

EXPANDING OUR GENE POOL

PRESERVING THE FUTURE, ENLISTING THE PAST

An ancient landrace breed known to have existed as early as 800 AD, the Lhasa Apso is one of the ten most closely related modern breeds to the ancestral wolf, according to the study "Genetic Structure of the Purebred Dog" published in Science magazine, May 2004. This hardy mountain canine developed in the heart of the Himalayas with very little purposeful selection. As such, the Lhasa Apso is a significant cultural artifact of Tibet, shaped by a combination of the remote, unforgiving environment and the Tibetan people's reverence for all living beings, particularly their dogs. In 1842, a British naturalist made a sketch of two small coated Tibetan dogs and wrote the following: "Tame dogs abound and are much praised by the men for guarding their flocks and herds and houses, and by the women for petting...For the former purpose the Tibetan Mastiff is used...The ladies dogs are Poodles or Terriers, many of which are pretty and have long soft hair."

Before the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, it was not unusual to find Lhasa Apsos in monasteries and villages throughout Tibet, faithfully fulfilling their role as a companion and sentinel.

What is a landrace and why is the Lhasa Apso a landrace?

A landrace is a recognizable breed of dog that develops according to the dictates of its environment and function rather than purposeful selection. A landrace will tend to have more variety than a breed purposefully selected for physical traits. In domesticated dogs, the Border Collie is a landrace. Several different varieties of Border Collie have developed in the counties along the Scottish-English border depending on what sort of sheep were being worked – slower lowland sheep or flighty highland varieties. But all the varieties, still exemplified today in the differences between the so-called "show lines" and "herding lines," shared the common traits of having a strong "eye" to control the sheep and the intelligence and stamina to flank and gather them at a great distance from the shepherd.

The Lhasa Apso is likewise a landrace because the native mountain environment dictated its overall form and function, particularly the breed's weather-proof coat and body shape for lung capacity as well as its canny survival skills and overall hardiness, while variations of color, size and head type existed from town to town and valley to valley. Early British dog fanciers remarked on the variation within the breed, but to Tibetans, the differences that Westerners observed were not meaningful. All small, long-haired native companion dogs were considered to be the same breed, the *apso seng-kyi*.

Officially recognized by the AKC in 1935, Lhasa Apso lines in the United States were developed from a foundation of 21 dogs. While this may sound like a large number, only six (6) of these founders were direct imports from Tibet. Four imports from the British Isles in the 1950s and 1960s were also from Tibetan strains. Seven founders were imported to North America directly from China and four other early imports from the United Kingdom were of Chinese origin. While the Tibetan ancestry of these Chinese dogs is acknowledged, the number of generations removed from their region of origin and the landrace is unknown.

Although the total number of Lhasa Apso foundation stock may seem high, many of the dogs were closely related. The dogs imported directly from Tibet to the United States came from one source, the Dalai Lama. Only one of the three females brought to the U.S. from Tibet contributed to the gene pool. U.S. breeders continue to adhere to a standard describing the landrace mountain breed of Tibet. Incorporating fresh genes into this mix, from dogs imported directly from the region of origin will help today's breeders maintain the landrace characteristics that are vital to the breed:

weather-proof coat, body shape for lung capacity, adequate nose leather, hardy mountain constitution and vigor.

The Lhasa Apso is a relatively healthy breed, but several serious heritable issues are common – renal dysplasia (RD), environmental allergies, autoimmune disorders, liver shunt, retained testicles and keratoconjunctivitis sicca (KCS, a/k/a “dry eye”). Forty years ago cancer in the breed was unheard of, today it is increasingly common. Forty to fifty years ago, Lhasa Apsos generally lived into their mid-teens before showing any signs of aging. The longest lived Lhasa Apso on record was twenty-seven years old. Today, a healthy fifteen-year old Lhasa Apso is the exception rather than the rule. Breeders are experiencing smaller litters, resorbed litters and bitches that fail to conceive. As the gene pool continues to decline, these issues will increase throughout the breed.

With the Chinese takeover of the government of Tibet in 1959, there has been a systematic and methodical genocide of the native Tibetans, their culture and their history. Favored for their small size and used as sentinels and companions by Buddhist monks and laymen alike, the Lhasa Apso was an integral part of Tibetan life prior to the Chinese invasion. Indeed, until very recently, semi-feral Apso dogs were living on their own in the streets of Lhasa and being fed by the local residents. In 2002, the Chinese began killing off these dogs and imposing licensing requirements on pets. With below poverty-level incomes, the imposition of a licensing fee is beyond most owners’ means. Given the political climate and influx of Han Chinese, it is very unlikely that the breed can survive in its native homeland. While Apsos can be found in Tibet, they are few and far between with many only in isolated pockets. Time is of the essence and the window of opportunity is quickly fading in terms of availability in Tibet and integrating them into Western breeding programs.

In recent years, AKC has allowed gene pool expansion of the Saluki, Basenji and, most recently and relevantly, the American Tibetan Mastiff Association. The Native Stock Committee has developed a two-pronged approach incorporating pieces from other breeds successful in opening the AKC Studbook. A petition, after approval from ALAC’s board, will be submitted to AKC asking permission for the general membership’s vote on the two-pronged approach. All dogs entering the AKC Studbook will enter with full three-generation pedigrees, as demonstrated on the handout. Like the American Tibetan Mastiff Association, dogs without full three-generation pedigrees will be recorded with AKC FSS[®], each generation undergoing the ALAC Critique Process before being recorded.

The Native Stock Committee advocates opening the studbook to region-of-origin Lhasa Apsos through a two-pronged approach:

- Allow the current breeding stock within the Gompa Lhasa Apso Preservation Program, with intact United Kennel Club pedigrees, full AKC registration.
- Allow use of the AKC Foundation Stock Service[®] (FSS) to record region-of-origin Lhasa Apsos.

The Foundation Stock Service[®] was created by AKC as a record-keeping service, traditionally used by rare breeds working towards full AKC recognition. Recently, AKC has allowed the American Tibetan Mastiff Association use of FSS[®] to record dogs without a full three-generation pedigree. The procedures for recording involve cooperation between FSS[®] and the parent club’s Registrar. The owner will submit the following to the NSC Registrar:

- A completed AKC FSS[®] Recordation Application Form.
- Five color photographs (head with eyes visible, left side, right side, front and rear).

- Copies of import/export documentation (if imported).
- Copy of DNA profile.
- Copy of microchip identification.
- A pedigree extended as far back as known.
- Copies of all registration certificates (if any).
- Critique Process fee.

After the above is received by the NSC Registrar, a Critique Case Number (CCN) is assigned. The owner will receive a list of qualified Critiquers and may then arrange for the three necessary critiques. Upon receipt of three Critique Forms, either all judging the dog to be a pure-bred Lhasa Apso or upon receipt of approval by the Board of Directors of ALAC, and receipt of a check payable to AKC for FSS[®] Application, the ALAC NSC Registrar will promptly forward the FSS[®] Application, photographs, supporting documents and a letter confirming that the Lhasa Apso has been found to be a pure-bred Lhasa Apso, to AKC FSS[®] for recordation.

Few breeds recognized by the AKC, notably the Basenji, Saluki and Tibetan Mastiff have viable native populations. Cooperation between AKC and these parent clubs is progressive and exciting.