

NORTH OF ENGLAND RAT SOCIETY

Pet Judging Training Manual



2015

1. Show schedule, classes, awards and paperwork

Theory

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Practical

Pet show secretary or assistant show secretary.

2. Pet judging

Theory

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Practical

Scribing, stewarding and/or sitting in (this should be done under at least two different judges), followed by co-judging at least once when a level of confidence is achieved.

3. Pet standards

Theory

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Practical

See *Pet judging* section.

General notes

Each trainee will be allocated a mentor/advisor. They will discuss with the trainee what past experience they might have and where they feel they have areas they need to spend more time on.

It is expected that the trainee and mentor together will come up with a rough training plan detailing the areas to address. This will then be passed on to the training coordinator for review and to establish and coordinate training opportunities to meet the trainee's requirements.

Any issues or feedback about the training should be directed to the Pet Judging Co-ordinator.



Tutorial 1: Understanding the NERS pet schedule

1.1 Classes

| Class number | Class name | Number range |
|--------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| P1 | Bucks 8 weeks to 6 months | P101, P102, P103 (...) |
| P2 | Bucks 6-12 months | P201, P202, P203 (...) |
| P3 | Bucks 12-18 months | P301, P302, P303 (...) |
| P4 | Bucks over 18 months | P401, P402, P403 (...) |
| P5 | Does 8 weeks to 6 months | P501, P502, P503 (...) |
| P6 | Does 6-12 months | P601, P602, P603 (...) |
| P7 | Does 12-18 months | P701, P702, P703 (...) |
| P8 | Does over 18 months | P801, P802, P803 (...) |

1.2 Judging process

Each of the buck classes is judged (and placed) separately. The four buck classes are then judged against each other in the buck challenge. In the same way, the four doe classes are first judged separately, after which the does are judged against each other in the doe challenge. The best bucks and does are then judged against each other for the supreme pet challenge.

The order that these classes are judged in is at your own discretion. Some people prefer to judge them in the order above; this is the order of the paperwork and helps make sure nothing is missed. It also means the bucks are generally more awake for judging (bucks tend to be more affected by sleepiness as the day goes on). Other judges tackle the largest class first in order to help the show secretary complete the paperwork in a timely manner. Another approach is to judge the does first to reduce their chances of coming into heat over the course of the show (especially after having handled lots of bucks), something which can make it difficult to judge them fairly. Finding what works for you is an important part of judging.

The classes are judged to 6 places (that is, 1st through to 6th place is established where there are at least 6 rats in the class). 1st to 4th place in each class receive prize cards and 1st place also receives a rosette. Judging includes 5th and 6th in case, for example, the first 6 bucks in one class are also the best six bucks/rats in the show overall and would therefore place in the supreme pet challenge. 5th and 6th places should be noted on the critiques as well as the challenge sheet.

In the buck/doe challenges, 1st through to 6th place is established, with 1st to 4th place receiving prize cards. There are no rosettes for the buck/doe challenges. Again, 5th and 6th places should be noted on the critiques as well as the challenge sheet.

In the supreme pet challenge, prize cards and rosettes are awarded for the top 4 places.

| | Placed | Prize cards | Rosettes | NERS champion points | NFRS pet points |
|------------------------------|--------|-------------|-----------------|----------------------|--|
| Class | 1-6 | 1-4 | 1 st | N/A | 1 pet point* for each NFRS class (see 1.6) |
| Buck/doe challenge | 1-6 | 1-4 | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Supreme pet challenge | 1-6 | 1-4 | 1-4 | For place 1-6 | For place 1-4 |



* The number of NFRS pet points given is the same as the star status of the show – for one star shows, one pet point is given as above. For two star shows, two pet points are given instead. However, the judge doesn't need to overly concern themselves with this, as the show sec should keep track of where NFRS points are allocated, and the Awards coordinator will log the NERS points.

NERS championship points are given to the top 6 places in the supreme pet challenge, as follows:

| Place | Rosette | NERS championship points |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 st place | Best pet | 6 points |
| 2 nd place | Reserve Best pet | 5 points |
| 3 rd place | 3 rd supreme pet challenge | 4 points |
| 4 th place | 4 th supreme pet challenge | 3 points |
| 5 th place | 5 th supreme pet challenge | 2 points |
| 6 th place | 6 th supreme pet challenge | 1 point |

The points are formally recorded after the show by the Awards co-ordinator and contribute towards NERS Pet Championships (12 points under at least two different judges) and Grand Championships (6 points in Pets plus 4 points in Varieties or Stud Buck).

It is the judge's decision as to whether any rat remains on the show bench. If you think a rat is unwell, unhappy, too young or too old to be there, ask your steward to let the show secretary know. The show sec will contact the owner on your behalf and return the rat to them.

1.3 Understanding the paperwork

The show secretary will provide you with a number of bits of paper for you to fill out when pet judging. Some of these are to assist you and some of them are important to the show sec.

- Steward's sheet

This sheet is not technically one you use as a pet judge; it is used by your steward although you may need to explain its use to your steward. It lists all the entries by class and by tank number, and is sometimes annotated by the show secretary with rats added or removed if there were late entries or withdrawn rats. The steward's sheet sometimes includes exhibitor names and other information which the judge shouldn't have access to, so ensure it is folded over if you do need to look at it. As steward, it can be useful to note down rats that are dual entered, as dual entries are stacked in number order according to the Varieties classes/tank labels. If the steward notes down the rat's Varieties tank number next to their Pet tank number on this sheet, and also notes where there are two rats sharing a tank (applies to kittens only), this will make it a lot easier for them to keep track of the tanks throughout the show and help locate the occasional missing tank.

- Class/challenge sheet

This sheet lists all the challenges by class. You or your scribe should fill it out as you go along. Once a class or challenge is finished, return the sheet to the show secretary as soon as possible – this helps the show sec get rosettes and prize cards written ahead of the rush at the end of the show. They will return the sheet to you as soon as they have copied the placings so you can record the results of the next class. You then use this sheet to call back the highly placed rats when needed for the next challenge and to remind you who won what. The sheet is formatted in the normal order of judging, so has the buck class challenges, then the buck challenge, then through the doe challenges and onto the supreme challenge. The special awards and junior / novice / rescue placings are last.

- **Critiques**
More information on how to write these is covered in section 3. After writing them, when you have finished a class you also need to make sure that the class placement is filled out on the critique. It is useful to keep hold of the critiques until you have finished the buck/doe challenges, then pass them to the show secretary who will add additional information on to the critiques. When the show has finished the show sec will give you back the yellow duplicate sheet to enable you to write up your report.
- **NFRS pet point sheet**
This may be included in your judging pack, although at present the show secretary completes it. More information about it is included in 1.6.

1.4 Integrated awards within the pet schedule

These are special awards that reward positive traits that are integral to the judging of the pet section. All rats entered in the pet section are automatically eligible for these awards and rosettes are awarded to the winners.

- **Best coat condition** – awarded to the rat you feel has the most outstanding coat condition in the show
- **Best overall fitness** – awarded to the rat you feel is physically the fittest; typically one with great muscle tone, though the rat's ability to move, run around and be active should be taken into account (an extremely muscular rat may not necessarily be fitter than a wiry, toned one)
- **Best presented** – awarded to the rat you think is best turned out, with nice blunt claws, clean tail and body
- **Most relaxed** – awarded to the rat who is most relaxed and calm during the day; this could be an active rat who was at ease and relaxed, one so relaxed they fell asleep on the judge, or a rat that is completely tractable and 'hangs' in your hand
- **Most engaging** – awarded to the rat that most clicked with you, the one who really made you feel special, repeatedly initiated contact or responded to invites, etc
- **Most affectionate** – awarded to the rat who displays the most affectionate behaviours
- **Most confident** – awarded to the rat that seems to own the show and who knows full well the world revolves around them

Throughout the judging process, you will likely find it helpful to make a note of rats that excel in any of these areas. This is easiest done by noting the tank number on the score sheet's line for the award in question. Having a record here of the shortlisted tank numbers for each award will aid you in recalling those tanks to the table to make a final decision at the end of judging without having to look at all of the rats again. At this point you may also want to refer to the rats' critiques to refresh your memory.

