

That Darned Puppy Coat!

Follow these step-by-step instructions to turn that problem puppy coat into the proper Griffon outerwear.



Photo Nancy Coffeen

by Amy Caswell-O'Clair

Photos by the author except where noted.

From the AKC Standard for the WPG:

"The coat is one of the distinguishing features of the breed. It is a double coat. The outer coat is medium length, straight and wiry, never curly or woolly. The harsh texture provides protection in rough cover. The obligatory undercoat consists of a fine, thick down, which provides insulation as well as water resistance. The undercoat is more or less abundant, depending upon the season, climate, and hormone cycle of the dog. It is usually lighter in color. The head is furnished with a prominent mustache and eyebrows. These required features are extensions of the undercoat, which gives the Griffon a somewhat untidy appearance. The hair covering the ears is fairly short and soft, mixed with longer harsh hair from the coat. The overall feel is much less wiry than the body. The legs, both front and rear, are covered with denser, shorter, and less coarse hair. The coat on the tail is the same as the body; any type of plume is prohibited. The breed should be exhibited in full body coat, not stripped short in pattern. Trimming and stripping are only allowed around the ears, top of head, cheeks and feet."

There are many different opinions on how much work should be done on the Griffon coat. Some say to strip or rake out the coat while others feel it should be left to fall out naturally. The problem with that second way of thinking is, puppy undercoat (and shedding adult undercoat) doesn't fall out by itself, it stays on the dog and mats. This article will discuss how to properly rake out and care for a growing puppy coat. Note that there is a wide variance in coats. Some puppies that have shorter, tighter coats will need less grooming than others, and the time frame on grooming/stripping may be months later. Pups with softer, heavier coats will need more grooming more often and sooner. But all Griffs need attention and regular grooming, even if it's just a weekly comb out.

It seems that the average Griff puppy coat starts to grow in abundance and mat at around four months old. The adult coat starts to come in, which means the puppy coat needs to come out. If it isn't removed, it will mat. I try to stress to all of my puppy buyers the necessity of combing their pups weekly from the time they pick them up until around 3.5 to 4 months old, when they get an abundance of hair. I suggest that they comb them daily or every other day, paying special attention to the beard, which gets wet and gathers a lot of debris, and can quickly become a matted mess within a few days.

The basic tools I use are a face-and-finishing comb (a flea comb could work as well) a regular medium/coarse steel comb, a Mars rake (12 teeth), a McClellan stripping knife (coarse) and a pumice stone. Oh, and really important: a mat buster!



The well-equipped Griffon grooming kit will contain:
 1. a face and finishing comb; 2. a medium/coarse steel comb;
 3. a 12-blade undercoat rake; 4. a stripping knife (coarse);
 5. a pumice stone; and 6. a mat buster. This stripping knife is a McClellan, but several different knives are available from many manufacturers in both left- and right-handed models and from extra-fine to coarse configurations. You want a coarse stripping knife for working on Griffis. The undercoat rake here is a Mars Coat King Stripping Comb. Other brands are available, and all come in different blade configurations. Pick a 12-blade.



This diagram shows the direction one should use when combing and raking the coat: always with the direction of hair growth. Note that while the topline is raked straight back from ears toward the tail, the sides and legs are raked down toward the floor.

What I like to do is to begin combing the pup weekly when it is 8 weeks. I use the regular comb, and then use the finishing comb to get out any other loose hairs. Pay special attention to the beard, front legs and underside where the hair is softer and will start to mat first. You may need a helper to help hold the pup to do the belly. I usually sit on floor and put the pup between my legs on its back; if it starts to fight, I just rub its belly until it calms down, and within a minute you will have a calm, relaxed puppy.

"... paying special attention to the beard, which gets wet and gathers a lot of debris, and can quickly become a matted mess within a few days."

Around 12 weeks the hair starts growing more, and now I personally like to start taking out some of the puppy coat. I comb the eyebrows, top of head and ears with the stripping knife to thin it out some and keep it at a reasonable length. (I don't like mop heads!) At this time, I also start combing the pup every other day.

You may want to start stripping or raking out a pup with a softer coat at around three months. A dog with a harsher, tighter (better) coat may need to be done around 8 to 12 months, and then just once or twice a year after that to take out the dead coat. Yes, even adults will mat terribly if the coat isn't properly taken care of with regular brushing.



