

Delegate's Corner

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AKC announced record earnings for the 2021 calendar year, the highest in the 138-year history of the registry. Hard to say what percentage of these record earnings are owed to the increased interest in dog ownership engendered by the COVID crisis, but earnings are earnings, and this report was very positive.

Also of general interest is the partnership AKC has entered into with Disney, leveraging their ownership of both the AKC and ESPN networks. The number of hours programmed by these two networks were almost 200% higher than predicted by AKC. ESPN expressed an interest in growing their percentage of female viewers and felt that televising dog related events was the best way to go about it. This has become a win-win situation for both AKC and the two networks as viewership was much higher than originally anticipated with over 1 million viewers watching ESPN even while the Super Bowl was in progress. This appears to be a very profitable partnership for all involved parties. AKC has chosen to highlight events that are different and exciting. The world's fastest dog, Flyball, and agility proved to be audience grabbing monsters for both networks and, of course, for AKC.

Before getting to the meat of this report, I wanted to recognize the passing of former AKC Board Chair and CEO Ron Menaker. Many of you who are involved in conformation may have actually shown under Ron as he was an active judge at AKC events up to just a few years ago. Among the many items that were created with Ron's vision is the Museum of the Dog in New York City. I did not know Ron at all well but listening to the heartfelt tributes afforded him by AKC CEO Dennis Sprung and current AKC Board Chair Dr. Tom Davies, it's clear we lost a seminal member of the world of purebred dogs. He will surely be missed.

So, in keeping with my plan of highlighting especially interesting or important topics in these reports, I want to again provide an update (and a few personal observations gathered during an intense conversation with a fellow Delegate who is a geneticist by profession) on AKC's idea of formulating its own purebred preservation bank (which I will refer to as the PPB during this report). Please read on for a new take on why this project should be of great importance to not only breeders and stud owners but to anyone who cares about our Leonbergers.

I believe strongly that AKC is selling this program incorrectly. And, I, as the Delegate, embraced their vision of what this project can be and, as a result, sold it to LCA members incorrectly.

So, let's take another stab at the PPB in light of what learned from several Delegates who are far smarter than I.

In presenting the PPB to the LCA, it simply did not fly. Easily the most prominent

sticking point was the fact that our breeders, in order to participate in the PPB, would have to sign what's called a Deed of Gift which essentially transfers ownership of straws they no longer intend to use into possession of the PPB. This means that stud owners would lose control over who eventually became the owner of those straws and, necessarily, which Leonberger bitch would become the eventual recipient.

I want you to suspend that thought while you read on. What if I told you that the express purpose of the PPB should not be simply to provide a way to avoid losing straws when breeders retire. That's the way AKC is selling it. Rather, think about how the PPB could, in some circumstances, actually play a major role in saving our breed.

A couple of things to remember:

- 1) The LCA controls the program and makes all the rules.
 - a. The only role AKC has is to provide the infrastructure for storage. They make no decisions.
- 2) You may specify that your donated straws may not be used for X number of years following your donation.
- 3) There will be at least several years of discussion before this becomes a reality.
- 4) This re-imagined version of the PPB should be thought of as a way to catastrophe-proof our breed far down the line

There are 2 separate tracks that should be examined before dismissing the idea of a PPB.

REMEMBER – the key words are “**Breed Preservation**”.

Scenario 1:

We know in the past 10 years, the LCA and the LHF have collaborated to identify genetic markers which, if rules are followed, should eliminate issues such as LPN1, LPN2, LPPN3 and LEMP. But, let's suspend that thought and travel 30 years down the road when most of us are not only no longer breeding but may not be around at all. Here's the scenario. A genetic bottleneck is defined as a drastic reduction in the size of the population of a breed. Most purebred dog breeds have a bottleneck somewhere in their past. Many breeds were drastically reduced during wars ((think Leonbergers at the end of World War1). While it's most probably not a war that might cause such disruption, it could be distemper epidemics, or, more than likely some genetic incursion that wipes out almost the entire population. If such a disease appeared, we would be unable to use the existing population of males to continue procreation. In two words, “we're stuck”. Not so, however, if we had created a semen bank consisting of not some of our best dogs (the ones whose progeny have fallen victim to this disease, but some that were not part of the breeding pool that led to this genetic bottleneck. I'm not talking about bad dogs, just dogs that may not have been the choice of most breeders. This is where the existence of the PPB can become the lifeline we would need to save the breed because, to repeat, we'd be using stored straws that were not in the pipeline when this genetic disease wiped out the population. We would be able to fall back on those banks of stored semen,

Scenario 2:

We're still 30 to 40 years in the future and, for whatever reason, breeding of Leonbergers has slowed to a crawl. Available studs are almost non-existent. We're more like the Otterhounds of today creating an average of fewer than 8 litters a year. In this case, we'd be able to draw on the other part of the PPB, the part that has straws frozen from the cream of the crop.....our best studs during the era in which it was frozen to keep the breed going. Having these straws in reserve could be a life bridge for the breed.

So, please don't look at the bank as a short-term solution for producing litters but, rather, as a long-term bet to hedge the possibility of encountering what's described above. When you look at it in this light, I'm hopeful you might see there are other issues in play here that we have probably not considered in making the decision not to participate in the PPB, decisions that could result in decimation of the Leonberger breed.

To reiterate, hopefully neither of the outlined scenarios every occur BUT if one should occur at some time 30-50 years in the future, the LCA leadership would have a resource to address the problem and keep this breed we all love from becoming extinct.

In addition, with the increasing availability of both computational and genetic technology, it will be possible to make decisions regarding both collection and utilization of these semen samples on quantitative data that reflect the priorities of the club's best interests.

Many, many things must happen before we arrive at a decision point. Understand, I'm not advocating for the creation of a Leonberger breed specific PPB although I still believe that would be the best solution for us. And, until AKC works through its issues and hopefully starts to look at the PPB as a long-term insurance policy for breed preservation, not much is going to happen.

Hopefully what I've written above might make some of you see this idea in a much different light.

