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## THE AKITA INU: JAPANESE NATIONAL HERITAGE

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*At dog doesn't care if you're rich or poor,  
educated or illiterate, clever or dull.  
Give him your heart and he will give you his  
John Grogan*

Akitas have for centuries been the object of myth and legend and occupy a special place in Japanese culture (Fig. 1, 3). When a child is born, the parents will usually receive an Akita figurine signifying happiness and long life (see video [11]).

If the baby is a girl, her first March 3rd is her first “hinamatsuri,” during which time her parents decorate the hina-dolls in the house, and serve colorful sushi, sweet treats, sake to mark the joy of having a daughter. If the baby is a boy, armors and samurai dolls are decorated around the house, and koinobori, or carp banners are strewn on outside of the house to show that there’s a new male child in the family. This is an event dates back to the 7th century.

If a person is ill, friends will also send a small statue of an Akita to express their wish for a speedy recovery [2], (Fig. 4, 5, 6).

Akita is a large and powerful dog breed with a noble and intimidating presence. They were originally used for guarding royalty and nobility in feudal Japan (see video [9])



Fig. 1. Akita puppy.



Fig. 2. E. Tsygankova [34].



Fig. 3. Akita inu.

Akita dogs are a breed native to Akita prefecture. The Akita-matagi, a Japanese hunting dog, is said to be the ancestor of Akita-inu. In the Edo Period (1603–1867), they were used as fighting dogs to assist bear hunters (Fig. 8) [41], **see video [34]**.

The Matagi culture has been traditional hunters of bear and deer found in the forest of Northern Japan for over four hundred years. For these men, hunting is a sacred act often performed in traditional garments and begun with a prayer (Fig. 9). If a bear is taken (often with the same weapon an ancestor used seven generations ago),



**Fig. 4. Red Akita.**



**Fig. 5. White Akita.**



**Fig. 6. Fawn Akita.**

its remains are rendered using a traditional Matagi knife. An offering to the Deity of the Mountains (Yama-no-Kami) is typically left behind, and is usually part of the bear. The Matagi hunt is so spiritual a practice that it wasn't until 2017 that an outsider was allowed to document it [32], **see movie [35]**.



**Fig. 8. Hunting.**



**Fig. 9. Traditional Matagi garb.**

*Old Dog Shrine* is on a hillside of Kuzowara in Odate City (the easternmost part of former Satake territory that is close to Dobukai, the territory of former Nambu). This shrine had been burned down on July 18th in 1936, and the reformed one remains here. There is a story about the dog called "Shiro" and it is enshrined and said to be a true story. The hunting license that appear in the story still remains in the modern day.

## The sad story of Sadaroku and Shiro

Once upon a time, there was a Matagi (traditional Japanese hunter) called Sadaroku and he was given a special license to hunt from the lord (it allowed him to do hunting in the other territories and even within a shrine's ground). He had a dog called Shiro which was his good partner in hunting.

On a cold winter day, Sadaroku and Shiro were chasing after a escrow. They passed the border to the Kazuno-Sakai and they reached closer to Sannohe Castle. But he was disappointed because he missed his game. Then, as he was to return home, he was suddenly surrounded by several men. They were the officers of the Sannohe territory. They came to capture Sadaroku with a criminal charge for shooting within their territory. Sadaroku tried to pull out his license to show his right to hunt. However, Sadaroku just realized that he forgot it on that particular day. He tried to explain the situation that he was in. But effortlessly he was put into jail.

Sadaroku repeatedly told Shiro to go home and to bring the hunting license. Shiro followed his instructions and went home.

As soon as Shiro got home, he started barking restlessly at Sadaroku's wife. But she didn't understand what Shiro was trying to tell her. Shiro came back to the jail again. And Sadaroku repetitively told Shiro the place of the hunting license. Shiro went home again surpassing the wildness without any rest. And this time he barked in front of the Buddhist altar. Then finally, the wife realized and remembered about the hunting license and immediately she tied it onto Shiro's neck.

However, when Shiro arrived at the jail, Sadaroku had been executed already and his corpse lay on the ground mercilessly.

From that night on, every day and night, Shiro's sad howling were heard in Sannohe castle and its town. Soon, a natural disaster occurred in this area and everyone who were involved with the death of Sadaroku died tragically

Later on, the wife and Shiro were expelled and they moved to Kuzowara that was close to Akita-Ryo-Zyuni-Syokan (current Odate city).

