

By Stephanie West

1. What are your Leo's names (past and present, registered names and call names), age and sex?

Bramble- Mountain Lakes Bomaseen Bramble RN, female 9 1/2 years old

Huggins-Dragonslairs New Kid in Town RN, male 12/08/08-09/26/16

Classy- VLX CH Mandolin Trails Class Act CD BN RAE CGC TKN RL1, female, 7 years old

2. How long have you had Leo's? What originally drew you to the Leonberger Breed?

I saw my first leonberger at a puppy class I was taking with my collie, in the late 90's. I was instantly drawn to him and decided I would like to have one some day. I made a couple inquiries to breeders around that time but for whatever reason my calls and/or emails were not returned. I was busy training and showing my other dogs in obedience so the desire went on the back burner, but I never forgot about that fluffy puppy I watched grow up through the various training classes we attended together.

Fast forward several years to yet another training class I was attending with one of my Mom's dogs. There I met Donna Porter and Chewie, her 10 month old leo. The desire for a leonberger came flooding back. I had just lost my beloved Doberman, Greta, and while I wanted another dog I needed to change breeds as I couldn't bear the thought of having another doberman. I reached out to Lorene McLaughlin of Mountain Lakes who just happened to have a litter of 3 week old puppies. I went to her house and was met by her gang of gorgeous leonbergers. ,it was my first encounter with some adults of the breed. I fell completely head over heels in love with the breed then and there.

I brought Bramble home a few weeks later and the rest is history. The whole "you can't just have one" thing is certainly true in my case.

3. For you, what is the most appealing characteristic of the breed?

For me, it's the dichotomy of the breed. You see these dogs from a distance. Huge, regal dogs, proud and full of confidence. They are majestic, gorgeous and they take your breath away. All you can think is "royalty". And then you meet them up close and personal and realize they are really just the court jesters. I love that!

4. How did you first get involved in dog sports?

I had a very active, rambunctious smooth collie puppy. I was taking her to obedience classes and the instructor said, "you know, she's really smart, you should try showing her" I knew nothing about Obedience Trials. but started taking a competition class, received a lot of encouragement from the other students, went to my first trial with her and was hooked.

5. What are your dogs' biggest accomplishments in the sport thus far?

Classy is obviously my most accomplished leonberger, but I owe all her success in a round about way to Huggins, so I'll tell his story first.

Huggins started out with great potential, but around 10 months he began to get very reactive, first just with dogs and then with people. At first I thought it was adolescent bravado and he would soon grow out of it with a little training. He didn't and I soon realized he was becoming more than I could handle on my own. So I found a wonderful trainer who helped us work through Huggins' issues. Although he could still be reactive, he learned to control his impulses. He improved so much with training that I decided to enter him in a Rally Trial.

It was one of my proudest moments when Huggins earned his Rally Novice title, earning several Blue Ribbons along the way. It was icing on the cake when I found out he was the #1 Leonberger in AKC Rally Novice for 2014.

Because of the success I had with Huggins, I decided to ask my trainer to help me with Classy. I was showing her in conformation at the time but she wasn't succeeding due to some shyness issues. We began to work on strategies to help her gain confidence. She earned her Championship in February 2013. It had initially been my only goal with her. Although very smart and a quick learner, I figured she would be too nervous to ever compete in Obedience or Rally. My trainer had other ideas and encouraged me to "just give it a try".

I decided to enter her in a Rally Novice class to see how she would do. Not only did she qualify, she excelled! She got her Rally Novice Title earning 3 legs in 3 classes and coming in 1st in every class. In March 2014 she became the first Leonberger to compete in the Rally National Championship. She earned a respectable 195 out of 200 points in the Rally Novice division.

Classy quickly moved on through the various Rally Levels. In Oct 2015 she became only the 2nd Leonberger in the country to earn the Rally Advanced Excellent title. She was the number one Leonberger in AKC Rally Combined (Advanced and Excellent levels) in both 2014 and 2015. Along the way she also earned her Beginning Novice title, her Companion Dog title, Canine Good Citizen title and most recently her Novice Trick Dog title.

In 2016 we began to compete in World Cynosport Rally where she became the #6 dog All Breed in Rally Level 1 for that year.

In May 2016 she earned her Versatile Leonberger Excellent title through the LCA and was grandfathered into the LCA Hall of Fame under the old criteria.

And last, but not least, Bramble. She never liked showing much but she did earn her Rally Novice title. At the LCA Nationals in 2017, she brought me to tears when she competed Rally Novice and won 1st place in the B class at 9 years of age.

6. Are there certain characteristics that make your Leos well suited to the sport? Did you choose him/her as a puppy with these characteristics in mind?

I think Leonbergers willingness to please helps them to excel in the sport. They may not like what they're doing per se, but are willing to do it because it makes you happy. That is certainly the case with Classy.

Classy is definitely on the more active side and training is a must to keep her mind engaged and out of trouble. Classy was chosen purely for her conformation but her performance ability is certainly a bonus.

7. Do you find that training a Leo is different than training other breeds? If so, how have you changed your criteria and techniques to meet the needs of your Leo partner?

I have found with Classy, short training sessions are best. Most of our training sessions only last 5-10 minutes. If we are working on something difficult, when she does it right ONCE we are done

with training for that session. She hates to drill. I also find I have to be much more demonstrative with my praise than I was with my Doberman and GSD, the goofier I am, the more likes it. She definitely needs a cheering section!

8. What are your Top 3 Tips for training a Leonberger?

#1-YOU MUST HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR!!! These dogs are goofballs at heart. They are smart but they get bored easily and start making up their own rules. If you can't laugh at yourself, competing with a Leonberger will be a humbling experience.

#2-Short training sessions. They DO NOT like to drill, if they do it right once, they see no point in doing it again. It's a hard lesson for us humans to learn. Example, if you are training the retrieve and they FINALLY do it right. Make a big deal over it, whoop it up, have a party and PUT IT AWAY! DO NOT TRY IT AGAIN to see if it was a fluke. More than likely, if you do try it again they won't do it (again, they hate drilling) and then you are back to square one. I learned this the hard way, trust me. We moved along much further and faster in our training when I started following this rule.

#3-You must make training FUN for your Leonberger. Find out what makes them happiest. If it's food, great, reward their success with a treat. If they like to fetch, throw the ball after a great line of heeling. If they like to sleep on the couch, see #2. Keep it short, do a couple of sits and downs, a heeling pattern and let them take a nap. You have to find out what works best for your particular Leo and capitalize on that.

9. Do your Leos have guilty/naughty pleasures? (or maybe they are perfect, but most Leos seem to have that one thing that the can't/won't grow out of that becomes somehow endearing over the years)

Classy loves playing with the hose. She has figured out that when the water buckets are full, the hose gets shut off and the fun stops. So she inevitably waits until the bucket is full to the rim, calmly puts her foot in it and dumps the whole thing. Makes me crazy but it does make me laugh.