

BREEDING FOR CHINCHILLA COLOR

By TEX THOMAS

In my opinion the most unique feature of the standard Chinchilla breed is the distinctive coloration. Getting this coloration right and knowing how to adjust the breeding program to correct color faults is going to determine your success or failure as a breeder. In that context, I would offer the following observations on breeding for correct color.

Lets start with an often over looked item and that is belly undercolor. The standard specifically calls for white belly surface color over either white or blue undercolor. Which undercolor you use in the breeding program has significant influence on all other color aspects of chinchilla color. Breeding to white belly undercolor will correct several problems. First, it will brighten your intermediate ring color and widen the bandwidth of the intermediate color. Secondly, it will tend to lighten your surface color if it is too dark. Thirdly, you will tend to get a better dispersion of black guard hairs when using white-bellied rabbits. The drawback on using these animals consistently is that you can increase the number of “Ghost” animals in a litter—those being the ones where the white intermediate color runs almost entirely down the hair shaft and shows practically no blue base color. It can also tend to throw more salt and peppered surface colors where you lose the waviness of top color. Finally, it will narrow the height of the base color and tend to narrow the top black band above the intermediate color.

Breeding to animals with blue undercolor on the belly will intensify the base color and tend to widen the base color. It will also widen the top black band and increase the amount of guard hairs in the surface coloration. The problem with breeding consistently blue belly undercolors is that you are going to get too dark in surface color almost immediately, plus, you are going to lose brilliance of the intermediate color and start throwing more brownish coloration that will not clear up as the animal matures. That is why you need to keep animals of both types of belly undercolor for your breeding program. My personal choice is to keep a preponderance of the white-bellied rabbits as I feel that it is much easier to darken the color than lighten it.

I know that the most important aspect of chin color –point wise-- lies with the surface color, but my first culling evaluation is usually on the intermediate color. I demand a bright intermediate color that is almost as wide as the base color—only slightly narrower. Some rabbits displaying brown in the intermediate ring at this stage of development will clear up and whiten with progressive molts and age, however, I have never had a rabbit that is bright white in the intermediate

color as a junior go brown as it matures. That is not going to happen if you start with correct intermediate color. (One note on chins in general, they will tend to get a very slight browning coloration at the very top of the intermediate ring as they start to go into a molt, but this will come out when you get a finished coat.) The first thing I will cull for is that above mentioned “ghost factor” where the intermediate is too wide to allow for good base color. You can use these rabbits in a breeding program, but only if they are bred back to blue belly undercolor rabbits. They will never be show rabbits.

The undercolor and top narrow band are extremely inter related in the breeding program. You want an undercolor that is intense in slate blue color and just slightly wider than the intermediate color. Don’t try to get this band so wide that there is not room to express the brilliant white of the intermediate color, which you see on too many chins. If you get the undercolor too wide you have to narrow the intermediate color and this leads to surface color that is too dark. Always breed for adequate room on the hair shaft to express that white factor of the intermediate color. Again, if the top undercolor gets too wide, breed back to rabbits with totally white belly undercolor for correction. You will almost never see a chin with bright slate blue undercolor that does not have an excellently expressed black band at the top of the intermediate color. These two go hand in hand, as does the fact that this type rabbit is going to show an excellent amount of black ear lacing, which is usually never commented on in judging, but really sets off the contrasts of chin coloration.

If you see the top five rabbits in a Standard Chinchilla class at the ARBA convention lined up side by side, you are probably not going to see any two of them with exactly the same surface color. Unfortunately, this breed often gets judged at local shows by judges who never blow into the coat and select strictly on surface color. You have more points on the combined two interior colors than you do on the surface color—20 points versus 15 points, but you better be prepared to put excellent surface color on the table if you expect to win. This is why I have stressed starting with the intermediate color in establishing good surface color. You have to carry a bright surface color of sparkling white to have the contrasting coloration with the black guard hairs which must be interspersed throughout the coat. Any expression of brown in this surface color is going to be the kiss of death on the show table, and I can almost guarantee that if the surface color is brownish, the intermediate color is also brown or extremely dull in color. These two also go hand in hand, and in neither instance should the rabbit make it to the show table. A correctly colored chin must be of contrasting blacks and whites. The most common failing in surface color is usually not caused by breeding, but rather by conditioning. Any molting of coat is going to be magnified in the chin surface

color, making it look twice as bad as it really is. On these animals you just have to wait for their priming time to show successfully. Structure problems in surface color are usually related to being too dark, which can again be corrected by breeding back to white belly undercolored animals. If the surface is too light, then you need to breed back to animals with blue belly undercolor, but you must watch these animals for incorrect intermediate color, as that goes hand in hand.

Finally the coat is set off by the distinct black guard hairs. This is what gives the waviness to the surface color. You don't want the ticking so prominent as to overshadow the top color and give an impression of black surface color. These animals will usually appear too dark when looking along the lower hip area, simply because looking down at ticking off the drop of the hip makes the ticking appear to group too tightly, giving the impression of dark uneven dispersion of the ticking. Once again, the amount of ticking and the actual size of the hair shaft can be adjusted through a breeding program that pays close attention to the undercolor.

In summation, this is one of the few breeds in the ARBA standard that carries more points on color than any other single aspect of the breed. Color alone will not make you a winner, but lack of color will guarantee that you are a loser. Not every Standard Chinchilla born is destined to be a winner, but you need to have a breeding program instituted to give you the best chances of coming up with that complete Standard Chin.