Since sometime, Shiro disappeared and later a skeletonized corpse of Shiro was found in a hill nearby. From then on, every time when the samurais on horses try to pass over the hill, the horse get out of control unexpectedly and the samurais fall off and get injured. So the villagers feared that those were Shiro's grudge and to pray for the repose of Shiro's soul, they built a shrine on the mountain.

Subsequently, the people from this area have been passing down this tragic story to later generations and still showing and keeping the affection for Shiro [36].

After the villagers heard this sad story, they tried to make appeasement and wanted to commemorate this faithful dog. They built a shrine which was called 'Rouken-Zinzya' (老犬神社) [8], see **video** [24]. This shrine now is located at Odate city. Every 17<sup>th</sup> April this shrine has a routine festival. Through this story, it is a good opportunity to learn more about the Akita dog. Siro was thought to be Matagi dog which share the same faithful characteristics to the Akita dog [24], see **video** [43]), (Fig. 10, 11, 12).

Thus, from the Taisho Period (1912–1926), Akita-inu preservation movements became more common, and in 1931, they were designated as a national natural monument. Today, Akita-inu are seen as common household pets [41].

A breed native to Japan, the Akita Inu is a dog categorized as a large-size with a round face, triangular ears and a curly tail. Although these are big, tough animals, they have a gentle, affectionate nature and are known for their devoted loyalty. Treasured in the past as hunting dogs, they fell out of popularity in recent years, so in



response, the birthplace of the Akita Inu, Odate City in Akita (**Fig. 13, video [14]**), began a program to breed and promote them, conducting a range of PR activities that include a petting space in the tourist office where visitors interact with the dogs (**see video [5]**).



**Fig. 10. ‘Rouken-Zinzya’ shrine. Fig. 11. The Akita dog Shiro. Fig. 12. Inside the ‘Rouken-Zinzya’ shrine.**

Odate is a part of the Akita prefecture, the birthplace of Akita dogs. The dogs are an important part of the city’s history – Shibuya station (Tokio, Fig. 14) even has a bronze statue of Hachiko, an Akita famous for his loyalty to his owner (he continued to wait for him at the train station nine years after his death) [30].



**Fig. 13. The map of Japan. Fig. 14. The statue of Hachi in Tokio. Fig. 15. Hachiko statue in front of the Odate train station.**

Because of the increasing attention for Akita dog not only in Japan but also worldwide, this brand new *Akita dog visitor center* (Akita Inu no Sato) was built just in front of Odate station in 2019. The admission is free here (**Fig. 15**).

Odate City is fiercely proud of being Hachiko's (and the Akita breed's) furusato (home town), and loves to show it. Not only is there a Hachiko statue in front of Odate Station (Fig. 15), you can find a Hachiko Shrine on the platform and many more Akita-inu statues in the area, like on top of the postbox at the City Hall.

They've also decorated the city's manhole covers with Hachiko-related cartoon characters. And there's a small museum (Fig. 16, 17, 36), where visitors can learn about the dog breed; an Akita inu exhibition room to meet some cute dogs; as well as a gift shop to buy Akita inu related items and specialty products. The Hachiko statue

here faces the Odate's Oshinai area, which is where Hachiko was born. On weekdays, people can pet and play with real Akita-inu dogs. There are several Akita-inu dogs of different colors greeting visitors.



**Fig. 16. Akita Dog Museum in Odate.**

**Fig. 17. Inside the Akita Dog Museum, Odate.**

Odate in the northern Akita Prefecture is the home of the Akita dog – which is known in Japan, as well as throughout the world. The Akita is loved for its stately appearance and its nature – loyal, obedient and brave. It rarely barks. It is also Japan's largest dog, both in size and weight. The average height of an adult dog is about 26 inches and weighs almost 90 pounds [23].

However, over time, the Tosa-inu (Fig. 19, see videos [37; 38]) became larger than the Akita-inu resulting in the Akita dogs losing popularity. The Tosa Inu is world renowned for its fighting prowess. The breed has been Japan's National fighting dog shortly after, it was developed between the period of 1868 and 1912 by crosses with the Kochi (a local Japanese breed (Fig. 18), native Shikoku fighting dogs (Fig. 22), with Western breeds such as the German Pointer, Mastiff, Great Dane, Bulldog, St. Bernard and the Bull Terrier. Tosas were often referred to as the "Sumo wrestler of the dog world" (video [39]).



**Fig. 18. The Kochi.**

**Fig. 19. The Tosa-inu.**

To preserve the Akita-inu, the government initiated the Natural Monument program in 1919. Several times, the Akita-inu was said to be close to extinction.

