

A line of Leonbergers, large shaggy dogs with lion-like manes, are being walked by people at an outdoor event. The dogs are in the foreground, and the people are in the background. The scene is bright and sunny.

# SPECIALTY CLUBS & AKC MEMBER CLUB STATUS

## The Story of a Specialty Club's Fight To Become a Member Club of AKC

By Amy Fernandez

**S**peaking as someone who has endured the AKC club approval process, I can assure you that it's a joyride...Not! Obviously, AKC's first consideration from a survival standpoint is legality, and luckily this sport never lacks legal expertise. That said, most clubs use AKC's preformatted template for their constitution and bylaws, which streamlines the process and ensures that all new clubs hew a close line.

You may ask why that's such a big deal. If you take a close look at the AKC bylaws you wouldn't be the first to realize it's a little different. Specifically, the "club of clubs" concept of democracy is somewhat unusual. In reality, there are many interpretations of how and why it went down this way. However, the primary objective is to ensure that all participants have a voice in running their organization. That's how democracy works. AKC's governing format guarantees precisely that. Every club appoints a delegate and that individual represents them at delegate meeting where they all have an equal say in decision making, and majority rules. Of course, critics might say that the whole system is designed to ensure that a ruling party maintains control. Like most things, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

So why bring this up now? Well... it's no secret that our sport hasn't exactly been operating at peak capacity in recent years. For more than a decade every aspect of it has been steadily shrinking—mainly due to dwindling support. If you are reading this, you thoroughly understand the appeal of countless hours perfecting your canine contender and devoting every free minute to securing its competitive glory. It's a rough, demanding sport and to know it is to love it, which somewhat explains our current problem. We desperately need more people getting to know it. And as AKC has discovered, new breeds represent an untapped vein of enthusiastic novices. After decades of stonewalling, the floodgates opened.

The trick is keeping these new recruits onboard. So, let's turn this over to Matthew Townsend, president of the Mid-Atlantic

### THE LEONBERGER

The breed takes its name from the town of Leonberg in southwestern Germany, which was home to Heinrich Essig, who is credited as the breed's founder in the 1800s. His devotion to giant breeds motivated his vision to create one resembling a lion. The precise ingredients that went into the Leonberger's foundation remain under some debate but by the time of his death in 1889 his breed had gained a following far outside of Germany. In America, it started gaining traction in the '70s as part of the growing rare breed scene. Since 2010 it has competed from the AKC Working Group.

Leonberger Club of Virginia, one of those countless, voiceless satellite clubs that actually represent "the fancy", the ones who show up at countless AKC events simply because they want to promote their breed to the wider public. They don't get paid—they don't even get any credit for it most of the time—but they are cool with that. And since most of us have been there, done that, we totally

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understand the motivation.

Matt's group "has been going strong since 1997" and currently has about 200 members. That's impressive for any local club, but more significantly, these are really active members. "So our group is very pro-AKC: let's do RDO days, let's do ringside mentoring, let's do some local specialties, let's go out to Colorado and do an FCI-style show, these things are cool and great..."

Just to backtrack a bit, keep in mind that Leonberger fanciers were NOT uniformly keen on AKC recognition as Matt explains. He says, "Most of our members were adamantly opposed to seeking AKC recognition. Then an alternate parent club popped up and began to register Leonbergers with FSS and they applied to become the official AKC parent club." (FYI, that sort of thing happens more than you would expect. But we'll explore that topic another time.) "So our parent club came over kicking and screaming mainly because they didn't want this other group doing it." However, once they were in, they were all in.

"We are pretty big for a local specialty club and I think that's because we were the first group to become an AKC specialty club." I probably don't need to tell you that an abundance of enthusiastic, willing workers is not the general rule for most dog clubs. Usually, you're lucky to get ANY help with anything. Obviously, this support didn't materialize out of nowhere. He says, "Prior to AKC recognition, there were large regional Leonberger clubs all over. For instance, on the east coast there was the Northeast Leonberger Club, the Atlantic Leonberger Club, and the Southeast Leonberger Club."

