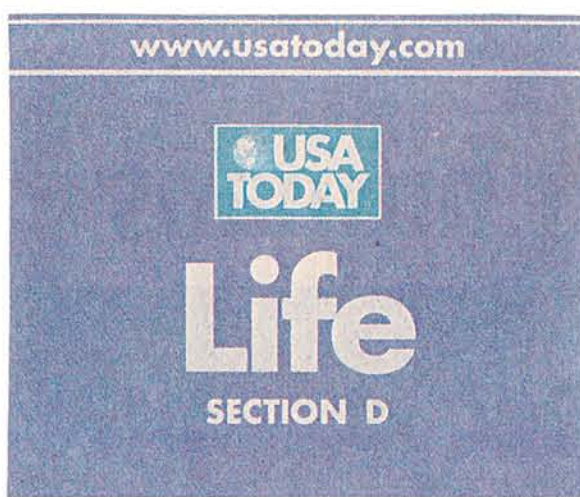


Monday, November 14, 2005



Photos by Jacki Gruber, USA TODAY

Fancy that! Felines fit for show

Cover story

Meet Ami: Otherwise known as Permaretto Swirl, a 1-year-old Devon Rex female cat.



Roll over, Rover, these cats are back in town

By Marco della Cava
USA TODAY

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Dog shows beg no explanation.

Man buys dog. Dog adores man. Man gets dog to stand for inspection, prance around a ring and, for a blip in its carefree life, refrain from putting its snout where the spotlight doesn't shine.

But cat shows? Man buys cat. Cat tolerates man. Man pleads cat to leave the couch backrest and parade its stuff only to see cat rise, stretch and vanish into litter box.

Purr-fect pose: When Anita Henrikson of San Jose, Calif., isn't practicing her profession of hair stylist, she is caring for and going to competitions for her award-winning cats, including her Naked Sphinx named Grand Premier Quakenoats Brazilian Wax of Permaretto.

Right? Categorically wrong, says Anita Henrikson, a well-groomed woman who will enter three felines in the Cat Fanciers' Association's 18th annual International Cat Show. This epic kitty confab, which runs Friday through Sunday in nearby San Mateo, will draw nearly 800 cats representing 41 breeds from a variety of continents. Your cat wins here, and it earns the right to strut its stuff anywhere on the planet. And, apparently, strut these cats do.

"Cats love to perform, which makes a cat show a real show. You go and watch the

Please see COVER STORY next page ▶

Cats are 'in tune' with emotions of their humans

Continued from 1D

cats," says Henrikson, who, when not styling human hair, attends roughly two dozen cat shows a year. "We do have drama."

She mentions a recent event, during which the power went out. "Everyone stayed calm and took out their flashlights. We groomed our kitties by flashlight, and the judges judged them by flashlight," she says. "Now that's dedication."

They do stunts, too

Electrical failures aside, is there cat-generated excitement? "Sure. They sometimes run up poles we have set up. Or they stretch," she says. "My cats can be real clowns."

And here's one now: A stubby, caramel-colored feline nicknamed Ami — short for Permaretto Amaretto Swirl — sits on a table in Henrikson's oversized ears and large, dark eyes give her a vaguely Noddyish look. She doesn't exude attitude, though she could. Ami currently is considered the best example of the Devon Rex breed in the nation.

Henrikson's other two competitors are another Devon Rex, an azure-coated wonder named Permaretto Blue Sky's Ahead, and an arresting Naked Sphinx (just think Dr. Evil's pet, Mr. Bigglesworth) called Brazilian Wax.

"My salon clients helped me name the Sphinx," says Henrikson. "One woman said, 'What else would you call a naked...?' and we'll just interrupt Mrs. Henrikson right there, thank you."

Henrikson, who is a Devon Rex breeder, admits that her cats come by their names in serendipitous ways. Zoto was named after a truck while my husband and I were driving on the highway one day, and I thought, 'Alana, yes!' My husband just shook his head."

Henrikson is an energetic woman who wears her passion on her sweater (an embroidered cat's head pops out of a front pocket), in her home (cat souvenirs abound, from paintings of past litters to a dramatic porcelain statue of a white cat being ridden by a black mouse) and on her car (DEVON REX reads the plate on her BMW X3).



