

Kuvasz: the armed guard of nobility

This gentle giant offers the wonderful combination of protector and companion

By Mary Blye Howe

When our Hungarian Kuvasz cautiously emerged from her travel box at the airport and into our arms, it was love at first snuggle. The 12-week-old bundle of bushy white fur had been confined for an entire day during her flight from Louisiana to Texas and was eager for a drink of water and a little attention from her new owners. Already an unspoken agreement existed between us: For the next several months we'd protect her, and she'd return the favor for the rest of her life.

Priscilla fit everything my husband and I had read about the Kuvasz (pronounced Koo-voss). She was affectionate without being obtrusive, avoided aggression while assuring strangers she had that capability, and demonstrated her passionate love of children by wagging her entire body when any came near.

We had our second Kuvasz flown in from Kentucky a few months later. Although it took Priscilla a few minutes to get used to the idea, she soon welcomed Aquilla into our home, too.

Both Kuvaszok (plural for Kuvasz) are from long lines of national champions, and Aquilla is the great-nephew of a world champion.

When I walk Priscilla and Aquilla, people in cars often pull over to the side of the road to gawk or ask questions. Most people assume they are sheep dogs, but Kuvaszok are, by nature, guard dogs. King Matthias I would go nowhere without at least one Kuvasz by his side, and, for a period of time, it was said that only those within the favor of royal circles were permitted to own one. Indeed, the word "Kuvasz" comes from a Turkish word meaning "armed guard of the nobility."

The word "guard," however, must be differentiated from the image of an aggressive attack dog. One Kuvasz breeder with whom I talked shied away from the word "guard" to refer to the breed, preferring instead "pro-

teCTOR," or at least "livestock guard." Another writer chose the word "guardian" to describe this breed.

Most official publications, however, don't hesitate to list the Kuvasz as a guard dog. Both the American Kuvasz Association and the "Encyclopedia Britannica" report this breed to be "guard unexcelled." This is important because, unlike a sheep dog, which often herds without protecting the livestock from wolves and other animals, the Kuvasz has been used specifically to guard and protect.

While Kuvaszok are often stubborn (allegedly because they worked for many years independently of humans), this characteristic can almost always be overcome with lavish praise and firm but gentle commands. Case in point: Although my husband and I have designed our back yard to look like Alcatraz, Priscilla still escapes. (She was so intent on getting out last week that she knocked down an entire section of our 6-foot privacy fence.)

At first, when I'd find her, I'd loudly command her to "come." When she'd hesitate, I'd run toward her with daggers in my eyes and scream louder: "Come!" Although all my neighbors within a 10-block radius would respond,



Priscilla and Aquilla's litter cautiously surveys their new world. Photos by the author.

BREED PROFILE

Priscilla would simply run away from me.

Later I found that a soft but firm command worked much better. When she'd approach with her tail tucked and head down, I'd pet her and reward her with lots of "good girls." I haven't had any problems with her since. Kuvaszok love compliments and will do just about anything for them.

The temperament of a Kuvasz may vary from one to another. Our female is on the aggressive side, often barking at strangers and almost always running promptly toward them to "check them out." Aquilla, on the other hand, appears laid back; while he also runs toward strangers entering our back yard, he seems less suspicious and more in search of new companionship. Both, however, have had oc-

casions to demonstrate their protective nature and have done so in an appropriate manner.

Although developed in Hungary, the Kuvasz's ancestors are from Tibet. One historian believes this breed was domesticated by the Sumerian herdsman as long as 7,000 to 8,000 years ago, accompanying them from Mesopotamia to what is today Hungary. In the latter part of the 15th century the Kuvasz was regularly used to hunt wild boar and

bear. During the Middle Ages, the Kuvasz would ward off bears and wolves as it stood guard in the Alps over sheep, cattle and horses.

During World War II, many Ku-

vaszok were shot by troops moving across Hungary, either because the men feared the animal or for sport. Since most people didn't have enough food even for themselves, many animals also starved to death. It is estimated that only about 30 Kuvaszok survived the war.

In the 1950s, breeders began to take interest once again in the Kuvasz, and, although it remained a rare breed for some decades, today the American Kennel Club no longer

treats the breed as such. The Kuvasz is eligible to compete in shows focusing on rare breeds, but they've also received AKC recognition alongside the better-known breeds.

With their dark eyes, nose and lips contrasted to the snowy white fur, the Hungarian Kuvasz is without a doubt a most beautiful breed. Its strong and sturdy limbs, graceful, sweeping tail and majestic posture contribute to this beauty. The Kuvasz also has a long life span compared to many other large dogs—from 12 to 15 years.

