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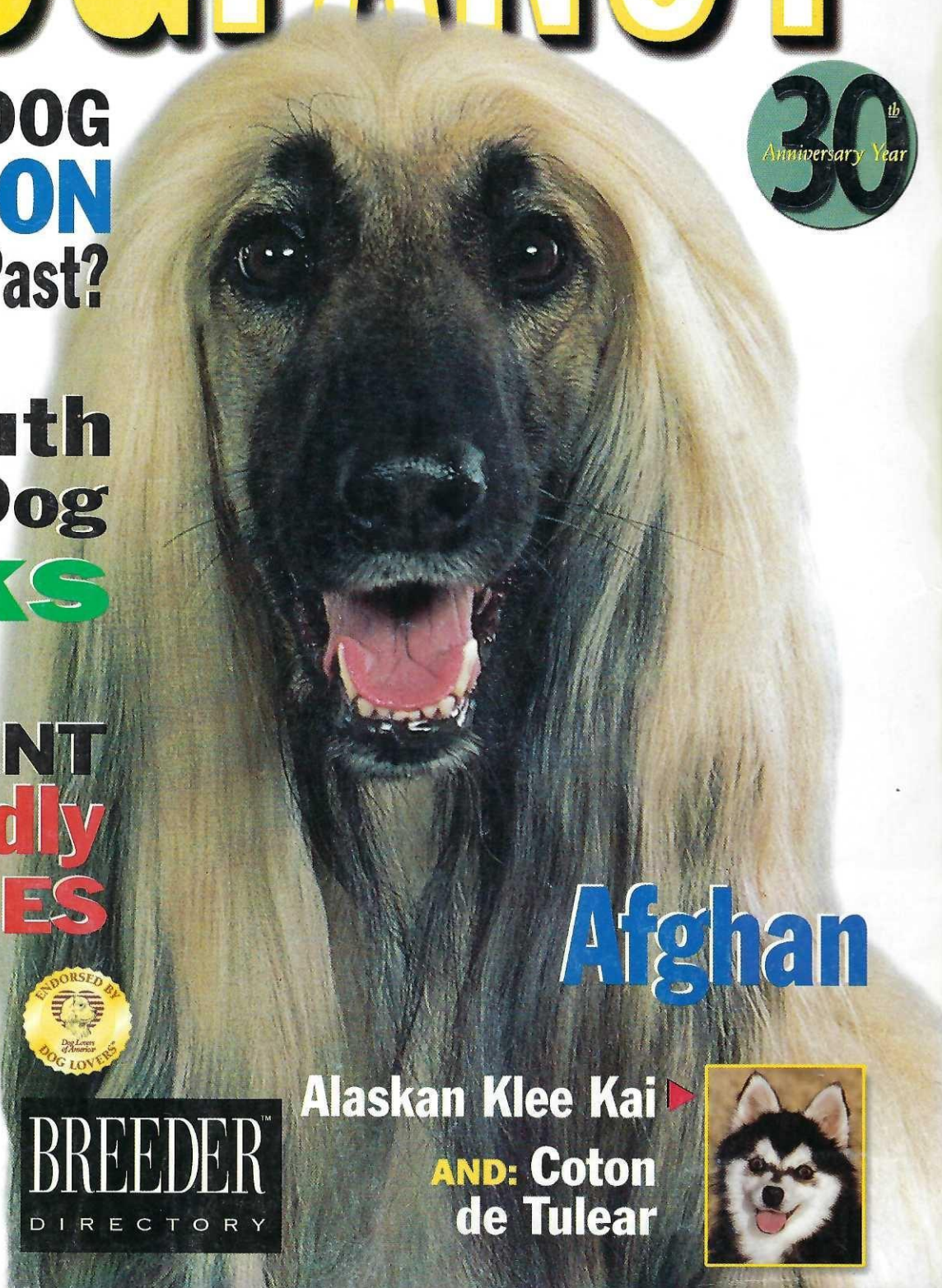
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