1.5 Extra awards within the pet schedule

- **Junior exhibitor** – awarded to the best rat owned by an exhibitor under the age of 16
- **Rescue** – awarded to the best rat amongst those entered as rescue rats
- **New exhibitor** – awarded to the best rat owned by an exhibitor who is entering a NERS show for the first time
- **Novice** – awarded to the best rat owned by an exhibitor who has an NFRS registered rattery name (not stud name)

Rats eligible for these awards are indicated on the steward's sheet and you should review the critiques to identify the top 4 rats in each category. If two rats have similar comments you will need to place one above the other. Remember to check your challenges – you have to be consistent, so if one rat has already been placed over another then the order should be

maintained in these categories. The exception would be if one rat has physically deteriorated considerably over the course of the show day and has lost enough health or condition to change the order. If this happens you need to make it very clear in your report.

These categories are placed once all rats have been judged and the supreme pet challenge has been established. Rosettes are awarded to the 1st placed exhibitor.

1.6 NFRS pet points

This applies to shows with NFRS star status, which will be stated on the show advert. If in doubt, ask the show secretary. They will also give you a 'star sheet' form to fill out (or may do it for you at the end of the show). The NFRS pet points are awarded to rats that are placed in positions relating to the NFRS pet schedule, which has different classes to the NERS pet schedule. The 1-4th supreme pet challenge placings also receives a pet point each.

The classes relevant to the NFRS pet points allocation are:

- **Adult owned pet** – the highest placing pet owned by an adult
- **Junior owned pet** – the highest placing pet owned by a junior (directly relates to our class A14)
- **Breeder owned pet** – the highest placing rat owned by an NFRS registered stud (not a novice breeder). Rats eligible for this should be marked on the steward's sheet.
- **Best pet** – the rat receives an extra pet point.

For a 1-star show, 1 NFRS pet point is awarded for each of the above, 2 pet points for a 2-star show, and so on.



Tutorial 2: Pet judging in practice

2.1 Why train as a pet judge?

When the NERS pet standards and judging training scheme was introduced, people had traditionally been judging pets without any training. Indeed, pet judging has often been seen as a 'reward' for loyal members. Pet classes have also historically been viewed as a "tag on" to the main variety show – for new exhibitors to enter, and to encourage juniors to get more involved with showing their rats, for example.

NERS have always placed a high priority on rats as pets first and foremost and have historically sought increasing parity between the pet section and the variety section at our shows. If we wish the pet awards to be made consistently and with as much thought and expertise as the variety awards, we need to have standards of excellence to judge the pet rats by, as well as judges who understand the standards and the process of judging. This is the only way to make the system fair and unbiased and for our awards and championships in the pet section to have real meaning. Using trained judges also reduces the possibility of rats being placed purely by how cute or cuddly they are – in training to be a qualified NERS pet judge you are joining us in acknowledging that there are many important qualities that contribute to making a rat an excellent pet in terms of exhibition and reward.

2.2 Being consistent

Our pet standards and training of pet judges allow us as a club to have a level of consistency from one show to the next, as well as be consistent across the pet rats entered at any particular show. As a judge you will need to learn to be consistent. This can take many forms – from the way that you approach and handle each rat, to following through on the same system of checks (e.g. for health and preparation) and being consistent in the way that you judge the rat. If you decide to comment against one rat not having its hind feet nails prepared, for example, you should do the same for all rats and it must have an equal bearing on their final placement.

Consistency of time is also important. It would be unfair to give the first 20 rats 8 minutes of consideration each and then rush through the last 20. Work out how long you have to judge each rat and try to stick roughly to this. Remember to also allocate plenty of time to establish the challenges and awards (and the paperwork), as well as time for a lunch break.

2.3 Being fair and impartial

This is crucial to any kind of judging. In many ways we are lucky because our exhibits are presented to us anonymously, but as a judge it will often be the case that you know which rats belong to whom, or which rats have won before. None of this should have any bearing on how you judge the rats. Your best friend and worst enemy should have equal chances of having a rat placed under you if they deserve it. A rat that won previously may or may not deserve to be placed again – that depends entirely on the competition on the day and the condition, presentation and attitude of the rat. You will need to judge each rat independently of what (and who) you know. Bear in mind that knowing a rat can exert a negative effect just as easily as a positive one, as illustrated in this quote from NERS founding member Alison Campbell:

"At the first show I pet judged at I knew who virtually every rat was and who they belonged to. The best pet rat there in my opinion happened to belong to a close friend. I found it very hard to give him best pet in case people thought it was favouritism. That is as unfair as if I had decided to give him best pet just because he was my friend's rat. Neither would be right and we must aim to let go of everything but the rats in front of us and how they are presented/present themselves on the day. "

If you are finding it difficult to be impartial or worry about these issues, it is essential that you talk this through with your mentor.



2.4 Placing the classes and challenges

One of the most difficult parts of judging can be placing the class challenges. Judges will develop their own style of doing this which suits them, however when starting out it can be useful to try the following method.

Placing classes

When you have finished judging a class, get all the critiques for the rats in the class. If you have a scribe, ask them to keep each class in a pile for you. It is best to place each class immediately after judging the rats in it, as your mind is fresh on how each rat performed. If it is a small class, placing all the show tanks on the table next to each critique will be doable. If it is a large class, read through the critiques and pick out the best 6-7 rats and ask your steward to bring their tanks back to the table.

Use the critiques and look at the rats to prompt your memory, and attempt to sort the tanks into order. It can be useful to place and then remove any definite decisions, be that the first placed rat or the last placing rats. At this stage you should have a good idea, although you may need to get any close rats out for a minute or two to get a comparative feel for them again. If the rats are incredibly close, temperament is generally used as a tiebreaker, followed by condition, then tractability.

Once you have your order, write their placings on each of their critiques. Store the critiques from this class with the placed rats in order, on top of any unplaced rats. This will come in useful later. Next, put stickers on the tank labels for the 1-4 placings.

- 1st place – red sticker
- 2nd place – blue sticker
- 3rd place – yellow sticker
- 4th place – green sticker

You then fill out the class placings on the class/challenge sheet provided. It can be very helpful to the show secretary if you pass this sheet to them when you have finished each class, as they can then start writing out prize cards and rosettes. They will return the sheet to you as soon as they have copied the placings so you can record the results of the next class.

Placing the challenges

Once you have judged all the buck (or doe) classes, you should do the relevant challenge. To do this, it is easiest to ask your steward to bring back all highly placed bucks (or does) to the table. In most cases, asking for the first 3 or 4 in each class is sufficient, unless the class was very close.

If there are any rats among these that you are immediately sure are not contenders for the buck (or doe) challenge, these should be returned, leaving only the contenders on the table. This reduces the number of rats you have to compare and gives you a much better overview. In some cases this may well mean you remove a whole class, especially if it was a small class.

At this stage it is worth putting the largest class in order on the table, or to start with the youngest class at the bottom with the next class on top. Don't stack the tanks more than two high as this can be dangerous. Instead place the first placed rats in the other two classes stacked in front of the second place rats.

Judge the 4 first placed rats (one from each class) against each other, referring back to their critiques for help (which should be easy to find if you kept them stacked in order) and getting some rats out briefly again if needed to determine your placings. The best rat will be your best buck (or doe). Note the tank number on the sheet, place another red sticker on their tank label and move them out of the way.

Then shuffle the tanks along until you can judge the rat who placed second in the same class as your challenge winner, against the rats who placed first in the other classes. You then pick the best rat out of that group – this becomes your 2nd challenge buck (or doe). They get a blue sticker on the tank label next to their previous sticker and are moved out of the way (for example put on top of the rat placed 1st challenge).

Then move onto the next comparison; again you look at the best of each class left and compare them against each other, giving out your 3rd and 4th place stickers, and placing 5th and 6th (no stickers). Record all the details on the placings sheet. If you are moving onto the other set of classes, please return the sheet briefly to the show secretary so that they can start writing the prize cards.

