

Caring for the MALTESE COAT

By Manny Comitini

The misconceptions and hype behind the grooming is easily the biggest excuse people use as to why they do not want to become involved in showing a Maltese.

My philosophy is to teach everything I know about grooming so that once it is understood, a person can move past it and focus more on the truly challenging parts

of the hobby: learning about Maltese structure and how to breed a better dog so that they won't waste time growing coat on a Maltese that should've been placed as a pet.

The time and effort people put into their Maltese show dog when it is at home being 'conditioned' (that is, not only coat condition, but physical and mental condition as well) is evident when it is presented at the dog show.

Many exhibitors exist on the level of ability to grow the coat to floor length, but only a few go on to learn and perfect their grooming skills to be able to present a sleek and finished exhibit. While many want to believe there is a product that will auto-adjust the overall dog, it is more about the process and how it is achieved rather than what is used to achieve it.

The ability to assess the condition, quality and texture of a Maltese coat is

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the key to determining the products to be used and the grooming process to be followed for the dogs' careers. There are a great number of coat textures found on the bodies of Maltese throughout the world. The longer you are involved with the breed, the more textures you will encounter. One could debate about which texture is the most correct, but the truths are that it is objective and all textures win in the show ring, at one time or another, when presented well enough.

My grooming tools consist of pin brushes from Madan® and Pure Paws®, Krest 4640 tail combs, as well as a variety of metal combs and soft slicker brushes. Products such as Vellus® Satin Cream, ProLine Self Rinse™ and Plush Puppy Protein Balm are used all time on every dog no matter the coat texture or the age. I never leave home without them. I use a professional, Sedu® brand human hair dryer (with an ionic option) with the Chris Christensen Systems® handheld dryer device to dry all of my coated Maltese. The hand dryer allows for greater control over the specific areas being dried with no over drying. The result is less volume, more shine and hair that not only looks healthy, but feels healthy. My flat iron is the CHI Air® Classic Ceramic Tourmaline.

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There is an abundance of very affordable human products found at neighborhood stores that can clean, condition and give a sleek, finished look to a Maltese. The type of products you use and the amount used is based on the condition and texture of the coat. I never use a product full strength. Shampoo and conditioner are always mixed with water and poured over the dog in the tub. This ensures an equal distribution of product throughout the coat. Shampoo is always rinsed out. Conditioner is never rinsed out. The ratio of shampoo to warm water is roughly 1:20.

On the shelves in my grooming room I have clarifying, whitening, moisturizing and medicated shampoos as well as light, moisturizing and deep conditioners. Brand names such as Herbal Essence®, Dove®, Suave® and Clear® are commonplace. I keep a bottle of white vinegar handy to use every so often (it is mixed with water and poured over the dog) in an attempt to control yeast and to prevent product build up. In regard to using oil, I haven't had to use it in a while. I enjoy seeing the coat in its natural state daily so that I know how it will look on show day.

I start routine puppy baths when they turn 8-9 weeks (sometimes earlier if necessary). Routine bathing takes place 2 times a week. After they turn 12 weeks old, potential show puppies are groomed every 3 days and sometimes more often, if needed.

For a puppy coat that is healthy and in good condition, I use a 'light' or 'every day' shampoo and then a 'light', 'every day' conditioner. If the coat gets damaged or dry, I use a moisturizing conditioner. Around 5 months, if the coat has severe broken and split ends, I fill a litter pan about 1/3 of the way up with water and add a more specialized conditioner (one made to specifically repair damaged hair and/or to prevent split ends). I have the dog stand or sit in the mixture for at least 3 minutes, to allow the ends to absorb as much product as possible. That last process is essential for puppies and is the trick to how I get my puppy coats to stay even, and thick with hardly any breakage. The result is a healthy coat close to floor length before they turn 9-10 months of age. By doing coat-damage control on puppy coats early on, you are paving the way to a close-to-flawless adult coat. I never allow the coat to become matted due to neglect. Knots are going to happen for various reasons, but if you are not the cause of them due to use of the wrong products or from not brushing and bathing regularly, the knots that do occur will be insignificant.