The people of Odate deplored the decrease of a pure Akita breed; then-Odate mayor Shigeie Izumi founded the Akita Dog Preservation Society in 1917 to preserve the full blood Akita.

Since then, the people of Odate and the society members have become devoted to preserving the pure Akita. In 1931, the Akita breed was designated a Japanese Natural Treasure. In 1967, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the society's foundation, the Akita Dog Preservation Society built the Akita Dog Museum which houses all sorts of information, documents and photos [23].

During the World War II period, the Odate and Shibuya statues were taken by the government to be made into weapons. A new Hachiko statue was built in Shibuya in 1948 (Fig. 14) and Odate in 1987 (Fig. 15). Today, Shibuya's Hachiko is a landmark where people – especially young students – meet.

Hiroshi Matsukawa of the Akita Dog Preservation Society said the first Akita to go to America was for Helen Keller. The famous U.S. author and educator – who was blind and deaf – visited Japan in 1937 and desired an Akita dog as her pet; one was donated to her. Matsukawa said there are about 30,000 registered Akitas in Japan. There are about five times that number in the United States, he said, because Americans who came to Misawa as occupation forces after World War II came to know the Akita and they liked them so much they took them back to the United States [23; 20; 44].

The Nihon Ken Hozonkai (日本犬保存会, The Association for the Preservation of the Japanese Dog), commonly abbreviated to Nippo, is a preserver and maintainer of the registries for the six native Japanese dog breeds: the Shiba Inu, Akita Inu, Hokkaido, Kai Ken, Kishu, Shikoku and Nippo also issues the Nippo Standard, which serves as a breed standard for the six native breeds [33], **see video [1]**. The Japan Dog Preservation Society established the "Japanese Dog Standard" in 1934 based on the essence and ideal body shape of Japanese dogs, and depending on the size, *small* (Shiba Inu, **Fig. 20**) and *medium-sized* (Kishuiken (**Fig. 21**), Shikoku dog (**Fig. 22**), Hokkaido dog (**Fig. 23**), Kai dog (**Fig. 24**), and *large* (Akita dog, **Fig. 25**) are classified into 3 types and stored [3; 23].



**Fig. 20. Shiba Inu.**



**Fig. 21. Kishuu Ken.**



**Fig. 22. Shikoku dog.**

Both Shiba (**Fig. 20**) and Akita-inu (**Fig. 25**) are extremely loyal to their owners. The Akita-inu has a temperament that has been used for dog training even though it has been improved, and the Shiba-inu is a dog that was raised and bred as a housekeeping dog. Since the Akita-inu is intelligent and apparently get bored easily, its not for everyone to have one as a pet due to its high demands in terms of exercise [16].

Akita dog is a large and powerful breed, with much substance and heavy bone; it is slightly longer than tall. The Akita's build reflects its original job of hunting big

game through deep snow and rugged terrain. Its double coat consists of a dense undercoat and a straight, harsh, outer coat – about 2 inches or less in length – standing off from the body. Such a combination provides ample insulation from water and weather. Its gait is brisk and powerful. The Akita is a versatile dog of large spitz type. It is able to perform as a hunting companion and protector [4], **see video [44]**.



**Fig. 23. Hokkaido Ken.**



**Fig. 24. Kai Ken.**



**Fig. 25. Akita Ken.**

As befitting its spitz-like heritage, the Akita is bold, independent, stubborn and tenacious. Demonstrative to its family, it is utterly devoted and will protect family members. It is reserved with strangers and can be aggressive toward other dogs. It can be domineering. Though not the breed for everyone, in the right hands the Akita is an excellent companion [4].

Akitas and Huskies are both for spitz-type dogs. They may appear to be related at first glance, but they are very different dog breeds. **In videos [6; 11]**, we can discuss all about these two breeds of dogs, which one is the best breed? On the other hand, Siberian Huskies (Fig. 26) caught the eye of public when they began winning sled races in the early 1900s'. They became legendary after they ran 658 miles in only five and a half days for an emergency medicine delivery [11].



**Fig. 26. Siberian Husky.**



**Fig. 27. German Shepherd.**



**Fig. 28. Shin Akita.  
Period (1912–1925)**

In 1908 dog fighting was banned in Japan, but the breed never regained its original size. At the end of World War II, the number of Akitas had been drastically reduced, and, as if that were not enough, there were three different types: Akita

Matagi (similar to the original), Akita Fighting and Akita Sheepdog. (Interbreeding of Akita with German Shepherd dog (Fig. 27), see videos [10; 6].

