

Grooming of your Old English Sheepdog

By Lita Long

I have for many years told people: "I will show you a way to groom. It is up to you to take that education and adapt it to your own style. You will ultimately choose one method over another".

Tools

1. A professional pair of grooming clippers and blades, such as, size 4, 5, 7, and 10. These are to be put in a conspicuous place, where the glare off the shiny parts will balefully glare at you if you procrastinate.
2. Slicker brushes - I use the "Ever Gentle" or "Universal" slickers.
3. Combs - I use Molting combs. There are 3 sizes with different spacing and length of teeth.
4. Pin brush - oval head and long narrow head with no balls on the ends of the pins. Do not waste your money on the cheap ones that have a brush on the other side.
5. Scissors - the more you pay for your scissors the happier you will be, priced within reason, no need to go all out for the \$200.00 per pair. I pay about \$35.00 - \$50.00. I use curved blades, straight blades, blunt ended (for between pads) and single bladed thinning scissors. I also choose to use longer than average blades except on the thinning scissors and blunt ended ones for the pads. Keep your scissors sharp.
6. Bristle brush - As far as I am concerned the only one I personally recommend is the Mason Pearson and I use both a large and midsize brush. My original is over 30 years old and still going strong.
7. Grooming table and comfortable chair. I add an old favorite movie for the VCR. Or plan my grooming for a special on TV. If you have a lot to do you might adopt a rule of "no groom - no TV".
8. Hemostats, ear powder, liquid ear cleaner, bulb syringe, cotton swabs.
9. Tooth tartar remover tool. Get one from your Dentist or Veterinarian and have him show you how to use it.
10. Can of baby powder corn starch.
11. For males, a bulb syringe and whatever your Vet prefers for a sheath douche. The male sheath is a closed unit so a liquid put in the sheath will not go into the body cavity.
12. Toe nail clippers. I use the guillotine type and follow with a quick swipe or two of a doggy nail file. Some people use an electric grinder. If your dog has a long coat you may wish to put the foot in a sock and push the nails through the material to prevent the grinder shaft from tangling up in the coat. When using a grinder, be sure that the dog is held immobile by a grooming loop or another person. I put the dog's leg between my arm and body so that my body keeps the rest of the dog away from the instrument. I also use a grooming loop. To accustom the dog to the grinder I do not have anything on the end of the shaft at first and simply touch the nail with the body of the grinder when it is on. This will accustom them to the feel of the vibration and the noise. Be sure to accustom the dog to the feel of clippers and the feel of blown air in a non-threatening gentle manner.
13. There are several "mat splitters" that involve sharp blades. The use of these tools takes careful thought as they do remove coat and if you are saving a coat they are better left in the tack box. If you are just interested in saving part of the coat and do not mind having uneven coat length they can be useful. Of course you can finish up by using clippers, with or without the addition of a cheater blade, or scissors, to even up a coat after you have used the splitters.

Preparing for the Bath

Before bathing, start with the dog standing on the table and loosen up the coat by long sweeping strokes of a large pin brush or bristle brush. Brush with the lie of the hair and then against and finally back into normal position. This will give you an idea of any tough areas. Now making sure all is "to hand", lay the dog on it's side with the back toward you with the "Judges" side up. Do the "Judges" side first, as sometimes a groomer will cheat on good grooming as they tire. Should you be inclined to tire midway through your job, do the "Judges" side first for the best look in the ring.

Begin with a long line parted down the spine, from the nose to the tail, and work a 1-2 inch area along each side of the part the whole length of the dog. Make a new part, 1-2 inches up from the original part and about 4-6 inches wide. Put your hand behind the new section and begin to brush. First use a bristle brush. If it will not go into the coat, graduate to the next brush in line, which should be a large pin brush. If this too encounters thick spots and will not easily penetrate the coat reach for the long narrow pin brush, which allows you to attack smaller areas. If this is still a problem reach for the 'ever gentle' slicker and if that won't do it, use the ultimate ripper and go for the Universal slicker. If this will not undo the area, you are left with evaluating the whole dog. Is this a small area that is alone in its condition or is it indicative of the whole dog. If it is the whole dog, please, put down all your tools, go get the clippers and clip your dog down. You can use a #4 blade if all is pretty loose but you will need a #10 blade if the mats are at the skin level.

