

Leo U Working Dog Interview

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

Jaxon – Eureka Jaxon von Jagen, male, 1/8/1998 – 5/7/2007

Okemo – Lenape Leos Befreunden Okemo, male, 6/14/2001 – 2/1/2009

Rutger – GCH CH VLX BoBev's Runnin Down a Dream NDD BNDD CD RE CGCA, 7¾ years old, male, dob 12/4/2009

Dutch – CH VLA Gavius Gentius Domus Corona NDD BNDD CD RN CGCA, 6 years old, male, dob 9/29/2011

2. How long have you had Leos? What originally drew you to the Leonberger breed?

I stumbled upon the breed while I was in college in New Jersey (Rutgers University, Cook College – go Scarlet Knights!). I came back to my apartment after an early morning class and one of my roommates was watching Regis & Kathie Lee. They were doing a segment on rare dog breeds, and I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw the Leonberger calmly sitting there. It wasn't long after that when I was on a dinner break from my retail job at the mall and saw a Leonberger peering out at me from the magazine rack in the bookstore. I bought that issue of Dog World on the spot, and I still have it today!

A year or so later I graduated from college, landed my first full time job and purchased my first home. I was ready for a Leonberger! My fiancé, Dale, (now husband) and I had a deal...he was going to get a Labrador Retriever and I was going to get a Leonberger. Well that was easier said than done! Back in the 90's it was not as easy to locate and talk to Leo breeders as it is today. We didn't have websites and social media. I contacted the LCA via mail and phone. Can you imagine??!! When I received a list of breeders via the mail I started contacting them by phone. Not many breeders were interested in selling a puppy to a recent college graduate in their early 20's...until Susan Grosslight said YES! I had also visited a family in our area who had several Leos, but Dale couldn't go with me on the visit. So when we welcomed our first Leonberger, Jaxon, into our family in March 1998 it was Dale's first meeting of a Leonberger. Jaxon was a whopper of a pup, and I remember Dale exclaiming "that's not a puppy, it's a calf!" It was love at first sight for all of us. As the saying goes, we couldn't have just one. In 2002 we brought Okemo home after he had been returned to his breeder at 15 months of age.

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

Gosh, it is hard to name just one characteristic. I adore their loyalty and their versatility. Because they were not bred to do one specific task they are adaptable to a wide variety of activities. I think a lot of people make the mistake of underestimating just what their Leonbergers are capable of, and this is what leads to Leonberger "creativity" around the house and yard.

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

When I had Jaxon and Okemo I had no interest (or time) in competing in dog sports. We took obedience classes and dabbled in carting, but I was working a very demanding job and the best stress relief was coming home and taking the dogs for a long walk. We also had our lab, Abbey Road. So I'd get home from work, throw on their leashes and head out for a long walk. The three were well trained by me; I just never considered competing with them.

After losing both Jaxon and Okemo in less than two years our house felt so empty. We dramatically changed our lives – sold our house, I changed my job so that I wouldn't be on the road or so stressed and we moved to an equestrian farm for a year. At first we didn't think we'd ever have another Leo after the pain of losing both Jaxon and Okemo in less than two years. Time does heal pain, and we soon found ourselves ready to welcome a new Leonberger puppy. Rutger came home in February of 2010 and my life has never been the same! The breed had just gone AKC a few months before Rutger was born, and I got the bug to compete.

When Rutger was six months old we moved from the horse farm to our stone cottage in the country, where we still live today. Shortly after the move we lost Abbey to cancer at the age of 12. She did an amazing job helping to raise Rutger, but now it was my turn and he and I started on our journey to performance. We took a lot of obedience classes which led us to the Rally ring. From there we headed into handling classes and the breed ring. Rutger and I have had many firsts together – first performance dog, first title, first conformation dog, first stud dog. He has been game for everything!

In 2011 we welcomed Dutch to our family all the way from The Netherlands. There could not be two more different dogs than Rutger and Dutch, and I quickly had to learn how to adapt my training style to be successful at training Dutch. I also learned that it was impossible (for me, at least) to show two dogs in conformation at once, and I asked a young lady in our handling class if she would like to show Dutch. Dutch blossomed in conformation with his junior handler and I continued working on performance events with him. While competing in obedience and rally is not his favorite thing to do, Dutch managed to earn both his RN and CD titles.