The supreme pet challenge works in a very similar way to the buck and doe challenges, if a bit easier as you only need to compare the top 6 bucks and the top 6 does, which means you can easily place them on top of each other, making comparisons quicker. The top 4 rats in the supreme pet challenge get a third sticker on their tank (in addition to the previous stickers for their class placing and challenge placing). It is fairly normal to have a good idea of your Best Pet by the end of judging, but it is still worth comparing the critiques and quickly handle any close rats to be sure, especially if one of the contenders was judged much earlier in the day. Once this is done, complete the placings sheet and move on to the special awards, recording the winner of each on the sheet, which you then hand to the show sec. Judging is then over and you can finally relax.



Tutorial 3: Writing critiques and reports

3.1 Tone of critiques and reports

When deciding what to say on critiques (and later on in the report) it is important to remember that this is something the owner will see. It is also worth remembering that the owner may be a child, or a novice to shows. Whilst this shouldn't stop you from writing down issues, it is also important to make sure that the overall tone of the critique is positive (and constructive, where appropriate) – it shouldn't be a lecture about all the rat's faults. If in doubt it may be worth checking the steward sheet to see if the rat is registered against any of these categories, or after the show asking the show sec to point out a particular owner you would like to speak to or to explain a comment you made on the critique.

3.2 Critiques

As you are judging rats you will be required to write your thoughts on each rat on a critique form. In most cases the show secretary will have filled out some of the standard information including show date, judge's name and tank number. Some judges prefer to have a scribe write their comments on the critiques for them, to better focus on judging. Others prefer to write themselves as they can better record what they mean. This is entirely up to you, but if you would like to have a scribe you will need to let the show secretary know in advance.

Critique content

Regardless of who fills out the critiques it is your responsibility as judge to make sure that the information recorded is suitable for the owners and reflects what you want to get across. It is also normal to make sure you comment against each of the categories (health, temperament, etc.) though how you lay it out and in what order you comment is up to you as a judge. In some cases you may choose not to comment on some areas when there is nothing specific at fault, such as health, or even elements of preparation or condition; however it is worth highlighting anything especially good or bad that you notice. It is important to be consistent with your comments for similar levels of performance. Comment consistency is less important in the temperament and tractability section where there is plenty of room for interesting and individual comments. Do try to give the exhibitors as much useful information as possible about the way their rat performed on the day, particularly if there are areas that the exhibitor can work on, such as condition.

Typical examples of what you might want to discuss on your critique (by category):

- **Tractability** – a general comment e.g. "perfectly tractable" or "good tractability" is worthwhile but you may wish to expand a little more depending on the rats behaviour, e.g. "Good tractability, initial hesitation out of the tank, but then very relaxed, or "Fairly tractable, came out of the tank fine but didn't really want me checking him".
- **Health** – good overall health can generally be assumed unless you comment otherwise. Any issues should ideally be mentioned with a rough location if possible, e.g. "small cyst on left back leg", or "small scabs to rump", "minor porphyrin staining around nose". If there isn't a definite issue but you are concerned about the rat's general demeanour then letting the owner know to keep an eye out is very valuable information to them.
- **Condition** – try to include a general comment about coat condition, weight, body tone and tail condition. Weight and coat condition in particular is something many owners appreciate reassurance on, even if they are good but not remarkable. Where you see an issue in condition such as dandruff, dry skin etc. it can be nice to include a quick note for how to improve it, such as "try adding a bit more oil to his diet", "may need some more protein", "carrying some extra weight, could do with a bit of a diet".
- **Preparation** – including a general comment against nails and tail is a good idea; overall cleanliness can generally be assumed unless you comment otherwise. Try and be consistent so all tails that are very dirty get the same comment, and "a few claws missed" refers to roughly the same amount of nails missed, for example.



- **Temperament** – this is where you can really make the critique personalised to the rat. A general comment can be useful but it's often the details and observations that make an owner's day. Remarking on the positive characteristics you notice is very worthwhile, as well as noting down if the rat was a little nervous or looking for reassurance. Once that is down, it is nice to record any comments about the rat as a person such as "very confident girl, owned the judging table and the judge" or "really sweet boy, so affectionate, gave the judge a full manicure", or "the judge absolutely fell for this guy, it was love at first hug".

3.3 Reports

Each time you pet judge you will be required to write your own show report. Providing these reports in a timely manner is an important part of judging. They should be forwarded to reports@neratsociety.co.uk and will be reviewed before they are posted on the forum for members to read. You will be given a copy of all the critiques at the end of the show and you should make sure to keep them, as the owner has the only other copy (NERS only records the challenge results). The report can go into more detail than the critiques where you'd like to expand or improve the grammar of a critique, however the content should be the same and so should the results.

The club has a house style for reports which should be followed when submitting your report but your notes may be as interesting and creative as you like. Again, do try to give the exhibitors as much useful information as possible about the way their rat performed on the day, particularly if there are areas that the exhibitor can work on, such as condition.

House style (in order)

- Placing (1st through to 6th). If there are seven rats in the class you may place the last rat 7th but if there are more than seven rats in the class you should write the unplaced rats as in numerical order under a heading of **Unplaced** after you have listed 1st to 6th.
- Tank number – this should be written by your scribe on the points record sheet, but it will also be supplied by the show secretary in their list of entries.
- Rat's name including any prefix if known. You can ask the show secretary for a list of prefixes if you are unsure.
- separating comma
- owned by [name of exhibitor] (and if applicable, add on 'bred by [name of breeder, not prefix]', or 'owned and bred by [name of exhibitor]')
- Notes.

Example:

1st P501 Windy Willows Pink, owned by Stuart Wainwright, bred by Amelia Scott. Lovely rat, very eager to engage with me but remained interested in her surroundings. Good weight and coat condition, a little un-toned. A little porphyrin around her nose. Excellent preparation. A really cheeky, entertaining girl.

Gathering the required information

To write your report you will need:

- A copy of your notes from the show
- A copy of the challenges and awards made
- A copy of the points sheet from the show
- A copy of the list of entries for the pet classes from the show secretary
- The names of your steward, scribe and anyone who sat in with you

Please ensure that you have the required information before leaving the show.

Report layout

The report will be published in *Rattitude* and for the editor's sake it is helpful if judges keep to



the following house style.

The title of the report should read:

Pet report [September] [2014]

(insert correct venue, month and year of the show)

Preston cup show

Julia Whitehouse (insert your name here)

You should begin your report with a comment on the show itself and the general quality of the rats presented. It is also courteous to thank your show secretary, scribe and steward. After this introduction you should include an individual report on each individual rat, organised into classes in the same order as they appear on the show schedule. This should be followed by a list of the challenges and special awards.

The challenges should include information from the first part of the rat's individual report, for example:

Doe challenge

1st P105 Windy Willows Pink, owned by Stuart Wainwright (Amelia Scott).

Awards should be listed in the same way, for example:

Best presented

1st P105 Windy Willows Pink, owned by Stuart Wainwright (Amelia Scott).

Titles should be in bold throughout (not underlined) and only the first word should be capitalised. If you have access to Century Gothic as a font, please use it to present your report in font size 9.

Please do not use any kind of tables or other formatting. If in doubt, work from a previous (recent) newsletter.

Submitting the report for publication

Writing a report does take time, and will be required around 2-3 weeks after the show. It is generally best to do this job as soon as possible after the show while the rats are fresh in your mind. This will also help in case you run into any discrepancies. If you prefer to submit the report in hard copy, please contact the newsletter editor as soon as possible after the show.



Tutorial 4: Tractability

4.1 What the standard says

Tractability (15%)

A tractable rat is easily handled, straightforward to pick up and yields to human hands. It will demonstrate a friendly and relaxed disposition when approached in the tank, and will not resist being lifted out.

Degrees of intractability are demonstrated by:

- *Defensive or offensive posturing in the tank, and "warning off" behaviours.*
- *Skittish behaviour, including excessive shying, avoidance or running away from human hands.*
- *Vocalising protest when picked up.*
- *Tense or resistant posture when picked up.*
- *Aggression, including nips and bites.*

Notes

A perfectly tractable rat is completely at ease and cheerful inside the tank, responds favourably to all advances made by the judge and is relaxed and enthusiastic about being lifted out.