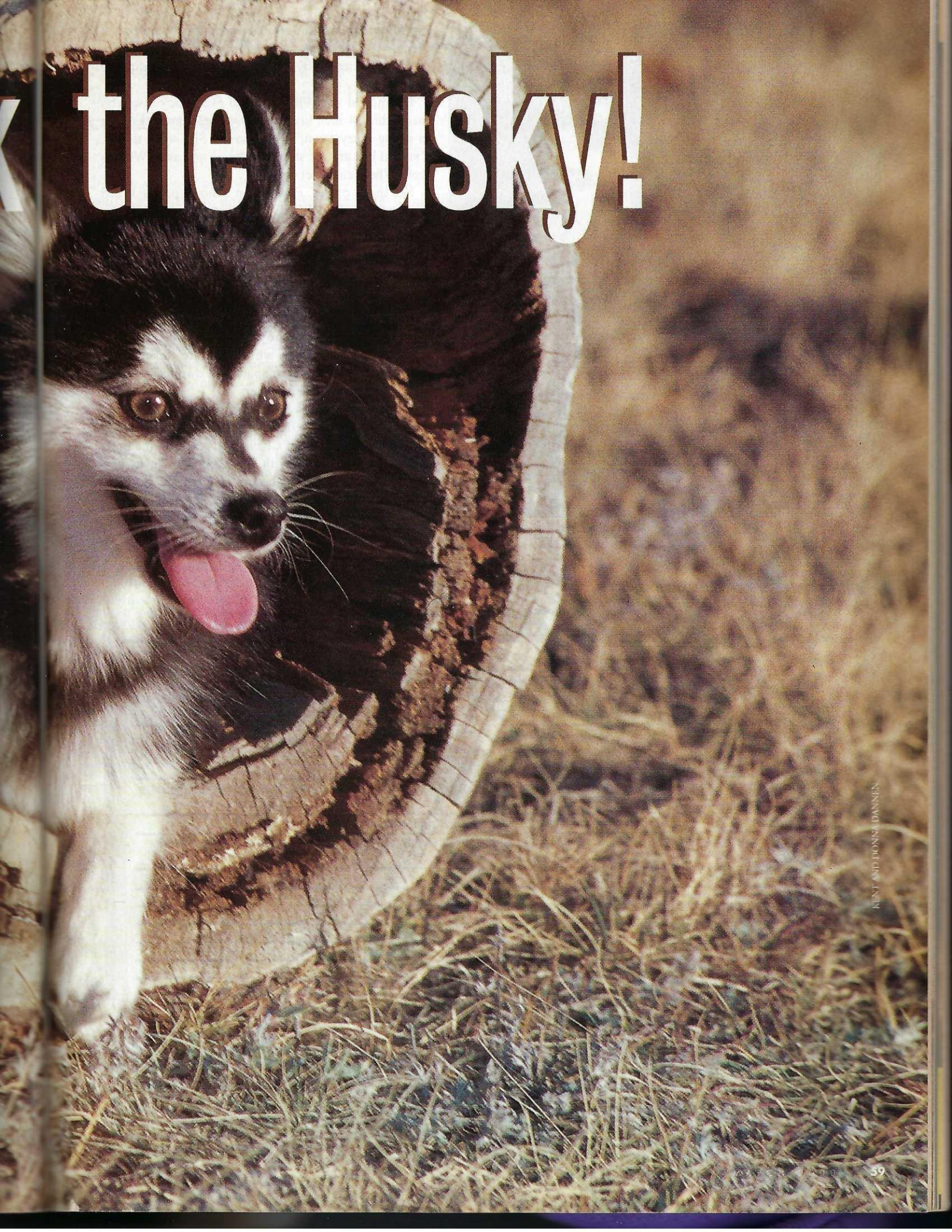
A rare beauty beckons from behind the Alaskan Klee Kai's mask.