The interbreeding that had the characteristics of a Mastiff and a German sheepdog (Fig. 27) fascinated North American breeders and were used to repopulate the breed in the United States. These interbreeding lines, and in particular the Dewa line, gave rise to the breed that is currently known as the American Akita [7].

Breed fans in Japan did not accept these breeds as suitable representatives of the Japanese breed, so they set about repopulating the breed with Akita Matagi dog breed (Fig. 29, 30). The result is the current Akita Inu which, although larger than the original Akita Matagi, retains the Spitz type (Fig. 31) and does not have the characteristics of a German Shepherd (Fig. 27) and Mastiff (Fig. 19, 32, 33) [6].



**Fig. 29. Japanese Akitas .**



**Fig. 30. The Red Japanese Akita.**



**Fig. 31. The Japanese Spitz. Fig. 32. The head of a Tosa.**

**Fig. 33. The Mastiff by Philip Reinagle, 1805**

According to Nobuo Naora (Nagara) of the Waseda University, dogs in Japan were domesticated during the Jomon Period (about 8000 B.C. to 200 B.C.). These dogs were of medium size. Large dogs were imported later into the Kanto area. Small dogs were also imported and gradually spread nationwide.

Skeletons of small and medium dogs and a few somewhat larger dogs from that period resemble those of Japanese dogs of today. The largest dog believed to be about 1 shaku 9 sun (approximately 57.6 cm, 22.7 inches) tall based on the skull size has been found at the famous shell mound in the prefecture of Miyagi. Almost all of the

skulls of these medium and small dogs have straight nasal bridges, while skulls of large dogs have a definite stop (see video [31]).

Burial mounds have yielded earthen dog images, bronze bells, and dog shaped burial mound figures from ancient times show standing ears and curled tails.

Dogs are first mentioned in Japanese literature in books such as the *Kojiki* (Japan's Ancient Chronicles written by imperial command in the eighth century (Fig. 31), *The Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters* is Japan's classic of classics, the oldest connected literary work and the fundamental scripture of Shinto [42]) around A.D. 682 and *Nihon Shoki* (First Chronicle of Japan [21]) around A.D. 720 with tales of their use as hunting dogs (Fig. 32; 33, 36). It was compiled under the supervision of Prince Toneri (676–735), son of Emperor Tenmu (Fig. 34, [18]), and contains a

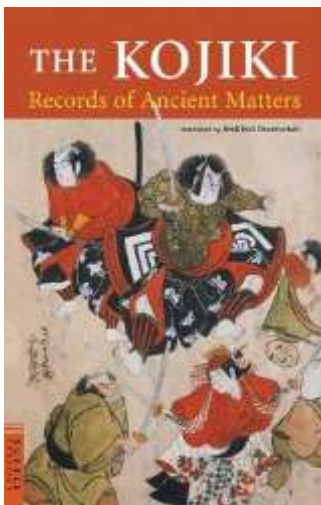


Fig. 33. Matagi dog.

Fig. 31. *The Kojiki* (in English). Fig. 32. Chronicle of Japan.

Fig. 34. Ōkuninushi. God of nation-building.

combination of myths, legends and historical facts, from the creation of the world to contemporary events of the reign of Empress Jitō. The first two chapters, known as Jindai no maki (Chapters on the Age of Kami), contain the Japanese creation myth which forms the basis of Shinto. They describe the origins of heaven and earth, the

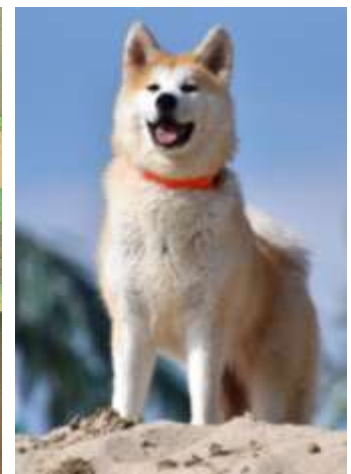


Fig. 35. The first Emperor is known as Jimmu-Tennō .

Fig. 36. Japanese Akita inu.

first seven generations of Shinto's multitude of deities and the creation of the islands of Japan by the gods Izanagi and his sister/wife Izanami [45]. We can see the statue of Okuni-Nushi-no-Mikoto of the Izumo-shrine (Fig. 34). He was given the responsibility from the world of the deities to build Japan.

