

# The lion that barked

by Gini Denninger

Lowchen, Petit Chien Lion, Kleine Lowehundchen, or Little Lion Dog—all these names apply to one pint-sized breed.

The Lowchen has a rather cloudy past. We know it existed as early as the 14th Century, but of its origins little is known. Today's breeders, when they get together, often ruminate as to which country or what breeds this dog descends from. Once you have lived with one of these mischievous imps, you can't be without one, since the house suddenly seems quieter, emptier, and filled with a little less love.

The Lowchen is considered a rare breed on the North American Continent. It is recognized by the British Kennel Club and is in the Toy Group, and by the FCI, where it is placed in the Companion Dog Group. In the U.S. at rare breed shows, one finds them in the Non-sporting Group.

At first glance the Lowchen resembles a Miniature Poodle, but to the knowledgeable dog person there are very definite differences. The Lowchen is a very sturdy dog for its size. The head is broad and short, with the length of the muzzle equaling the skull piece. The eyes are dark in color and round, but do not protrude. Pigment should be dark, except for brown dogs which are self-colored. Tight scissor bite is preferred, level allowed. The body is well proportioned, square like a Terrier's. In the breed standard an allowance is made for bitches to have extra length. The tail is high set and carried over the back.

When competing in a conformation show the tail must be up at least once when in the ring. The legs should be straight. The Lowchen is noted for its lovely and muscular rear. The dog should be up on its toes, with its feet small and round. The coat has some



length, is wavy, with the texture coarse but not as harsh as a Terrier's. Any colors and variety of patterning are acceptable. The Lowchen does not matt easily; when it does, the matts are fairly easy to brush out provided reasonable care of the coat is taken. The Lowchen do not shed, which is good news to fastidious housekeepers. The preferable size is 12 inches at the shoulders with the weight at 12 lbs. The English Kennel Club standard limits the size to 13 inches, and it enforces that by often making use of the wicket.



To keep its unique look, the Lowchen is clipped in the lion pattern. To achieve the look, one clips the body in almost the same pattern as the Poodle. It seems, however, that the Poodle's pattern was originally copied from the Lowchen clip. Vero Shaw, in 1881, wrote of the Poodle being trimmed to resemble the Canis Leonis (Lowchen), which could be a blow to Poodle enthusiasts. The furnishings are left absolutely natural, no trimming, just brushed and flowing.

Because of the careful breeding programs followed by those involved in the breed, there are relatively few health or temperament problems at this point. Most breeders are discarding from their already limited gene

pools any dogs known or thought to be carrying undesirable genes. Because we are able to pinpoint fairly easily where problems are arising, the hope is that the Lowchen will continue to be a healthy breed, free from the problems that plague small breeds.

The Lowchen is said to stem from the same family tree as the Bichon Frise (which is actually the modern version of the now extinct Tenerife), Poodle, Bolognese, Barbet (now also extinct), and Havanese. Possibly some Terriers or Miniature Pinschers lurk in the background. They are known to have lived in Germany, France, and around the Mediterranean. In 1840 Richard Cope wrote about a dog existing in Malta that he thought was the Lowchen. He described it as feeble, timid, and inactive. That is a far cry from the Lowchen of today. Up to the mid-1800s a large version of the Lowchen existed. This dog closely resembled the lion in stature and appearance. It is extinct, and little is known about the breed.

The Lowchen was a favorite of royalty. It can be found in many works of art stemming from the middle ages. Many old churches on the Continent contain tombs of knights with Lowchen carved at their feet. According to legend, if a knight died in battle, he was buried with a lion carved at his feet; if he died a peace-time death, a Lowchen was carved at his feet instead. Both represent valor and bravery.

Another legend describes why the Lowchen is clipped in such a fashion. They were favorites of the ladies at court and were in very popular use as "hot water bottles". The Lowchen was also carried around in the ladies' voluminous sleeves, much like the royal Pekingese was in China. Often when one says "Little Lion Dog" people confuse the breed with the eastern dogs



that are nicknamed "lion dogs" due to their renowned courage.

The beautiful Duchess of Alba favored this breed, and many oils done of her include a member of this breed. One of the most famous is the 1795 portrait by Goya, who included Lowchen in many of his works. German artist Albrecht Durer also grew to love the breed and included it in many of his woodcutting designs. More examples of the Lowchen in art are the tapestry, "The Lady and the Unicorn", which is housed in France's Cluny Museum, and the oil portrait, "Madonna and Child with a Multitude of Animals".



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German artist Lucas Granack the Eldest did two complimentary portraits, one of Heinrich the Holy, the other of Katerna von Mecklenburg. At Heinrich's feet is a sighthound resembling a Borzoi, and Katerna has a Lowchen at her feet with, curiously enough, cropped ears.

