

Seeking perfection

Imagine the future

Try to imagine a final at On Safari in 2054... the rosette for the best Bengal goes to an absolutely friendly and fertile F6 boy who looks just like Amirage, the ALC pictured here underneath. Our On Safari winner will have a phenomenal head, huge nocturnal eyes, a totally horizontal pattern with extreme contrast, an absolutely white tummy, a long body and a great rosetted tail. Perhaps his coat is even clearer than Amirage's and he might be glittered. Wouldn't we all be proud to show such a cat? Wouldn't we all be happy to have such a stud in our breeding program?



Amirage

In this article we will write about the standard of the SBT Bengals and the progress of the breed. However, most pictures show ALCs (or SBT of 2054). Why? We are convinced that one should always keep in his mind the final goal of our efforts. When we evaluate a Bengal we shouldn't compare him to what we already have but to what we really want to achieve. Ernesto Che Guevara once said: "Let's be realistic and try to reach the impossible". This could very well be the motto for this article, but also for our breeding program.

The Bengal breed is unique within the cat fancy because, unlike all the other breeds, we can take a picture of our ideal cat. We can look at the future. The Bengal standard is not the product of our imagination; it's more or less an accurate description of the Asian Leopard Cat. All the Bengal breeders want to achieve the same goal and the TICA standard gives a very simple general description of the "ideal" representative of the breed: "The goal of the Bengal

breeding program is to create a domestic cat which has physical features distinctive to the small forest-dwelling wild cats, and with the loving, dependable temperament of the domestic cat.” Not all the breeders may agree on what is the best way to achieve this goal. However there can’t be any doubt about the final goal and basically a judge should always keep these two things in his mind when judging a Bengal: domestic behaviour and wild look.

The Temperament

From the 4th generation on, the Bengal is no longer considered as a hybrid, and must necessarily have a loving and affectionate character – even in the show hall. If someone exhibits an extremely shy, nervous, aggressive or vocal Bengal, then this person only contributes to perpetuate the wrong ideas about our breed, which unfortunately are still very common.

The TICA rules states the following: “Temperament must be unchallenging; any sign of definite challenge shall disqualify.” We all know that the behaviour of any cat is due both to genetics and to the socialisation of the kittens. In the last ten years most Bengal breeders have significantly improved the temperament of the cats they show – unfortunately not all of them. Some cats are very friendly at home but do not like the show hall. As an exhibitor I should accept this fact: it is unethical to campaign a cat that does not feel comfortable while being judged and therefore complains. It’s even worse if somebody tries to calm the cat with drugs. I would wish the judges to be far more severe towards these kinds of troubles. A judge who is unable to handle a cat (of whatever breed) should not be ridiculed but the owner should carry his responsibility towards the cat and the breed as a whole. Only unworthy, shortsighted breeders can be willing to keep on working with lines developing behavioural disorders.

What is the “Wild Look”?

It seems to be so easy: just take the picture of a wild cat and compare it with what we have in the show ring... In reality things are more difficult and complex: The standard asks us to breed for physical features that are distinctive to a “small forest-dwelling wild cat”.

What is a “small forest-dwelling wild cat”? It could be Asian Leopard Cat, a Margay, an Ocelot or a Jaguar or a Leopard. In the first years there was a long discussion among breeders wanting to create a miniature Leopard and others breeding for the look of the Asian Leopard Cat. Nowadays most breeders agree that we should move towards the Asian Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*), the wild ancestor of our Bengals. The reason why the standard does not name the Asian Leopard Cat is because we accept other patterns and colours than the Brown Spotted Tabbies (the Marbled, the Seal-Lynx Pointed, the Seal-Mink, the Seal-Sepia and the Silvers) and because of political pressures asking us to remove any direct reference to the ALC.

As long as the Bengals in the show ring still look so domestic, it seems ridiculous to argue about which small forest-dwelling cat or which subspecies of the ALC should inspire our efforts. Our standard resumes the whole discussion: “judges shall give special merit to those characteristics in the appearance of the Bengal which are distinct from those found in other domestic cat breeds.”