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

Between Rutger and Dutch I have put over twenty individual titles on them! I've had several accomplishments that I am very proud of, but the greatest accomplishments have been around draft work. In March 2015, at the first NRLC sponsored draft test, I trialed both Rutger and Dutch and they earned their Novice Draft Dog (NDD) titles. Then in April 2017 we tested as a brace team, two dogs hitched together to the cart, and they earned the first ever LCA Leonberger brace title (BNDD)! While the individual titles have all been rewarding, for me the most amazing thing has been to work with Rutger and Dutch ("RutDut" as we call them) as a brace team. To train two dogs to work together is extremely rewarding. Knowing each dog's strengths and weaknesses and using that knowledge to train them to work together has been challenging, but it has also been great fun! I've heard from others that watching the two of them work together with me is amazing. One draft judge commented that they were "the nicest working team" he had ever seen!

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?

Versatility, adaptability and steady temperaments definitely help with drafting. They don't react to noises, other dogs or sudden movements. Although, the first time I attempted a draft test at the 2014 LCA National Specialty in Burlington, VT Dutch did refuse to continue on with his draft test once he caught a whiff of someone's Stromboli! But, really, who can blame him?

Both Rutger and Dutch enjoy carting, and that is the key to any sport you pursue – make sure your dog is enjoying what you're asking them to do. We don't train just to compete in draft trials...both boys help us around our property to cart wood, garden refuse and even the recycling bins to the end of our long driveway! How useful is that? They know that they will be well rewarded for their hard work with effusive praise and yummy treats no matter if we just finished yard work or just completed a draft test.

While I didn't pick either Rutger and Dutch specifically for these traits, I did pick the Leonberger breed because of these traits. Leonbergers should be willing to work, versatile in the work that they can and will do, adaptable to varying environments and steady in temperament. If you've researched pedigrees and breeders then the chances are good your Leonberger can be a successful working dog with time, training and patience.

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 think every breed has its rewards and challenges when it comes to training. I also believe that every Leonberger is different to train, and because of this it is crucial that YOU learn to adapt YOUR training style to the individual dog.

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

Just three? Gah! That's too difficult. Here are my top pieces of training advice.

1. Don't overtrain. My experience with Leonbergers has shown that they become bored by repetition. Once they know something, if they do it right one time while we're training, I don't ask them to repeat it again and again and again. A lot of people say that Leonbergers are stubborn, but I believe that more often than not the stubbornness is really boredom. Either boredom with repetition or boredom with the handler.
2. Positive rewards only! Leonbergers are sensitive to how their partner works with them. I find that high value treats and lots of verbal praise (or a clicker if you're more coordinated than me) go a very long way in getting the results you want. Just be sure that on days where you're using a lot of training treats you feed less at their meals. Overweight Leos can be injured doing dog sports.
3. And while we're talking about keeping your dog lean I also want to mention that you need to properly condition your Leonberger for the sport you want to pursue. A lot of injuries happen with "weekend warriors" – dogs who compete in high activity sports on weekends after being a couch potato all week.
4. Break down the training into small pieces and don't rush your dog. If you are training a dog to cart never hook them up to cart without first taking the time to introduce them to the equipment. Not taking the time to build the foundation will mean a lot of frustration for you

and a lot of frustration for your dog. Ultimately, you may never be able to compete in a sport if you don't take the time to build the foundation.

5. TRAIN THE DOG IN FRONT OF YOU! No two Leonbergers are exactly the same. You must learn what approach and treats work for the dog you're training.
 6. My final tip is that the handler and dog both need to be prepared for competition. Don't only train in your backyard or the training facility you've attended since your Leo was a few months old. Don't be afraid to ask questions if there is something in the rules and regulations that is not clear. When I was preparing for the brace draft test I asked a lot of questions. I had never seen a brace team at a draft trial so I watched YouTube videos of other breeds competing as a brace team. I want to be prepared so that my dogs can rely on me to confidently handle them during all aspects of the testing day. This holds true for any dog sport. And before you walk into the ring – be it draft, conformation, rally or obedience – take the time to first observe the sport without your dogs.
9. Do your Leos have guilty/naughty pleasures? (Or maybe they are perfect, but most Leos seem to have that one thing that they can't/won't grow out of that becomes somehow endearing over the years 😊.)

Rutger and Dutch are pretty perfect! When we lived in a development with a tiny fenced in yard my Leos were very naughty! Now we have a lot of outdoor stimulation for them – wooded trails, lots of smells and space to stretch their legs.

Rutger has one annoying habit of whining under his breath when he's bored. He also loves to give hugs to people that he adores.

Dutch is an excited humper – he can't help but hump Rutger whenever they go for a car ride, and he sets the van a rockin'! Dutch also loves his stuffed babies, and he will dig through his toy basket at night to select just the right baby to take to bed. He repeats the same process in the morning, rooting through his toy basket in the bedroom to select a baby to start his day with.