

SIAMESE STANDARD – A RETROSPECTIVE

By Betty White

There is no show cat that predates the Siamese. Truth be told, one of the primary reasons for holding the first cat show in London was the Siamese breed. Then, as now, the Siamese was regarded as an elegant cat with a wedge-shaped head. The first few pages of the printed handout on your table are the documentation of that fact. It may come in handy during your next encounter with lovers of apple-headed, 15-pound wonders. Yours and mine are, have been, and will continue to be the “traditional” Siamese!

Which is not to say that our breed has not changed over the years. One of the impressions that a casual reading, from beginning to end, of our historical standards produces is that our cats have changed more dramatically than our standards. This is true of any breed nearly as old as ours – the Persian, for instance. We would affirm, as would Persian breeders, that we are finally approaching the ideal only dreamed of a hundred years ago. Perhaps it would be more accurate to agree that the dream changed over time as kittens were born and possibilities presented themselves. I doubt that a person in this room would insist that the 2006 Best Siamese was in some breeder’s mind’s eye a hundred years ago. Forget about death and taxes, change is also constant to the human condition, and the ideal, the perfect Siamese remains illusive because it changes gradually over time.

Another impression, and one of more interest to us, is that there are some recurring themes to our developing standards. Breeders have had similar ideas and concerns from the beginning. For instance, we’ve always considered eyes important – shape, color, and set. From allowing “china-blue” eye color, we’ve strengthened the standard to where it is today. We’ve struggled with crossed eyes, finally taking a stand in the 1934 standard that we would prefer them not to be crossed. By 1955 we were subtracting five points for crossed eyes and calling them undesirable. From the 1967 revision until today, we describe Siamese eyes as “uncrossed,” but there is no specific direction as what to do if they are not. (This is not our fault; we voted to add crossed eyes to DISQUALIFY in 1976 and the Board would not agree.) This seeming lack of direction about crossed eyes, at least from a judge’s standpoint, illustrates the last impression one receives from reading through all the standards.

That impression is: Standards are living things that often mirror the times in which they were written and modified. Historically, standards have reflected give-and-take between breeders and governing bodies. (Obviously, I mean the CFA Board in this discussion.) Breeders have proposed standards and/or changes, and the Board has either agreed or not. Body and point color of the Siamese, for instance. Siamese body clarity has been stressed from that first sentence under “COLOUR,” spelled the British way, in the 1889 standard until today -- with enough points allotted to drive the message home. Breeders agree that color is important. Yet, when the breed council voted to penalize “poor coat color” in 1980 by a vote of 93 to 34, the Board would not agree to the change. (Nor would they agree to penalize “weak chins,” which passed by 94 to 33.)

To understand the growing conflict between breeders and the Board over standard changes requires an appreciation of CFA’s growth during the middle years of the 20th century. In 1959 Siamese breeders asked the Board to require Siamese to be judged by Siamese breeder judges, because “judges mostly have longhair backgrounds.” Imagine asking the Board that in 2006! At an

Annual meeting in 1964, the president read a letter from a club objecting to the Siamese standard because it penalized sturdy, well-bred animals in an attempt to attain “dainty” and “svelte.” The club recommended that the standard be made comparable to the Abyssinian standard of “lithe, long and muscular...”. Imagine a club doing that in 2006; imagine any of you sitting still for it! The number of CFA breeds was increasing, and with that increase was a general demand for a closer look at all the standards “for judging cats.” (Please note that definition of “standards.” This is an ongoing debate.) In response, CFA’s president appointed breed committees in March 1966. The chair of the Siamese committee was Jeanne Singer, with Marge Naples the other member. All committees were to report their recommendations by May 14. The Siamese standard was the first to be discussed, as there were a number of people who attended the June meeting specifically to hear the discussions on this breed. The discussion lasted over 2 hours. Mrs. Singer presented the recommendations, which were adopted as amended by the CFA Board of Directors. In her struggle to define the indefinable, Jeanne wrote a gorgeous piece of prose describing a beautiful Siamese. The CFA Board was quite taken with it; that essay became, instead, the preface to the CFA Standards of all our breeds.

The breed committees, of course, evolved into our present breed council system. For a few years prior to 1983, the Board considered a 60% positive response from the entire membership of a breed council as indicative of general approval of a question/change. After 1983, it became 60% positive of those members who voted. In either case, the Board was – and is – the final authority. There is no question, however, that breed councils have increased in power and in importance since 1984. There is less of the give-and-take of yesteryear; for good or ill, few Board members want to buck the present tide of Breed Council ascendancy.

Whether a standard is a blueprint for breeders or a guide for judges – or both – is not apropos of our discussion. How Jeanne approached her task, though, is important to us. There is little doubt that she visualized the Siamese in artistic terms; the preface just mentioned proves that. That she wanted a “positive” standard with a minimum of penalties/disqualifications specifically mentioned is a fact because she said so on many occasions. To her mind, saying Siamese eyes are uncrossed clearly states that crossed eyes are undesirable. Verbalizing body clarity makes the case for no barring, ghost striping, spots, etc. Besides, Siamese breeders have been saying that in their standards for generations, haven’t they? She understood, in other words, that when it comes to the salient feature of a Siamese – color restricted to points on a clear body – there was unspoken agreement among breeders and judges. This was the thinking of a highly literate, extremely articulate woman with a background in breeding over many years, years that saw the Siamese become enormously popular in this country primarily as a color pattern on an elegant frame.