This 5-month-old pup is ready for some grooming.



The same pup, now 6 months old, after being combed, brushed and raked weekly for one month.



This 8-month-old Griff had never been combed.



The same pup one month later, after just two groomings.



An 8-month-old pup.



The same 8-month-old pup after one grooming. Much can be accomplished in just a single proper grooming session!

To strip/rake:

1. Comb hair out with regular comb.
2. Take the undercoat rake and start at top of neck and go down the body in short strokes. I start from top of neck straight down the back, then do under the beard to the middle point in chest, then I start going down the sides: from top side of neck down along the body. I use the rake until no more hair comes out easily. How much you take out of the chest and legs depends on whether you want to show your pup or not. If you do not plan to show, you can use the rake until no more comes out on chest and legs and belly. If you want to show, just take a couple passes on the chest and legs and belly to remove the excess dead hair.
3. The next step is the stripping knife. I make the same pattern starting at the top of neck and going down back, then along the side of the body. I again do this until no more hair comes out.
4. I also like to comb the eyebrows, top of head and ears with the stripping knife. Under the ears and cheeks, I use the Mars rake first, then the stripping knife to thin this out.

5. If your puppy still has a lot of very fine hair sticking out, it would be good to use a pumice stone. Just use it like a brush and in the same directions as before to take any fine hairs out. They will collect on the pumice stone and you will need to pick them off the stone as you go. Most of the time, these long stray hairs can also be easily plucked out by hand with no discomfort to the dog.

Note that besides getting a growing puppy coat under control, grooming is an opportunity for you to monitor for ticks, fleas, burs and other dangerous grasses like fox tails, so always keep an eye open for "things that don't belong" when grooming your dog.

Grooming as described here will not strip off all your puppy's coat, but be sure to stop with the stripping knife or rake if you start to see open skin, and just use a comb. I groom pups like this once a week for several weeks until the harsher adult coat comes in, and then about once a month after that. Maintaining a healthy coat is good for your dog and keeps them functional, attractive and presentable. And mat free! 🌟

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Grooming the Griffon for the Show Ring:

Errors and Corrections

by Amy Caswell-O'Clair | Photos by the author

I have only been in the show ring for approximately five years, but in that time I have learned what many great mentors have taught me: to enhance the attributes of our breed by grooming and to limit grooming so that the Griffon looks as it should in its natural state. While many handlers like to fluff, puff and blow dry our breed, this is not natural and not how our hunting dog should be presented.

Reading the standards for our breed gives a good indication of how our breed should be presented in the show ring. I always think of Jean Castaing's translation of the French standard when I think of grooming and how to best represent my Griffon. Some points that especially influence me and my decisions of how to groom are:

Head: "... furnished with a harsh, but not too long, coat, with mustache and eyebrows clearly distinct, a skull not too large; muzzle long and square ..."

Error: Excessive hair on the top of the head.

Comments and correction: If we have a mountain of hair on top of our dog's head, how will the judge be able to see if it is square and noble? Another thing to consider is that the hair on the head is an extension of the undercoat. Massive amounts of hair on the head would indicate a soft coat on the body. Strip the excess hair from under your dog's eyes and cheeks, under his ears and on top of his head to make his eyebrows and beard stand out. Never, ever, cut your dog's beard it should be left in its natural state.

Eyes: "Large and round, not covered by the eyebrows, very intelligent expression ..."

Error: Too much hair in the eyebrows that is too long and covering the eyes.

Comments and correction: How can we show off our dog's beautiful eyes if they are covered by hair, and all of the hair is fluffed in front of its eyes? You would never see a dog in the field like this, and if you did, it would take you a week to brush him when he came out of the field. You may also need to strip his bangs out so that they are not too heavy and so that you are able to see his eyes.

Forequarters: "Straight, strong, very solid at the shoulder, bushy hair."

Hindquarters: "Bushy coat, thighs long and very muscular, hocks not straight, angulated."

Feet: "Round, solid, very tight and joined at the toes." (I have also heard descriptions of our Griffon's feet as having feet like a cat if that is easier to imagine.)

Error: The legs are excessively fluffed and/or back-brushed. The paws are left too hairy.

