

effect of breaking the colour up into clear, solid patches, hence 'brindle and whites' are rarely seen. Although the resulting pattern is largely random, it does show a predisposition to the pattern required in a Dutch cavy, a pattern also commonly observed in cattle, cats, dogs, etc. As with all these animals, the last place to 'lose' the colour is the cheeks. The gene has also been shown to have a slight sex linkage, with sows displaying, on average, very slightly more white.

Historically, tort and whites were one of the most popular and successful colours. However, the 1990s were not a good decade for this variety and they lost much ground in terms of quality and size. Notwithstanding this, a number of good quality tort and whites have been produced in recent years, to suggest an upturn in their fortunes. It is good practice not to mix tort and whites with other colours, and as a result tort and whites often display different strengths and weaknesses to brindles - for example, tort and whites often have superior head furnishings. However, many of the 'new' tort and whites can claim a significant proportion of brindle blood in their recent past. Roan x tort and white is not recommended. Not only does it produce aesthetically challenged offspring, but also a tendency to reduce the markings to circles around the eye. Thus it is not possible to tell whether or not the offspring are roaned. This could of course lead to unpredictable and possibly distressing breeding results (in the unintentional production of microphthalmic whites).

Any Other Colours

At the present time, there are few AOCs being exhibited. The most common are chocolate/red/white tricolours (most descending from Brian Cutting's stud) where the chocolate acts as a recessive to the black of a tort and white. 'Golden' Agoutis are also seen. These have the advantage in the breeding pen of being dominant to most colours, and thus a cross to a good brindle should produce agoutis in the first generation. Recently, Tina Tennant has developed a line of attractive silver agoutis. Red and whites, and black and whites, are occasionally seen. Although these are often mis-marked tort and whites, some breeders do maintain pure strains.

Breeding

Good Abyssinians are bred in one's own shed, and not acquired as a result of trawling pet shops on wet Tuesday afternoons. As I noted at the beginning of this article, the Aby comprises a complex mix of major and minor genes, which, together produce a breed with a significant number of features. As such, there is a lot that can go wrong with an Aby! I believe that it is vital that all the desired features of the breed should be visible somewhere in the stud. Failing this, the cavies must be capable of producing the missing factors. Ideally, these features would be displayed all together on one or two of the animals...

The aim of your breeding programme should be to promote the positive features and eliminate the undesirable to produce a strain of consistent winners, but not surprisingly this is not easy! Your individual interpretation of the Standard, with the inevitable emphasis on what you consider to be important or attractive, and what you believe can be sacrificed, will in turn result in the success or otherwise of your individual strain. Some fanciers seem to breed Alys for many generations seemingly without progress. With any breed it is easy to get in a rut whereby the offspring are very similar (i.e. have similar genetic makeup) to the parents. This is fine if the strain is producing winners; but, if not, it can be difficult to get out of.

As with most breeds, breeding stock should be as near to the standard as possible. This is not to say that all showable Alys make good breeding stock, or that non-showable cavies should be excluded from the strain. For what it is worth, I believe in selecting stock that has achieved good size and substance, has a good wealth and depth of coat, and is well furnished. In particular, I would avoid the use of cavies with collar faults, long cast saddles, or short, flat coats (no matter how neat they appeared). In return, I will accept doubles, lifters, out of line centres, etc. (it is worth noting that doubles appear more pronounced on deep, short coupled Alys). Doubles tend to come and go in a strain, but once depth of coat is lost from a bloodline it cannot be salvaged. Again, get the ridges right, and the rosettes will take care of themselves.

Showing

Young Alys need to have lost their soft baby coat and the new coat needs to have gained sufficient depth before they can be

shown. Often this is not until they are well over 14 weeks. In 3-5 month classes, sows can compete equally with boars, and in fact a 4 month old sow can often carry more substance and look more impressive than her brother. However, this does not last and there are few sows that can hold their own in a competitive 5-8 month class. This situation can be seen as very much to the Aby fancier's advantage - there being no need to make difficult decisions regarding whether or not to risk breeding from a sow. Further (possibly because of their more streamlined shape), difficult births and such conditions as toxemia are rarely experienced. By the time they are adult, the vast majority of sows simply do not have the depth or wealth of coat to make it worthwhile omitting them from the breeding programme. Those few that do have sufficient qualities should definitely be put straight back into the breeding pen in any case!

Stock should not be over shown, particularly when young. As with all cavies, the aim should be to produce a cavy capable of winning as an adult.

To achieve show success, preparation is essential. A periodic bath is required to rid the coat of grease, hayseeds, loose hairs, etc., and particular attention should be paid to keeping the back ridge clean. This will need careful timing as it is likely to put the recipient out of action for a number of weeks; undertaken too near a show it will render the coat too soft. Regular brushing/comb will keep the coat free of loose hairs.

In the run up to the show, in addition to the usual good husbandry to produce the cavy in top condition, training is required to ensure that he shows himself off well on the table and does not become upset or stressed - both conditions that are likely to result in the cavy's coat going fluffly and thus impossible to assess.

Immediately prior to the show, the grease spot will need cleaning and the feet washed. It is quite an art to prevent the rest of the cavy from getting wet!

Conclusion

If you wish to keep a breed of cavy that has a unique and fascinating appearance; that is a challenge to produce and yet responsive to selection in the breeding pen (sometimes!); that is capable of competing in the highest company; where every individual is different; and, most of all, that has plenty of character, then look no further than the Abyssinian.

As regards judging, if nothing else, please assess the class in a positive manner, look for the good points of the Abyssinian and don't dwell on the faults. Remember it is the overall impression that counts.

I will end this article with a quote from Miss Gertrude Armitage Southam (...a thoroughly practical breeder of cavies...), writing in 1888. *'We all know the smooth-coated guinea pig, with its compact little body and short, sleek fur. Many people seem to think that there is too much of the 'rat' about this breed to make it attractive, and certainly one smooth-coated cavy I once possessed so much resembled a rat with its long, lean body and glassy pink eyes that some people could hardly suppress a shudder when it approached them.'*

Comparing them to the smooth coated cavy, Miss Southam describes Abyssinians as *'much handsomer and more imposing-looking cavies, with perhaps just a touch of ferocity about their appearance, slightly disconcerting to the novice, but which is quite inconsistent with their amiable disposition.'*

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