



Today's **LEONBERGER**

The Breeder's Perspective

By Amy Fernandez

Leonbergers entered the AKC Working Group ten years ago after decades in the rare breed scene. That is always a drastic transition in many respects. Three leading breeders offered their take on the breed's progress.

Matt Townsend has been involved in the Leonberger breed since 1999. He is an AKC judge, president of the Mid-Atlantic Leonberger Club of Virginia & Tarheel Leonberger Club, a longtime exhibitor, and a Leonberger breeder under the Sforzando prefix.

Agi Hejja started in Kuvasz in the 1970s and has been involved with Leonbergers since 1998. She is an AKC judge for both breeds and Junior Showmanship. Agi is the judges education chair for the Kuvasz Club of America and co-chair for the Leonberger Club of America.

Alida has been breeding and exhibiting Leonbergers under the kennel name *von Alpensee* since 1993, and has bred more than 40 AKC Champions since the breed was accepted into the Working Group in 2010. Alida is a breeder-judge and enjoys both exhibiting and judging this magnificent breed. She is the Co-chair of the Judges Education Committee of the Leonberger Club of America.

How is the Leonberger breed faring since AKC recognition?

Matt: Conformation and presentation have steadily improved hand-in-hand since AKC recognition. Having access to judges, breeders, exhibitors, handlers, and stakeholders in the greater fancy has prodded many of our breeders to focus on improving structure and movement. Full recognition of the Leonberger coincided with the widespread adoption of social media and other platforms that allowed American fanciers to connect with one another more easily and to be able to see prospective studs from coast to coast. In my opinion, fantastic imports, frozen implants, and creative, determined breeders have all moved the breed forward exponentially compared to our progress previous to AKC recognition.

The breed continues to struggle with cryptorchidism, immune disease, cardiovascular events, and cancer. Shortly after AKC recognition we were able to find markers for a spectrum of neurological disease that caused polyneuropathy in Leonbergers. As a result of multiple markers being discovered, many Leonbergers have been excluded from the gene pool and we are having to work

very hard to maintain the diversity needed to have fertile, vigorously healthy Leonbergers in the future.

Agi: The breed took off in all competitive sports as soon as we entered AKC. Show entries all over the country demonstrate that there are many Leonberger enthusiasts out there. With popularity came many new breeders and sometimes poorer quality. Educating owners, breeders, and judges is the key to keeping Leonbergers within the standard. We have a ways to go in order to establish correct working dog movement in all our breedings. As with other breeds, Leonbergers are also morphing... from plain farm dog to eye-catching, family-oriented, all around animal. Their easygoing personality and trainability have families staying loyal to the breed for many years.

With growing popularity, a lot more litters and puppies were born and some health issues which previously were not obvious came to the forefront. As a result, the parent club's mandatory/recommended health testing list has been growing and will outgrow the breed soon. As more and more Leonbergers have been excluded on the basis of health test results, we are becoming increasingly aware of the great need to preserve diversity in our breed and are putting a number of strategies on the table going forward.

Alida: Without a doubt, AKC recognition has brought the Leonberger from relative obscurity in the U.S. to an often-recognized breed. Their good nature and reputation as a family-friendly dog has helped to increase their popularity. In many areas of the country Leonbergers can be seen at conformation shows and in a variety of working events. The versatility of the breed is highlighted by the diverse AKC titles Leonbergers have been earning. The increase in popularity has invariably led to an increase in the number of breeders, and the quality of the dogs being bred can vary greatly. Overall, correct structure and movement has improved in the years since AKC recognition, but progress has been slower in maintaining breed type, especially correct head type.

Are judges doing a good job?

Matt: Absolutely. Leonberger judging has steadily improved for the better following recognition. The chances a judge will

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see a large, quality entry of Leonbergers varies drastically with the region of the country. A show in Maryland may have 100 Leonbergers with the top Leos from all over the USA. Other areas are not as lucky.

For the most part, judges understand that Leonbergers are moderate, sound, balanced, large working dogs who should excel as family companions and that our breed is not a “cookie cutter” type of working dog. There is a great deal of variation in coat, size, heads, and color. Regardless of how it is accomplished, judges are recognizing moderation, soundness, efficiency, strength, and beauty in our exhibits.

To my mind, judges could improve upon giving equal weight to bitches in the show ring when considering Best of Breed and Best of Winners. The Leonberger is a strongly dimorphic breed and a bitch not having the size, bone, or coat often present in the dogs does not constitute less merit on her part. Bitch specials tend to be very strong examples of the breed. Some judges could also benefit from “seeing with their hands” just a bit more. With multiple colors in the coat and lots of different types of coat length/texture, faults can appear to the eye that are not truly there and merits can be presented that are a little deceptive. I always encourage judges to feel the blade, prosternum, and fit of the elbow in the front and to examine the backline and brisket with their hands. Don't be fooled by a well-made illusion or dissuaded by a small patch of dark hairs that can fool the eye as a shadow!

Agi: Being a breeder-judge and judges educator, I pay careful attention to breed judging. Overall, I am happy that the evaluation of the breed is trending towards positive. Every judge brings their own background to the show ring. The ring results vary due to geography, entry size and judges' experiences.

Alida: In general, judges are doing an excellent job evaluating the breed, especially in the area of soundness and movement. As a breeder-judge, I would like to see judges also consider breed type when evaluating the Leonberger in the ring. I realize that this requires an increased level of judges education for a non-breeder judge to truly understand breed type as well as structure and movement, and that each judge enters the ring with their own unique set of experiences and breed backgrounds, making it more difficult for them to recognize correct breed type.



Matt Townsend



Agi Hejja



Alida

What aspects of the breed have improved and what do breeders need to work on?

Matt: We preservation breeders have quite the challenge. Rears that are rather straight are endemic to the breed from the very beginning. We commonly have flat croups, straight rear angulation, and/or high set hocks. In the 1990s, many of our dogs were balanced by being rather straight in the front and the rear. Over time, we have been able to have a measure of success with accomplishing proper layback of shoulder blades, maintaining appropriate bone, and developing stronger returns. Because improvement has been slower with the rear, many Leonbergers that are exhibited and used in breeding programs, though getting closer to the standard with an improved front, have less balance and weaker backlines than we used to see. As a breed, I feel we need to push for improvement in rear structure while maintaining the progress made so far.

Agi: Owner-handlers are learning and adjusting to the AKC show ring requirements. Dogs are presented well groomed and trained. Their willingness to be shown and good attitude shows in their smiling faces and waggy tails. It is a pleasure to judge this breed!

Balance, fronts, and rears are improving. Angulation, head carriage, and stronger backlines need attention. Breeder education, even for our more experienced preservation breeders, must be a priority in order to make lasting improvement.

Some of the exhibits outer coat color is changing to a full black blanket. In former years, we have not seen this. The standard allows for longer black tipping but a full cover is not desirable.

Alida: Over the past 10 years there has definitely been an improvement in the soundness of the breed. When I am ringside watching a show with a good entry of Leonbergers, I am usually pleased at the number of dogs with relatively clean coming and going movement, compared to what I saw in my early years with the breed. Breeders need to continue to strive for dogs with correct shoulder layback and front angulation, which is an area that continues to be a weakness along with too-short necks; this goes hand-in-hand with shoulder faults. Breeders need to keep in mind that the Leonberger is an elegant breed with a proud head carriage.