

RAT hunting has never been more popular than it is now. This is a trend that is not only confined to Britain. Subsequently, over the years, working terrier breeds have sprung up globally. Though these have been, in general, working terriers often designed and bred to go to ground on heavier, more toothed vermin.

There is, however, one breed or type that has been bred specifically to hunt rats from abroad. Although its ancestors can certainly be traced back (like all working terrier breeds) to British dogs it is a true 'all American'. Its name – the American Rat Terrier. Historically we do have a few English dog breeds that have been bred specifically for rat hunting and, back in time before its abolition, the rat pits or rat baiting as it was sometimes termed.

The now extinct English White and Manchester Terrier spring immediately to mind. While in latter years for rat hunting, legally as we know it, the late Brian Plummer's breed, Plummer Terriers, were basically bred for rat killing. America's answer is their own American Rat Terrier.

Like the Manchester, English White and even Smooth Fox Terrier, in its early days the American Rat Terrier was used in the rat pits within the States. The nimble, fast and athletic American Rat Terrier became popular among landowners to keep down vermin including rats.

Worthy hunting dog

As a breed type it became very popular after the 1890s. The type had a myriad of genetic influences including Italian Greyhound and Miniature Pinschers and even Beagle. Its height of popularity became at its greatest during the 1920s-1940s when it had become a worthy hunting dog at not only rats but also hares and sometimes squirrels.

This was all very well in the rural and natural America of the time but agricultural policies were changing and with it so was the attitude of some landowners.

It was very fortunate for the American Rat Terrier that a number of enthusiasts still saw the need for an altogether more natural and environmentally friendly form of pest control and that specifically meant rat control with terriers. Several owners of the type stood steadfastly by their type of terrier and maintained their beloved working bloodlines. Unlike many terrier or indeed dog breeds, the American Rat Terrier has an expanded gene pool and there is one very good reason why – outcrosses!

The American Rat Terrier

John Glover looks at a breed he believes could become one of the ratting world's greatest workers



• Head study of an American Rat Terrier.



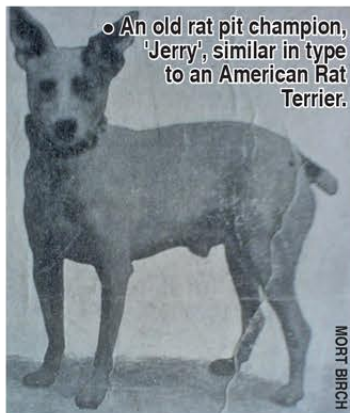
JORDAN REED

• The fast and nimble American Rat Terrier.



• End of day bag with the American Rat Terriers.

These crosses have been well chosen by breeders of this feisty type and there lies a clue, Feist. The Feist is a terrier type that is acknowledged as the ancestor of the American Rat Terrier which was usually black and tan in colouration. Roosevelt was gifted a pup in 1905 by one John Goff, a black and tan called 'Skip' that it was said had ridden the White House of rats by 1906.



• An old rat pit champion, 'Jerry', similar in type to an American Rat Terrier.

Generally speaking the American Rat Terrier comes in a variety of colours. However, white bodied is a good description of most of them that also includes tricolour, black, tan and blue; it is always with white, too. Features wise it is similar to an old type Fox Terrier, the type of which used to be used way back in time in the rat pits of old England.

Despite its heavy working heritage the American Rat Terrier is now becoming increasingly popular as a pet/show dog. Variances in weight also occur with specimens ranging from 6-50lb in weight – a very big gap indeed. Perhaps even more distressing is a hairless version!

Fortunately for the American Rat Terrier there are two very important factors in its favour. Firstly, that aforementioned expanded gene pool (a rarity nowadays) and hunters like one Californian-based enthusiast of the breed, Jordan Reed. Jordan is the only hunter in the States who runs a rat pack which can be hired out to hunt rats in a manner we are very accustomed to in Britain rather than associated with the USA.

Jordan's enthusiasm for the breed is in no doubt and his knowledge of the breed is unquestionable. Jordan also finds the breed very sight orientated and hunts extremely similarly to gazehounds. The breed is neither noisy or has an inclination to go to ground. Clearly the type hunts like a pack of hounds with tremendous stamina and sight.

The American Rat Terrier reminds me so much of early Fox Terriers in England. Dogs the like of 'Jerry', a rat pit champion from Leicester, a leggy and athletic type of terrier that competed in the rat pits of old, way back in the mists of time.

However, it is the references to the use of alleged sighthound blood that intrigues me the most. The possible use of Italian Greyhound, that most miniature of the European sighthounds. Do these sighthounds possess olfactory senses like its cousin, the most English of dogs, the ever reliable Whippet?

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• A successful ratting day with the American Rat Terriers.

If it does then one can see where possibly the 'Farm Feist', aka the American Rat Terrier, gets both its sight orientation and its superb olfactory senses from. I cannot emphasise strongly enough how important nose is in any ratting dog, that brilliant ability to mark when quarry is in residence and it applies the world over.

This would apply equally so in any situation that Jordan Reed uses his Farm Feists for, whether that is the dusty grain mills where he smokes out his rats or even flushes them out with water. The American Rat Terrier is a breed that does not seem to be common outside its homeland of the USA.

However, with the internet the world becomes a small place and who knows, perhaps American Rat Terriers may make it one day to British shores. A return back to its original ancestral home!

Growing in popularity

Stateside, the American Rat Terrier is growing in popularity. It is gratifying to see that the traditional methods of rat control with terriers is still being practised with enthusiasts like Jordan Reed among others.

So much so is the breed gathering momentum that a social media group on Facebook has been set up called North American Sporting, Working and Ratting Terriers. Hopefully this will enjoy great success and go on to generate this all American terrier as a real working dog and provide inspiration and stimulus for a breed that could go on to be one of the ratting world's greatest working breeds.



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