



Groomed to Purr-fection

The Professional Approach to Getting Cats CLEAN

Iris Zinck

With all the internet trivia describing cat bathing as a “martial art,” it is not surprising to learn that average cat owners typically perceive it that way. What surprised me was discovering what a vast gulf there is between cat fanciers preparing their cherished show cats for weekend show rings and the professional groomers who handle cats of all breeds daily.

Four different professional cat groomers provide insight into how the show-cat owner's approach to creating a beautiful, living work of feline art for the show ring compares with the work a professional groomer typically does to keep a cat clean, well-maintained, healthy, and happy. Given a cat's sensitivity to noise, scent, and touch, the challenges are myriad and significant.

Challenge #1:

Convincing Owners of the Necessity of Grooming

Exhibitors know their cats must be at their best to be successful at a show. But for professional groomers, the first hurdle is persuading cat owners that their cats truly need this service. Certified Master Feline Groomer Sandra Gonyea, of Victor, NY, who has been a groomer for over 50 years, is quick to refute the oft-quoted myth that cats can groom themselves. “Cats don't groom themselves, they LICK themselves!” she says. “No amount of licking can remove mats or tangles, or the excessive oils that cats' skins produce.” That's why all cats—not just show cats—should have regular grooming specifically for the particular cat, its breed and its living conditions. Sandra adds that clean cats carry lower amounts of the Fel-D-1 enzyme that causes the majority of cat allergies, “so allergy sufferers suffer less around clean cats.”

Lynn Paolillo, a Certified Master Feline Groomer from Hamilton, NJ, provided further motivation for all cat owners to consider implementing grooming routines. “One of the biggest mistakes many cat owners make is waiting until there's a problem. Knots and tangles start as small clumps or excess dead hair, but by the time a lot of owners notice them, they are too large or severe to be removed easily at home. Many owners then cut mats out, which is NOT recommended because skin can be hidden and caught up inside the knots, leading to injuries. Combing or brushing knots and tangles, no matter how gentle the owner tries to be, is often very painful for the cat.” Danelle German, a South Carolina-based groomer who founded the first cat-specific grooming organization (the National

Cat Groomers' Institute), agrees, “The worst mistakes I have seen are cats that have been sliced open by scissors or clippers when an owner tried to remove mats. When I uncover that sort of thing, it is usually infected and requires vet attention.” CFA Allbreed Judge Doreann Nasin, who runs a cat-only grooming shop in Franklin, CT, stresses the importance of introducing all cats, even shorthairs, to bathing at a young age, before it is really needed, in order to stop problems before they happen, and then maintaining a regular grooming schedule. She mentions that the most difficult cats she works with are senior kitties from quiet, single-cat homes. “They tend to be hyper-sensitive and are reactive to any sound or thing you might do to them, so literally everything takes extra care.”

Once the cat owner agrees that grooming is a necessity, it is essential to establish a home grooming routine. Even if you are using the services of a professional groomer, Lynn says, “grooming at home should focus on building a positive experience for the cat and preventing coat issues. The best way to do this is to dedicate short periods a few times a week to combing the cat before knots begin to form. For shorthaired cats, the back, sides, chest and base of the tail will be where the most hair will need to be removed. For longhaired cats, the belly, chest, armpits, rear legs and tail will need the most attention, followed by the back and sides.” Showing owners the right tools to use is also essential, says Lynn. She suggests that clients keep a comb, “preferably a large Greyhound-style comb, next to their TV remote. If the cat sits on your lap while watching TV, spend a few minutes combing a few areas like under the chin, the back, sides or tail. Work in small sections, ending before the cat gets too agitated.” And do not forget the treats!

Challenge #2:

Helping Exhibitors Do a Better Job of Presenting Their Cats

Although Danelle is no longer providing hands-on grooming services, she has plenty of advice for exhibitors. Sandra and Lynn often work with active exhibitors to help them put their best foot forward to present a kitty for judging. As a judge, Doreann can only groom her own cats for shows, but she tries to make suggestions for better grooming when she encounters situations where she believes they might be beneficial. “I think it is very important to offer helpful feedback to help encourage these exhibitors to keep showing and learning about grooming.”