BY ELLEN KANNER

K-2 perched on a table and batted her big brown eyes at passing strangers and wagged her plumed tail. The 1-year-old black and white Alaskan Klee Kai looks like an Alaskan Husky, but she's much smaller than the rugged sled dog and has an easier job: Attract women.

The Alaskan Klee Kai's high energy enables it to keep up with the big dogs.

K the Husky!



KENT AND DONNA DANNEN



Alaskan Klee Kai descended from Alaskan Huskies.

"Alaskan Klee Kai are babe magnets," said owner Dennis Tuma, a massage therapist in Aspen, Colo. "That's all they really do, and they give unconditional love."

It's mutual — with Tuma and everybody else who meets this 14-inch-high beauty. "She's the cutest dog in a dog-crazy town," Tuma said. "She stops traffic. I've had bus drivers stop their buses and ask, 'What is that? Where can I get one?'"

Not many places. Fewer than a dozen people breed Alaskan Klee Kai (KLEE kye), recognized in 1995 by the American Rare Breed Association and in 1997 by the United Kennel Club. K-2 is one of 700 dogs, none taller than 18 inches. Weighing between 8 and 22 pounds, AKK get their name from an Eskimo term meaning "small dog," and they have distinctive bandit mask markings on their faces. As pups they look like baby raccoons, and they grow to resemble the Alaskan Huskies from which they're descended. They're perfect for studio apartment dwellers — they want to be close to their owners.

While many breeds boast lineage dating back centuries, AKK go back only 25 years — and all roads lead to Linda Spurlin of Chewelah, Wash. In the mid-1970s, she fell in love with an undersized Husky and began breeding dogs with similar qualities. Spurlin, then living in Wasilla, Alaska, raised them in her back yard purely for her own pleasure, but with dogs this cute, the secret got out. It took years, but Eileen

In Brief

Alaskan Klee Kai

Country of Origin	United States.
Function	Companion.
Life Span	15 to 20 years. Estimates vary because of the small number of Alaskan Klee Kai and their brief history.
Height/Weight	Toy: up to 13 inches, 8 to 10 pounds. Miniature: 13 to 15 inches, 10 to 15 pounds. Standard: 15 to 18 inches, 15 to 22 pounds.
Color	Black and white, shades of gray and white or red and white, with symmetrical markings on face.
Coat	Thick double coat — soft inner, straight outer. Sheds twice a year.
Grooming	Brush daily or at least every other day, clip toenails monthly, and trim fur around paw pads and bathe as needed.
Activity Level	High.
Intelligence	High.
Trainability	High.
Watchdog	Excellent.
Character	Friendly, playful and protective.
Home Environment	Apartments OK. AKK desire extensive human contact.
Good with Children	Yes, when socialized.
Good With Other Pets	Yes, when socialized.
Attitude with Strangers	Wary until introduced by owner, then warm.
National Breed Club	Alaskan Klee Kai Association of America Inc., 14845 W. Chaparral Loop, Peyton, CO 80831; (719)749-2298. Secretary/Recorder: Eileen Gregory.
Rescue	Carmen Cetrone, http://users.snip.net/~carm74/rescue.htm or Eileen Gregory (719) 749-2298
Web sites	www.alaskankleekai.com and www.webring.org/cgi-bin/webring?ring=kleekai;list

“She is the cutest dog in a dog-crazy town. She stops traffic. I’ve had bus drivers stop their buses and ask, ‘What is that? Where can I get one?’”

— Dennis Tuma

Gregory of Peyton, Colo., persuaded Spurlin to make the dogs available to others. “When you have something this special, it’s selfish to keep it to yourself,” said Gregory, who also breeds the dogs.

Spurlin and Gregory developed a strict breed standard. When you buy a UKC-registered Alaskan Klee Kai, you agree your puppy must be assessed at 8 months of age and spayed or neutered if it has a disqualifying characteristic such as asymmetrical markings on its face or back, improper bite or all-white coat. “Every dog has to pre-qualify before it can breed,” Gregory said. “A litter will not be recognized if the dog is bred without being authorized.” There’s no point in breeding dogs that will pass on poor genetics.

Spurlin and Gregory have produced sturdy, healthy dogs. The only medical condition has been males with cryptorchid, common to all Toy breeds,

where both testicles fail to drop. Fewer than 10 percent developed patella luxation, a loosening of the knee joint, caused by the stress of excessive jumping. “These dogs are built on springs,” Gregory said. “They bounce straight up and down in their excitement to see you. They’re made for companionship, to give love and get love.”

When 4-year-old Princess is by her owner Mary Jones’ side, 9-year-old Willie, her other AKK, won’t be far away. “Everywhere I go I take the dogs,” said Jones of Tyler, Texas. “They go with me into the bank, to church.”