Tractability should not be confused with extremely quiet and docile temperament. A busy and explorative rat can also be completely tractable.

If the judge is unable to get a rat out of the show tank after several attempts (and the rat will not come out voluntarily), it should be removed from the show bench and returned to its owner via the show secretary.

Rats should be approached with verbal cues. This will avoid the rat being startled and acting out of character.

Rats should be approached gently and respectfully, and where a rat is startled by environmental factors (like grating show tank lids) it should be given a minute or two to calm down before being assessed.

4.2 Approaching the rats

Every rat that is entered into a pet class can be assumed to be considered a lovely pet by their owner. As a pet judge it is good to always be looking for those special qualities that make the owner feel their rat is a lovely pet. From a behavioural perspective, pet exhibits can sometimes respond very differently to the demands of the show day than their humans expect. Pet exhibits have been known to become very hormonal, anxious, tense and hyperactive, or even bite the pet judge. This is not because they are not great pets, but because they are unable to cope with the rigors of the show environment.

First and foremost a rat is a rat, and can be expected to respond as a rat. As a pet judge it is wise to approach all exhibits as rats first and pets second. Your initial interactions with each exhibit can help you form an assessment of how they are coping with the show environment, their predominant responses and a little about their character.

Each rat should be treated with care and respect. Care should be taken when moving tanks around and placing them onto the show bench, and this should be done as quietly and gently as possible. Pet judges should ensure that their steward understands the importance of this and act accordingly. Wire lids can also grate and cause loud or ultra-sonic noises which can startle a rat, so before you have even approached the rat in person he may have become agitated and anxious.

Always approach each exhibit in the same manner, using verbal cues and observing their behaviours in the tank. Remember that once you have handled a few rats your hands will smell very confusing to any new rat and allowing the rat to sniff your hand in the tank before removing him may actually cause anxiety. It is best to adopt a calm and confident approach



(the rats will pick up on your nerves if you are anxious about handling them), and having established verbal contact with the rat simply lift them out of the tank. Hesitancy or overly cautious approaches to some rats can encourage poor tractability. A reluctant rat can be encouraged to come out of the tank themselves, giving them a bit of time to get used to the situation. If you are entirely unable to remove a rat from the show tank, it should be returned to its owner via the show secretary. It is fair to assume that if a rat that is thought to be a lovely pet by its owner is so distressed by the proceedings that you can't pick him up, he shouldn't be left to sit in the tank for the afternoon.

4.3 What is tractability?

The dictionary defines tractability as being

"easily managed or controlled; docile; yielding; easily worked, shaped, or otherwise handled; malleable."

The standard defines a tractable rat as being

"easily handled, straightforward to pick up and yields to human hands. It will demonstrate a friendly and relaxed disposition when approached in the tank, and will not resist being lifted out."

Tractability should not be confused with extremely quiet and docile temperament. A busy and explorative rat can also be completely tractable. Tractability is assessed primarily over the first encounters with the rat in her show tank and when first picked up and held. However, some rats might resist a strange human picking them up and then become very tractable once they are out of the tank and fully engaged. Therefore, tractability judging should reflect the whole judging experience of the rat.

Negative behaviour that affects tractability

- Defensive or offensive posturing in the tank
This includes rearing up (not to be confused with a rat who is standing on her back legs in eagerness to know what's going on "out there"), backing off, posturing over into a semi-side-lying position, any mouthing behaviours that involve teeth but are not aggressive bites, raising their coat.
- Skittish or fearful behaviour
This includes running away from human hands, struggling and squirming excessively when picked up courteously, 'slippery eel' behaviour when held.
- Vocalising protest when picked up
This includes eeps, squeaks and low level shrieks, often accompanied by struggling and squirming.
- Tense or resistant posture when picked up
This includes freezing when touched and tense body which in some cases might extend into the handling session.
- Aggression
This includes aggressive nips and bites. Most aggression in pet exhibits is due to fear (defensive) or confusion (offensive). Rats rely heavily on scent to make sense of their environment. During a pet judging session they may be overwhelmed by the many unfamiliar rat scents on you and your hands. In their confusion some rats might make a mistake. Strong scented soaps and perfumes often have the same effect, so please consider this when you are getting ready, or when you wash your hands before or during the session.

4.4 Weighting tractability

Perfect tractability should refer to a rat which is completely at ease and cheerful inside the

tank, responds favourably to all advances made by the judge, is relaxed and enthusiastic about being lifted out and remains so throughout the session.

If it is impossible for the judge to lift the rat out of the show tank and the rat will not come out voluntarily, the rat should be returned to its owner via the secretary.

Getting an idea of the different degrees of tractability and how you judge them can be useful. For example:

- Totally tractable with no negative behaviours.
- Signs of mild intractability in the show tank which resolved once out
- Moderate intractability in the show tank which resolved once out (or) signs of mild intractability in the show tank which continued once out
- Severe intractability in the show tank which resolved once out (or) moderate intractability in the show tank which continued once out
- Severe intractability throughout the session
- Intractable (remove from show bench)

If a rat displays overt aggression or extreme fear and bites the judge, it should be returned to its owner. Rats who mouth or nip the judge should be assessed individually and may remain on the show bench or be returned to the owner at the judge's discretion.

4.5 Special awards to consider within this section

Most relaxed is awarded to the rat who is clearly relaxed and calm during the day and across situations. This could be an explorative rat who was at ease and relaxed, one so relaxed they fell asleep on the judge, or a rat that is completely tractable and 'hangs' in your hand. Whilst you still need to observe and interact with them throughout judging, often this is the first sign of good potential for this award. Some judges take age into account to some extent, as a younger rat who is very relaxed is rarer than an older rat.



Tutorial 5: Health

One of the most useful things you do as a pet judge is carry out a health check on the rats entered. This has two main functions; it gives the owner a valuable second set of eyes to look over their rat and pick up on issues they might have missed, and it ensures that any significant health issues are spotted early and the rat taken away from the stressful show experience to somewhere more familiar. This can also limit the chances of some conditions spreading to other rats, such as parasites.

5.1 What the standard says

Health (10%)

The rat should be completely free from signs of stress, injury or ill health. These include:

- *Porphyrin staining around the eyes and nose, or staining of the coat.*
- *Infestation of lice.*
- *Scabs under the chin or around the head and shoulders, indicating an outbreak of mites.*
- *Hair loss with underlying skin changes, redness or sores.*
- *Lumps of any size or position, including cysts, abscesses and tumours.*
- *Repetitive sneezing.*
- *Laboured or noisy breathing.*
- *Fresh wounds or healing wounds. Fully healed operation sites where the coat is sparser should not be penalised in terms of health.*
- *Discharge or bleeding from anywhere on the body.*

Notes

Health issues which do not pose an immediate risk to the rat, or to other rats present, may be penalised and noted and the rat may continue on the bench. Any problem which is likely to deteriorate, needs immediate attention, or poses a threat to the other rats, should result in the rat being returned to the owner via the show secretary immediately.

Rats with permanent disabilities that can clearly be shown not to be acute problems (such as only one eye or a tail amputation) may be shown in the pet section and should not be penalised for their disabilities.

5.2 What to check for

- **Visual**
The first step in doing a health check is to look at the overall rat. Some issues are immediately apparent or give you signs that further investigation is needed. Look for porphyrin staining around the eyes and nose as well as any staining on the coat. A rough, fluffed up or irregular looking coat says that something is up. This may just be an out of condition coat, but it could also be a sign the rat is feeling unwell or perhaps has a hidden injury under a ruffle in the fur. A rat with poor coat condition is also more likely to have lice than one with a beautiful shining coat.
- **Overall body feel**
Stroke the rat's body all over. This often settles the rat and allows you to feel for lumps, bumps, and scabby bits. Make sure to check in the arm and leg pit areas for the beginnings of mammary lumps. Also check the groin area, as bucks in particular can suffer from abscesses there and does can get mammary lumps.
- **Parasites**
Check the coat for any lice; the fur around the rump is often the best area to check as this is an area the rats can't groom as effectively. Part the fur in a few places (by blowing, or using your fingers) and look for small orange/brown rods which will move, or small



white/translucent dots which are well stuck to the hair shaft. If you see orangey flakes, these could be buck dandruff, which is often orange due to buck grease. If you're not sure which it is, speak to an experienced buck owner, the show sec or another judge. Mites can't be seen with the naked eye. If you see lots of small scabs around the shoulders or overall coat condition is poor, there is a higher chance that parasites are present.

