

# Royal Dog Of Madagascar

## THE HISTORY OF THE COTON de TULEAR

By Amy Fernandez



AKC exhibitors have become accustomed to new breeds popping up in the group lineups. In many respects, their presence represents a refreshing turnaround from AKC's traditional begrudging reluctance to admit new breeds. They didn't do it very often, and when they did, the process was generally a chaotic affair. Over the years, breeds have been admitted to the studbook sans viable gene pools, written standards, or organized clubs. The detriment of various errors and omissions only became apparent in retrospect. AKC's Jack Russell/Russell Terrier debacle epitomized the pitfalls of premature recognition.

Generally, the problems are somewhat less colorful than accidentally mixing two breeds in the studbook. But until recently, the ordeal has not been characterized by careful forethought and planning. Over the past decade, AKC has been industriously repaving that rough road to recognition. The process has become far more efficient and standardized, and breeds are scrutinized every step of the way to AKC competition.

Despite this micromanagement to ensure their readiness, new breeds invariably arrive with plenty of unresolved issues hindering their success. Typical disadvantages include buggy breed standards, genetic pitfalls, and mismanaged parent clubs. But the recent arrival of the Coton de Tulear in the Non-Sporting Group

on July 2 has introduced a new twist to the perpetual drama of purebred dogs.

American fanciers may consider the Royal Dog of Madagascar an obscure breed. In fact, it has thrived as a purebred for almost 50 years. "The hardcore reality is that the Coton de Tulear is not rare," Pat Enright should know. She's bred and shown Coton under the Diamondkrest prefix for 15 years. She achieved her first big success with the breed back in its rare breed days, campaigning her Intl. Ch. Celestine Jenny's Gem. His record of over 80 consecutive group wins made him the breed's first breakout star as an all breed competitor.

She admits that his national success exacerbated an existing problem in the breed. "My mentor, Diane Sandberg, wasn't loved by many. She was outspoken and she knew what she was doing. In many ways, she was ahead of her time in the Coton community. She bred two litters a year and considered that too much. But the demand was so high back in the 1990s. For many breeders it had become a business, 10-20 litters a year wasn't unusual."

The modern dog world's love affair with the Coton got its start in France via the country's longstanding international bond with Madagascar which dates back to the mid-1600s. The French introduced the Coton to Western Europe and they are also credited



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with introducing the original Bichon stock that contributed substantially to the Coton's development.

This is one of the few undisputed facts of Coton history. Although it's acknowledged as Madagascar's national dog, most aspects of its heritage remain a mystery. Theories and opinions abound regarding the Coton's evolution, but no documentation exists to verify most of these strongly held beliefs. That's been an ongoing source of conflict throughout Enright's long tenure in the breed. Regardless of how it came to be, she emphasizes one key point, "The Coton is not another little, white, fluffy dog. This is a hardy, rustic breed. In Madagascar their coats were twisted, matted, and protective. They weren't pretty, but they were very functional. For almost 200 years these little dogs survived in that rough environment. It made them tough and versatile. They are survivors with a high prey drive and pronounced feral qualities."

Like every other part of its history, it's impossible to gauge the degree of natural or artificial selective pressures that guided 400 generations Coton development in Madagascar - except for genetic isolation. Situated in the Indian Ocean off the eastern coast of southern Africa, Madagascar separated from the mainland 65 million years ago and countless unique species of lemurs, shrews, bats and rodents evolved on the island. Even long-extinct species like Madagascar's pigmy hippos shared one common denominator - small size. Survival prospects for a small feral dog in this environment would have been reasonable.

Dogs arrived with the first human inhabitants 2000 years ago. By the time Europeans staked a claim in Madagascar in 1500, the island sustained a population based on Asian and African dogs. By the mid-1600s international trade cartels like the French East India Company began establishing settlements on the island. Thanks to its isolated location, inviting coastal ports, fresh water, and hospitable inhabitants, the world's fourth largest island also became its largest outlaw camp. Madagascar remained a magnet for fugitives, black market traders, and generally colorful characters until the 18th century.

Over the centuries, both good and bad fortune landed an eclectic mixture of international travelers on Madagascar, a fact reflected in the genetic heritage of native Malagasy inhabitants and the island's canine gene pool. The breed is named for Tulear, a city marked by its long history of failed settlements thanks to the usual welcome wagon of disease, local hostilities, and environmental challenges. Those unfortunate conditions have been the basis of



thriving feral dog populations worldwide that are constantly fortified by an ongoing supply of abandoned purebreds. This global canine mashup formed the Coton de Tulear's foundation.

The breed's documented history commenced around 1890 when Madagascar became a French protectorate - an event that precisely coincided with Europe's blossoming mania for purebreds - and newfound fascination with rare, exotic breeds. Cotons began trickling into France in the late 1940s when political upheaval triggered a mass exodus of French residents from Madagascar. As the country transitioned to an independent nation during the 1950s and '60s most French inhabitants returned home, bringing their beloved Cotons. Even today, Madagascar's French population numbers approximately 124,000.