All four groomers agree inadequate grooming occurs far too often. In Danelle’s opinion, one of the most frequent mistakes is not getting the cat fully clean and properly degreased. “This results in a clumpy, separated coat; it looks bad and won’t win in the ring.”

Doreann’s pet peeve is comparable: “novice exhibitors may not rinse their cats well enough and/or use too much product on the coat.”

Speaking of “product,” when asked about the old standby combination of Goop and Dawn, the groomers’ reaction was distinctly negative. Doreann does not use either product. “Both can really dry out the coat, making it brittle and more prone to matting and static.” She feels the grooming industry has many better options that can be carefully chosen to suit different coat textures. Danelle remarked, “Why on earth would we use dish detergent on a cat’s skin and coat when there are really great products out there that are actually made for cats?” while Sandra added that even Dawn’s manufacturer notes that it is not recommended for use on pets. The professionals were less negative on the subject of Goop, however; Danelle will use it for stud tail or other problem areas and Lynn will use it “when a heavy-duty degreaser is needed.” Sandra may use it for spot degreasing but also recommends Les Pooches F&T or Farber Pre-Step Crème for stud tail and problem areas.

Cat-Safe Grooming Product Choices

Emilie Woltering

We all want our cats to look and feel their best. In this time of pets integrating as members of the family, the marketplace is booming with pet products. Now more than ever, it can be challenging to find the perfect grooming items for your pet. While there are many great products on the market, there are also many that fly under the radar of quality control.

When choosing a product to use on your cat, keep in mind that compared to dogs, cats are especially sensitive to toxins. Their livers are less effective at breaking down toxins than the livers of dogs and humans. This means that any substance that enters a cat’s body takes a long time to clear out, and there are certain substances that cats cannot get rid of at all.

They do not have to eat toxins for this to happen – cats can easily take in certain toxins through their skin, or by licking them off. For this reason, it is extremely important that you know what is going into and on your pet.

Shampoo

Choosing shampoos labeled specifically for cats is the best way to avoid harm. Human shampoo is usually too acidic, and non-cat shampoos often include ingredients that cats cannot process. However, there are also shampoos designed for cats that can cause harm. Check each bottle to avoid these ingredients before using it to groom your cat!

- Pyrethroids are chemicals designed to kill insects. They are often used in flea and tick products and are included in dog shampoo for a bonus effect of flea repellent. Unfortunately, cats are extremely sensitive to pyrethroids. The safe concentration of pyrethroids for cats is around 0.2%, while dog products can have concentrations over 55%.¹ For this reason, it is extremely important to make sure that you avoid bathing your cat with dog shampoo.
- Certain essential oils, especially tea tree oil and lavender oil, can be extremely toxic to your cat. Tea tree oil has been linked to skin and respiratory irritation, but at high concentrations, it may cause severe poisoning and death.² Lavender oil more frequently results in nausea and vomiting.³
- Artificial fragrances from pet shampoos often come from petroleum, which is highly toxic. Fragrances also come from phthalates (DBP, DEP, DEHP), which cause hormone imbalances that could lead to reproductive toxicity.⁴
- Sulfates are what give products like soap and shampoo sudsing properties. They are great for removing dirt but can also dry out and irritate the skin. If they enter the eyes, they can cause severe pain and irritation.
- Mineral oil is often used for a glossy coat but leads to eventual drying out of the skin’s natural oils and creates a barrier that prevents cats from releasing other toxins.
- Parabens, formaldehyde, and methylchloroisothiazolinone (CMIT) are preservatives that have been linked to the development of cancer.
- Phenol, propylene glycol, and pennyroyal have been linked to organ failure.

The groomers collectively expressed the importance of matching grooming products to the cat's coat type, and also of selecting the right tools. Many tools and products available for dogs are not appropriate for cats. Lynn particularly cautions against the use of de-matting sprays or waterless shampoos, which can "leave residue on the cat, which the cat can ultimately ingest by licking." Combs were universally preferred over most types of brush, with the Chris Christensen combs being a favorite (see sidebar). Sandra suggests looking for combs with "longer, finer teeth that get right down to the skin for finishing." The quality of milling on the comb as well as the spacing of teeth affect how much coat it may pull out.



