

Longhairs

By Sharon Deas

First of all, do not let all those people who say that Longhairs are too much work, put you off. I find many people exaggerate just how time consuming Longhairs are. True they are more work than Selfs, but they are well worth that extra effort. I think it is more of a case of not putting off things. You can't let days pass without combing out your Longhair, nor can you leave it too long between baths, or allow their cage to get dirty. If you are inclined to put things off till tomorrow, what should really be done today, then perhaps Longhairs are not for you. Otherwise, get out there and get a Longhair!

Unlike many other breeds of cavy, it is not only possible but very probable to buy a potential top quality show cavy. Most breeders, myself included, have far more good youngsters than they have time to wrap and show and are only too happy to sell some of them to those who are willing to take the time and effort to get them to the show table. Or you may be able to buy one that is already on the show table, especially if the breeder has several to show. These cavies are a good way to start as they are use to being wrapped and have at least got that far. Many a good cavy will never get to the show table as they simply will not put up with being wrapped. These 'advanced cavies' are an excellent way for you to learn how to wrap and show your first Longhair before they eventually go into your breeding program. You may be able to get a cavy to show with the proviso that you return it to the breeder, so they can use it for breeding, this is especially good if you want to show Longhairs but not necessarily breed them.

Which Breed?

The choice may depend on what is available at the time, or there may be a breed you love above all others and you want only them. If you do not mind which sort of Longhair, then I suggest the Texel. The curly coats tend to keep the wrappers in better, they are easy to present on the show table, no mane, frontal or coronet to worry about. If you do not get the 'wrapper kink' out of the coat, it does not really matter with a Texel.

How to Choose Your Longhair.

First of all choose your breeder. They should have been breeding, showing and winning with their Longhairs for a few years and have a good reputation for selling quality stock. It is probably best if you leave the choice to them as they should give you a good balance of breeding stock. Once a cavy has had its hair cut, it is hard to tell what their coat was like, so you have to trust the breeder if you are getting stock that has had their coats cut.

Once you have bred your first litter, choosing takes place from day one. Faults like hemmed or folded ears, poor heads and eyes are obvious at this time. Fur faults are visible now as well as any fault with the crest in a Coronet or Merino, BUT be careful not to discard your young Longhair for a seeming fur fault on the head or the crest while they are still with their mother. This is caused from nothing more than having their head under mum too much and will disappear soon after weaning.

As soon as I wean my babies they get put into individual cages. I keep my cavies in all wire cages, this includes a wire floor, this helps to keep them clean and dry, essential for longhairs. I have another good look at them now that they are weaned, but there is little you can tell about them yet. Boars have the hair around the 'boy bits' trimmed, this is to help stop getting hair caught.

I get them used to being handled by placing my hand in the cage, just touching them until they stop running. The cage cannot be too large and it is better if there is only one cavy per cage as they can scare each other. Once they stop running I keep my hand touching them for only a couple of seconds before removing my hand. The idea is to teach them to stand still at the approach of a hand. The next day I do it again, this time they usually stop running sooner. I may gently stroke their cheek or forehead, again for only a few seconds, it is important to remove your hand before they move. If they are the ones to break contact, you have to do it all again. It must be you who breaks contact with them, not the other way around. They quickly learn it is not so bad and sit still for a quick stroke.

Depending on just how clean they are, (some may need to be done sooner) they are bathed for the first time around 6 to 8 weeks old and are combed out. From now on they are washed regularly, usually every 2 weeks, even if it is only the rump that is washed. Some will need washing more often. Some cavies keep themselves wonderfully clean and other seem to manage to get dirty 5 minutes after you have washed them! For those dirty sorts, if they have white areas on them, then they usually do not make it to the show table. As for what you wash them in. There are so many choices, I wash in a cheap (human) shampoo. Other people use Insecticide, fungicide, anti-bacterial and anti-dandruff shampoos and so on. I leave the

choice of shampoo up to you. After bathing, gently pat dry the cavy, do not rub the hair as it will pull hair out. Blow dry the cavy completely as trying to comb damp hair will pull hair out.

Don't forget to check your cavy's eyes for any problems. People tend to spend so much time looking after the hair that they forget to check the eyes, especially with those breeds which have hair over the face. You may find that the poor cavy has a grass seed in their eye and it can go unnoticed for days.

If you have the misfortune to find that your cavy has partially pulled out a wrap and has been dragging around this dirty/wet knotted bundle of hair, do not attempt to comb out until you have washed and dried the cavy. If you are already late for work and simply do not have time to wash, then wrap it up the best you can, dirty, wet and all and leave it until you do have more time. Do not just cut it off thinking your cavy is finished, it might not be as bad as you think.

From now on you start to get more of an idea of what your youngster is going to be like but there is still a long way to go and sometimes the one you thought would turn out tops, fails to come up to expectations and one you did not think all that much of, can surprise you. So do not give up too soon. The cavy must be perfectly clean and dry before you make any decision on whether to keep it or not. I never make that sort of decision until the day after I have washed the cavy, so it absolutely clean and dry. That is when it should look its best. If the cavy is damp or has a slightly greasy/dirty coat, you may end up discarding what is in fact a good show animal.

