

A Few Words from a Judge

The Lions Gate Leos

by Eva Berg, AKC Judge

My love affair with the Leonberger and the Leo People began in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho in March 2006. As an AKC Working Group judge, I knew that the Leonberger breed would probably be coming into my group in the near future. I thought that I had better take the opportunity of learning as much as possible about the breed, before I had to officially judge them. While not exactly in the back yard of the San Francisco/Bay Area, an LCA National Specialty in Idaho seemed to be about as close as I could get. My impression of the Leo was cemented as I walked into the lobby and the vast public space of this luxury hotel was filled, overflowing with these beautiful, large calm dogs!!

My "Idaho Experience" was total immersion. I watched all of the judging of the regular and non-regular classes as well as the sweepstakes. I was captivated by the FCI show with its in-depth critiques. I first met some of the Leo people as official mentors and breeders that were generously willing to sit with me and share their extensive breed knowledge. I was able to learn many of the Leo details by participating in a wonderful breed seminar and was so impressed by the large number of Leo breeders and fanciers that were in attendance to expand their breed knowledge. Watching several Leos go through their breeding evaluations was an additional learning experience.

I was invited to address the Board of the LCA to share my experiences with AKC. I hope that I was able to somewhat satisfy the Board that with the LCA becoming a member AKC club, it could offer substantial advantages to the breed, while allowing the LCA to continue as a première breed club protecting the Leos.

I was grateful that my sincere interest in Leos was recognized, and I was invited to Judge the Fall Regional Leonberger Club Specialty show in Colusa, CA. in October 2006, and the Leonberger Club of the Northwest Specialty show in August 2008. These shows gave me the opportunity to put all of my watching and studying to the test, and I truly enjoyed evaluating these two large groups of Leos.

The "Crown Jewel" for any judge is being invited to judge a national specialty show, and if it is for a breed that you truly admire and enjoy, it is an unequalled thrill. I was overjoyed when invited to judge your 25th National Specialty – the last one before becoming officially a recognized breed!

Your show committee is to be highly commended. They located one of the best-kept secrets in the Bay Area – the old McClellan Air Force Base near Sacramento, California. The facilities for Leos and their people to live, play, learn, sleep and show were about as perfect as they could be.

Great Dogs – Great People. Let's start with the people. From my Coeur d'Alene experience to McClellan, a consistent factor has been the owners and exhibitors. All were friendly and willing to share their dogs and their talents with strangers who expressed any interest in the Leos. In the show ring, excellent sportsmanship and support of all exhibitors was evident at all times. Owner-handlers dominate your show, and I hope that continues, as it adds to the individuals' enjoyment of the sport. At the three shows that I judged, it was very evident that the quality of the handling improved at each show. It takes quite a bit of skill to properly exhibit a large breed, and the Leo people are more than up to the challenge. And your future is secure. The four Junior Handlers that competed at the National were very talented youngsters, and I hope that they continue to exhibit as Juniors at AKC shows, and handle their Leos in the Breed ring. My Best Junior was an absolute delight and I am confident that she will have a great deal of success in the future.

I am very pleased to report that I have observed a steady and definite improvement in the overall quality of Leos in the Breed ring. Most of my classes had several exhibits that on another day could walk off with the top prize. This depth of quality is more important than seeing the occasional superior specimen, and speaks well for the future of the Breed.

As a class first comes into the ring, I view the outline and proportion of each exhibit. Do they conform in balance to your breed standard? The first time around the ring I view the dogs and often a few exhibits already begin to stand out. Of course, I then go over each exhibit to carefully view the head shape, the muzzle, the proper bite and teeth, the eye shape and color, then the strength and proper length of the neck, working my hands down to feel the shoulder lay back and the length and angle of the shoulder blade and the upper arm (I not only view the front legs to make sure they are straight, but also feel the proper bone structure), continuing with my hands to feel the topline (since hair can visually change the topline), I feel where the ribcage ends and check to see the length of croup and breadth across the loin. I feel the musculature in the hindquarters as well as the angle of the hock then check the length of tail as well as the tail set. I then feel the coat (including undercoat). In the overall visual view I check the mask and check to see that the dog has the allowed coloring. Now, it is time to move. On the circle, I am looking to see if the dog can reach forward in his stride and have a strong drive off the rear. All these pieces go into determining who most correctly represents the Leonberger Breed standard within a class.

Overall there was quality in the young dogs/bitches. A few bites could have been a bit better but full dentition was universal. Some of the younger dogs could not quite handle their bodies. Front and rear legs did not always move together and a few had a difficult time moving out and were pacing. In the older dog classes, they did appear a bit more coordinated. I did feel that some of the older dogs were not properly muscled and a few were overweight. This is a large breed, but when the dog's body becomes excessively heavy, the head may appear too small and therefore the dog esthetically is out of balance. I felt that at this show, the strength was in the bitch classes. Many of the females, to me, were fantastic. There were a number of females that could win the winners (purple ribbon) on any given day. However, the very best came into the ring in the Specials classes. What a lovely sight to behold all your lovely champions. The breed has greatly improved over the last 4 years. The balance and substance overall is super. The masks are clear and very identifiable, the temperaments are still superb, and the coat color and texture are good. I feel the areas of concern are still toplines, tails that are carried too high (although I am more concerned with the set), lack of rear angulation and shoulders, in some cases, too straight.

You, the breeders, are the guardians of your breed. As you continue to work on your problem areas, I know you will always keep temperament in the forefront.

Your show committee is to be complimented on a successful and well-run event. Your dinners and educational programs were outstanding. Your judges' education group did a phenomenal job and the new illustrated standard is wonderful. Please keep up the good work and continue to offer as many seminars as possible as you come into the Working Group and need to educate the AKC judges on your breed. I loved learning about the history of your breed and a very touching moment was the awarding of the Grey Muzzle certificates.

I wish you the very best as you venture into the Working Group within the AKC.

Thank you again. My love affair with the Leo continues....

Eva Berg