There is another choice. If the dog has been out in the weather, the mats have been wetted, are tight to the point of not being able to get a comb into them, or lie close to the skin, you might consider this. If the dog can be dried out in a warm place, and is otherwise in clean condition, you can put off grooming for 2-4 weeks. Keeping the dog dry, often no more damage will be done. In a 4-week period, the mats will have grown up off the skin level by about 1 inch and you will be able to split or separate the mats and save some coat. Or clip the coat using a thicker blade (4 is thicker than 10) thus leaving a fuzz behind. If the dog is dirty, really completely matted from total neglect or has sores or external parasites, do not even consider this and go ahead and clip this dog down and give it a bath.

Now that the dog has relaxed as I tested the condition of the coat, I move back to the head (unless you have had to shave the dog) and do the area from the "part", up over the top including the ear as far as you can comfortably reach. It is at this point that you clean the uppermost ear. Pluck any necessary hairs out of the ear canal, I save the part of the ear cleaning which calls for the use of a liquid cleaner until I am ready to turn the dog over. That way, the liquid left after the cleaning, can drain out onto a towel when I turn the dog over. Now check the eye and scale the uppermost teeth.

Using the tools in the order mentioned above, finish the entire upper side of the dog as far across the dog as you can comfortably reach. Part an area about 1 - 2 inches up and carefully brush the hair sideways and then down, being careful not to hold on to the hair from above and so back comb or tease the coat instead of brushing it out straight. If the soft brush will not go through the coat, pick up the section and brush it against your hand. In this way you can evaluate the area and if necessary graduate to the harshest tool you need to "clear" the area. Remember that if you are grooming to keep a full coat that you are only straightening and pulling the undercoat upward through the guard coat, not pulling it out by the roots.

If you are show grooming do not put your thumb on the back of the brush and use it as a comb or you will remove more coat than you desire. Your brush should be grasped loosely and not forced down through the coat. Use caution when using a slicker brush. If you repeatedly scrape the skin you risk introducing the normally present staph germs into the scratches which can lead to large infected areas. The brushing action should be a lift and pull not a push and scrape thus the reason for not putting the thumb on the back of the brush. By turning the dog (if the table is big enough), moving your chair or turning the table, move around the dog, grooming as you go.

Preparing for the Bath - Continued

When it is time to start the legs, have the legs toward you, and start with the pad area. Trim all the hair out from between the pads and clip the nails. If you are using a grinder it might be best to get help until you are confident in using one. Wait until you have the dog dry before standing the dog up, and using a grooming loop or assistant to hold the dog, do the nails with a grinder. If you are comfortable using clippers, go ahead and clip out the hair from between the pads. I also clip or scissor 1/2 inch behind the largest pad. Feet are usually the part that most of the dogs do not like, and as soon as the feet are taken care of they relax again, knowing the rest is not going to be so unpleasant for them.

Start with a comb and carefully comb all the toes and in between the toes in the webbed pocket. Switch to the brushes in the order above and begin by brushing all the hair against the grain up the leg, using a bristle or pin brush, leaving it all pointing as much upward as it will do. Then continue the 1-2 inch parts around the leg as you did the body of the coat. Do the inside of the leg on the bottom when you do the top of the upper leg. Do not rush your job and you will both enjoy it better. I use a comb in the arm pits and in the groin areas. The less undercoat left there to mat the better. Use a comb on the edges of the ears, the lips and chin areas. Clip a half circle area in front of the sheath. (Do not remove the tassel on the end of the sheath as this aids in directing the flow of urine away from the legs and chest.)

