

What does the LCA mean to me?

I decided to put some of my thoughts on the purpose and responsibility of breed clubs on paper. These thoughts and ideas are influenced by my almost lifelong involvement in dogs, my upbringing in Germany with its very comprehensive system of breed clubs, my love for the Leonberger breed, my close ties to the Swiss Leonberger Club (in fact I am writing this from Zürich right after the Swiss Club Show where similar discussions took place among the Swiss Leonberger fanciers), and by my scientific background. I realise not everybody will agree with what I have to say but I hope to provoke some thought processes and discussions among breeders, stud owners, working dog owners, pet owners and future puppy buyers. Maybe, just maybe, I might even change some minds.

To me, the LCA represents and offers benefits to all of the groups I mentioned above. Breeders benefit from the reputation of the LCA as a diligent advocate for protecting the breed. The LCA upholds a certain standard of health, type, and temperament in the breeding stock, something many puppy buyers state as the main reason why they decided to buy a Leonberger. Breeders themselves can rely on that standard when looking for breeding partners. The club offers information on studs and directs prospective puppy buyers toward breeders who have a litter or plan one. LCA sanctioned shows provide a venue for exhibiting breeding dogs and offspring for other breeders and future puppy buyers to see. Stud owners benefit from some of the same services. The LCA offers more and more events where working dog owners can compete and earn titles. Every Leonberger owner and future puppy buyer benefits from the breeding regulations. We all benefit from a very close knit and supportive community.

It is quite obvious, the LCA offers benefits for everybody but it seems there is a slight discrepancy between the interest and expectations of some breeders and stud owners on one side and most puppy buyers on the other side. There are breeders who would like to keep as much control over their breeding programs as possible and who resent more regulations, including mandatory health tests. Most puppy buyers, on the other hand, like the idea of not having to worry about checking whether all relevant health tests have been conducted on the parents of their future companion. Some novice puppy buyers do not even know what questions to ask before putting a deposit down on a puppy. The issue is how can a breed club reconcile this discrepancy? The code of ethics of the LCA state:

"Members shall be aware at all times that the Club exists to protect the breed and that these aims are to be uppermost in the minds of members in all their activities in the breed."

So whatever the club does, the protection of the breed has to guide its actions.

How can we best address the mentioned discrepancy while protecting our breed? The Leonberger breed needs both happy and supportive breeders as well as satisfied puppy buyers - it could not exist without either. At the same time we need to maintain a population of mentally and physically sound, healthy, and typey dogs. I believe breeders and stud owners should keep the responsibility of making main breeding decisions. There is no way the LCA can or should police or control everything a breeder does. The LCA needs to listen to the concerns of breeders and not unnecessarily reduce their freedom. Hopefully, most breeders will work together with the breeding committee and board members toward final breeding regulations implemented by the LCA that are in the best interest of the breed and therefore in the long run in the best interest of the breeders. At the same time, every breeder must follow the minimum framework of regulations that the LCA provides, if that breeder wants to be part of the LCA and enjoy its benefits. It is the responsibility of the membership to report violations. This guarantees that no breeder will have an advantage by taking a short cut at the expense of individual dogs or the breed.

On the other side, it is and always will be the responsibility of the puppy buyer to do their homework and research, to ask the important questions about breeding philosophies and practices. Often, but not always, it is not so much a question of whether the breeder is good or bad, ethical or non-ethical but a

question of personal preferences. Some breeders will closely line breed, others not; some will concentrate mainly on a certain look, others on temperament or working potential. Puppy buyers need to be aware of the issues and decide whether they are comfortable with the breeder's decisions. To help puppy buyers in this task, I would like to see the LCA start a campaign to create an educational info package that includes all the points that are addressed by the breeding regulation and what issues remain for the puppy buyer to address themselves.

Even though I believe we should not over-regulate breeders, when it comes to health issues, I do not think we can make any compromises. I cannot understand why any breeder would not want to have certain mandatory tests for serious diseases present in our Leonberger population. Lets look at the CERF test, for example. I do believe that almost all breeders would CERF their breeding dogs even without it being mandatory, BUT what about those few who only use the reputation of the LCA without believing in the code of ethics. The breeder who would breed a non-CERFed dog that turns out to have cataracts. Or the breeder who did CERF his dog and she failed but he believes he knows better than the experts what the right thing to do is and goes ahead and breeds her anyway. We all agree, hip dysplasia is important and everybody respects the OFA results but eye issues are clearly also important, just ask the owner of a blind dog. It is difficult enough to deal with genetic problems as long as we cannot identify carriers and non-carriers but we definitely should not include affected dogs in our breeding pool. If nothing else, our code of ethics requires that.

Again, the most important goal is to preserve our breed, create typical Leonbergers as sound as possible in mind and body, who live long and healthy lives. In order to do that, we need happy, responsible, and supportive breeders in the club, therefore we should not over-regulate them but work with them together. We need a healthy and sound breeding stock therefore health tests are necessary. And we need confident and satisfied puppy buyers therefore we need to educate them about what the important issues are for them to look into. I truly hope we can achieve all that together.