Only the best: Anita Henrikson with retired Rex-n-Px Zotos Permanent Wave, nicknamed Zoto, a Devon Rex cat, right, and Permaretto Amaretto Swirl, a 1-year-old Devon Rex female.

"I really wanted her to you know, get out and meet people, but I didn't think she'd get this into it," says the general contractor, who often gets roped into duty "if the shows are out of town, she likes me to go with her."

Perhaps he has gotten into the cat show scene by force of habit? "Ah, it's OK," he says. "There's a real broad range of people there. Some people look real wealthy. Others look like they're homeless, and you don't know how they got in the building."

It's a woman's world

Anita Henrikson says most folks who enter cat shows are women.

include a gay couple hilariously devoted to their pet's in-ring success. In truth, there likely isn't a huge difference between the dog and cat show crowds. Just different strokes for different fanatics.

One group revels in the devotion radiated by canines. "Dogs are members of the family who are bred to do jobs. They're there with you all the time," says David Frei, co-host of the prestigious Westminster Dog Show. "Cats invite us into their world when they care to."

Which is precisely their magical appeal, says the other group: "The Egyptians worshipped cats, and cats have never forgotten this," says Pam DeLaBar, president of the Cat Fanciers' Association. "Cats are smart. You just have to convince them that what you're asking them to do is what they want to do."

A telling glimpse of the differences between the dog and cat camps appears in two new picture books, *Dogs 24/7* and *Cats 24/7*.

"I was amazed at how many good pictures we got of cats," says

series co-creator and cat owner Rick Smolan, finding a diplomatic way to say the obvious. Cats don't really do anything. So while *Dogs 24/7* literally leaps with shots of dogs and masters at play, *Cats 24/7* is filled with animals decidedly at rest, the warm and fuzzy collectible equivalent of sleeping pills.

True cat lovers hiss at the notion that cats are neither obedient nor adoring. "Cats are much more in tune with the emotions of their human companions than people think," says Mavra Marrow, a Heber, Calif., cat behaviorist who dissects cat problems over the phone. "Many cats are extremely dog-like. They'll ride in cars, sleep under the covers and fetch."

The international cat show may help prove that these animals can indeed perform. A new "agility" test will find owners coaxing cats through an elaborate maze by using treats or toys.

It's really a neat new thing," says Henrikson, her three show cats circling her like sharks, at times taking detours to drink from a Waterford crystal bowl that sits in the bay window behind the couch. "It's amazing what cats will do."

Not slowed by asthma

And owners. Consider that Henrikson is severely asthmatic. She has breeds whose hair is short and tends not to shed, but she still has to "be on top of my game when it comes to medications" to coexist with her four-footed pals. "Come showtime, I double up on meds, and I never handle other cats."

Henrikson's eyes go wide when



Pampered pet: Anita Henrikson bathes her Naked Sphinx, Brazilian Wax. The cat resembles Mt. Bigglesworth from the Austin Powers films.

asked about another sacrifice: the cost of competing. "I don't know, honestly." She pauses. "OK, I just don't want to know. Because if I knew, I would never do this. Let's just say, all my extra money goes to this. It's my social life. Some people golf. Some people gamble. I go to cat shows."

And once there, a metamorphosis takes place. Henrikson is no longer the well-regarded hair stylist. She's not the wife or the mother of three twentysomethings. Instead, she's the confident ringmaster and feared champion.

So argue all you want about dog shows and cat shows and which is more legit. In the end, it's really not about which animal is cooler but which owner can get his or her pet to perform in the limelight.

"I walk into a hall now, and I know some people are saying, 'Oh, no, they're here,'" says Henrikson, one thumb burrowing into a spot just behind Ami's ear. "I love that wonderful moment when someone says, 'Wow, that's your cat?'"

She looks over at her purring posse, Sky, Ami and Brazil. Each has picked out a spot in her tidy living room, which is ringed with rosettes, the equivalent of trophies in the cat show world.

Henrikson smiles wide, shifting excitedly on the sofa. "This upcoming show, it's like the Super Bowl really," she says, as the animals turn her way in response to her voice.

So there it is. Where some might just see three cats, others see weekend warriors who demand little more than a little food, a bit of affection and big breaks for naps.

Let the meowing begin.