

THE BOMBAY

By Phil Maggitti

What do you do when you've produced so many grand champions that you stopped counting at 100? When you've had so many best-in-show winners that you stopped counting at 500? When you've had the two top longhairs and the two top shorthairs in the country in the same year? When you've had two cats from the same litter go Cat of the Year and Best Opposite Sex Cat of the Year in the same year? When you've had Cat of the Year and Best Opposite Sex Cat of the Year on three other occasions to boot? When you've retired a cat at the age of 4 after he's been Cat of the Year three times? When you've bred the first Domestic Shorthair to go Cat of the Year? When every single, Sunday-go-to-meetin' finalist in one ring at a show is a cat that you've bred?

Do you write your memoirs? Hit the talk show circuit? Become a judge and stop breeding? Run for president of your association? Or do you look for another challenge to meet? If your name is Nikki Horner and you started breeding cats when you were 16 and you're not even 40 yet, you go out and get yourself a challenge. In Nikki's case it was the challenge of creating a new breed.

Actually, Nikki Horner began thinking about creating her own breed in the late '50s, right before she went on a roll to end all rolls, taking Cat of the Year wins in 1960, '61, '63, and '65—and taking Best Opposite Sex Cat of the Year in each of those seasons, too. Her first three Cat of the Year wins would come with the same cat, Grand Champion Shawnee Moonflight, a Copper-Eyed White Persian male. Her other top gun was Grand Champion Shawnee Trademark, a Silver Classic Tabby Domestic Shorthair male, the first of his breed (which is now called the *American Shorthair*) to achieve this honor. But Nikki was never a one-, two-, or even a three-note performer. She also had some of the top Burmese in the country. Yet as good as they were, they weren't good enough to suit her.

"There seemed to be something missing," she recalls. "I thought, 'Wouldn't they be absolutely gorgeous if they were black with copper eyes (instead of sable with yellow eyes)?' Then I said to myself, 'Well, that's one thing I haven't done yet—create a new breed.'"

She decided to call this new breed the Bombay, "after the black leopard and the city in India. I think the name has a ring to it. It's very exotic sounding. Of course if I had known the expense and all the work it would take to establish a breed, I'm not sure I would have done it."

Nikki's first attempt to produce a copper-eyed black with Burmese conformation was a thumping failure. One of the only things she hasn't gotten right in her career. "I crossed Black Domestic Shorthairs and Burmese, but the cats I produced were big and horsey. They looked like poor Americans. Besides, their coats were too long, and their eye color wasn't any good. So I had to start all over again."

The second time around Nikki found a Black

Domestic Shorthair male in Minneapolis with the eye color she was looking for. She bred him to one of her best Burmese females. Then she bred one of her best Burmese males to a Black Domestic Shorthair female, a half-sister to Cat of the Year Trademark. She kept all the kittens from these litters, crossed them with one another, and she was on her way. But it was a long, long way to eventual acceptance.

"When I tried to get people interested in the breed they would say, 'I'll wait until you get them recognized, then I'll buy one.' That attitude really delayed acceptance. I had to take my cats out as a provisional breed forever."

She also had to deal with a lot of unshowable kittens. When Nikki crossed a Black American with a Burmese, she got black kittens, black being dominant to sable. But each of those kittens carried a recessive gene for sable, and when she bred two of them together or crossed one to a Burmese in order to improve type, 25 to 50 percent of the kittens were sable, but they could not be shown as Burmese because they weren't "purebred."

In 1976 the Cat Fanciers' Association became the first registry to recognize what Nikki Horner likes to refer to as "the patent leather kids with the new—penny eyes." By that time, after thousands of miles and hundreds of kittens, Nikki was feeling a little burned out.

"Getting the Bombay recognized just about did me in," she says. "I'd lost interest in cats altogether because it was so tiring. I said that if I got this breed recognized, I was going to take a break. So I got out of cats the year the Bombays were accepted."

You can get out of cats, to be sure, but you can't always get cats out of your blood. By 1986 Nikki was back in the hunt, showing a Burmese and a Bombay and doing quite nicely once again. She hadn't lost any of her style or verve during her sabbatical, either. At one show when a judge was presenting a Bombay infinals, he mentioned that this was a lovely man-made breed.

"Excuse me," said a voice in Southern drawl from the gallery. "That's *woman-made*." The judge, Nikki laughs, wasn't particularly amused.

During the last 44 years Nikki Horner has written her name in large, florid letters across the cat fancy. We will probably never see the likes of her 1960-through-'65 performances again. Yet if you ask her to name the most satisfying thing she's done in cats, she'll talk about the CFA Invitational show in St. Louis last year.

"When I walked into the show hall with those sky-high ceilings that had big white banners hanging down over each breed section and I saw the one that said *Bombay*, I thought, 'By golly, people won't remember all the cats and all the wins I've had over the years; but when I'm gone, the Bombay breed will still be here.'

And that, Gentle Reader, is what separates the women from the girls, the men from the boys, and the truly great from the just-plain-great in the cat fancy.