

## 2014-4 The Importance of Temperament

One of my pet peeves is the sight of a small toy-sized dog straining at its leash, coming absolutely unglued as it rages, teeth bared and hackles up, at a person or another dog in the general vicinity. Very often, the somewhat embarrassed owner will attempt unsuccessfully to quell this maelstrom of fury by picking up the small terror in a football hold as they try to shush it into submission. The dog often continues its frenzy in the arms of its master, legs flailing and teeth gnashing. When witnessing these spectacles I always think that if my 130 pound Leonbergers behaved like that, they would be menaces to society. Just because an aggressive dog can be picked up and managed doesn't make the behavior any more appropriate.

While aggression in dogs can be the result of genetics, it can also be a learned behavior, the result of environmental factors. Whatever the root cause, the manifestations of an aggressive temperament are often witnessed very publicly—whether on a neighborhood walk, in local park watching a soccer game or in the show ring. Similarly, shyness, the opposite of aggression, can be witnessed in the whelping box at a very young age or can be acquired by an environmental trauma. Both shy and aggressive dogs pose a significant risk to themselves and the world around them, regardless of their size. That said, there are always extenuating circumstances: the inexperienced puppy who is suddenly overwhelmed and shrinks back or seems fearful as the judge bends to begin his examination, the seasoned show dog who is caught off guard by a judge approaching from a different direction or angle, the recently bred intact male who finds himself in a ring with bitches in season. No dog is perfectly behaved all the time, and as with children, it's unfair to expect it. But that doesn't mean we should accept it and perpetuate it, either.

Temperament is a hallmark of the Leonberger breed type. As our Breed Standard states, the Leonberger is a “calm, non-aggressive” breed.....*The gentle character and even temperament of the Leonberger is of utmost importance for fulfilling their role as a family companion. The Leonberger is self-assured and calm, with a steady, playful demeanor. He is willing to please and possesses a good capacity for learning. The Leonberger exhibits a marked friendliness towards children and is at ease in all situations, never showing fear, shyness or aggression. Quarrelsomeness or hostility towards people or dogs in normal situations, or an unwarranted show of timidity or nervousness, is not in keeping with Leonberger character and shall be penalized to the extent that it is effectively eliminated from competition.*”

At home or in the show ring, aggressive or shy behavior has no place in the breed type of a Leonberger, and dogs that routinely display these behaviors should not be put in the position of dealing with the stressful show environment. All glory and shiny trophies aside, the purpose of dog show is to evaluate breeding stock against the accepted breed standard. Temperament, then, should be given as much consideration, if not more, than other breed hallmarks such as mask or feathering.

Public perception is everything. The sight of a shy or aggressive Leonberger in the ring can suddenly tarnish the reputation of the “calm, non-aggressive” breed we love and foster the notion that the Leonberger is quarrelsome and ill-tempered rather than showcase the breed's gentle character and even disposition. In this age of hyper-vigilant media and breed bans, that's a risk that no breed can afford to take.

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