

• **A SHOWSIGHT BREED FEATURE** •

Judging the Leonberger

BY ALIDA GREENDYK

It has been just over a year since the Leonberger became a fully accepted AKC breed and they are now a relatively common sight at AKC all-breed shows, particularly on the east and west coasts. The breed is still a rare sight at AKC shows in other areas of the country, such as the southeast and southwest. Though the Leonberger is a recent addition to the AKC's Working Group, it is not a new breed. The Leonberger has been in existence for over 150 years and at times during its fairly lengthy history has enjoyed great popularity with both the average family and royalty alike.

Although the Leonberger remains the multi-purpose working dog for which it was originally bred, its most important role is as a family companion. An observer watching a Leonberger with its family will clearly see the breed exhibiting its modern purpose. Because of this, temperament is an essential aspect of Leonberger type and must be given great consideration when one is judging the breed. The Leonberger approaches the world with an unruffled calm, never showing fear or shyness nor exhibiting aggression toward dogs or people. To successfully fulfill their most important role as a family companion, the Leonberger must demonstrate the characteristic gentle, even-tempered, and self-assured manner in all situations. In the show ring, any hostility or timidity must be strongly penalized.

In Europe, the Leonberger is classified as a part of the Molosser Group, and while it shares some common ancestors with other molossers, judges must keep in mind that the Leonberger lacks some of the characteristics that are commonly found in a typical molosser breed. The Leonberger is a very large dog with strong bone and body, yet it must still remain elegant with no feature exaggerated in any way. The breed exhibits a unique combination of size, harmony and balance.

The Leonberger is slow to mature, and this can make judging the puppy classes difficult. A male Leonberger will not reach full maturity (including coat and mane) until three to four years of age. Young dogs in the 9-12 and 12-18 month classes will often appear leggy and awkward and in most cases will not have a fully developed coat; this is especially apparent in young males. The head may be under-developed and proportions may not yet be correct.

The Leonberger is a breed that displays distinct differences between the male and female, and when looking at a Leonberger in the ring, there should be no question as to the sex of the dog. Males also have a





longer, more profuse coat and a mane which develops on the neck and chest at maturity. Females should not be penalized if they have a shorter coat. A mature male should be two to three inches taller than the female at the withers, have a noticeably stronger body and heavier bone, and the head should be decidedly masculine. The head of the female should always appear feminine.

The head of the Leonberger is strong, particularly in the male, though it should never be blocky nor overly massive and heavy in appearance. The skull is rectangular, slightly deeper than it is broad; it should not be wedge-shaped nor should the muzzle be long and narrow. The skin on the head is smooth and clean with no wrinkles present, the top of the skull is only slightly arched, the stop is moderate, and the eyelids and flews are tight, giving the overall appearance of a moderately proportioned, yet strong head. The bite is scissor with a level bite accepted. The black mask extends up to and includes the eye area, and in some cases to the top of the head. Expression is another essential component of the correct Leonberger head; the set of the eyes, set and carriage of the ears, mask, and eye color and shape (dark, almond-shaped eyes are preferred) all play a role in creating the

required sweet, soft, and good-natured expression. The standard states that the eyes must be "neither deep-set nor protruding, neither too close together nor too wide apart." Ears are "level with top of skull...of medium size, triangular...hanging flat and close to the head." In keeping with the moderation of the breed, the body must be powerful and strong with good substance, well sprung ribs, and chest reaching at least to the elbows, but must never be overly massive. The depth of the body and the length of the leg must be approxi-

mately equal. If the body depth is more than fifty percent of the height of the dog, it is too massive and is not correctly proportioned. It must be noted that in a mature male, it is essential that the judge feel the depth of the chest; the length of the coat may make the dog appear to be short-legged and lacking the correct 50/50 body to leg proportions.

Despite its size, the Leonberger in movement is light on its feet with a powerful, free, and smooth gait. The Leonberger should never be heavy or plodding in movement but must demonstrate elegance in its ground-covering, effortless gait which shows good reach and drive. As speed increases, there is a tendency toward single-tracking. Judges of the breed should reward soundness in body and movement and overall balance between front and rear, as these are important qualities that the breed must possess to remain true to type.

The Leonberger is a natural breed, and its natural appearance is one of the most important aspects of breed type. The Standard states that "the outline of the dog's body is always recognizable" despite the length of the double coat. Grooming which obscures the outline of the dog's body is incorrect. A properly groomed Leonberger is one which has been bathed, brushed, nails trimmed, and





excess hair on the feet trimmed. Any alteration beyond this is considered a major deviation from breed type. To maintain correct breed type, it is of great importance that dogs which have been trimmed, shaped, or scissored beyond trimming excess hair on the feet must never be rewarded in the show ring.

The medium to long double coat is lion-yellow, golden to red and red-brown in color. Sand colored (cream, pale yellow) is also allowed, though this color does not occur with frequency and will not be seen very often in the show ring. All colors may have black tips (some with long black tips) on the outer coat and are always accompanied by a black mask. There is ample feathering on the backs of the legs and the tail. The coat should never obscure the outline of the dog.

A common fault which judges will see in the Leonberger ring is poor

toplines with weak backs and high rears. In many cases Leonbergers with high rears also exhibit poor rear angulation with straight stifles and long hocks, which often affects movement and overall soundness. Other common faults are short necks, very light eyes and/or poor masks which detracts from the expression, east-west fronts, and narrow rears; all of these faults affect the soundness and type that is of great importance in a working dog.

To briefly review the qualities a judge should look for when judging the Leonberger; it is a large, strong, elegant dog with a moderately proportioned head and balanced body, a powerful and easy gait, a calm, self-assured nature, and a soft expres-



sion, that is always presented in the show ring with a natural, untrimmed coat and appearance.

—Alida Greendyk

About the Author: I have been involved in dogs since childhood, and have owned and loved Leonbergers since first seeing one in 1989, eventually leading to the founding of my kennel, "von Alpensee" in 1995. Von Alpensee has produced 23 LCA conformation champions including three National Specialty winners, a Search and Rescue dog, and a number of obedience, water rescue, rally, and agility title holders. Since the Leonberger entered the AKC's Working Group in July of 2010, 13 dogs from my kennel have finished their CH, and four have finished their GCH; one of these became the first Leonberger to win an AKC all-breed BIS. I became an AKC provisional judge for Leonbergers. My two teenage daughters and I currently share our home with six Leos.