Considering this longstanding link, it's not uprising that France became the Coton's first purebred stronghold. The breed was recognized by the French Société Canine Centrale (SCC) in 1970 and accepted by FCI two years later. This milestone also introduced the first formal interpretation of type. As Enright explains, it wasn't everyone's cup of tea.

"The FCI standard was based on the Malagasy standard with one critical difference; they low-

ered the weight limit to 13.2 pounds. They were looking at marketability, so they wanted the breed to be light and portable." She confirms that predictable problems arose as breeders attempted to merge the standard's divergent demands of small size and robust substance. "Many FCI judges ignored the dq and put up dogs that exceeded that weight limit. It's an ongoing problem."

However, that complication didn't compromise the Coton's success. The breed was soon well-established in France. From there, interest quickly spread to neighboring Belgium and Italy. In France, the standard is currently managed by the *Club Du Chihuahua, Du Coton De Tulear, et Des Exotiques*. Founded in 1953, it also represents the Chihuahua, Chinese Crested, Xolo, and Peruvian. According to the CCCE, France registers approximately 2000 Cotons annually.

But France wasn't the Coton's only brand new niche. In 1975 an American biologist, Robert J. Russell, introduced the breed to America. "Jay Russell claims he is the father of the breed." Enright explains, "He lived in Madagascar for two years studying lemurs and he has an amazing amount of information about Co-



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tons." At that time, the Malagasy government prohibited their exportation as part of its efforts to protect native fauna. "He circumvented normal channels by smuggling what he thought were Cotons into the country."

Russell's contraband Cotons became the foundation stock of North America's first Coton breeding program, Oakshade Kennel in Marlton, New Jersey. In 1976 he established a private American registry and a national club, the Coton de Tulear Club of America. Enright explains that he remains an authoritative presence in the breed. "He was always opposed to AKC recognition. He has made it a mission to say no to AKC and he has a substantial following within the breed. To them, his word is final."

But it wasn't long before he had competition. By the mid-1980s Coton breeding programs based on FCI-documented stock thrived all over Europe and dogs from multiple sources started to be imported to America. Needless to say, their arrival wasn't invariably welcomed by breeders who had founded American lines with Madagascar stock a decade earlier. In part, the friction stemmed from the fact that these European imports had the advantage of official documentation and credibility in the organized dog world.

Coton stock had been registered in Madagascar since 1968, but it remained inaccessible because of the government's export embargo. Unfortunately, purebred dogs and lemurs require somewhat different management. Dwindling incentive to document, register, or maintain the breed once again left Coton fending for itself in its native land. By the time the Malagasy government lifted the embargo in 1988 there wasn't much left to export. Although Russell's undocumented stock had arrived illegally, it ensured the continuation of bloodlines that subsequently deteriorated in Madagascar. That fact reinforced the protectionist mentality that pervaded the Coton fancy.

Enright describes the escalating mess as outright war by the 1990s. "Less than a month after I started in Cotons I started to notice all the underlying controversy. Anyone who disagreed simply picked up their toys and started a new club to promote their agenda. At one point there were seven Coton clubs in the U.S. It was ridiculous!" Along with a host of minor controversies, the overriding issue was the question of AKC recognition. "When I got into the breed I understood that the club was headed towards AKC recognition. I knew the breed needed this and I was all for it from the



get-go." She admits that she was blindsided by the vehement opposition.

"I call it the mouse that roared. Most of it came from a small, very opinionated group determined to promote a narrow biased agenda.



They used the usual scare tactics to discourage the community from pursuing AKC recognition. The majority of members came into the breed as pet owners. They were novices in many ways and their lack of experience made them easy to influence." A numerically smaller breed could never have sustained the inevitable factionalism that resulted from these conflicting agendas and warring groups. But this riotous state characterized the Coton world for decades.

New breeds entering AKC usually contend with some discord within the ranks. However, that attitude often loses momentum as clubs confront dreadful tasks like formulating an AKC standard and designing educational presentations. That stuff never happens without plenty of fights, but it also brings the realization that cooperation is essential in order to promote a clear ideal for their breed. But teamwork has definitely not been a conventional routine within the Coton community. Moreover, its sheer size minimizes any impending sense of urgency to foster a cooperative mentality.

Even so, Enright firmly believes that the Coton has a bright future in AKC. "The breed has eight champions in less than two months. Right now, most of the entries are coming from a few big kennels. But they are trying to do the right thing by getting the breed out there." She admits that judges' education is a work in progress and the club could be doing more to promote correct type. "I'm not a pessimist by nature. Coming out of the gate, any standard will have glitches. But overall, the Coton standard will encourage more realistic breeding for correct type. The club eliminated the 13.2 pound dq and set the ideal weight at 15 pounds. That was a triumph. Judges will be able to put up more substantial dogs and breeders will be able to focus more attention on consistent size, and correct proportion, bone and substance."

Most importantly, she believes that the breed's newfound credibility will open doors. AKC recognition puts the Coton in a much better position to attract experienced, knowledgeable people. "Back in 2000, Annie Clark told me that people will make or break your breed, not AKC. They are going to come into Cotons without preconceived ideas or political allegiance. And they will be the saving grace of this breed."