Those looking to purchase a Kuvasz for the first time should understand that its fur ranges from very wavy to very straight. Show-quality pups normally cost between \$800 and \$1,000, while pet-quality animals (those with imperfec-

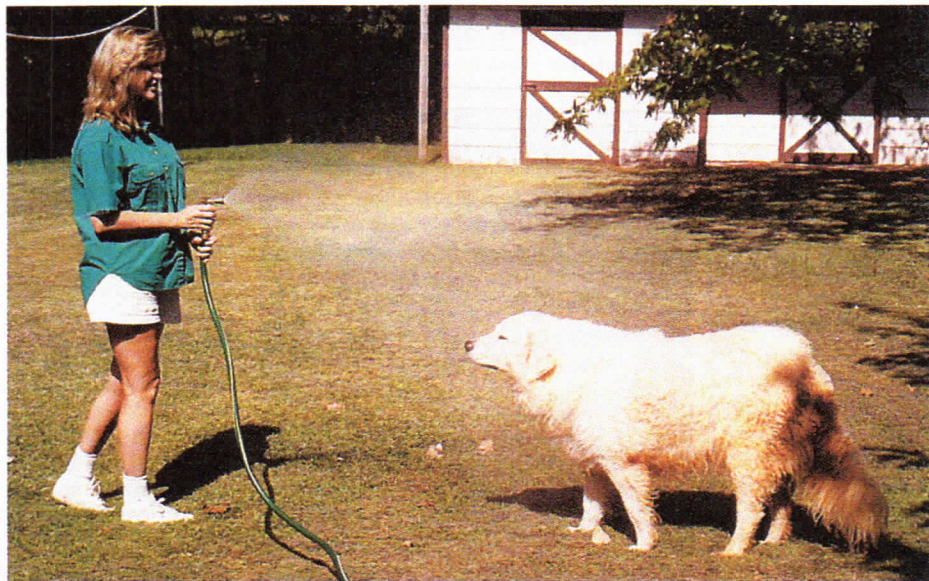
tions in their appearance or structure) will cost considerably less.

Although a very small amount of shedding may go on year-round in warmer climates, the Kuvasz usually gets rid of its undercoat—the down-like fur underneath the guard hairs—within about two-months time. Thorough and frequent brushing during this time helps immensely.

Both of my animals love to be groomed, and Aquilla snores loudly and contentedly for as long as we're



It's difficult to believe that the small bundle of fur above, Shalimar's Priscilla May, would grow to closely resemble her mate (right), Walors Aquilla Ray. Kuvaszok grow to an average height of 28 inches and an average weight of 95 pounds.



Author Mary Blye Howe cools Aquilla with the pause that refreshes.

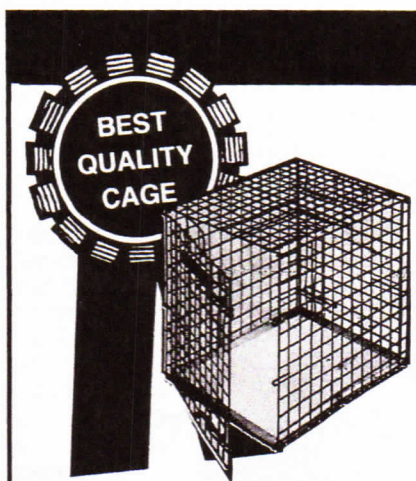
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willing to run the comb though his fur.

If eternity could be calculated in terms of climate, the Kuvasz would equate winter with heaven—the colder the better. While we leave our garage open year-round to provide shelter for our animals, you won't find them there in the winter.

Texas rarely sees snow or ice storms, but the first winter after we purchased our Kuvaszok, Dallas saw one of its worst. During the storm's most intense moments, we found Aquilla lolling in the middle of the back yard, his face turned upward in blissful greeting to the chilling sleet, and his fur literally caked with ice. It was the only time he refused to sit still while we brushed him out, nor could we drag him out of the cold and into the garage.

This might tell you that, although the Kuvasz will make a wonderful house dog, it prefers the outdoors.

While this breed loves to give and receive affection, it doesn't make a nuisance of itself. If we want to eat a hamburger on the patio, or just don't want to be bothered, our dogs will obediently find another part of the yard in which to lay.

Cleanliness is another plus. Normally, Kuvaszok will find a remote area of the yard in which to relieve themselves. In addition, a natural oil in their fur continually cleanses them, so a Kuvasz can lie in mud one day and you won't know it two days later. It is, in fact, not a good idea to bathe a Kuvasz too frequently.

As with any large dog, the Kuvasz is not exempt from tendencies toward certain diseases, namely, osteochondritis dissecans, panosteitis and hip dysplasia. As a puppy, our male was diagnosed with OCD, and our female with moderate dysplasia. Although the veterinarian recommended surgery for OCD, Kuvasz breeders recommended I wait a few months. I did, and Aquilla outgrew the disease. It has also been three years since Priscilla was diagnosed with dysplasia, and she has thus far shown no signs of lameness. It's important to get a few professional opinions before proceeding with any kind of treatment.

Some veterinarians now prescribe the drug Adequan for dysplasia, which is supposed to help regenerate cartilage that has been worn down from the disease. The vet with whom I spoke, while not exuberant about the drug's capabilities, has used it on occasion with satisfactory results.

High-protein dog foods (Kuvasz breeders recommend 24 percent protein or less), overfeeding and excessive jumping can increase the Ku-

vasz's chances of becoming afflicted with one of these diseases, so efforts must be made to avoid them.