- **Breathing**

During your health check you may feel a vibration in the chest; this is often easier to feel than it is to hear and should be investigated further. Listen to their chest for any grunting or wet noises. You may also find the rat sneezing or have swollen glands. These should all be noted down and dealt with as outlined in the next section.

5.3 When you have identified a health problem

The first step is to review the health problem and decide how serious it is, if it is likely to be transmissible to other rats, and how likely it is to deteriorate during the course of the show. Where you have a rat who is well in themselves and in good condition with one or two minor issues such as mild sneezing or a couple of scabs, then typically making a note on their critique and continuing judging will be sufficient. If you are concerned about a rat, you need to consider if withdrawing the rat from the show is the best option for it.

Severity

Each health issue identified has different potential for harm for the rat, ranging from a tiny scab up to serious breathing issues or a large abscess. A serious issue is one where you believe that the rat could be at risk being in a show environment. Examples of this are where you believe there is an active infection present (say a head tilt or sizable abscess) or that the issue requires attention (such as an open wound or evidence of respiratory issues).

Transmissibility

As a judge you are in a position to pass on a transmissible problem to all the rats following that first rat. As such, if you believe something is transmissible through contact you need to return the rat to its owner via the show sec, wash your hands and change your top layer of clothing. The most common transmissible issue in shows is finding lice. If you find several rats with lice it can be worth advising all owners to treat their rats with ivermectin after the show, as a precaution. It is rare that you will have a rat showing signs of a serious respiratory infection on the show bench, however if it does occur, you need to notify the show secretary immediately and the rat should be returned to its owner.

Deterioration

A show day is a long and stressful experience for many rats, and being in a show tank with minimal food, fluid and proper shelter does not help. It is not uncommon to notice some deterioration in condition during the course of the show day, especially in old rats. Where you observe this and believe it has the potential to negatively affect the rat's health in the longer run, it is good practice to return the rat via the show secretary.

If you consider it to be in the best interest of the rat to leave the show bench you have three options.

- **Disqualification**

This should be used where a rat has a significant problem that means it is not showable, such as an obvious infestation of lice, an open wound, large tumour, etc. By disqualifying you indicate that the owner needs to check their rats more carefully prior to the show, not bring elderly or vulnerable rats, etc. Disqualifications are submitted to the NFRS.

- **Withdrawal**

This should be used where there is a fair chance the owner could not have been aware of the problem, or it has developed during the day. It is a 'softer' option and allows you to inform the owner and remove the rat from the bench but does not require notification to the NFRS. Judging is not completed and no critique is given.

- Complete judging and return the rat

This is where you think the rat is well enough to finish judging it but is likely to deteriorate significantly over the course of the show. In this case the owner still receives a critique but the rat gets to go back to its owner sooner and is not considered for the challenges.

If any issues are minor and not seen as detrimental to the rat you can continue judging it and instead include the issues in the critiques and your placing decisions.

5.4 Weighting health

Perfect health is where a rat is entirely healthy and shows no signs of stress, illness or injury. The vast majority of rats entered into pets should fall into this category.

Weighting should be dependent on the number and severity of the issues found. Typically a rat with a small healed scab or who sneezes a few times but otherwise seems in good health would do better than one with several minor bite wounds, or making occasional grunts. Use your judgement and experience to decide how detrimental a potential health concern is. At the buck/doe challenge stage there should be no rats with serious injuries or illness present.



Tutorial 6: Presentation

6.1 Why we judge presentation

Presentation is about how the rat has been cared for up to that point, including pre-show preparation. Whilst this may not immediately seem linked to a good example of a pet rat, it is clearly an advantage for a pet rat to be comfortable allowing its owner to trim nails and clean tails. It also shows that, generally, the rat's home environment is kept clean as this usually (but not always) translate into a clean rat. Trimmed nails also make shows a more pleasant experience for the judge, reducing the amount of scratches you will get. A clean tail is often a healthier one; bucks in particular can let their tails get in quite a state and this can cause dry flaky scales or even infection.

6.2 What the standard says

Preparation (10%)

Preparation is taken to be an indicator of relationship between the pet rat and their owner.

Preparation should include:

- *Overall cleanliness – it is not necessary for rats to be bathed prior to entry into a show but they should be presented in a clean condition. Most rats kept in hygienic conditions will keep themselves reasonably clean.*
- *Tail – free from grease and grime. A rat will often neglect its tail when grooming and the owner may need to help out in this area.*
- *Nails – short or show signs of having been trimmed.*

Notes

A perfectly prepared rat should be clean, with a clean tail and short blunt nails (although nails can sometimes feel sharp despite having been trimmed).

A rat with a stained or dirty coat, long sharp nails and a dirty tail should be noted as having no preparation.

Pigmented rats have more pigment in their tails than paler varieties. This should not be confused with dirt.

6.3 Weighting presentation

When judging presentation it is important to remember why we are assessing it. It is possible to be overly zealous and judge the slightest staining on the tail or coat harshly. The same is true for nails, as it can be easy to miss the fact they have been cut when they still feel quite sharp. Generally, if you can tell a good attempt has been made (from your experience) then you can give the benefit of the doubt. With that in mind the following is a good guide:

Excellent presentation – all the rat's nails are short and blunt or show signs of being cut, the tail and body are clean (but not over-cleaned).

Good presentation – a few nails may be missed but claws are otherwise good, the tail may have some amount of staining (typically underneath where the tail does get more grubby).

Poor presentation – nails have not been cut and the tail is dirty; no evidence of preparation.

Some rats can become messy whilst being in a tank, be that from droppings or the fruit/veg in the tank with them. If they have managed to tread muck into themselves and it is clearly from the show tank experience, it is fair to give the rat a wipe down with a baby wipe and judge them in their cleaner state.

6.4 Over-preparation

Over-preparation is where an owner has tried a little too hard, to the point where it is



detrimental to the rat. This should be taken into account when judging and a comment left to let the owner know that they need to be a little more gentle next time.

The most common example of over-preparation is an over-cleaned tail. This is where the tail has been scrubbed or cleaned too vigorously, most likely involving excessive force or harshly going against the direction of hair/scale growth. This presents as an overly dry, rough (but clean) surface, sometimes slightly pink and sore-looking or occasionally with dried blood outlining some of the scales.

Over-trimmed nails occur when an owner overcuts the nails enough to nip the quick. If it is only slightly damaged it may take a short time for any blood to appear. Usually this presents as a spot of dried blood on the tip of the nails. This should be noted down to let the owner know they have cut too short. In rarer cases the nail may still be bleeding. This is where your discretion is important. If you feel the rat is bleeding heavily or shows signs of being bothered by it, you should return the rat to the show secretary, otherwise just note it down.

You may also see overly cleaned coats. Some owners bathe their rats prior to showing and whilst this is not normally required, it is also not normally an issue. However, if the rat has been repeatedly bathed to the point where the fur and skin are dry and fluffy/flaky, it should be noted down on the critique. This is not as significant as over-doing the nails or tail, as the rat has not been harmed.

6.5 Special awards to consider within this section

Best presented – look out for the rat you think is the best turned out, with beautifully clean shiny coat, clean tail and short nails. If you have several good examples and need to whittle it down, you can take into account how difficult this might be to achieve. For instance, it might be more difficult to trim the nails on a young active rat; for a very pale or white rat it might be harder to maintain a perfectly clean and sparkly coat as staining will show up easier; an older rat will have had more opportunity to get embedded dirt in their tail than a young baby. The rat that wins this award should be a good example of all three preparation areas – overall cleanliness, clean tail and trimmed short nails.