Head, body and pattern of an ALC.

In general the wild look is created by two distinctive features. Type (head and body) and pattern are the two main constituents of the wild look we are seeking, and tomorrow's Bengal cats will necessarily have to excel in both elements. Both the breeders and the judges should keep in their mind that type (head and body) is worth 65 points in the TICA standard whereas colour and pattern is only worth 35 points. So the aim of a Bengal breeder can never be to produce a nicely rosetted cat with a cobby body and a round face.

What should we look for in a Bengal's head?

Generally, the first impression the judge gets when he approaches the cage is determined by the head. Ideally, the cat may not at all resemble a domestic cat and must, aesthetically, be as far removed from any other cat breed as possible. The following front views of the Asian Leopard Cat give an idea of the direction the Bengal breed is heading towards.



Front views of ALCs.

There are several distinctive features that help a head towards the wild look of an Asian Leopard Cat: the size of the eyes, position of the eyes, prominent muzzle and chin, the width of the nose bridge, the length of the forehead as well its egg-shape in profile (foreskull and backskull), the straight profile between nose tip and eyes, the vertical alignment of the forehead markings, the small and rounded ears, position of the ears as well as the roundness between them. Taking the head as a whole, an ideal Bengal head is a lot smaller than one would expect an average head to be.



Notice how small the ALC head is compared to his body.

The shape of the head

The standard describes the shape of the ideal Bengal head with these words: “Broad modified wedge with rounded contours. Longer than it is wide. (...) The skull behind the ears makes a gentle curve and flows into the neck.” This shape is unique in the cat world and very far removed from the roundness demanded in many breeds or from the long, pointy heads of, for example, the Oriental Shorthairs. The heads, compared to other cat breeds, are somewhat flatter, meaning that the distance between the forehead and the jaw is smaller, again giving prominence to the length of the head.



The shape of an ALC head.

But because the round heads are generally regarded as “cute” and “adorable” by most lay people, Bengal breeders find that out of their litters the ones with the worst Bengal heads, i.e. the ones that are roundest, get chosen first as pets.

Eyes

The eyes should be very far apart and large, because the “forest-dwelling wild cat” is a nocturnal animal and necessarily needs its big eyes. They are set very low compared to what we are used to seeing in the domestic cat. The shape of the eyes should not be excessively round as this again would remind us of the domestic cat. We prefer a more oval shape in the Bengals eyes.



Huge nocturnal eyes (picture OBobtor)

The colour ideally would be brown to yellow. However, what we see today is mostly green. As with many other features, again the Bengal breeder's energy is focussed on producing an eye colour far removed from the aspirations of breeders of other cat breeds. Most breeds attempt to produce a catching eye colour. Bengal breeders focus on imitating an animal whose survival depends on its ability to blend into nature.

Muzzle and chin

The "small forest-dwelling cat" is predator and thus needs to have a strong chin. Personally, I believe that the chin is one of the most important features to determine the wild look and it adds balance to the shape of the head. On the other hand, most Asian Leopard Cats don't have an excessively prominent muzzle.



The ALC head: a strong chin, a wide nose bridge but not a huge muzzle.

The last couple of years have featured cats in the show ring with huge whisker pads but very little chin which gives the cats a rather peculiar look that isn't wild looking at all.

Width of the nose bridge

As mentioned above, the ALC's eyes are set very far apart. This leaves room for a very prominent nose bridge. Many of the Bengals shown today still have their eyes far too closely together giving them a domestic look. This is particularly true when this trait is combined with a rounded face.

Length of the forehead, shape of for- and backskull

The low positioning of the eyes as well as the fair length of the head leaves room for a prominent forehead. The forehead should never be straight (as in an Ocicat or in a Russian Blue), but be slightly curved towards the backskull giving the top of the head a nice egg shape.