Long before a breed is admitted to the AKC FSS program fanciers must found a studbook and create an infrastructure to support breed development. In other words, they need to recruit members, sponsor shows, keep records, award titles, and lay all the groundwork. Although they were new to AKC, Leonberger fanciers were not new to competitive conformation. "Since we were no longer able to have LCA shows and award LCA titles, our group decided to reorganize as a specialty club and we



**Matthew Townsend, president of the  
Mid-Atlantic Leonberger Club of Virginia**

started putting on shows and since we were the only ones doing it at that point..." Their specialties were big and successful. "We had fanciers from all over the country supporting our shows." Local specialties like that have become the exceptions to the rule these days.

And like I said, once they shifted their allegiance to AKC, they were all in. "We are big supporters of AKC, contributing funds to the AKC Museum of the Dog, participating in RDO Days, bringing judges from overseas to help with judges' education, offering ringside mentoring at specialties, and helping to grow every breeder judge in the USA. The MALC has also worked hard to start up the other three Leonberger specialty clubs in AKC: New Jersey Leos, Greater Bluegrass Leonberger Club, and Tarheel Leonberger Club." This big block of participants has synergy. Among other things, it tends to foster healthy Leonberger entries for all breed shows throughout the Virginia/Maryland area. That's a key issue because this degree of support benefits everyone. These are people

you can count on to bring in entries and extend their involvement to other aspects of purebred dogs. Maybe their optimism overtook them. They decided to apply for member club status.

AKC really wasn't in any position to start tightening up their membership requirements until 1910. Prior to that, Article I of the constitution provided that all organized clubs and associations formed to hold bench shows or field trials (that's all there was back then) were eligible for membership. Then in 1933 AKC ruled that all specialty clubs formed for the improvement of any breed or related breeds were likewise eligible to become member clubs. We're a little fuzzy on the exact criteria but you can check the bylaws for more specific details on that approval process. They didn't grant it often but, technically, specialty clubs might also enjoy the rights of membership; mainly they could hold shows under their own authority without permission of the parent club.

The structure of AKC political participation has actually gone

### AKC Clubs

You probably know all this but just for the record, AKC currently permits two types of clubs. Licensed clubs, approximately 1852 currently, do not have delegate representation or autonomy to hold shows without official AKC/parent club approval. In other words, they can be "licensed" to have an AKC event, which can include breed specialties, obedience trials, field trials, agility, tracking, etc.

Member clubs have an actual voice in AKC business. Generally, this right is limited to all breed clubs and national parent clubs. Every recognized breed is required to have a parent club, although that wasn't always the rule. They are charged with representing their breed's interests within the AKC political structure. Each one is represented by a delegate and participates in the AKC democratic process.

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through many changes. For instance, for the first five years of its existence, it represented both American and Canadian dog clubs. And until the 1940s quarterly delegate meetings always took place at AKC headquarters. When that became too unwieldy, the party was relocated to a series of larger venues in NYC. Not until the '90s did AKC hold any delegate meetings outside of New York City. Also, that “club of clubs” deal wasn’t finalized until 1923. Until then individuals could also join as associate members. AKC found them thoroughly annoying as noted in their Sourcebook, “associate members were thorns in the side of the organization, continually making suggestions and requests.”

Much earlier than that, AKC got plenty of flak from clubs that were located any distance from NYC. They resented the burden of obligatory delegate attendance at meetings. It was terribly expensive and time consuming. Nonattendance had very real negative consequences—but those penalties also seemed to operate on a sliding scale.

It wasn’t always fair but member club status had real value. For instance, before the current point system was introduced, ALL member club specialty shows—regardless of entry size, breed, location, or anything else automatically counted as four point wins. In contrast, all events sponsored by non-member clubs were only worth two points. It wasn’t real popular and that lopsided arrangement was thankfully phased out in 1909. However, non-member specialty clubs still required parent club approval and payment to hold their shows and inactive member clubs often monopolized territories and show dates for spite... the point is that AKC bylaws were revised and amended in response to the evolving situation but nothing ever happened fast. The endless debate about allowing female delegates is probably the sterling example of that behavior.

As Matt mentioned, AKC has been pretty stingy about granting

member club status to specialty clubs. They don’t like doing it. “Currently, there are about 15 specialty member clubs and they were all admitted prior to 1945. Since then I have been told that specialty clubs that were granted member status got it because AKC had very few clubs and wanted to recruit every club that they could.” That sounds plausible. But every aspect of AKC culture has evolved with the times. Corporate headquarters is no longer ground zero for all meetings. And women actually do

participate in the process. And if we consider this situation in terms of 2020, stuff that was inconceivable a year ago is functioning remotely. Ok, it took a pandemic to trigger that leap into technology, but the virtual business meeting is now a working concept that will likely continue post-pandemic simply because it is convenient and cost-effective.