According to Hirokichi Saito and Yonekichi Hiraiwa, hunting dogs were used with trained hawks for almost 1500 years from around 355 to the mid 1800s. (Fig. 34).

As early as A.D. 358, black pinto dogs resembling Japanese dogs of today are said to have come from Korea, followed by other dogs from there from time to time.

The Akita dog, the large Japanese dog, was in the greatest state of impurity when compared to medium and small Japanese dogs at this time. Many of the Akita dogs had been outcrossed to Western and Tosa (Fig. 19, 32, 33) fighting dogs. This occurred mostly during the earlier part of the twentieth century [17], **video [15]**.



**Fig. 36. The Akita is an excellent companion.**



**Fig. 37. With her favorite pet puppy.**

A breed native to Japan, the Akita Inu is a dog categorized as a large-size with a round face, triangular ears and a curly tail. Although these are big, tough animals, they have a gentle, affectionate nature and are known for their devoted loyalty. Treasured in the past as hunting dogs, they fell out of popularity in recent years, so in response, the birthplace of the Akita Inu, Odate City in Akita, began a program to breed and promote them, conducting a range of PR activities that include a petting space in the tourist office where visitors interact with the dogs (**see video [5; 22]**).

This is a large and powerful breed, with much substance and heavy bone; it is slightly longer than tall. The Akita's build reflects its original job of hunting big game through deep snow and rugged terrain. Its double coat consists of a dense undercoat and a straight, harsh, outer coat – about 2 inches or less in length – standing off from the body. Such a combination provides ample insulation from water and weather. Its gait is brisk and powerful. The Akita is a versatile dog of large spitz type. It is able to perform as a hunting companion and protector [4].

As befitting its spitz-like heritage, the Akita is bold, independent, stubborn and tenacious. Demonstrative to its family, it is utterly devoted and will protect family members. It is reserved with strangers and can be aggressive toward other dogs. It can be domineering. Though not the breed for everyone, in the right hands the Akita is an excellent companion [4], Fig. 36, 37.

To sum up, below we describe Akitas inu Scientific Classification, Breed Characteristics and Breed standard.

**Scientific Classification**

Kingdom - Animalia  
 Phylum - Chordata  
 Class - Mammalia  
 Order - Carnivora  
 Family - Canidae  
 Genus – Canis  
 Species - Canis Lupus  
 Subspecies - Canis Lupus Familiaris  
 Breed – Akita (Fig. 5, 38) [9], see video [46].



**Fig. 38. Akita inu. Scientific Classification.**

**Breed Characteristics**

**Name:** Akita (Fig. 38, 39).  
**Other names:** Great Japanese Dog, Japanese Akita, American Akita.  
**Origin:** Japan.  
**Breed Group:** Working (AKC:1972) Herding (UKC:1980).  
**Size:** Large to Giant.  
**Type:** Purebred.  
**Life span:** 10–14 years.  
**Temperament:** Alert, Courageous, Dignified. Docile, Friendly, Intelligent, Responsive.  
**Height:** *Male:* 26–28 inches (66–71 cm). *Female:* 24–26 inches (61–66 cm).  
**Weight:** *Male* 75–120 pounds (34–54 kg). *Female:* 75–110 pounds (34–50 kg).  
**Colors:** Black, Fawn, Red, White (Fig. 38, 40).  
**Litter Size:** 3–12 puppies (Fig. 40).  
**Puppy Price:** Average 800–1200 USD.  
**Adaptability:** 5 stars.  
**Barking Tendencies:** Rare.  
**Cat Friendly:** 3 stars.  
**Child Friendly:** 4 stars (Fig. 42).  
**Good with Kids:** This is a suitable breed for kids and is known to be playful, energetic, and affectionate around them.  
**Dog Friendly:** 3 stars.  
**Health Issues:** Hypoallergenic: No.  
**Intelligence:** Ranking: #54 Smartest Dog Breed.  
**Playfulness:** 3 stars.  
**Stranger Friendly:** 2 stars.  
**Watchdog Ability:** 5 stars [4].



**Fig. 39. Akita inu.**



**Fig. 40. Puppies.**



**Fig. 41. White Akita inu.**

**Exercise Needs:** The Akita Inu needs moderate but regular exercise to stay in shape. It should be taken for long daily walks.

**Apartment Friendly:** The Akita Inu will do okay in an apartment if it is sufficiently exercised. It is moderately active indoors and will do best with a large yard.

**Shedding Level:** Constant Shedding: Expect this dog to shed frequently. Be prepared to vacuum often. Brushing will reduce shedding as well as make the coat softer and cleaner.