ALC head with a rounded forehead and a nice backskull.

The markings on the forehead are a great challenge for the Bengal breeders, as we are dealing with a Tabby which traditionally has the Tabby-M markings on the forehead. The Asian Leopard Cat, however, has nice vertical markings. Such markings are extremely seldom, but not impossible to find in SBTs.



Vertical markings instead of a Tabby M.

The ears

Not all the Asian Leopard Cats have exactly the same shape and positioning of ears, depending on the subspecies and in what climate they live in. But compared to all the SBTs we are seeing, their ears are smaller, rounder and set lower. I believe that next to focussing on getting rid of the round faces, the ears are the next big fault that today's Bengals breeders must tackle. They have a big influence on the look of the cat, but they are not easy to work on. Normally, it takes several generations to get rid of unwanted big and pointy ears.

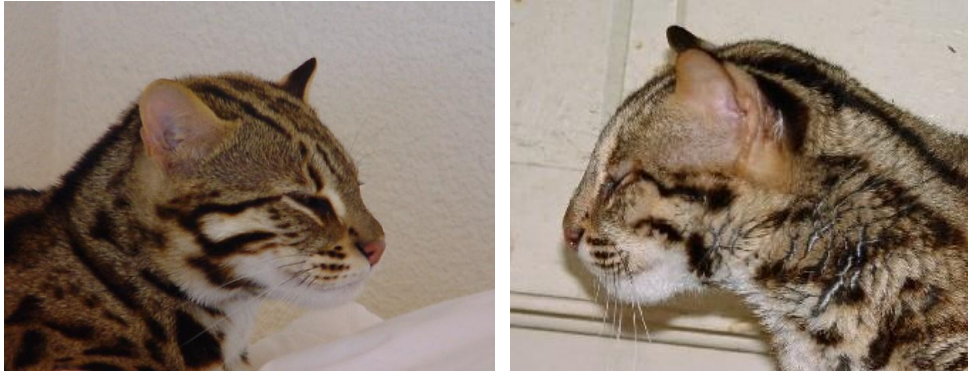


Notice how rounded the ears are and how low they are set in this 3 months old ALC kitten.

The area between the ears should not only curve in profile but also in frontal view. This means that there should be a certain doming to the head.

The straight profile

The TICA standard asks for “a very slight, to nearly straight, concave curve” in the profile and this is a good description of what the ALC profile looks like. We certainly don't want a visible dip in the nose as demanded in the Main Coon standard. On the other hand, I believe that in the last years the straight profile got a too dominant position becoming sometimes synonymous with the wild look. It is true that Bengal breeders seek a straighter profile but it should not become as pronounced as in some other breeds where the straight profile ends in a distinctive angle to the forehead. The standard asks that the “curve of the forehead should flow into the bridge of the nose with no break”. If we keep that in our mind, the Bengal head will always stay clearly distinguishable from an Ocicat head. Unfortunately nowadays this is not always the case. Judges should be alert to the fact that these two breeds should not become interchangeable (the same thing goes for the rosetted Ocicats).



ALCs do have an almost straight profile.



The profile of a three months old ALC kitten.

What should we look for in the body?

There are a number of features to look out for in a Bengal body: the toning, the length, the neck and the tail. The judge should be aware of the fact that a Bengal should imitate a hunter that is able to pursue its prey fast and jump far and high.

