

TECHNIQUES OF DEMATTING

By B Bird

as presented to Atlanta Pet Fair 2002 & 2005

Dematting skill is something that is developed with practice over time, much like scissoring and styling. The following techniques are offered as a means of developing your skill in dematting. The more you utilize these techniques, the greater speed you will develop at achieving your result, with the least possible discomfort to the pet.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER - MAT SPLITTING

Splitting matted fur into smaller pieces is to dematting as holding the shears properly is to scissoring. It is your fundamental key to success. By slicing your matted area lengthwise into smaller pieces, you have a much better chance of untangling the hair. There is also less discomfort to the animal to have a small pieces of hair worked on rather than a large mass. One of the best tools for splitting mats is a plastic letter opener that looks like a business card, with a single ³tooth² and a blade in the corner.

Mat splitting requires care and paying attention. Because you need to use a very sharp tool, there is always danger of slicing something besides hair. Watch out for edges of ears, folds of skin, and the tips of tails. Scissors can be used with great caution, ALWAYS working away from the skin. Never cut into mats with scissors pointing inwards to the dog.

Another way of dividing and conquering matting is to shorten the matted coat first. Using your "rough out" shears (an older, less valuable shears) roughly scissored off some of the length. This is especially effective on poodle or poodle mix coats. Oftentimes scissored off mats will brush apart after bathing on these coats. Just try it!

PICK DON'T PULL

Most matted hair will break apart more easily if you use a picking action, rather than trying to pull a comb or rake through a hunk of hair. Correct picking technique is very similar to the technique we use to comb up hair in preparation for scissoring. You are lifting the tool in and out of the hair, not pulling through. Pick from the ends of the hair toward the skin, not from the skin out. Relax your wrist and get a sort of whipping action going. The objective of picking is to loosen the hair. Later you

will get more separation with a comb.

FROTHING

The concept of frothing emerged in the moment during the demonstration of dematting techniques at Atlanta Pet Fair, 2005. I was doing rapid picking action in a matted area on a Cocker Spaniel, using a Mat Breaker tool. As the undone fur rose to the surface, it formed sort of a foam on the top of the coat. "Look,!" I exclaimed, "It's FROTHING!" Voila! A concept was born. Frothing is helpful when you are working on a larger matted area and is an alternative to picking each little piece apart. Lightly whip in a wider area and then brush out the froth and continue with the comb. Or more frothing...

ATTACK FROM THE SIDE

Once you have an area divided by splitting and loosened by picking, you can finish by combing through. I recommend you use a coarse comb and work from one side of an area of matted hair rather than a front and center approach. If possible, hold a piece of hair in one hand and comb with the other. Holding the hair with your fingers between the part being combed and the skin will reduce discomfort to the animal. Release your hold to get the last bit of combing to the skin. Hopefully your picking loosened the hair from the skin.

SLIPPING N' SLIDING

Products which make the hair slippery will ease the detangling efforts. There are plenty of different products to try. One of the most slippery products is Cowboy Magic Detangler and Shine. Another silicone gel is Eqyss Survivor. Remoisturizers and thick conditioners work well used full strength. Less bad mats can be teased apart with aid from diluted spray-in conditioners. Some groomers do much of their dematting in the tub on a wet pet.

Grooming powders and even corn starch can lubricate the hair shaft for increased ease in tangle removing. Wear a paper mask if you choose this route, so you don't inhale a lot of powder as you work.

Silicone products such as *Ice on Ice*, *The Stuff*, *Quicker Slicker*, *AbraCaDaBra* and *Best Shot* coat each hair shaft with slick silicones. Silicone sprays work best when dried on to the coat. It requires a leap of faith to trust that dematting will be easier after the coat is bathed and dried.

BLOW IT OUT - THE USE OF AIR

Air flow can be used as an aid in untangling hair, either from a High Velocity dryer or a traditional stand/arm dryer. The action of the air serves to shake loose some of the hair that is woven together to form a tangle. In the case of more coarsely textured hair, much detangling can be done with air flow and splitting of larger areas. On finer coats, the use of air flow from an arm dryer while fluff drying will speed up dematting.

BATHING - THE USE OF WATER

Many groomers were trained with the admonition to never bathe a matted coat. It was cautioned that bathing would cause the matted fur to tighten its grip. This is true if the matted fur is not combed out after the coat is dried. Cleaning and conditioning a matted coat can often help to release the grip of tangles, and some products, such as the silicones mentioned above actually work best when dried into the coat. Avoid rubbing products into tangled hair, as rubbing can worsen the situation. Squeeze products through the coat and pat dry with towels. It is recommended that you do some mat splitting before the bath, thus insuring that your bathing will be thorough, products will be distributed, and hair thoroughly saturated. Big clumps can be difficult to penetrate.

TOOLS AND PRODUCTS

Find the tools and products that work best for you. For the purpose of splitting large matted areas, look for tools that have replacement blades. These tools are only as effective as they are sharp. Find out if you prefer the rake style or comb style mat tool. A "V" shaped comb is designed for picking technique. Try one. Look for a wide tooth comb or coarse comb. A teflon coated coarse-medium comb is great on small dogs such as Bichon, and a larger wooden-handled poodle comb is good for larger dogs. Many tools are coming out with ergonomic handles so that dematting need not be as stressful to the hands and wrists. My personal favorite tool is the gray-handled Mat Breaker.

A pair of blending shears is also helpful for dematting. Blenders have one notched tooth blade and one straight blade. They can be used to break up mats or to cut out stubborn knots with less danger of slicing the dog or leaving a huge hole in the coat.

Detangling products are another personal choice. Basically these products do two things, they remove static electricity that causes the hair

to cling together and they make the hair more slippery so that it will slide apart more easily with less breakage. Experiment with small quantities of several products until you find what you like. In trying out new products, always follow manufacturers instructions explicitly to give a product the best trial.

GO FOR IT!

By practicing and developing your dematting techniques, and in finding tools and products that work for you, you can gradually expand your ability and speed in dealing with a matted coat without harming yourself or the pet. You will be surprised at how much more dematting is possible on many pets. Dematting can become a lucrative specialty service, similar to cat grooming or special needs grooming. As such, you can market yourself as a specialist and command an extra high fee. You are also in control of determining on which animals and for which clients you choose to apply your special skills. You are not required to demat a screaming hysterical dog who can't take it, or bail out a chronically neglectful client on an annual basis. By becoming a dematting specialist you can distinguish yourself from your competition. Your willingness to assess a client's pet for possible dematting and some expansion of your skills in this area will win you clients and loyalty.

BBird began grooming on the family Lhasa Apsos in the days before "teddy bear" trims or shorter cuts were acceptable. "Barbara!" her mother would call, "Come help me untangle this mess!" For over 30 years she has advertised professional skills in dematting, gaining many devoted clients.

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