Tutorial 7: Condition

7.1 Why we judge condition

This is possibly one of the most difficult aspects of pet judging to learn, as well as the most useful. As a judge, providing well considered comments on the condition of the rats entered gives the owner a valuable second opinion and can help them ensure their rats are getting excellent care. Because of this, if you see a condition fault (especially a significant one) it is helpful to put a constructive comment on the critique.

Whilst the bulk of judging condition is down to experience and can only really be taught by hands-on experience sitting in / scribing / stewarding, the below guide may be helpful in getting an understanding of the terms used. This is a simplified version of a more detailed *Rattitude* article on condition.

7.2 What the standard says

Condition (25%)

- *Overall fitness: The rat should have good muscle tone, and look bright and alert with clear, bright eyes. They should have abundant energy and vitality. Older rats will naturally be slower, but should still be fit, active and well toned.*
- *Weight: The rat should be a good weight for its build; neither underweight nor overweight.*
- *Coat: The hair should be short, smooth and glossy. Greasy, long, dry, thinning coats and dandruff reflect lack of condition. Rex coats are wavy or curly, but should still have a good quality to them. Thinning in older rexes is acceptable. Some orange buck grease is normal at skin level. Bucks should naturally have a coarser coat than does.*
- *Skin: The rat should be well hydrated, and the skin clear and free from dryness or flakiness. This includes the tail, which should be smooth and not excessively dry or scaly. Rex rat tails will feel rougher due to the curled hair.*

Notes

Where lack of condition exists to a degree that is likely to indicate an immediate underlying health or dietary problem, the judge should inform the show secretary so that the owner is aware of the problem on the show day and able to discuss it if needed.

It is expected that judges use the critique form to highlight any potential condition issues that might affect the rat's long term health, such as obesity or dry skin, etc.

7.3 Judging body condition (including overall fitness and weight)

The rat's body gives us lots of information about its fitness as well as whether it is a good weight for its size. This is important to the long term health of the rat and as it can often change quite slowly, it can creep up on us as owners. Therefore, getting a second opinion can be useful. Describing the feel of a rat is even harder than describing the look of it and this is an area where hands-on experience is by far the best teacher.

Assessing the body condition is largely about touch, with visual examination playing a secondary role. When judging a rat's body condition, stroke them all over from head to tail tip (much like you would in the health check), and feel around their abdomen and chest area. It can be useful to see how baggy the skin is by feeling the skin between the front and hind legs on each side. Have a good look top down when the rat is well stretched out.

Positive signs

- A good weight for their size

It can be quite hard to judge the correct weight for rats until you have handled a number of individuals who are at either end of spectrum. Rats vary in size so much that look and feel is the only reliable way to judge this, and even then there is an element of personal opinion. However, there is definitely an ideal weight band for rats to be in, ranging from fit and lean



to carrying a small amount of extra reserves (more acceptable in older rats who may need it a little more). Feeling the rat, you want to be able to feel its shape, not any excess fat, though as mentioned a small amount is allowable especially in older rats. You should be able to feel their bones but they should not be prominent; instead there should be clear muscle over them. Try holding the rat around the chest so its body dangles down, if it is comfortable like that. Stroking down the body and looking at it, you should see that the shoulder and bum are similar width and the waist doesn't bulge out further than this (a doe should be like a long slender pipe and a buck more like a brick, although some bucks can be more doe-like and slender too). If they won't comfortably hang then try to watch them as they stretch out moving around. A rat with baggy skin but a good weight can look fat if it is lying down as it appears to have skirts.

- Good muscle tone

A rat with good muscle tone feels firm, solid and dense to the touch. Does will generally also feel slender and racy, and bucks (especially your typical stud buck) will be broader and more bricklike, but both will have a good covering of muscle and feel very strong and fit. In some cases rats can have this muscle underneath a layer of fat but you can still feel the substance below the fat.

- Skin "fits" nicely

The rat's skin has only minimal give and is nicely proportional to the rat. This is generally better in younger rats as older rats' skin often becomes less elastic.

Negative signs

- Overweight

The rat carries excess weight. The easiest way to tell this is by feel; the rat will often feel broader than it should and/or soft and squishy. Some rats hide fat under a layer of muscle, in which case the rat will feel muscular but not as dense as a rat that is all muscle. An overweight rat can also have a noticeable stomach or appear rounded and pear shaped, with some rats looking quite pregnant. A rounded firm abdomen isn't always a sign the rat is fat; they may have recently had a big meal. A body which is very soft and squishy to the touch is generally fat, although muscle can also feel softer if a rat is particularly relaxed or becomes dehydrated. In terms of visual examination, if a rat bulges out at the middle when stretched out or has a noticeably large bum and abdomen, they are more likely to be fat than a rat of more consistent width. In these cases it is worth having a good feel of the shoulders too, as if a rat has no muscle tone on the shoulders it can make their bottoms appear disproportionately big.

- Obesity

This is beyond simply being overweight or a bit chubby; here the rat has substantial girth, with the body appearing oval or round when sitting, and there is significant excess fat and flab to the touch. At this point it becomes an important health risk which the owner should be alerted to – an obese rat is significantly more likely to suffer from many health conditions, so as a pet judge it is important that you point this out in the critique.

- Underweight

The rat feels noticeably bony. It will also normally lack muscle tone, especially over the rump and tail, and sometimes with the face looking slightly gaunt. This can vary from serious cases where the rat is at real risk to where it is a bit underfed and just needs a boost. It can also happen to a rat going through a sudden growth spurt who has previously been fine on that same amount of food or one who is carrying a health condition in its early stages.

- Baggy skin

When handling the rat you will easily be able to grab handfuls of skin between the front and hind legs. The skin will feel very loose and baggy, and in some cases the rat may look a little like a flying squirrel.

- Lack of muscle tone

This shows itself as a rat feeling quite loose, light and insubstantial. It may feel soft or underweight, or be overweight and very squishy. This can present in different ways, so one rat may lack muscle tone around their shoulders but have strong powerful back legs (common in rats who don't climb much) whilst another may have good muscle tone on their shoulders but a weak back end (common in rats with varying degrees of hind leg degeneration).

7.4 Judging coat condition

When judging the rat's coat condition, first of all give it a quick full body stroke. This smooths the fur and gives a more consistent impression than when straight out of the tank, and you will also get a proper feel of the coat. A smooth and shiny coat on a doe feels like stroking silk and even in a coarser buck your hand will still glide well. A rat that is excessively greasy feels sticky and a dry coat tends to feel fluffy or rough. Once you have felt the rat's fur, look at it both from above and side profile, paying particular attention to the fur over the rump.

A 'good' coat condition varies significantly with a rat's age and sex/hormone levels. Testosterone has a considerable impact on the coarseness of a rat's coat, and as such an entire buck beyond the age of sexual maturity will get an increasingly coarse coat. You should take time during your training to get a proper feel for what constitutes a good buck coat condition, from another judge or experienced buck owner. Age also has a large impact, particularly in bucks who often lose coat condition at a younger age than does. Use the age information the classes give you and bear this in mind. You would expect a young rat to have a much shinier and smoother coat than an older buck or doe. This is something you will get better at the more rats you see and feel, so the more experience you can get the better you will get at weighting it.

Positive signs

- Glossy sheen

This is harder to see on a rex rat and other coat types as their fur texture often presents a matte look (rex, velvet) or can give a greater shine (satin, lustrous), but a healthy looking rat should have a shine to their coat and once you are familiar with different coat types you will get a good feel for this. A good shiny coat is dry feeling, not sticky or greasy, although rats who are satin or lustrous can sometimes feel a little greasy or damp.

- Short neat fur

In some varieties it is normal to have a longer coat (e.g. roans often have this) but generally a rat's fur should not be excessively long or straggly. The coat should be shorter over the head and shoulders and slightly longer over the body. It should not appear spiky or fluffy. In varieties that have guard hairs, those will naturally be proud of the standard fur.