The body characteristics in general

The body is the next thing that a judge gets a feel for when he lifts the Bengal out of the cage. It has to be strong, muscular, athletic with a nice solid feel to it. Often the weight of a Bengal can be quite surprising considering how slender it looks. A lot of judges place too much importance on size and weight instead of toning and hardness. The standard asks for an

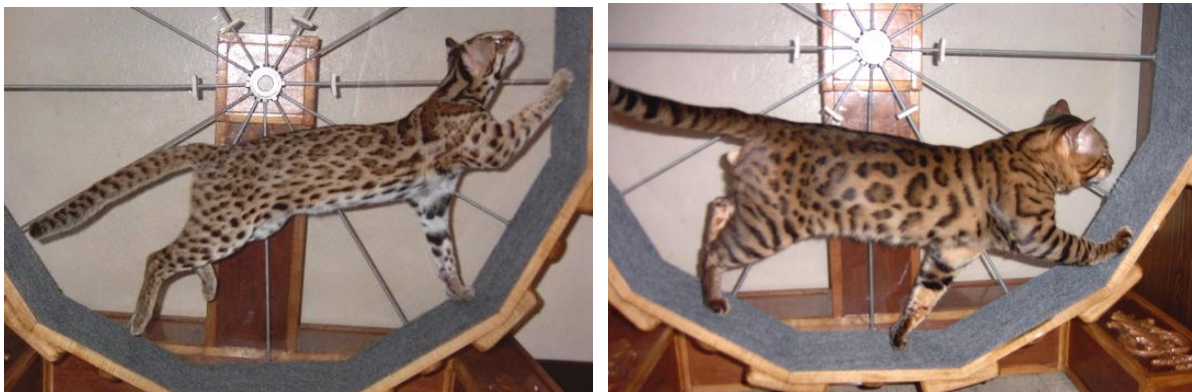
athletic body. What does that really mean? Thinking of a human being, both a heavy-weight boxer as well as a long distance runner have an athletic body. We should keep this in mind whilst judging a Bengal as this means that we can only use the body of the ALC as guidance as to what “athletic” might really mean. The Asian Leopard Cat has a slender and amazingly long body, but is not a large cat. Unfortunately, some judges still tend to choose huge, cobby males with a higher body fat index before smaller cats who in fact have the wanted toning, confusing heaviness with athleticism. The kind of body a judge should be looking for can well be found in a female as easily as in a male. Therefore, there is no reason for the tendency to choose males before females.



The ALC has a slender and amazingly long body.

The length of the body

Bengals should have a long body. This stems from the fact that the Asian Leopard Cat has an extra vertebra compared to the domestic cat. We know that there is a very small number of SBTs that have inherited this particularity from their ancestors. However, this is not a necessity to length as there are numerous Bengals with the domestic amount of vertebrae and a nice long body. The length adds a lot to the wild look as it makes the movements more gracious and elegant, again imitating the wild cat.



An ALC and a SBT in the exercise wheel: there is a significant difference in the body shape.

The neck

Another feature adding to the elegance of the Bengal cat is the length of the neck. It should be fairly long and muscular. This also gives the male cat an advantage as the stud jowls tend to look less prominent that way (wild cats don't develop stud jowls).

The tail

The next feature adding to the elegance and grace of movement is the tail. It contributes a lot to the balance of the cat. In Bengals, it must be similar to that of the ALC: not too long, but very thick and it should be carried low. Breeders get usually very excited when they find in their litters a kitten with a rosetted tail – how many years will it take to breed an SBT that has two rows of clearly defined rosettes on his tail? As all the Brown Tabbies, the Bengals need to have a black tip to its tail and the tip should be nicely rounded.



This tail really helps to keep the balance while climbing on trees and jumping.

What should we look for in the pattern?

Talking about the colour and pattern of a Bengal, there are a couple of points to look out for: the texture, colouring, pattern and the whited tummies.

The texture

The standard asks for short and dense coat: “dense and luxurious, close-lying, unusually soft and silky to the touch.” Those among us who had the pleasure of touching an ALC know that the feeling is quite unique and different to any domestic cat. I think the adjectives “short” and “dense” best describe the texture of an ALC coat. “Close-lying”, “soft” and “silky” corresponds to what we currently see in the show hall and to what we refer to when we talk about an SBT with excellent coat quality. This is also unique, but different to the ALC coat.



The ALC Coat is not so close-lying and silky.