"Bathing a cat is an art. Once it is mastered and the right products are used, the results should be outstanding."

Danelle German, Founder, National Cat Groomers Institute

If your cat begins shaking, seizing, or developing a red burn within an hour after a bath, immediately wash the affected area with a cat-safe shampoo or GENTLE dish liquid to remove the irritants, then bring the cat to an emergency vet.

Red, itchy skin or vomiting after grooming indicates possible exposure to an allergen. In this case, stop using this product and follow up with your regular vet.

Eye and Ear Products

Many veterinarians warn against the use of tear-stain remover. The feline eye is a delicate area that is sensitive to many toxins and irritants. It is generally believed that if your pet has excessive staining around their eyes, it is likely indicative of a bigger issue. Many veterinary ophthalmologists can help you find a permanent solution to this problem.

That being said, if you are still interested in using tear stain products, it is important to look for mild cleansers that do not contain paraben, peroxide, bleach, or antibiotics. Warm saline, distilled water, or generic eye rinses are safer choices.

Please know that non-prescription eye cleaners that claim to have antibiotics like tylosin tartrate are not FDA-approved, meaning they are not tested for safety or efficacy. Furthermore, long-term use of antibiotics may lead to the development of multi-drug resistant bacteria, making any potential eye infections infinitely harder to treat.

With regard to ear cleaning, the key is to not overdo it. It is so tempting to grab ear cleaner any time you see dirt in your show cat's ears, but over-cleaning will often cause more ear wax to

build up. If you are going to clean your cat's ears, using a small amount of ear-cleaning solution on a cotton ball is the way to go. Feline ear canals are extremely short, and Q-tips can damage an ear in a matter of seconds. Using cotton balls ensures you can get the ear clean while not going into an area you should not.

There are many ear cleaners and flushes available. Making sure they are cat-specific is important because many products for dogs contain pyrethroids which, as mentioned before, are highly toxic to cats. Products like vinegar, alcohol, and hydrogen peroxide are often recommended for cleaning ears. Unfortunately, the L-shape of the cat's ear canal makes it extremely difficult for them to get rid of these substances. If these substances sit in the ear, they can cause further irritation or even foster the growth of bacteria.⁵ Keep your cat safe and stick with products specifically made for felines!

SOURCES

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Challenge #3:

Managing a Reluctant Kitty Client

“Everyone thinks there are some magic tricks that will help one handle and groom aggressive cats,” says Danelle. “First and foremost is knowing upfront what type of temperament we are dealing with. Each type requires different groom style choices and handling techniques. So, assessing a cat BEFORE we groom it is essential.” She adds that “Confidence also plays a vital role. Cats know when the handler is not confident and will take advantage of that in a skinny minute. Confidence comes from knowledge and experience.”

“Environment is very important when grooming a cat,” notes Sandra. “Having a quiet place free from distraction is conducive to a successful groom. Additionally, all your movements and actions need to be slow, rhythmic, and intentional. Fast jerky movements or sudden changes and noises will alarm the cat and possibly cause a reaction.” Even in the most relaxing environment, you will still have some unhappy clients and bad actors. “If I have a difficult cat, I will use a green plastic e-collar or air muzzle to keep it from biting. I can still monitor for stress and see the cat’s face but it cannot bite me. If

“Just because Dawn is what was always used at one time does not mean we need to continue using a potentially harmful product to bathe our cats. When we know better, we do better.”

Sandra Porter-Gonyea, Certified Feline Master Groomer



I have a feline swatter or bunny kicker, a big, fluffy towel is my best friend.” Sandra also advocates the use of Kevlar sleeves (see sidebar) to help protect your arms from aggressive scratches.

