



The Importance of the Tibetan Mastiff Coat

When I entered the breed 20 years ago, I remember hearing that the hallmarks of the breed are the head and the tail. A third characteristic that distinguishes the Tibetan Mastiff is the coat. Their thick, showy coat is what initially draws many people to the breed.

The undercoat is extremely dense, soft, and wooly. In winter, when the TM is considered “in coat”, it may be almost impossible to separate the fur to find skin. The overcoat, or guard hair, can vary from medium to long and can be fine or coarser “*but hard, straight, and stand-off; never silky, curly or wavy*”. The coat tends to be longer and thicker around the neck, forming a mane-like appearance, which can be pronounced in males and some females. TMs have a low maintenance coat with minimal dander and do not have a doggy odor, so frequent baths are not necessary. A good weekly brushing to prevent tangles and to remove surface dirt is all that is required.

A number of factors influence coat, both genetic and environmental. While the amount and length of coat is heavily influenced by genetics, males generally carry more coat than females, both in length and thickness. Age has to be taken into consideration when talking about the coat. The puppy coat is soft and fluffy. Sometimes TM pups never lose their puppy coat, but rather it becomes the undercoat as the adult coat comes in over it. The adult coat starts to make an appearance around 6-8 months in a distinct pattern: Down the center of the back and up the legs, and fills in from there.



Coat will continue to grow and develop well into maturity. Diet can affect both the amount and the condition of the coat, as can temperature and time of year. Diet is one area where you truly reap what you sow. A good quality diet with adequate protein and oils will result in a shiny, healthy coat. Coats of TMs kept in an air conditioned environment in the summer will fare much better than those left outside.

Altered dogs, both male and female, may develop a different type of coat altogether, commonly called a “spay coat”, that is longer, softer, and a finer texture.

Winter Coat Photo Crystal Lange

General health of the dog can also affect the quality of the coat. Dry, brittle coat or hair loss can often be the first signs of hypothyroidism or other health issues. A healthy, well-nourished and well maintained coat will be sleek and shiny.

Winter coat is thick enough to be completely impervious to water in order to endure the harsh weather conditions of the Himalayas. In their native Tibet, where average winter lows range from -10 C to -18 C in the plateaus and drops drastically as you ascend in altitude, the coat of the Tibetan Mastiff is the very essence of its survival.

Within the last 10 years, the breed has been infiltrated with foreign dogs interbred with St. Bernards, Chows, Newfoundlands, etc., in an effort to produce larger size, more wrinkles, and longer coat. One sure way to distinguish the descendants of these mixed breeds is to carefully examine the coat--longer and more abundant for sure, but soft, wavy, and unable to repel snow and water. The TM coat should more resemble the coat of a Husky than a Chow. This is why our standard points out that *“The quality of the coat is of greater importance than length”*.

In summer, TMs lose their undercoat in a massive shedding over 6-8 weeks that is referred to as blowing the



coat. Sometimes the dogs will lose so much fur that bare skin can be seen beneath the guard hair, and even the tail can become sparse. This is especially noticeable the first 2 years, as the overcoat is still filling in. Our standard specifically states

“Dogs are not to be penalized if shown with a summer coat”, but many judges, like most individuals unfamiliar with the breed, expect a thick, plush coat year-round.

This perception is magnified by the fact that most TM owners will not show their dogs when out of coat, so most judges have no idea what a summer coat looks like.

I recently had one knowledgeable judge comment that when they are out of coat, “a TM in the ring is a coyote on a string”. An exaggeration, but the winter-to-summer transition is very real. Just as winter coat is essential for winter survival, summer coat ensures the dogs can survive the summer heat outdoors in their homeland.

Summer Coat Photo Crystal Lange

Coat is not just a window dressing, but serves a functional purpose for a working dog such as the Tibetan Mastiff. It is critical that we understand this, and not be thrown by an abundance of coat or the lack thereof. The two photos are of the same dog, first in winter dog, and the second in summer coat. Both are correct.

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