It is important, also, to examine the Siamese fancy in the United States in 1966 in terms of the standard written. Jeanne wanted a positive standard, but that was not all she wanted. She meant to address a breeding fad sweeping the country, but more noticeable in the west. This was the time of the “coffin-head,” a skull aberration that we would agree today was grotesque. It all began with the birth of a watershed seal point male, a truly beautiful cat who was a quantum leap in type. I mean, of course, Fan-T-Cee’s Tee Cee. Too many breeders were of the mind that if a little Tee Cee was good, then a lot of Tee Cee had to be better. The skull became elongated, the wedge exceedingly narrow, and in the case of one CFA GC male that I saw, the cat did not (or could not) close his mouth. With this configuration, eyes were to the side of the head, a bulge occurred over the eyes in profile, and

ears were upright and small. Please realize that the Siamese standard still called for a long wedge, a straight profile, and “rather large” ears.

Instead of a discussion of the head and everything about it, except eyes, as had been the general rule since 1889, the Siamese head in the 1967 standard is discussed in terms of a wedge, and then the various features are broken out separately – skull – “No bulge over the eyes”; ears – “strikingly large”; eyes – “Placed well within the frontal plane of the face; never at the side of the head”; nose – “long and straight”; muzzle – “fine and wedge-shaped”; chin and jaw. It’s hard to imagine a coffin-head making the cut, isn’t it?

The 1966 wholesale standard revisions mandated by the Board were meant to be of a fairly permanent nature. The Board did not envision undertaking this large task and then having the standards be constantly revised and reworded. This explains, in part, some of the reticence of subsequent CFA Boards to agree to changes that they viewed as redundant or just plain unnecessary.

For ten years there were no proposals to change the Siamese standard in any way. There was an attempt by some breeders to strengthen the points for muscle tone and body color in 1976, but this failed. They were more successful in voting to change the wording in PENALIZE to include paw pads. “Improper (i.e., off-color or spotted) nose leather or paw pads.” In a discussion with Jeanne some years later, she asked me if I realized what prompted that change. She said it was the result of a cat that did a lot of winning in the east. “Personally,” she said, “I think paw pads are to walk on.”

A flurry of proposals were advanced in 1978, but the only ones that both the Board and breeders agreed upon were the addition of “soft or mushy body” to the PENALIZE section and the references to mouth breathing and malocclusion in the DISQUALIFY section. These, too, were a direct reaction to show results. We’ve already noted that the Board agreed only to disagree with Siamese breeders with regards to poor coat color and weak chins in 1980, but a rather large controversy erupted in 1982 over “dainty” that led to that word being replaced with “refined.” The vote was 105 to 17. “Males proportionately larger” won by 99 to 23, but the Board modified it to read, “Males may be proportionately larger.” Actually, the two proposals were part of the same controversy and, once again, reflected what was – or was not -- happening in the show ring. The interesting thing about this particular brouhaha was that the entire tempest revolved around semantics – the real or perceived definition of “dainty.” The following year, “dainty” in the body description was changed to “graceful.”

Some of the wording in the 1967 standard disappeared between then and now, specifically the caution about eye placement. (The coffin-heads were no more!) You will note that 5 points were added to muscle tone when the 5 for condition no longer became necessary; CFA added a condition statement to all CFA standards a few years ago. There were no changes to the standard from 1984 until 2000 when “palpable and/or visible protrusion of the cartilage at the end of the sternum” was added to PENALIZE. This was changed to its present wording a few years later. Strictly speaking, the new structure statement added to the standards about five years ago ought to remove the necessity for anything in our standard dealing with structure. However, I believe that CFA will first need to provide judges with some guidelines, just as they did for condition.

Our Siamese standards have served us well over the years. However, referring to that eternal constant – change – there is no reason to view our standard as “cast in stone” if there is reason to believe our breed would be served better with clarification or modification here and there.

Most of you have read the words decrying the youth of his generation written by Socrates in Athens in the 5th century BC. They sound as though they were written in the United States – or France, or Holland -- yesterday. I’d like to read something to you about our breed, and while it sounds as though I wrote it, I did not!

“Today we have many seals [Siamese] with excellent head type. The day of the apple head is past. Body type has been struggling along, but not nearly enough determined breeding skill has been focused on the fine-boned, dainty but firmly muscled body. There is still a tendency for the coarse, ungainly body to be overlooked for the sake of a good head. Tails have improved enormously. The real whip tail is no longer an oddity. Eye color has not actually improved, just spread around more. Years ago we had seal specimens with the very deep vivid blue eyes unique to Siamese. It was once thought to occur only on seals. The seals, fortunately, have spread it to the other colors, so that now, at least, ALL Siamese are required to have it.

“Color, alas, with a few exceptions, has gone backwards. Ten or fifteen years ago, breeders and judges were far more demanding and selective about seal color. Examples of good stable seal color could be found in any show room. Woe to the seal whose front legs were pale, whose whisker pads were white, or whose tail was ticked! Hip spots or tiger markings were fatal! Now such deficiencies are overlooked.”

“Perhaps this will be the challenge of the next decade in seal point [Siamese] history. We shall try to preserve our head type, eye color, body type and at the same time improve our point and body color. The perfect seal [Siamese] is yet to be born.”

These words quoted above were written by Jeanne Singer in an article entitled, “Seal Point Siamese,” in the *1966 CFA YEARBOOK*. You see, Jeanne was interested in something other than the coffin-head in 1966! She knew – just as you and I know – that color is the most difficult thing in breeding Siamese. It is and will continue to be a challenge. That is why, passing or failing, proposals addressing body color in the Siamese standard have been the most recurring theme appearing on breed committee/breed council ballots for all of the Siamese cat’s 100 years in CFA.

Perhaps if we dedicate ourselves to the task, the next time we celebrate a milestone year we’ll also celebrate the universal perfection of the paint job on the most beautiful of breeds!