

Leonbergers 10-20

Agileos!

Leonbergers, though a very large breed, are extremely agile and athletic. It can be very surprising to see such a big hairy dog not only complete an agility course, but do it with speed and accuracy, zipping through weave poles, soaring over jumps, and zooming through tunnels. When long-time Leonberger owner Bonnie Goodfriend first started doing agility with her Leonberger, Frieda, her fellow competitors good-naturedly suggested she get a “real dog” to do the sport instead. Frieda went on to become the first giant breed in the world to title in agility in any venue. Goodfriend recalls, “When Frieda finished the final titling run, everyone was screaming, ‘Frieda is a real dog!’”



Frieda the “Real Dog,” owned by Bonnie Goodfriend

Leonbergers can indeed do agility, although there are certain precautions that must be taken in doing the sport with such a large breed. Former Leonberger Club of America president Bill Wilson had two of his Leos, Denver and Nautica, invited to the AKC Invitational in the same year. Bill’s long history with the breed helped him hone his training program with his own dogs in order to develop the skills they will need to do agility while protecting their skeletons and musculature during their prolonged puppyhood and adolescence.

Wilson begins foundation training as soon as he gets a puppy, starting with body awareness, contact training, and safe-height (close to the ground) obstacles that can help the pup learn where to put their feet without risking a fall from height, which could damage those slow-to-close growth plates. He uses positive-reinforcement to identify and reward contacts, speed, and clarity with his Leonbergers as they mature, so that by the time their skeletons are mature (around 2

years old), they already know how to safely maneuver the various obstacles involved in the sport. “Always keep it fun,” Wilson adds, particularly when it comes to competing/trialing. Care must also be taken to keep the thick-coated breed from overheating during training and competing. He will not run his dogs on hot, humid days, and will not even sign up for a trial that is not going to be held indoors with air conditioning, or during the hottest months of the year.



Emi flying over jump, owned by Mara Bovsun



Argo touching down contact, owned by Shannon White

For those new to the sport, it helps to find an agility instructor who has experience working with very large breeds. Adult Leonbergers can slam teeters, bend weave poles, and leap to the top of the A-frame without touching the up contact. Obstacles must be taught with the dog’s safety in mind. Leonberger owner Mara Bovsun, started out in agility with an adult Leonberger, but the lessons she learned with that dog led her to begin the journey anew with a puppy. Bovsun, who lives in New York City, put a JWW title on her adult Leo before retiring her, and began early foundation training with her next Leo as a puppy. Though she says if she could go back, she would spend even more time on building that foundation, her second Leonberger, Emi, already has 13 titles and has earned the LCA’s Versatility title. Despite her size, Emi completes clean agility runs with times consistent with smaller, lighter breeds. “Border Collie times,” Bovsun says, which underscores the importance of teaching the obstacles in a safe manner. Running a dog twice the size, or more, of those smaller breeds that can still do the course at that speed requires a solid training foundation and clear communication from the handler as well.

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Leonberger Club of America <https://www.leonbergerclubofamerica.com/>