Coming home from the office one day a couple of years after we purchased our Kuvaszok, I was shocked to find a tiny, squalling Kuvasz in the corner of a flower bed. Priscilla had birthed the first pup of her first litter and had run off to look for a new nest to whelp the remainder, leaving the first in abject misery and bewilderment.

After getting Mom settled, my husband, a friend and I got things ready to help, if needed. By 3 a.m., we had six more Kuvaszok. Friends expressed surprise that Priscilla let Aquilla near to inspect the pups so soon after the birth. They didn't know, as did Priscilla and I, that Aquilla would run in terror the first time one of them squealed at him.

Aquilla didn't make friends with the pups for several days—that is, until he discovered the leftover milk that encircled their tiny mouths after they had finished nursing. When Aquilla stuck out his big, red tongue to steal some of the treat, seven little pink ones returned the kisses. Contentedly ignorant of Dad's true motives, they were overjoyed with the new source of affection.

When Priscilla grew tired of nursing, she'd simply get up and walk off, the pups dangling from each nipple, dropping off one by one over a distance of about 4 feet. In a desperate search, seven pups would sometimes happen on Aquilla, and mass hysteria would break out when they found out the nipples had disappeared. Startled by the commotion, Aquilla would once again run for safety.

As the pups grew, they instinctively found the same cool resting places that Mom and Dad used. It may have been the smell of security that attracted the little Kuvaszok to these particular spots, or maybe these were the coolest places in our yard. I hoped it was for the latter reason—that made it much easier when seven new owners came to pick them up.

Neighbors and friends stopped by to see the pups as they grew, and were deluged with canine enthusiasm. One friend shook a pup's head and laughed at his "ferocious" growl. He might laugh now, but just wait until that pup is full grown.

Buying the Kuvasz of your dreams

If you are interested in purchasing a Kuvasz, here are a few things you should keep in mind:

- (1.) Are you going to keep you

Kuvasz in the house, or do you have a shaded, cool area of the yard for its use during summer months? If your answer to both of these questions is "no," please don't consider this breed! A sheltered area for the Kuvasz is a must.

(2.) Have you taken the time to locate a reputable breeder? The sources at the end of this article can help.

(3.) Is the pup you are considering buying friendly, rather than shy or extremely hyperactive? It's difficult to gauge a dog's personality before it's full-grown, but a pup with a moderate amount of aggression and friendliness will probably produce the kind of pet and guard dog that makes up the ideal Kuvasz.

(4.) Does the pup have any visible defects? If its eyes aren't dark brown and its nose and lips black, you shouldn't pay show-quality price. Also, the fur should be white with no markings. My dogs' fur sometimes gets discolored from lying in the dirt or sand—that should be distinguished from a defect. You can tell the difference by examining the base of the fur.

(5.) Did the breeder supply you with a paper showing the pup has had its first series of shots, a negative parasite check, the American Kennel Club registration papers and a three-to four-generation pedigree?

Anyone interested in more information on the Kuvasz can contact the following sources.

- Kuvasz Club of America, Dan Atwell, 838 Heron Road, Cocoa, Fla. 32926.

- The American Kuvasz Association, Linda Harvey, S. 94 W. 27495 Edgewood Ave., Mukwonago, Wis. 53149; (414) 363-4544.

- *The Kuvasz Guardian*, 18 S. Terrace Ave., Mt. Vernon, N.Y. 10550.

- *The Candle*, Kuvasz Fanciers of America, P.O. Box 2794, Grass Valley, Calif. 95945. Gail Dash, secretary, P.O. Box 7115, Mission Hills, Calif. 91346; (818) 366-5333.

- If you have to give up a Kuvasz, know of one that is impounded or if you'd like to rescue a Kuvasz, please contact the Kuvasz Rescue Committee, Sherlynn Stancil, 9129 W. Grand Ave., Franklin Park, Ill. 60131; (708) 455-6318.

Mary Blye Howe is a free-lance writer based in Ducanville, Texas. She says that the last four years spent with Pasillo and Aquilla have made her a die-hard Kuvasz fan. ■

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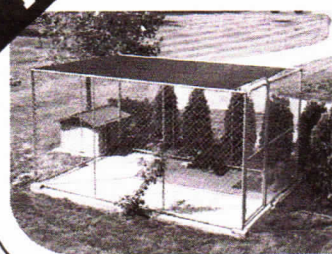
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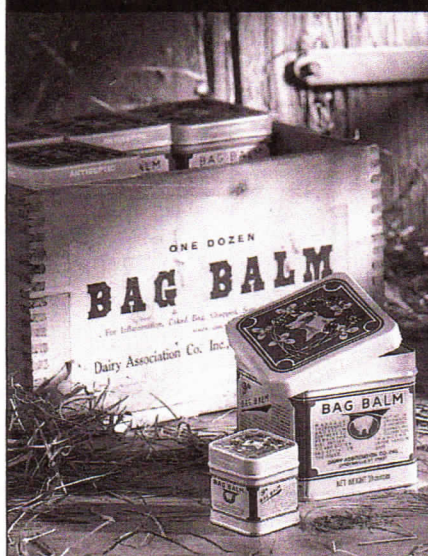
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