Commentary and correction: Our breed is not a terrier, it is a hunting dog. You would never see this in the field, and if you did it would not protect the legs as well as the hair all brushed down. It would also gather a lot more debris in the field or woods.

Maybe people fluff the leg hair to give the illusion of more substance, or maybe they feel it's hair and must be fluffed, or they think it looks better, but it is not how our breed is supposed to be presented. If you would like to add a bit more substance to your dog's legs, you could back-brush the leg hair up for body, but please brush it back down before you enter the ring!

One time I decided to have my Griffon shown by a professional. I have always shown her myself, but wanted to see if there were handling differences if I had her shown by a professional. I brought her "groomed," but they stuck her on the table and put their slicker brush in action back brushing all of her legs so she looked like an Airedale terrier. At the time, I was not confident enough to tell them that was not correct. I can still remember that in the ring she had the strangest looking hocks with the hair all combed up on them like little horns. When the rear legs were back brushed, it also hid her good angulation and made her appear straighter in the rear. With the hair from the foot to thigh fluffed, it also hid her nice, cat-like foot.

The dog's leg hair should be brushed downward and the paws lightly trimmed to show the cat-like foot.

The tail: "Carried horizontally or the tip slightly raised, with bushy hair but without a tuft ..."

Error: The tail is groomed with a flag underneath, like a setter.

Commentary and correction: A Griffon tail should not look like a setter tail. If there is hair hanging under your dog's tail like a setter, take some thinning shears to remove it so it blends with the rest of the tail hair.

Coat: "Bushy and rough, at the touch reminds one of a boar's silk, never woolly or curly. Undercoat, fine and somewhat dense."

Error: Some Griffons seem to be stripped too short in a pattern; others are not stripped at all. Some of them have grooming products used on the coat.

Commentary and correction: Stripping can be done



Above and below: Before and after grooming the head and face. Too much hair on top of the head hides how square and noble it is, plus indicates a soft coat. Strip excess hair from under the eyes, cheeks, ears and on top of the head to make eyebrows and beard stand out. The eyes must not be covered by eyebrows. Note: Never trim the beard!



It is wrong to groom the legs fluffed out and/or back-brushed. Fluffed legs would not protect the dog in the field whereas the hair brushed down will. The feet should be trimmed of excess hair to create a tight, cat-like paw.



around cheeks, head, neck and anywhere the hair does not lay well and to enhance the look of your dog. Most Griffons should have the puppy coat stripped out to allow the adult coat to come in. My Mica puppy looked like she was going to have a softer coat. I took two days to strip it out with a rake, then strip it out with a stripping knife (When I say “days,” I mean 30 minutes one day and 30 minutes the next.) Now one year old, she has an ideal coat that repels burrs, sticks, debris and snow. I do notice I did not strip her chest hair as much, and this hair is softer and lighter brown. I find it very important that if you have a softer puppy coat to strip it good around four to five months. I’m also curious about what she would look like now if I had not stripped her. I suspect a uniform chestnut soft coat vs. the harsh steel grey coat it is now.

Grooming products for the coat should not be used, especially all over the coat. Maybe if you want to help hold the hair down on the ribcage or loin, okay, but not if you are trying to harshen up the feel of your dog’s coat. The texture of the coat is the texture of the coat, and if the judges are judging for breeding quality, what is

the point of you faking the appearance of your dog? If you are really looking for the opinion of the judge, then leave the coat natural.

Coat color: “Preferably steel grey with chestnut (maroon) markings or all chestnut; frequently chestnut flecked with white and grey or roan ...”

Error: Coloring products are being used on dogs’ coats.

Commentary and correction: Please remember that the color of your dog’s coat is the color of his coat. NEVER color your dog’s coat to change the color and his appearance. This is very disrespectful to the breed and very dishonest to your dog. You should be proud of him for the color that he is — plus coloring your dog’s coat is a rule violation.

We as exhibitors have the power to present the judges with properly groomed dogs that should fit the standard of our hunting breed. We need to tell our handlers what is correct for our breed and show them good examples in photos. When the dogs are groomed incorrectly, we need to tell them what is wrong and require that they present our dogs in the proper way. Together we can succeed in having our dogs presented in the way that they should be. 🌟