- Soft smooth feel

The coat should feel smooth and soft. This varies significantly between bucks and does, with does having a much softer coat. A buck's coat naturally becomes coarse with increased testosterone so would normally start changing around 12-13 weeks and be at its coarsest when hormones peak around 9 months). A good buck coat will not feel dry or overly greasy when it is stroked and it should flow well under the hand even if a texture can be felt.

Negative signs

- Dull coat

This is where a coat lacks shine but doesn't look or feel dry. The first thing to eliminate is that there isn't a coat type causing the effect. If this is not the case, a dull coat can often be assumed to be linked to diet (typically oil or protein), environment (typically lack of humidity) or the rat's amount of grooming (either from itself or others).

- Dry coat

A dry coat looks dull but also feels dry to the touch, and often the skin and/or tail will also feel and look dry. It is fairly normal to see white or orange flakes of dandruff in a dry coat.

- Dandruff

This can be a more advanced sign of dry skin. Much like in humans, some rats are more prone to dandruff than others. In bucks, the flakes can be coloured orange by buck grease present on their skin. Dandruff can be confused with lice (small orange/brown rods that move) or lice eggs (small white/translucent dots which are well stuck to the hair shaft). Dandruff in rats will come off easily and be quite loose. If you aren't sure, try to look in good natural light and ask another judge for a second opinion.

- Long straggly coat

This is where hairs in the coat fail to moult out when they are ready, looking long and scruffy. This typically affects guard hairs along the rump and these hairs are often loose. Lightly pinching them between finger and thumb and gently pulling often sees them come out (if you feel any resistance, they are still attached). This is a sign that the fur is ready to, but not able to moult, and can be another progression of a dull coat.

- Greasy coat

On stroking the coat it feels damp, sticky, tacky or greasy. It is more common in bucks where the coat may also have a yellowish or orange hue from the buck grease. Whilst it is normal for adult bucks to have some orange residue on their skin, it should not make their coat feel or look wet.

Coat related issues that are not “condition” related but you may see

- ‘Old buck coat’

This is where a buck's coat begins to lose guard hairs around its saddle area, spreading to the rump. It shows up particularly well in agouti based rats as the loss of guard hairs removes a lot of the darker pigments in its coat. In extreme cases it can give an almost hooded effect of true agouti on a sandy brown base.

- Barbered or chewed coat

This is where a rat's coat is overall normal but sits unevenly with shorter patches or small bald spots, which on parting the fur shows it has been trimmed short. This is typically caused by a cage mate or the rat themselves chewing the fur. Self-barbering is usually a nervous habit, most common on the wrists and forearms and sometimes chest and inner legs. A rat is typically barbered by others if the patches are around the head and neck area. Sometimes chew marks are evident along the back and rump where a cage mate has been overly zealous in their grooming.

- Scabs, bites and scratches

These may make the coat lie unevenly or be revealed on parting the coat to check skin health, and should be captured in the health section of the critique.

- Rusting

Whilst rusting is a normal part of ageing it can also be down to copper deficiency, genetic predisposition and overexposure to sunlight. The coat appears noticeably brown, normally in patches although sometimes affecting a much larger proportion of the rat's body. It is generally more common around the rump area where the fur is older, and also on the belly. It is generally only apparent on dark self varieties like black, Russian blue and mink, as other colours do not show up the change of hue as effectively (if you suspect rusting on a pale rat, look at 'Staining' below). An old rat with a moderate amount of rusting is not unexpected, whereas a youngster who is very rusty may potentially have a deficiency so this could be highlighted on the critique. On the flipside, an 18 month+ black rat showing no signs of rusting alongside good coat condition is a real positive.

- Staining

This is more obvious on pale rats and typically shows itself as red flecked hairs or a pinkish hue, normally around the shoulder area and face from when the rat grooms itself. A rat's saliva and tears contain a red pigment called porphyrin. Most of the time there is not enough to stain the coat, but where a rat grooms frequently or something is upsetting its internal health it can produce excess porphyrin and stain more obviously. Excessive

porphyrin staining around the eyes and nose should be captured in the health section and minor coat staining could be noted in a preparation context if you think the rat just looks a little mucky.

7.5 Judging tail condition

The tail offers a good opportunity to get a snapshot of the rat's muscle tone and hydration levels. The fact that the tail is not covered in a thick layer of fur means that its overall shape and condition is easier to review than say the hind quarters (which can also be an early warning sign for loss of muscle tone). The lack of fur also means that you can get a good general indication of skin health and condition, as well as the skin health of the tail itself.

When assessing the rat's tail condition, run your fingers over it lightly to get a feel of the skin quality, dryness, irregular scales, lumps and bumps. Then examine it overall, paying particular attention to the base of the tail as this is where square edging is most obvious.

Positive signs

- Well-rounded tail
This is where the cross section of the tail is round or oval, there are no clear corners or edges and it looks and feels full and strong.
- Good tail "feel"
The tail feels smooth when stroked down towards the tip, there isn't any sign of dryness or lumpiness and the scales are even and flat. *Note: a rex rat's tail will feel rougher than a smooth coated rat's tail due to the slight curl on the tail hairs.*

Negative signs

- Square tail (or matchstick tail)
This is where a rat's tail is very narrow at the base and has a square cross section (hence the name matchstick tail). It is more often seen in young rats from poor backgrounds, but older rats can also develop this – it happens when a rat doesn't have the nutrients it needs to build muscle tone on the tail over an extended period. As a result, these rats are often small or skinny in body too.
- Square edged tail
This is similar to a square tail but a much milder state. The tail has slight edges to it, so is closer to a trapezium or rectangle cross section (think the cross section of a Yorkie bar) – the edges are still curved but there is a definite edge to it. This is essentially saying that at that time of life the rat has slightly less nutrients than it needs to grow at its maximum potential. In young rats this is quite a normal feature during their regular growth spurts, and not of much significance unless very pronounced. As rats age it becomes more important, as a square edged tail is then more likely to relate to underfeeding or sub optimal nutrient balance.
- Scaly tail
The tail scales are older and lift up a little, making the tail feel rough or dry and look yellowish or mucky, as these scales trap dirt easily. It should be noted down on the critique as the owner should be able to improve this either by giving it a good clean or looking into the fat or protein intake in their diet (a bit of oil can really help).

7.6 Special awards to consider within this section

Best coat condition should be awarded to the rat that you feel has the best example of coat condition in the show, taking into account their age and gender.

Best overall fitness should go to the physically fittest rat with the best muscle tone for its age and gender. This rat should be clearly fit, firm and well-muscled; a slim wiry rat being as eligible as a typical broad stud buck.



Tutorial 8: Temperament

8.1 Judging temperament

This is the section which relies most on your personal preference as a judge, and as such it is quite normal for a rat to show better under certain judges than others. This is as much down to the rat preferring a certain kind of human as to the human preferring a certain type of rat. As a judge it is still important to recognise good examples of temperament, even if it is not your preferred personality, though it is natural that of a number of rats who are equally wonderful, one that is more your kind of rat will do better under you.

When judging temperament it is important you give each rat a similar amount of time to spend with you. Willingness to 'cuddle' should not be used as the sole measure of interaction. Allow them to explore you and part of the judging table (keeping them away from any tanks other than their own that are on the table at the time). Look out for personality quirks, where their attention is focused and how at ease with the situation they are. If they do not come up to you and initiate contact, then pick them up and say hello, handling them gently but confidently (some rats dislike overly gentle or cautious handling) and trying a scratch or stroke. You can also pick up impressions of the rat's temperament throughout the course of judging; it links to a certain extent with tractability, and how they accept the health check or having their nails looked at can tell you how relaxed and flexible they are.

Try to make the experience as enjoyable as possible for the rats involved. If they are nervous or unhappy, try to reassure them. Whilst they are unlikely to place highly, a good show experience can really help develop a rat's confidence for the future. It is worth putting in a little extra time if you think a rat may come round, although if they are clearly stressed and not enjoying the experience even with additional effort on your part, you should consider returning the rat to its owner after judging. If any rat tells you through their behaviour that they really don't want to be there or be handled by you, you should respect this.

