

Leonbergers 1-17

You Lookin' at ME?

Driving to work one day, I was listening to a local radio station's "80's at 8:00" play list. As a teen of the '80's, I was singing along to the The Stray Cats' 1982 rockabilly hit "Rock This Town" as lead singer Brian Setzer warned, "Well, you look at me once, you look at me twice, you look at me again and there's a-gonna be a fight..." Suddenly it occurred to me that those lyrics are literally the message, blaring at 140 decibels, by many intact, adolescent, male Leonbergers who have locked eyeballs with another male dog.

Owners who just weeks ago were congratulating themselves for raising such a happy, outgoing puppy are suddenly faced with a 100 lb. stiff-postured and staring upstart, difficult to control around other dogs, and downright frightening to behold. Confused, they often call their breeder or a trainer and ask, "What could have happened? We were SO careful about socializing him! What happened to our baby boy?" The answer, dear owners, is a simple one: your baby is growing up. When our Leonberger boys are adorable little fluff balls, eager to explore and in love with the world, it's so easy to believe that they'll stay just as perfect as they are at that infantile state. But the fact is, they grow (and grow and grow!) and the hormones surge, and suddenly their best friend from the dog park is viewed not as a pal but as a potential challenge, resulting in much smack-talking and chest thumping from the very same darling baby boy.

The topic of managing adolescent socialization could easily fill a year's worth of Gazette columns, but almost always, the genesis of a conflict between dogs begins with one simple action: eye contact. As we all know, two young males engaged in a staring contest rarely ends positively. Perhaps the most vital tool in heading off these DEFCON 2 escalations is to be aware of your dog's surroundings and quickly break eye contact with other dogs before the dance for dominance begins. Foundational training is crucial. A reliable "Watch me" command is invaluable in getting your young male to shift his focus to you, which then enables you to redirect his brain to something more positive: a quick heeling pattern, for instance. Having something else to think about and focus on lowers the dog's heightened state of arousal and enables the owner to head off a potential escalation of hostilities before it begins.

It's human nature to avoid uncomfortable situations, and when the "butt-head adolescent male" phase hits, it's very tempting to just stay home and avoid any potential conflict. However, this is exactly the time that adolescent males SHOULD be out there, properly managed, engaging in their world and learning exactly what kinds of behaviors are appropriate, and which, decidedly, are not. Don't stay home. Remain vigilant and proactive about the body language of your dog and those you encounter, and soon your "butt head" days will be a distant memory, replaced with the pleasurable companionship of a happy, confident, well-socialized Leonberger who you can truly take anywhere.

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