**Trainability:** Moderately Easy Training: A confident and consistent approach is required to train an Akita. Repetitive drills or overly harsh training hinder the process. Akitas are easily housetrained. They must be socialized young if they are to live with other pets.

**Grooming: Low Maintenance:** Grooming them should be an easy process. They are fairly heavy shedders and can go heavier than normal two to three times per year. Daily brushing could be a good way to reduce this problem. This breed needs to bathe every few months, although it can be more often, depending on the needs of each owner. Toenails should be trimmed every month, and their ears should be cleaned once a week [4], see video [5].



Fig. 42. Akita inu and a child.

### Breed standard

**GENERAL APPEARANCE 1.** Large, powerful, alert, with much substance and heavy bone. The broad head, forming a blunt triangle, with deep muzzle, small eyes and erect ears carried forward in line with back of neck, is characteristic of the breed. The large, curled tail, balancing the broad head, is also characteristic of the breed [12].



### The Breed Standard

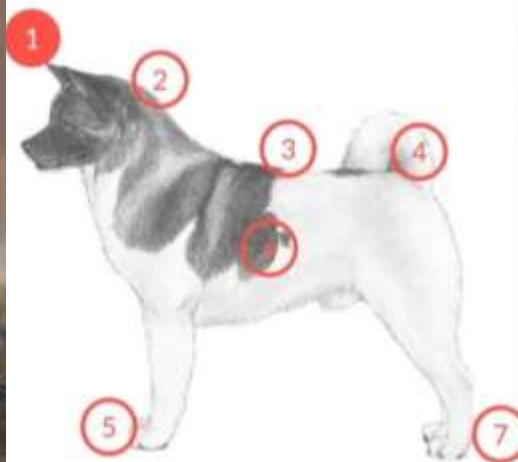


Fig. 43. General appearance of Akita. Fig. 44. The breed standard of Akitas. Fig. 45. Champion class.

**HEAD 2.** Massive but in balance with body; free of wrinkle when at ease. Skull flat between ears and broad; jaws broad and powerful with minimal dewlap. Head forms a blunt triangle when viewed from above. Fault – Narrow or snipey head. Ears – The ears of the Akita are characteristic of the breed (Fig. 38, 43, 43, 45), see videos [5; 6] . They are strongly erect and small in relation to rest of head. If ear is folded forward for measuring length, tip will touch upper eye rim, videos [66; 29; 68].

**BODY 3.** Thick and muscular; comparatively short, widening gradually toward shoulders. A pronounced crest blends in with base of skull. Body – Longer than high, as to 10 is to 9 in males; 11 to 9 in bitches. Measurement from the point of the sternum to the point of buttocks. Chest wide and deep; reaching down to the elbow, the depth of the body at the elbow equals half the height of the dog at the withers. Ribs well sprung, brisket well developed. Level back with firmly-muscled loin and moderate tuck-up. Skin pliant but not loose. Serious Faults – Light bone, rangy body (Fig. 43, 45), see videos [5; 6] [12; 6; 2].

**TAIL 4.** Large and full, set high and carried over back or against flank in a three-quarter, full, or double curl, always dipping to or below level of back. On a three-quarter curl, tip drops well down flank. Root large and strong. Tail bone reaches hock when let down. Hair coarse, straight and full, with no appearance of a plume. Disqualification – Sickie or uncurled tail (Fig. 40, 42).

**Fig. 42. Japanese Akita ken.**

**FOREQUARTERS 5.** Shoulders strong and powerful with moderate layback. Forelegs heavy-boned and straight as viewed from front. Angle of pastern 15 degrees forward from vertical. Faults – Elbows in or out, loose shoulders.

**COAT 6.** Double-coated. Undercoat thick, soft, dense and shorter than outer coat. Outer coat straight, harsh and standing somewhat off body. Hair on head, legs and ears short. Length of hair at withers and rump approximately two inches, which is slightly longer than on rest of body, except tail, where coat is longest and most profuse. Fault-Any indication of ruff or feathering (**Fig. 38, 40**), see video [6]) [12].

**HINDQUARTERS 7.** Width, muscular development and bone comparable to forequarters. Upper thighs well developed. Stifle moderately bent and hocks well let down, turning neither in nor out. Dewclaws – On front legs generally not removed; dewclaws on hind legs generally removed (**Fig. 42**). Feet – Cat feet, well knuckled up with thick pads. Feet straight ahead [12; 6; 15].

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