As the remaining royalty of the middle ages lost favor or died out, so did the Lowchen. The breed's existence was so closely linked with the ruling class that it was near extinction before WW I. A. M. de Connick of Dieghem is documented to have shown the dog before the first World War with great success. But nothing was heard of him afterward. The breed was in existence in limited numbers until WW II, during which it was closest to extinction. What breeders there were lost either their lives or their dogs because of enemy soldiers, while others, fleeing invaders, turned their dogs out into the streets.

During this time of social upheaval, an elderly Belgian woman, Madame Bennart, devoted herself to finding what good examples of the breed were left in hopes of saving it. She was an unusual woman who was never seen out in public without her high buttoned boots, and was rarely photographed, with or without her dogs. Upon her death she left her kennel to DVM Hans Richart of Germany. He carried on the work Madame Bennart had started.

Interest in the breed grew, and it was registered with FCI, with France as the country of origin. They were imported into Great Britain in the late 1960s by Mrs. Stenning of Cherrycourt Kennels, quickly followed by Mrs. Banks of Cluneen Kennels. A breed registry was stated in 1971. The breed became popular rather quickly, with recognition by the British Kennel Club coming in 1976. The first show at which the Lowchen were eligible to compete for challenge certificates was Crufts '76.

On the tour to Crufts in 1971 were Mr. and Mrs. Charles Cook. They were

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"The Little Viking Dog"

**Little Lions**

(Continued from page 39)

quite taken with the Lowchen (which were not eligible at that time for challenge certificates), and managed to talk Mrs. Banks into parting with three puppies. As the plane returned from Crufts, the pilot radioed ahead to New York City that he had a planeload of dog lovers and dogs, including a "first": the first Lowchen that would touch American soil. So exciting and unique was the idea that when the plane touched down the tarmac was filled with news reporters representing both television and press. The Cooks were careful to see to it that the dogs were carried out in their order of birth—Cluneen Dana first, followed by Cluneen Erinna, then Cluneen Fergus. Mrs. Jane Cook described that moment as being overwhelming. Try to imagine holding three squirming puppies and then having to speak to the press!

Bob and Carol Yhlen of New Jersey saw the article about the landing in the *New York Times* and were intrigued. Bob managed to track down the Cooks and was allowed to buy Cluneen Dana, which was the start of the Lowe-Ray Kennels. Leslie Sammuels-Healy, who had gone to live in England in the '60s, returned to the U.S. and settled in Texas. She brought with her Pepperland Kennels, which has been in Lowchen since 1973. Another breeder of note is Dorothy Goodale of Colorado. She imported Leon v.d. Drei Lowen, who has sired some very top quality dogs, including multiple Best in Show dog LLCA Ch. Berdot's Luke Sky Walker, who resides at Liz Vargo's Destiny Kennels.

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The majority of the Lowchen are located on the east coast, in Texas, Michigan, and Ohio, with interest in the breed spreading to California. There have been reports that there is someone in California who, unfortunately, is crossing Lhasa and Maltese and selling them as Lowchen. Most of the Lowchen in this country descend from the v.d. 3 Lowen, Cluneeen, or Siewlee stock within two to three generations.

The Little Lion Dog Club of America was started in 1976 by Mr. and Mrs. Cook and Mr. and Mrs. Yhlen. The registry is held by the Yhlens, who print the registration certificates on stock certificate paper. A point system devised by Liz Hendricks-Vargs and Bob Yhlen was instituted for the LLDCA in 1984. There are eight Champions in the U.S. at this time, with more on the way. At this time there are fewer than 400 dogs registered with The Little Lion Dog Club of America. In 1960 and 1973 the breed was listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the world's rarest breed. They showed up again in 1979 when International Champion Cluneeen Adam Adamant was listed as the world's most expensive dog, when his owners turned down a large offer.

It is interesting that the breed has not yet been discovered by the American public; Lowchen have been listed in many dog books, and were represented by Lowe-Ray's Crickett in a spread on rare breeds done by *Life Magazine* in January 1979. The cover blurb was "Dogs so rare, six of man's most unusual best friends", and the article was titled: "Dogs you never saw before". The breed is presented at rare breed shows on a consistent basis and does a large portion of winning, considering the numbers shown.

These surprisingly robust and sturdy dogs are out-going, happy, and become very attached to their owners. Because of their high intelligence and willingness to please, they do well in obedience. Leslie Healy's 11-year-old Rossglen Charlie Brown at Pepperland completed his Championship with the last of three five-point majors, and also earned a leg to his CD in obedience the same day in 60-mph winds! To say this is an active breed is an understatement. They are not meant to be coddled. They like excitement and are always first on the scene.

For more information on the breed, contact the Little Lion Dog Club of America, 6 Homestead Circle, San Angelo, TX 76905. □