But let’s get back to this Leonberger situation. “In 2016, our enthusiasm led us to inquire with Club Relations about what would be needed to become a member club.” AKC gave them the green light; after all, it was permitted in the bylaws. Moreover, as Matt explains, “In 2000 the Board appointed a Bylaws Overhaul Committee whose members recommended a number of changes to the Bylaws to clean up inconsistencies and to bring them into alignment with best current practices. One of the proposed amendments, which was approved by the AKC Board, involved Article 4 Section 4, allowing a local specialty club to become a member club. The Leonberger was admitted to AKC ten years after this happened.”

Finally, we are getting to the salient issue at hand. Matt contacted AKC Club Relations and got a rundown on what they needed to do and his club proceeded with that task. After numerous, tedious rounds of bylaw revisions, AKC Club Relations finally rubberstamped their revised bylaws, which included the provision for an AKC Delegate. And then they took the next

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step of applying for membership status. The Board has turned down the application “largely because there is some kind of unwritten policy that specialty clubs aren’t supposed to become member clubs.” They seem to have a lot of those unwritten rules over there. “For many of our members, there has been a real hurt resulting in working so hard only to find out that the AKC Board of Directors has denied your application out of hand and, to add insult to injury, the AKC isn’t refunding our \$275 application fee.”

Yeah, you are probably thinking ‘no surprise there’. But Matt makes a good point that is worth considering. “I am a breeder and big time advocate of Leonbergers because of my local specialty club. Those folks took me in, taught me the basics, mentored me when I wanted to breed and show. There is no way I would have become so involved in this if there hadn’t been a local specialty club encouraging me.” That’s how it works more often than you realize. “Someone is likely to be far more interested in learning about the Leonberger when I am standing there at my local park with my dog on the end of my leash. This stuff gets people interested and makes them want to learn about a breed,” he says.

He continues by saying, “If you get a purebred dog you are more likely to join up with a local group in a specialty club. There is community there to help you learn how to care for your dog, train it, and introduce you to activities you might want to try with your new dog. This is how everyone gets involved but it only happens when there is someone reaching out to these new owners.”

He also makes a valid point that parent clubs are typically overwhelmed trying to cope with that workload of responsibilities. “Promoting a breed on a national level is beyond the scope of six board

members of a parent club.” I think we can all agree that it ranks among the most taxing, thankless jobs on earth. Those fun jobs run the gamut from judges’ education to balancing the budget and managing the website. They can’t do everything. On the other hand, this country is full of dog lovers. And as Matt says, “no matter what you do every single dog came from someone doing a breeding, whether intentional or otherwise. The difference is their commitment to responsibility for the puppies and the breed.”

Yes, puppy buyers are encouraged to surf the web, contact parent clubs, and go to a dog show. But as Matt says, more often than not, it is at that grassroots level where relationships are formed that will foster lasting interest in a breed. And we sure need more of that these days. “A lot of times the right questions are not the ones getting asked, like how can we increase the membership, make our voice louder; compete with these ideas that are antithetical to the goals of AKC?” It’s something to consider, especially because that vacuum is predictably filled by more AR propaganda.

Matt says, “It sure does seem that if you have 1800-plus specialty clubs you have a huge network of enthusiastic people that could be on message advocating the value of purebred dogs. And that is likely an undercount because a lot of parent clubs don’t encourage their regional groups to become recognized clubs. I’m not saying that I have all the answers, but it would be great for people to think about what specialty clubs could offer to AKC as member clubs. They could be a huge part of the solution in terms of putting the AKC message out there.” And this is where we should probably give it some thought. “Our board simply wanted AKC to consider the application based on the merits of our club, what we have accomplished and aspired to do, rather than viewing it as some hypothetical takeover by specialty clubs.” One other thing, “Club Relations can easily shut the door on this for good. At the December 2nd Delegate Meeting there is a vote on a bylaw amendment so that no specialty club can become a member club.” That vote passed.

