

# JUDGING THE LEONBERGER

By Ag i Hejja



**I**n judges' circles, we often hear that winning dogs stand out as they enter into the ring. In Leonbergers, the same often holds true. We see some of the important elements of breed type first; large size, proud head carriage with black mask and calm, confident demeanor.

Once the class lines up, the silhouette of the breed is vital to the correct Leonberger type. Several elements are highlighted in the general appearance section of the standard. Let's examine these elements one-by-one.

- Large size
- Balanced Build
- Powerful and Strong
- Lion-like coat, black mask

**Large Size.** The Leonberger is a large dog. Though many in the fancy believe that "bigger is better", it is important to note that Leos are not meant to be as large and imposing as the St. Bernard, nor should they be the size of the Bernese Mountain Dog. Ideally, their size falls somewhere in between. Bitches have an ideal height of 27½" and dogs are ideally 30". The depth of the chest is close to 50% of the height at the withers. They must be large and powerful enough to be suitable as an all-purpose working dog, but not so large that they lose the powerful, elastic, and agile movement that is characteristic of the breed.

**Balanced Build.** The Leonberger will ideally have rear angulation matched to

the front producing a balanced dog. The eye should not be drawn to any particular part of the body, but should see the entire silhouette. The slightly rectangular body is supported with medium—heavy bone in direct proportion to his size. The Leonberger's neck flows elegantly into well laid-back shoulders, blending smoothly into a level topline. The Leonberger has a "full body", meaning that there is only a slight tuck up. The underline is as important as the topline.

**Powerful and Strong.** The Leonberger is a powerful dog that shows a combination of strong and lean muscles, good bone, correct angulation, proper length of body, and balance. Well laid-back



shoulder blades with a matching return of upper arm provide the framework needed for powerful muscles. The well-sprung ribs, broad, compact loin and sloping croup, all come together to create great power in the balanced Leonberger. Its important that nothing is overdone to accomplish this power. Everything is in moderation and in balance!

**Lion-like coat and black mask.** Mature males carry a mane that extends over the neck and chest. This mane, coupled with great size, makes their silhouette immediately discernible from the bitches. The females typically have a shorter coat and lack the length of main males get. This does not make the dogs typeier than bitches. Leonbergers are a dimorphic breed; males and females are easily recognizable. With everything else equal, an elegant bitch is every bit as deserving of a Best of Breed as a robust dog.

### **The Leonberger Head**

Correct head and expression, in harmony with overall size and coat, are hallmarks of the Leonberger. As with the silhouette, the head should always be appropriately masculine or feminine; you should have no doubt about the sex of the Leonberger from looking at the head. The bone structure, coloration, and expression are unique to the Leonberger.

The ideal head is well balanced in proportion to the size of the dog and is deeper than broad with the length of muzzle and the length of skull approximately equal. The face is covered with a striking black mask that extends above the eyes; the Leonberger's good-natured expression is soft, intelligent, and confident. Likewise, the nose and lips are black and blend with the mask. With close fitting eyelids, the eyes are moderately set into the skull upon a slight oblique; the eyes are medium sized, almond shaped, and colored a rich, dark brown.

The ears are an integral part of the head's proper silhouette; they are fleshy, moderately sized, pendant, and hang close to the skull. The tip of the ears are level with the inside corners of the mouth. When alert, the ears are level with the top of the skull and set slightly forward. The flews are tight and close fitting and there







should be no coarseness or drooling, even in a large male. An ideal Leonberger has a scissors bite with full dentition; level bite is acceptable.

### **Leonberger Gait**

When looking at a Leonberger, one should expect efficient, balanced, ground covering movement. At a trot the Leonberger is effortless, powerful, free, and elastic and should always maintain a level topline. Viewed from the front or from behind, their forelegs and hind legs travel parallel. As speed increases the legs tend to converge toward the centerline.

Overall the efficient gait of the Leonberger along with strong reach and drive gives the impression of a large dog that can travel effortlessly.

### **Leonberger Coat**

The greatest variety in Leonberger type can be found in the coat. Leonberger coat is acceptable in a wide range of colors and lengths and—to a lesser extent, textures. A judge is highly unlikely to have an unacceptable coat color entered into the ring today. Coat colors are lion-yellow, golden, red, red-brown, sand, pale yellow, and all combinations thereof, sometime with black tipping.

Leonbergers with plentiful black tipping can appear quite dark, especially when out of coat; this is not a fault. A black tipped dog should always have a lighter undercoat. No coat color is preferable to another.

In general, dogs will have more coat than bitches and should have, at maturity, a well-developed mane. Having well furnished feathering on the back of the forelegs and breeches is desirable in an adult dog. A Leonberger will often not develop a fully mature coat until they are three to four years old. Though coat is a desirable aspect of breed type, coat by itself does not make the Leonberger.

### **Leonberger Character**

Mature Leonbergers show absolute confidence while exuding a gentle and sometimes playful demeanor. A giant tail wag in the ring is quite welcome. The modern purpose of the Leonberger is to be a steadfast family companion. Proper Leonberger character is essential to breed type. With a mature exhibit, any hint of aggression, nervousness, shyness, or fear should be penalized in the breed ring.

Leonbergers have about a two-year “puppyhood” that can sometimes lead even well trained exhibits to overly playful or submissive behaviors when being greeted by the judge. This should not be confused with a faulty temperament, but rather recognized as acceptable (even if undesirable) puppy behavior. With a patient and friendly approach from the judge, they should recover fairly quickly.

To sum up the Leonberger type and characteristics: Calm, confident, large size with appropriate dimorphic features. Balanced body to leg proportions. Balanced front and rear angulation. Strong bone with double coat. Powerful, free and elastic movement.

An even temperament with gentle character is the utmost importance in fulfilling their role as a family companion. ■

### **BIO**

*Agi's involvement with purebred dogs started in 1969 in her native country of Hungary. Her first breed was the Kuvasz, and then added the Leonberger 20 years later. Agi is an AKC judge who serves as the Judges Education Chair for both of her breed clubs.*