looking coat of today’s Norwich is anything but natural, learning to hand strip or finding a groomer who will hand strip is an important consideration in choosing this breed. The traditional way to groom the terrier coat is by manually removing the dead (or “blown”) hair. Each hair follicle supports a single hard outer hair and several soft finer hairs that form the supportive undercoat. The purpose of hand stripping is simply to remove the old faded outer hairs and excess undercoat so that new hair can grow in the follicles. The color pigment of the Norwich coat is in the tips of the outer hairs. Clipping or scissoring cuts the colored tips off and the dog’s natural color fades. The texture is also softened. Because hand stripping takes considerably more time than grooming with clippers, professional groomers charge more or decline to offer this specialized service. Pet owners may not realize that maintaining a hard coat is often a work in process. If the timing of grooming visits is not consistent, the finished results will vary. For best results, the coat is “rolled” so that there is always a new layer of growth coming in. “Rolling” is how dogs that are on the show circuit maintain the desired coat appearance, but this requires frequent grooming and is generally not practical for the pet owner.

Wire coats that are cared for properly by hand stripping have a beautiful shine and rich colors. It is relatively easy coat to maintain the Norwich coat, and while many owners learn how to trim and tidy their own dog, hand stripping is not for everyone. When done correctly, it causes little discomfort to the dog, but many pet owners are hesitant. While hand stripping is recommended for the adult Norwich, clipping is acceptable (and sometimes preferred) for an older dog. It is also an option for the Norwich with an incorrect soft coat that is difficult to pull out. Besides the beauty of vibrant color and healthy hair, the hand stripped Norwich coat has other advantageous. Because it is fairly dirt resistant, a Norwich does not need frequent bathing. Also, by stripping out old coat, hair follicles are not plugged with fine hairs and oily sebum which can contribute to skin problems.

Although the modern Norwich is not likely to dispatch small vermin, it is important that modern breeders preserve the nearly weatherproof coat as this is one of the inherent qualities that distinguish this hardy little hunt terrier. Most are devoted pet companions like Roxy, whom I continue to groom. Her body coat is now in two distinct layers with correct harsh texture, and though the leg furnishings are a bit soft, her owners are pleased to have a Norwich that looks like a Norwich.

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