Because so many of Doreann’s clients tend to come from single-cat homes and are stressed and reactive, she typically uses a two-person technique. “I always use an open, fan style e-collar that not only takes away the advantage of a cat biting but also helps protect its face from water in a bath. You can still touch the face if the cat allows you but avoids covering its eyes as this may add to the kitty’s stress. We lay the cat down on its side on the groom table and gently hold all four feet with one person controlling the front and one person controlling the back. This provides better control and keeps everyone safe. The person in front has the job of interacting with the cat, talking to it, petting the head when allowed, giving mental support and watching for any signs of distress. The person at the back is grooming the cat, starting from the back to the front and trying to be gentle and quick, especially if it is getting a clip down or just a brush out.”

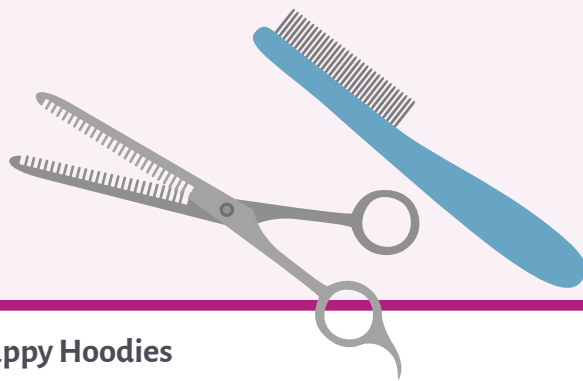
Challenge #4

Drying—The Finishing Touch

All four groomers agreed that blow drying is an essential final step to the grooming process. According to Lynn, “Cats need to be blow dried in order to help get out excess dead coat and prevent tangles. If a coat is left to air dry, the wet hair can clump together and become difficult to separate.” Sounds like a good way to create mats, rather than prevent them!

Hair dryers made for human hair can be used in a pinch, but Lynn notes, “they can easily get too hot to be used safely on cats.” Save them for emergencies and be sure to keep switching to the “cool” setting! Invest in a quality dryer designed for animals. Danelle and Lynn recommend the Romani Junior Force Dryer, which is “pricey but will last for decades.” Other favorite dryers

Groomers' Favorite Tools, Products, and Resources



Chubbs Bars

These organic pet shampoo bars are formulated specifically for cats and require no diluting. Ideal for that first lather, they were made to get grease out of the coat and are kinder and gentler to the coat than Dawn or other harsh detergents. They also do not contain any of the hazardous ingredients cited elsewhere in this section. www.chubbsbars.com

Shampoos from Chris Christensen, Les Pooches, and Farber

(Farber Pre-step Crème is a classic)
Sandra likes Chris Christensen's Clean Start Clarifying Shampoo for a second lather and also uses their Moisture Miracle on thick, heavy coats. www.chrischristensen.com, www.farberproducts.com, <https://lespoochs.com>

Conditioner/Anti-Static Spray from PinkPawPalUSA

Sandra relies on this grooming spray "anytime I brush or comb." It reduces static, smooths snarls, texturizes and volumizes. <https://pinkpawpalusa.com/product/grooming-products-cats-dogs/grooming-spray-pinkpawpal>

Chris Christensen "Buttercombs."

Also Artero combs or other metal greyhound-style combs. These are used for combing the bodies of cats, especially longhaired cats. Artero combs and other simple metal combs can be purchased at most pet stores for less than \$12-15. The Chris Christensen combs, on the other hand, are expensive, professional quality, with the teeth milled very smooth and the tips rounded to be gentle on cat skin. They are available on Amazon, from Cherrybrook, or directly from their website www.chrischristensen.com

Small Dog Nail Trimmers

Lynn prefers this style over the cat/scissor-style nail trimmers as they provide a lot more flexibility when holding and are a better choice for adult or large cats like Maine Coons. Available at most pet supply stores.

Happy Hoodies

Created as a grooming tool to calm and protect pets from the loud noise and high-pressured air associated w/ force drying. These terry cloth headbands fit comfortably around a cat's head to muffle the sound of the blow dryer and wick water away from the head and ears. Available from Amazon and Chewy.