Judges often say they should be able to recognize a Bengal with their eyes closed, simply by touching the cat – no other breed seems to have such a smooth coat. Some of the winning Bengals you can see in show rings have lost this quality. Whilst focussing on wild type, certain catteries have introduced in their breeding programs cats with a lower quality of texture.

One of the problems arising in the context of texture is the so-called ticking. At this point it should be mentioned that the word ticking is not used in its original meaning by Bengal breeders. Being a Tabby, of course all Bengal cats are genetically ticked. However, Bengal breeders speak of a clear-coated cat when the individual hair of the cat contains only few different and large bands of colour and when the undercoat has no greyish tinge. Usually, clear-coated cats with a good quality of coat are glittered. Glittering means that the outmost tip of the individual hair contains no colour. This is beautiful, spectacular and unique to this breed. The standard says that the “coat may be glittered or not glittered, with neither type to be given preference”. This indifference can be explained because the golden glitter is caused by a recessive gene, which was introduced in the breed by domestic cats. Therefore the golden glitter adds nothing to the wild look of a Bengal. A judge has to know that, according to the standard, there is no preference between a clear-coated and a ticked cat. But he should be aware that it takes several generations to eliminate ticking out of a line. Therefore, it is just as difficult to breed for a good head as for a clear coat without greyish undercoat.

Some breeders believe that they can improve the coat quality of the brown spotted and marbled Tabbies by using cats descending from silver lines, although there is no proof that there is a genetic correspondence between the dominant silver gene and the presence of large bands of colour in the hair of a Tabby. The American Shorthairs have been selected over years to get the large banding gene. So probably the clear coats in the silver lines do not come from the dominant silver gene but from the American Shorthairs that have been used to create the Silver Bengals. Unfortunately we can't just isolate one gene from another breed and add it into our gene pool. Breeding means that you either take everything or leave everything. Every shortcut has its price. This is why a lot of breeders do not consider using cats coming from silver lines (as they are concerned by the cobby body and the round head that are typical of the American Shorthair). These breeders are convinced that they can achieve very clear-coated cat by carefully selecting the Bengal breeding stock.

The colour

In our breeding programme, we give a preference to cats with a yellow to orange ground colour before greyish cats. The explanation of this lies in the TICA standard declaring that the

Bengals should imitate “small, forest-dwelling wild cats”. There are indeed greyish ALCs which can be found further north in the Himalayan Mountains and in Siberia. But the felines who live in tropical forests – like the Ocelot, the Jaguar, the Margay or the ALC living in the Borneo, Malayan or South Indian forests – are very colourful.

The pattern

The biggest misconception of the breed, probably, is the one about pattern. The importance of the rosettes, in general, is overrated – though the fascination with them can easily be understood: they are unique to the Bengal breed and attract lay people first. However, over half of the sub-species of the ALC are not rosetted, but spotted. Some ALC do have a pattern that, reproduced on a SBT Bengal, would be considered of poorer quality.



An ALC with a very unspectacular pattern.

So what should a judge look for in pattern? Contrast, horizontal alignment and whited tummy are the three characteristics. This is also what the standard defines, this is what the wild cat has and this is what, genetically, is most difficult to achieve. According to the standard, a rosetted cat is only to be given preference to if it is just as good (in all above mentioned points like body, head, etc.) as a non-rosetted one. It is also important to note that nowhere does the standard define the size of the spots. Many Bengals we see nowadays in the show halls do have bigger rosettes than any ALC. Is that desirable?



Two rosetted ALCs.

However, I don't want to be misunderstood: I am not against rosettes. I find them attractive and I breed for them. But I also think that they should get the importance that the standard applies to them. The TICA standard allocates a mere 15 points (out of 100) for pattern. When a judge distributes these 15 points, he has to consider the horizontal alignment of the spots, the absence of rip bars, the contrast, the chin strap, the mascara markings, the shoulder streaks, the spotted legs and tail and even the whited tummy. Although the standard speaks about rosettes – “rosettes showing two distinct colours or shades (...) are preferred to single spotting but not required” - there is no breakout of points specifically addressed to them.