After every bath the coat is ironed. When I explain this part of the grooming people tend to respond with questions about damage to the hair from excessive ironing. Ironing the hair every 3-4 days is hardly excessive. Any tool used incorrectly is going to damage the coat. A high quality ceramic flat iron set at the correct tempera-

ture will be very gentle on the coat. Thicker coats require higher temperature settings (350°-400°) while flat, silkier coats benefit from lower heat settings (300°-380°). Ironing seals the follicle and traps the moisture which helps prevent split ends. This allows the coat to grow to lengths passed the floor.

Ironing the coat before wrapping makes wrapping the coat very easy. It's difficult to give an exact age as to when to begin wrapping a Maltese coat. Each Maltese is an individual and some take to wrapping better than others. I do not wrap all of my dogs to attain coat past the floor. But by the time one turns 8-9 months, I would have started to wrap the dog's muzzle, ears and head hair to prevent it from being chewed on while they eat. I use wax paper tissue wraps size 6"x10.25". Up until that time, the hair is banded up on the muzzle and head using the lightest bands available.

The way I bathe the dogs for show is no different than the way I do maintenance baths. The bathing products do not change for that individual dog on show day. I choose to bathe my dogs on the morning of the show and every morning that I show.

I start grooming on show day, the latest, 4-5 hours before ring time. That is plenty of time for two Maltese to be properly exercised, brushed, bathed, dried and ironed, with about 15 to 20 minutes for top knots and a small trim of whatever hairs I might've missed during the grooming the time before.



I do all my trim work either before I leave for the show or the night before the show. To brush through coats I use pin brushes and sometimes small, soft slicker brushes when necessary. I spray the coat with a solution of light or leave-in conditioner and distilled water to get the coat loosened up while brushing through and checking for any small knots. I use the same solution ringside and in the ring while brushing to keep the hair in place. I don't use styling products in spray bottles as it could cause the coat to look and feel different from how it should. The dog is bathed using the same process as described before (maintenance bathing), then dried, and then ironed.

On show day, I flat iron the coat using styling products. The two products I've been using for years are Garnier® Fructis Style™ Anti-Humidity Smoothing Milk and Plush Puppy Protein Coat Balm. Both have anti static properties and both provide a light hold to the coat that keeps the loose hairs from flying about and the ends of the coat in place without causing the coat to feel or appear greasy. Both products absorb quickly and give a nice, natural-looking sheen to the coat. They both can both be re-applied ringside or in the ring by hand if extra hold is necessary (on windy days) and then again when taking winning pictures without any build up. They both also condition the hair while it is being kept in place.

To put top knots up, I tease the hair gently and rely mostly on the teasing and band placement to form the shape of the top knots. I never do severe-looking, high top knots that crunch when you touch them and bounce when the dog moves. I use a minimal amount of hair gel and after the top knots are up, I apply a light amount of hair spray to keep everything in place. The more natural the hair looks, the better. I use hair spray on the end of the metal part of the tail comb to smooth the tiny hairs in place on the head and around the top knots to give a nice clean appearance and so the main focus is on the dog's eyes.

When showing is over, the first thing I do is go back to the set up and break



down the top knots. I don't like leaving them in for longer than necessary. The product I use to break down the top knots is the same water/conditioner solution I use to spray through the coat before the bath. The less styling product you put into the coat the easier it is to remove without breakage. If the dog is one that I wrap the body on, this is when I get that done. If the ground on which we showed was especially harsh I will wrap the coat using the Vellus® Satin Cream for extra over-night conditioning on the ends.

So, there's the big secret to how I grow coat on a Maltese. Hopefully I made it read as easily as it actually is to do, and hopefully this article encourages people to get over any fears of maintaining coat and they take an interest in our breed. ■



BIO

I've been breeding and showing Maltese with my partner, Christopher Vicari, for over 20 years.

Our kennel name is Chrisman Maltese. Together we have consistently bred Maltese that went on to become top producers and top winning Best in Show, Best in National Specialty Show, Best Puppy, Best Bred-By, Best Veteran Maltese that have won titles all around the world. We have had #1 Maltese All breed and breed systems as well as numerous top 10 Maltese throughout those years. We currently hold the title for breeding the youngest Maltese ever to have won a Best in Specialty Show.