Jones’ husband, Earl, wanted the dogs. He took her to Gregory’s kennel, and gray-and-white Willie closed the deal. “I was a cat person and Willie — he was more like a cat,” she said. “I couldn’t get over the size and beauty. Then actually having him in my arms, well, he cuddled me.” He has continued to be her closest companion since Earl



KENT AND DONNA DANNEN

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KENT AND DONNA DANNEN

Owners need to be prepared to spend a lot of time with Alaskan Klee Kai — they crave lots of attention.



KENT AND DONNA DANNEN

Alaskan Klee Kai may be used for both plural and singular.

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“There’s no doggie odor to these dogs. Star cleans herself like a cat, will put her whole paw on her mouth and wash her face with it.”

— Mary Ryan

died last year. “These dogs are my security and my solace.”

Other owners point out their dogs’ feline qualities. Star, 2, perches herself atop the recliner, couch or windowsill. “She likes to be up high,” said owner Mary Ryan of Upper Darby, Pa., “She thinks she can do what the cat does.” Star loves Ryan’s cat, as K-2 loves Tuma’s cat. AKK are cat-friendly when socialized with them.

Whether it’s cats, children or other dogs, Alaskan Klee Kai need socializing. Tuma takes K-2 with him everywhere, often carrying her inside his bomber jacket. “She likes the security in unfamiliar circumstances.”

Friends for Life

K-2, like other AKK, has a strong stay-off-my-turf territorial instinct — an ideal watchdog that barks at strangers. But Tuma has only to introduce K-2 to an interested and, no doubt, attractive stranger, and they’re friends for life.

“I believe any breed will get along with anything if you work at it,” Spurlin said. “If you raise them from babies together, they’ll get along. Obedience training helps. I’ve had birds, horses, cats and they’ve always gotten along.”

Alaskan Klee Kai also exhibit a feline fastidiousness. “There’s no doggie odor to these dogs,” Ryan said. “Star cleans herself like a cat, will put her whole paw on her mouth and wash her face with it. [Gregory] has one that does that, too.”

However, like Huskies, they shed.

“They have two seasons when they really shed and it takes a lot of brushing,” said American Klee Kai Association President Chris Shackelford, owner of eight AKK in Columbus, Miss. “But the best grooming is frequent petting. You get out a lot of loose hair and put oil into their coat with your hands when you pet your dog.”

Alaskan Klee Kai also share a certain feline attitude. They know they’re slightly fabulous and bask in praise and petting. Star’s name was no coincidence. “She really is our star and she

acts it,” Ryan said. “She struts down the street in charge of the neighborhood. She feeds on it. She’s a ham. She looks in the mirror at herself and strikes a pose.”

But as fond as she is of herself, Ryan is the love of Star’s life. “She has given me so much pleasure. The kids are in

and out but she’s here all the time, by my side. I have MS [multiple sclerosis], and she’s very protective. She can tell when I’m not feeling good and will get up close and lick my face and hand or nuzzle next to me. She’s gotten me out more and has put a lot of laughter in this house.”

What is it about this toy that fascinates dogs?

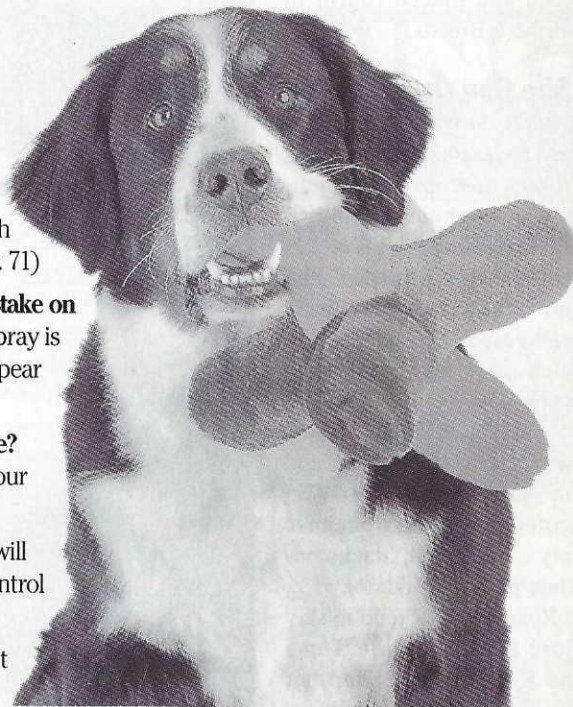
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That's been Spurlin's goal. A wet puppy nose pressed against a cheek is more important to her than a full crate of pedigrees. Yet in their brief show history, AKK boast nine champions and outperformed other Toy dogs to win two Best in Show titles. Gregory, who had never shown a dog, entered one of her kennel dogs in a UKC competition. "The dog showed himself," she said. "He earned best of breed and placed fourth in Northern Breeds."