If I am grooming at a Dog Show, I will often reverse the direction of my line brushing to leave the coat going up on the sides, forward on the back, and up on the legs and head. If you do the show side first and leave the coat in it's UP direction, when you turn the dog over it will "iron" the hair into place for you. If you wish to remove coat, reverse the order of grooming tool usage. If you hold a molting comb by the toothed area as you would a pencil you can work on a mat in a piecemeal method. Hold the mat tightly with the fingers of your left hand and insert the end tooth of the comb in the middle of the outside edge. Pull toward you in a picking motion. Do not insert your comb and pull for all you are worth. This is not a fishing trip. Remember what you are doing.

A mat is made up of tangled hair and is much like a cord your three year old has tied up for you - knots on knots on knots and all intertwined! What you are trying to do is straighten out the knotted area. You should not try to pull the whole thing out by the roots. In a normal coat the undercoat strands occupy the spaces between the guard coat shafts and you are attempting to untangle the guard coat and straighten out the undercoat. A matted coat does not insulate the dog very well from heat or cold and not at all from rain. With a pet that you want to keep looking like a full-coated OES you must keep the undercoat manageable. Either treat the coat as a show coat or remove the amount of undercoat necessary for you to manage the coat.

You can keep a long coat manageable by learning to groom with a comb and universal slicker. The biggest caution I have for anyone is to remember what is under the coat. The skin of your dog is the only barrier between nasty germs and your dog's immune system. You can cause serious injury by grooming too roughly. You might be wise to clip your dog on a 3 times a year schedule. With only 4 months in between clips you will not have a coat longer than 4 inches at any time and I personally think that OES in their 'pajamas' look absolutely adorable.

The BATH

Bathing the OES is another matter. NEVER BATHE A MATTED DOG. You should bathe your dog only when it is dirty. The practice here at Blue Panda has been to bathe the whole coat of puppyhood. Once the dog starts to acquire an adult coat we only give a full body bath when the coat becomes too dirty to stand off naturally (this means that the coat looks dull, droops, or otherwise does not look clean and loose). For most of the shows we use a very dilute shampoo and do the whites and privates only. Soap residue is the single most common cause of skin problems. On dogs with damaged coats we sometimes condition the coat while doing the pre-bath brushing and even add some conditioner to the shampoo and or use a cream rinse or re-moisturizing type conditioner after the shampoo.

RINSE, RINSE AND RINSE AGAIN. Begin by cleaning the dog's ears so as to remove all traces of ear cleaner and residue from the ear area during bathing. Insert cotton balls into the ear canal. If you know your dog has sensitive eyes or you are not sure of the safety of your shampoo, put in some eye drops. Your Veterinarian can suggest his favorite brand.

If you have a male, douche the sheath first in the tub. Mix your solution - again ask your Vet what he or she prefers - and draw it up into the bulb. Gently insert the end of the bulb into the sheath and gently close the sheath around it. Squeeze some of the liquid into the sheath and remove the syringe. Holding the sheath closed. Gently move the liquid around by lightly shaking the sheath or stroking along the sides. Remove the liquid by releasing the sheath and gently squeezing along the sheath from the back to the front thus pushing out the liquid. Repeat once or twice. Your Veterinarian may instruct you to insert some antibiotic medication if an infection is present. Now shampoo, condition if necessary, and **RINSE, RINSE, RINSE.**

After the bath leave the dog in the tub on towels to drip for about 10 minutes. This is long enough to heat some large bath towels in the dryer. Warm towels seem to absorb moisture better than cold ones and feel better to your pet. You can also use a chamois to sop up the excess. Then use a blower type of cool (no heat) dryer to blow still more moisture off the coat. Be careful to avoid tangling the coat by holding the nozzle too close to the dog. Now blot again with more warm towels or even wrap the dog in a warm blanket.

When the dog is in a non dripping state, move it to a towel covered table, remove the cotton ear plugs and begin drying. Leave fresh cotton ear plugs in place if the dog objects to the feel of air in the ear canal. Be sure to remove them if they are left in place it can lead to ear problems.