Kevlar Sleeves

Slip-on stretchable sleeves to shield thin skin against scratches and bites. Also great for gardening and tough tasks around the house. <https://www.amazon.com/Kevlar-Sleeves-Protectors-Bruising-Resistant-Gardening/dp/B099NLB3D6?th=1>

Other Resources:

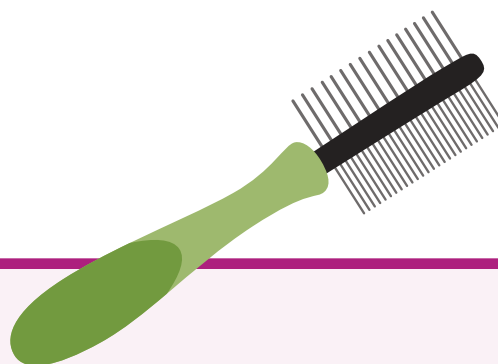
<https://www.cherrybrook.com/> Carries Chris Christensen products, shampoos and combs, quality combs by Aaronco and Safari, Wahl clippers/blades, HV and stand dryers

<https://store.ryanspet.com/> Carries Chris Christensen and Artero products, shampoos and combs, Wahl clippers/blades, HV and stand dryers, 4-inch blunt tipped shears, pin brush, air muzzle, green e collar

<https://shernbaousa.com/> HV and stand dryers

<https://nationalcatgroomers.com/product/catty-shack-vac/> CattyShack Vac

<https://petmarvel.com/products/pet-dryer-cube> Cat Dryer Box



mentioned included the K9 Fluffer, with a variable speed knob; the Catty Shack Vac (CSV), a container-style model that lets you use your hands to lift and separate the coat hairs while drying; or the EZ-Groom Dryer with adjustable speed. If these dryers are too costly, consider a HV (high velocity) dryer and/or a stand dryer; per Sandra, these dryers will blow air into the coat to dry it and also blow out excess hair as you comb.

Doreann, as well as Lynn, generally uses a “Happy Hoodie” (see sidebar) to help muffle the sound of the blow dryer and wick water away from the head and ears, reducing drying time.



“While not every cat loves getting groomed, most cats love the feeling of being groomed. Imagine getting your hair shampooed by a professional who massages just the right places, knows the products and tools for your hair type, does a way better blow out, and you leave feeling fabulous!

Cats can absolutely experience the same things!”

*Sandra Lynn Paolillo,
Certified Feline Master Groomer, NCGI Certifier & Instructor*

The Ultimate Challenge: Becoming a Groomer

Until relatively recently, very little formal training was available for cat groomers. Although Doreann has taken several training seminars, she considers herself primarily self-taught. “I shadowed a mobile groomer for three months as her bather because she had broken her wrist and couldn’t get the cast wet. She taught me a lot on clipper care and different styles of breed-specific dog grooming; in return I actually taught HER how to better handle cats, understand Persian coat care, read cat behavior and avoid confrontations with a cat.”

While Doreann’s experience demonstrates that it is perfectly possible to transfer and expand what you have learned in grooming show cats to a cat grooming business, Lynn and Sandra are passionate about the advantages of the training they received at the National Cat Groomer’s Institute, founded by Danelle. Lynn explains that NCGI’s program combines background knowledge, including feline temperaments, behavior, common health concerns, cat breeds, safety, and tool and product usage. Each cat is treated as an individual and each appointment takes an experienced eye and a skilled hand to create a beautiful groom while keeping the cat safe and comfortable. NCGI’s certification, which includes the Certified Feline Master Groomer title, confirms mastery of this knowl-

edge and hands-on skill, in a total of 9 exams. There are fewer than 400 CFMGs at present, which speaks to the dedication the training requires and the level of expertise it confers.

We hope this article has given you some new insights on the fine art of cat grooming and who knows, perhaps it has you thinking about a new career! Should this be the case, investigate the NCGI website at <https://nationalcatgroomers.com/> or consider attending the NCGI “Bad Ass Cat Groomers Online Conference” on July 9-11. More info is available at <https://nationalcatgroomers.com/online-conference/>