The contrast is defined by a clearly distinguishable change of colour between the spot and the background colour, giving a precise outline to the spot. Again, there is an advantage for non-ticked cats if the individual hair has the same shade of colour from tip to almost the skin. Black spots or rosettes are always to be given preference to over brownish or reddish colours markings because they tend not to fade with time. A Bengal cat can lose its contrast either because the spots lighten up (fading is probably genetical) or because the background colour darkens. The definitive colouring is reached only at the age of 1.5 years. However, this definitive colouring again can change due to hormonal levels changing, as is the case with pregnancy.



Great contrast and beautiful horizontal alignment of the pattern on this ALC kitten.

The horizontal alignment is extremely important and gets too little attention at the moment from the judges. The importance is due to the fact that it sets off the Bengal cat from other cat breeds, especially also the common house cat, as “normal” and easily achieved patterns run vertical, not horizontal. A special concern herein lies with the marbled Bengals whose pattern should show a clear horizontal flow and is not allowed to have a classical bulleye structure. Especially in regions where the judges see few marbleds, e.g. Europe, there seems to be a need for education on how to judge a marbled pattern.

The whited tummy is the most difficult trait to achieve in the Bengal breed and one of the most challenging one for the next ten to twenty years. This has to do with the fact that the white hair of wild cats is actually white hair, whereas the white hair of the domestic cat is merely hair with no colour that is caused by an inhibitor gene. It is difficult to produce a cat with a good contrast on the top part of the body and a whited tummy. Probably there are only about half a dozen world-wide. Certain lines are so-called sorrel Bengals (they are reddish-light in colour) and there the whited tummies are easier to achieve. But often these cats are so light that the spots can no longer be detected on the tummy. And the standard demands spots on the belly. It is probable, that a whited tummy can only be achieved through breeding back to early generation cats or ALCs.

What faults should a judge look for in our breed ?

Most of the minor faults to look out for are mentioned above, either explicitly or because they diverge from what a Bengal should be and look like. However, because I strongly feel that judges have an important responsibility towards preserving the credibility of TICA as well as consulting breeders towards a better breed, I would like to stress three very important faults

that a judge should not accept at all: a bad temperament or sedated cat, lockets and structural problems.

It is, in my eyes, especially low if cats need to be sedated to be shown. Not all cats have the necessary show temperament and given the Bengal's hybrid nature, a Bengal with a show temperament is even more difficult to achieve. Sedating a cat to achieve the necessary calmness is a fraud and shows a lack of respect for the living creature. I would hope that a judge recognizes a sedated cat and that he punishes such behaviour by not placing the cat. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Also, it makes no sense whatsoever to keep on exhibiting a cat that shows permanent bad behaviour in the ring. It should also be the job of a judge to let the breeder know to leave the cat at home. Is it not ridiculous that not so long ago a terribly behaved cat got his Best Cat to Supreme with the remark that then the breeder would not need to bring the cat anymore?

Lockets tend to be dyed with powder or hair dye. Again, this is fraud. A judge should look out for those: most of them are done badly and can be detected. The lockets on the neck can be spotted as the locket disrupts the dark markings on the collar. Lockets are genetically dominant. Therefore, Bengals with lockets should not be used for breeding. Also, the colouring procedure is cruel to the animal and therefore needs to be punished. Yet, it is amazing that cats make it through various shows, sporting a locket one week and none the next. Breeders in the show hall know about that.

Another problem that we see emerging more and more are Bengals with structural problems. This is very worrisome, especially as many judges don't seem to have caught onto this particular issue at the moment. There are Bengal lines currently being shown that are cow-hawked (crooked legs) and have hip problems. It is obvious that no breeding should be undertaken with such cats – and yet they are being supremed. I also think that a lot of breeders are unaware of this problem, therefore it would be especially important for the judges to take on an educational role.

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Boris



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