

Leonbergers 1-19

Cultivating our Youth to Protect Our Future

Spend some time listening to a group of well-seasoned dog folks and one of the common themes you'll hear is that the sport of dogs is greying and fading. From casual ringside conversations to social media discussions to podcasts, I've heard this same refrain many times in recent years, in both performance and conformation. In my last column, I encouraged experienced LCA breeders to consider serving as a mentor for those who are just beginning their journey as a breeder of Leonbergers. Having the calm voice of experience at the other end of the telephone and ready access to the wealth of knowledge gained through years in the breed is such a valuable commodity and serves the breed well by ensuring that wisdom is passed down through the years.

But to whom is that wisdom being passed down? Is there, in our breed, a generation of young fanciers ready and willing to accept the torch, to carry the banner, to shepherd the Leonberger through the next fifty years? Do we have a core group of youth who are excited about the breed, who've grown up in it and are eager to make a name for themselves in Leonbergers? From outward appearances, the answer to these questions is a resounding "No." And yet, Leonbergers and kids are a natural combination. We know that many breeders not only actively recruit children to come socialize puppies while still in the whelping box, but then place many puppies in homes with children. "Family companion" is the overriding purpose of our breed, and yet at our last national specialty, one could count the juniors entries on one hand. Simply selling puppies to families and offering junior showmanship classes at our nationals is not enough to build a strong future fancy.

Currently, there are but four AKC Juniors listed in the Leonberger Juniors rankings, and three of the four have under ten points. Granted, Leonbergers aren't the flashy Juniors dog that, say, a Bichon, English Springer Spaniel, or a German Shepherd is, but as an outstanding breed choice for a family companion, I'd wager there are many Leos living with kids, and at least some of those homes are show/performance homes. Why, then are we not seeing more Leos in the show and performance ring, with juniors on the end of the leash? While there are over 3,100 members in the "AKC Juniors" Facebook group, a quick search of the term "Leonberger" turned up very old posts from two members: my daughter who is now a senior in college and one other mom of a junior from another breed who showed a friend's Leonberger a few times in the Juniors ring. The group is an active forum, full of lots of great advice and discussion, yet our breed is conspicuously absent.

One great way to build enthusiasm among young Leonberger lovers is with a well-organized and promoted club Juniors Program to provide mentorship, recognition and support to young members who are venturing into the show ring with their Leonberger. Many parent clubs support the youth within their ranks by offering year-end awards to juniors who compete in many venues, from the AKC Juniors ring to performance events to community education opportunities, mentoring programs, even stipend programs and college scholarships. Such a program requires commitment from club leadership and volunteer hours from the membership, of course, but these investments will undoubtedly pay big dividends when a new generation, "home grown" through an active Juniors program, will stand ready and willing to serve as future stewards of the Leonberger.

The LCA already has many of the most important ingredients: A breed which is an ideal family companion, legions of dedicated owners with decades of experience to share, and even a free, online

Junior Handling course available through our LeoU program. If there's a young person in your life, or in the life of your Leonberger, consider encouraging them to venture into the Juniors ring or a performance venue. You'll find a wealth of information on the AKC website under the "Sports and Events" tab. Swelling the ranks of Leonberger juniors would demonstrate in a tangible way that the breed we love will be well-positioned to meet any future challenges the fancy may face.

Astrid Robitaille

Leonberger Club of America