"Shoulder drop" is something to watch out for. This is where the hair on the top of the shoulders can start to moult out, but they can moult anywhere, most often on the shoulders or down the sides. You find that there is a patch of hair that is only a few millimetres long. This is more noticeable because the hair tips are often a different colour. Some family lines are more prone to moulting than others. I do not breed from any that have moulted hair and they are no longer any good for the show table, so I pet home them.

Between 2 and 3 months of age I put in the first wraps. I put in 2 wrappers (splitting the sweep into two) at the back, then into 3 wraps as soon as possible. I use grease proof paper for wrappers and hair bands. At first I use only greaseproof paper but as the hair gets longer I use those polystyrene trays that you get your meat in. Cut to size, it is waterproof and light weight, better than cardboard, which gets heavy and falls to bits when it gets wet.

At first the wraps are likely to fall out fairly often but persevere, it will get better as the hair gets longer. Be firm but gentle as you try and put wraps in what seems to be a constantly moving target! If you are lucky you get one that sits there quietly but most will wiggle, buck, squirm, kick and run off! Frustrating you to the point of thinking about super glue or nailing it's feet to the floor! Some will run madly around their pen until the wraps fall out, others will pull and/or chew on the wraps. The kickers are hard to deal with, some do learn there is no need to kick every time you touch them, but others seem to kick before they even think about it, almost as an involuntary reaction! Worse still if once they do kick and entangle their feet in their hair, they kick all that much harder because it hurts, entangling even more hair and pulling it out. However, keep on keeping on and most will get use to getting wrapped and settle down, other will not and will end up as pets or in the breeding pen. I have found that there is no trouble breeding from them, as their babies will be good or bad as individuals. Siblings can be as different as chalk and cheese as for their reactions to wraps and showing.

I gradually build up the number of wrappers to 5 and then to 7 and even to 9 on an adult cavy. I find that the cavy seems more comfortable in the extra wrappers as you do not pull the hair from such a large area. Now you can tell the texture and density of each of the babies. It is the evenness of the length and density that will differ between your youngsters. Some will have long, dense sweeps but lack that length and density over the shoulders and/or sides. Others will differ only slightly, this is what you want. Do not mistake a fine coat for a lack of density, or a course coat for good density. The coat should feel soft and silky for the straight haired breeds and soft and springy for the rexed breeds. All should be dense but because the kink in the hair of the rexed breeds, they feel denser than the straight haired breeds. A good judge will make allowances for this. Density is made up of the topcoat and the undercoat. The undercoat only grows to a few inches long, which is why density is checked close to the body, not out at the ends of the hair. Some cavies can be a bit slow in growing in their undercoats so don't be too impatient and discard them too soon.

Density and length can be destroyed by the cavy kicking, pulling or chewing their hair. There is little you can do once this happens, so the idea is to prevent it from happening. Feeding lots of fresh grass every day and always having good hay available will prevent most chewing problems.

Do not have the hay loose in the cage, it will tangle with the hair. Have it in a hay net or some way that the cavy can only pull out one stalk at a time. I have the hay on top of the cage where they reach up and pull down a stalk when they want too. It goes without saying that there must not be anything in the cavy's pen that can pull hair out, which includes any box or sleeping quarters that has a doorway because every time the cavy goes through the door it will catch some hair.

One of the things that is so disappointing about longhairs is one mistake and that can be the end of their show career and months and months of work down the drain. It can be really heart breaking as there is no second chance. Hopefully this will not happen and you will be able to put a spectacular looking cavy on the table.

I wash the day before the show. I had read so many times that you need to wash your longhair some 3 to 7, even 10 days before the show, no matter how many days before the show I washed them, I found they always looked the best the day after I washed them. However I have to admit it took a long time for me to decide that I was better off washing the day before the show rather than following the words of wisdom I had read in numerous articles! You need to do what is best for you, rather than what is best for someone else.

I tried all sorts of different shampoos, conditioners and just about everything else. I found that conditioners tended to leave the coat limp, rather than silky and that cheaper shampoos are better than the expensive ones, which usually have fruit oils which leave the coat heavy and limp. Having said that, find out what works best for you. Water hardness and even what you feed your cavies can make a difference to how the coat is after a bath.

The Standards book will tell you how your particular longhair is to be presented. Remove the guard hairs on the face but be careful not to remove any hair from the chops (the long cheek hair). There must not be any knots anywhere on the cavy, and that includes under the arms and on the belly. Make sure that there is equal amount of hair on each side of the cavy, in other words the part has to be in the middle! Even with those breeds that do not have a part, still need to have equal amounts of hair on each side. Do not take the part too far back, and take hair that should be in the sweep, and comb it down the sides. This is where you need to feel the density for yourself and make sure it is even all the way around. Comb the chops forward so that it stands out, rather than swept back, where it will look like the cavy does not have much in the way of chops.

Get the cavy settled, combed and then, leave it alone! You do not have to keep fussing, it does not do you, or the cavy any good and it annoys the judge. Leave the comb next to the board so the judge can use the comb if they want to.

There is no other breed that can attract the attention of the public like the longhair, and rightly so, as there is no more stunning animal than a good quality, well presented longhair.

So, why don't you have one?