8.2 Difficulties judging temperament

There are certain situations where judging a rat's temperament is very difficult. The main example is when a doe is on heat. This often happens during the course of a show day, especially if the bucks have been judged first, but with patience and a certain amount of care you should still be able to get a good judgement on most does. If you come across a jumpy doe that seems to suddenly spring in your hands, it is likely she is coming into heat. Try stroking her rear end and see if this triggers the characteristic hop, often followed by ear wiggling and vibrating. If so, the girl is definitely on heat. From there on you need to avoid touching the rear end and ensure a firm hold when handling. See how she reacts to you stroking her head, say, or what she thinks of your hand. In most cases unless the doe is heavily on heat you can get a good feel for her as a rat from this kind of interaction.

Other difficulties can be caused by a mature buck smelling other bucks on your clothes or your hands. It is rare that they get aggressive or grumpy although it does happen. Firm handling can help the situation, as overly gentle or apologetic handling is likely to encourage them to try and push you around. If the rat is getting grumpier or displays any aggressive behaviour which you are not confident in dealing with, it is best to return them to the tank before they make a mistake.

8.3 What the standard says

Temperament (40%)

Excellent temperament will be a combination of a number of positive temperamental traits (see below). A rat who scores well on temperament must demonstrate a happiness to interact with the judge as well as other desirable behaviours. It is down to the judge's discretion how important each of these traits are to them, provided they judge the rats consistently throughout.



Interactive behaviours

- *The rat is relaxed and at ease, regardless of whether it is active or settled with the judge.*
- *The rat seeks interaction with the humans present.*
- *The rat demonstrates a desire to engage with the humans present by behaviours such as exploration (of the judge), eye contact, mouth contact, grooming, licking, bruxing and returning to the judge after exploratory excursions.*

Positive temperament traits

- *Curiosity: A well-adjusted rat is usually curious and investigative.*
- *Confidence: When a rat is relaxed and comfortable they will demonstrate self-assurance and boldness.*
- *Friendliness: An excellent pet rat will be amiable, affectionate and enthusiastic in relating to people.*
- *Calmness: Some confident rats are extremely relaxed and calm.*
- *'Humour' and cheerfulness: Some rats are natural comedians, and are extremely entertaining.*
- *Flexibility: A well-adjusted rat should be able to adjust to the demands of the situation.*
- *Reliability: An excellent pet rat (when treated respectfully) should remain pleasant and reliable, showing no negative temperament traits.*

Negative temperament traits

- *Indifference/lack of focus: The rat doesn't care whether a human is there or not. A very active or apathetic rat might become completely distracted. The rat isn't in any way focused on relating to the judge.*
- *Caution or fear: Some rats will cling to humans because they lack confidence or are afraid. If the rat is 'cuddly' it should also be confident, not cautious or fearful.*
- *Reluctance: The rat is difficult to engage or shows signs of mistrusting the judge.*
- *Unresponsive: The rat doesn't respond positively to any advances made by the judge.*
- *Grumpiness or unreliability: The rat should not demonstrate any defensive or aggressive behaviour.*

Notes

Willingness to 'cuddle' should not be used as the sole measure of interaction. Some very interactive rats do not stay still for very long. Some rats that appear quiet and cuddly may be bored, scared or looking for reassurance because they are uncomfortable with the situation.

If a rat is distressed to the point of aggression towards the judge, it should be removed from the show bench and returned to its owner via the show secretary.

8.4 Weighting temperament

Weighting temperament is very much a personal thing and the amount of importance you assign to each positive and negative trait will vary. The key thing is to be consistent in the way that you judge each rat. Every rat that is entered into a pet class can be assumed to be considered a lovely pet by their owner, but rats can sometimes respond very differently to the demands of the show day than their humans expect. Even if they seem a little out of sorts on the day, each rat should be given a good chance to settle and get something out of the experience. Comments on temperament should also reflect this, recognising that the rat may be nervous, stressed or grumpy due to the show environment and is undoubtedly lovely at home. This is also the section where you can give the most interesting and sometimes amusing comments, and many owners enjoy details about how their rat behaved at the show.

Positive temperament traits

- **Curiosity**

The rat will typically be sniffing around, either sitting on you observing the world or with a real need to be everywhere and go many places. Older rats, especially males, are more likely to do this slowly and carefully, but they could still be no less curious than a buzzing hyper young doe.

- **Self-confidence**
With some rats you can literally feel their self-assurance and confidence. They will often 'own the table' and be very clear that they know they are special. A quieter, gentler rat can be similarly confident but may show it less obviously. Generally a young rat demonstrating real self-confidence and boldness is rarer than an older rat that has had time to understand his or her place in the world.
- **Friendliness**
The rat greets you in a friendly happy manner, or genuinely enjoys and seeks out your attention. Some judges prefer an "in your face" kind of friendliness where the rat very much wants and seeks out attention and tries to engage the judge, whereas other judges prefer a rat who simply accepts the attention and is relaxed and happy both in their own company and the judge's.
- **Calmness**
This often links in with good tractability – a rat that is relaxed and perfectly at ease with his or her situation and is also naturally self-confident.
- **'Humour' and cheerfulness**
These rats are often playful, entertaining and mischievous. You may well find your pen stolen, your paperwork chewed or your tea sampled!
- **Flexibility**
Watch how the rat deals with the different elements of judging as well as the show environment as a whole. A flexible rat will be able to adjust to the demands of the situation, regardless of what is going on around them.
- **Reliability**
The rat remains pleasant and reliable throughout the judging process, showing no negative temperament traits. Sometimes you find over the course of judging (or over the course of the show day) that a rat becomes grumpier, especially on warm days where heat can bother bigger rats more than smaller rats. This is why it is often a good idea to say another quick hello to any rats which are close to each other when doing the challenge placings, particularly the supreme pet challenge.

Negative temperament traits

- **Indifference/lack of focus**
Some rats clearly don't care for you as a judge. They may ignore you completely or avoid any interaction, not trying at all to relate to you. A very active or apathetic rat might become completely distracted and show no interest in the judge at all. Whilst exploring is good, it should also include some element of investigation and interest in the judge and any other humans nearby too. This shouldn't be confused with a rat that may not actively seek out contact but clearly enjoys it when engaged.
- **Caution or fear**
Some rats will cling to humans because they lack confidence or are afraid. If a rat is 'cuddly' it should also be confident and relaxed in himself/herself. You can see this caution or fear in a rat that hides their head away, snuggling into the judge and preferring not to acknowledge or deal with what goes on around them. They may also vibrate or feel quite tense.
- **Reluctance**
The rat should not be difficult to engage or show any signs of mistrusting the judge. Reluctance is often combined with some level of intractability, where the rat shows visible tension on being handled. Alternatively the rat could be constantly trying to get back to its tank, clearly not enjoying being around the judge or actively avoiding contact, flinching or moving away from approaches. A rat having a nice time with the judge and then returning itself to the tank is not the same as a rat who constantly tries to get back to the safety of the tank or hides away.

- **Unresponsive**
In some cases a rat may just ignore contact or 'switch off' during any interaction, rather than showing some element that they enjoy or respond to attention.
- **Grumpiness or unpredictability**
Some rats can show clear signs of disliking the judging or handling. In extreme cases they can show signs of aggression such as fluffing up and sidling. They may shove the judge's hand away with their feet or teeth, or be pushy and try to dictate the level of contact they accept.

8.5 Special awards to consider within this section

There are three main awards to consider in this section, though it is also relevant to **Most relaxed** in the tractability section.

Most confident should be awarded to the rat who is clearly very happy in their own skin and somewhat owns the judging table, knowing full well that the world revolves around them. This kind of self-confidence is more common in older rats.

Most affectionate is for the rat that shows the most affectionate behaviours, including licking or grooming you, or clearly wants to spend lots of time with the judge.

Most engaging should go to the rat that really clicked with you. A good way to think about this is which rat made you truly feel special, that clearly liked you as a judge and repeatedly initiated contact or responded to invites, or was very much your kind of rat.