I usually start on the head. If you know your dog has a dry coat condition you may want to spray on a conditioner as you dry especially if you elect to use a dryer with a heating element. Remember that hair has tensile strength. Pull it too hard and it breaks. Over dry it and it becomes brittle. When drying, use no heat or at best very low heat. You are blowing the water off the hair not drying out the hair shafts. Use heat only if the dog needs warming. Gently pull the hair out straight from the center of the circle formed by the blowing air and let the air blow the moisture off the hair.

Do not rush. Work around the circle and then continue to "dry" areas of the dog. Such as head, neck, chest, rump, legs, body, and back. Gently pulling the hair straight as it dries will give you the most length of coat. Natural drying most often leaves too much "break" in the hair and it often looks like the coat is starting to cord.

Please do your dog a favor and put his hair up in a topknot of some kind when you finish, as with a freshly done coat they are all virtually blind. Top knots can take many forms from a simple pull it up on top of the head and secure it with a barrette or rubber band to devil horns over each eye or even braiding or French braiding from the eye to the back of the skull. Be sure that whichever method you choose will allow the dog to close it's eyes.

GROOMING At The Show

At the show, start by dampening the coat on any grubby areas with water or waterless shampoo and work in our favorite drying whitener. Beware of the too frequent use of any colored products without washing or rinsing them out, as the coat can "grab" the color. Sometimes, permanently. On the privates or any area "dirtied" by urine or feces, my choice is baby powder cornstarch. Otherwise there are many choices from cornstarch, rice flower etc. to a milk of magnesia mixture.

For cleaning around the mouth we have used lemon juice, with or without salt, mixed with cornstarch to whiten the beard. Any time you strip the hair of it's natural oil it is wise to use a conditioner to prevent the hair from re-staining even worse. All of which must be thoroughly removed by the time the dog goes into the ring. Do not skimp on the amount of time you spend grooming at the show. Your dog will be relaxed and ready to show if you do not stir him up by quick and hurried movements. Plus, if you are not hurried you will take more time to speak kindly to interested spectators. And, you are more likely to be willing to "Mentor" another who is a novice exhibitor.

When the coat is clean, begin the line brushing, then stand the dog up and finish my trimming of the rump and feet. When trimming the feet brush up the hair so it is standing out. Lift up the hair and comb down one inch. Trim this to even up the straggling ends and leave a nice round look. Comb out and lightly down the next inch and trim that to blend. Do another inch or two to finish blending so the leg looks like a pillar and not snow shoes.

Remember when doing the back feet to have the dog stand with the feet well under his body because if you trim when the feet are back when he moves his feet into a natural position he will have his toes showing. I do not trim all the way around the back feet after I do the first inch or so, as that would take away from the well let down hock look which calls for the hair to be shorter at the pad level and longer at the rearmost or highest part of the hock. When doing the rump use thinning scissors first around the rectum. I trim this area to be about 1½ inch long and blend outward and upward, leaving the hair longer as I go. If you leave the skirts too long your dog will look like he has a full pants problem.

Ask someone to show you how to pull a coat. Those of you who have shown horses will know what I mean. This is useful in areas on which you do not wish to leave a scissors mark. I finish by what I call volumizing. Using your hands and forearms, brush the coat up, down, back, and forwards - this forces air into the coat. Finish with the hair in the direction you want it to go. A little light back combing to support the angles and you are finished.

I do not have the room in this article to cover all the "tricks of the trade" nor to deal with problem areas of conformation. These problem areas best described as the parts of the dog you would like to change so that your dog reflects the type of OES you prefer, and they are as varied as the people who bred the dogs. It would be far better to educate or re-educate the judges, into being able to tell what is really under the hair, than it is to pull out all the stops to make your dog a replica of what you think the best OES that ever lived looked like. You can fool yourself into thinking that the groomed dog you see will be genetically programmed to pass on the look that was created. But, you cannot fool Mother Nature. I estimate that 20% of the exhibitors are good enough to make any dog "look" like a winner. For the remaining 80%, education of Judges is your best offense.

Now go hug your dog and get started.