She Can Open Doors

AKK show well because they have smarts as well as looks. "If you train them, they'll do about anything," said Tuma, adding his K-2 is particularly sharp. "She knows how to open doors, drawers, closets. She's a quick study and her attitude is great."

Alaskan Klee Kai litters average only three pups and the waiting list is long. Ryan waited four years because only a blue-eyed, black-and-white puppy would do.

Ryan and Star tend to stay close to home while Tuma and K-2 and Jones and her dogs go out and about. "They adapt to whatever lifestyle you have," Gregory said. "They'll be couch potatoes if you let them, or they'll run. But remember they're small. It's a journey for them to go from the living room to the kitchen."

AKK will amuse themselves with chew toys and each other, but they really want you. As long as you're



KENT AND DONNA DANNEN

Alaskan Klee Kai perform well in rare-breed conformation show rings because they are intelligent as well as good-looking.

"They're extremely attractive, they're a nice size, they're good with families and kids, no strong prey drive or guarding instinct that make them difficult to live with. The only downside is they're descended from Huskies, so they can run like demons."

— Cindy Cooke

United Kennel Club new breeds and standards specialist

“They’re not hyper, but when I’ve left them for a while, they tell me all about it. That lasts for three or four minutes, then they’ll start playing.”

— Mary Jones

there to love, they’re happy anywhere, including non-Arctic regions. Shackelford, who moved from Alaska to Mississippi, said her dogs adjusted better to the heat than she did.

If it’s an Alaskan Klee Kai you want, accept no substitute. Spurlin’s original stock spun off another breed, known simply as Klee Kai. But these dogs have been bred outside the AKK’s specifications and, consequently, some lack the distinctive mask or other standard characteristics. “If it doesn’t have the mask, it isn’t an AKK and can’t be registered with us,” said Cindy Cooke, UKC’s new breeds and standards specialist.

Small, Medium or Large?

Alaskan Klee Kai come in three sizes: toy (up to 13 inches high), miniature (13-15 inches) and standard (15-18 inches). Spurlin and Gregory laugh when they remember early efforts to breed a 15-pound male AKK with a 50-pound Alaskan Husky. “The pups came out various sizes and people were delighted,” Spurlin said, adding the association groups dogs by height rather than weight to avoid “some yoyo starving a dog to get it in a lower size category.”

Alaskan Klee Kai may be small, but “They’re not little yappy dust mops,” Tuma said. They do like to vocalize. “They’re not hyper, but when I’ve left them for a while, they tell me all about it,” Jones said. “That lasts three or four minutes, then they’ll start playing.”

They ask for your attention. “If you want low maintenance, you don’t want a Klee Kai,” said Tuma. “You have to spend time with the dogs to bond with them. And you have to be patient, because they cause you to stop every 10 feet to explain what they’re about.”

There’s a lot to explain about this new breed and it’s all good stuff. “I see a bright future for them,” said the UKC’s Cooke. “They’re extremely attractive, they’re a nice size, they’re good with families and kids, no strong prey drive or guarding instincts that make them difficult to live with. The

only downside is they’re descended from Huskies, so they can run like demons. Then there’s the hair.”

Hair, schmair. “She sheds less than my cat,” Tuma said. Perhaps K-2 is exceptional, or maybe he and the other owners are in denial. After all, what’s a

little hair in exchange for a lot of love?

K-2 has given Tuma more than love — she’s fulfilled his deepest wish. He has a girlfriend now and enjoys being the love object of two alpha females. 🐾

Ellen Kanner is a free-lance writer in Miami.

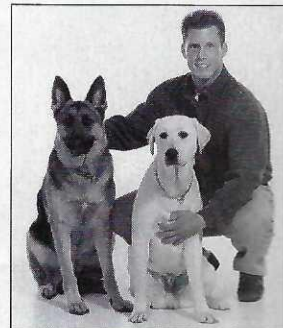
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