

## A Portrait of the GSMD

Written by Don Dickenson

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a large, powerful dog that was originally developed for draft work, livestock management, and as a farm sentinel. "Swissys," as they are referred to by many breed enthusiasts, can make fine companions for owners who are willing to devote the time and energy necessary to properly develop the robust mental and physical characteristics of these dogs. Adult males stand 25 to 28 inches at the highest point of the shoulder and generally weigh between 115 and 140 pounds when fully grown. Females are 23 to 27 inches in height and generally weigh 85 to 110 pounds at adulthood.

The Swissy is a tri-colored dog with a black base coat and markings of tan and white. The coat is composed of two layers: A dense, black top coat 1 to 1 ¾ inches in length, and a fine undercoat which may be quite thick. Grooming requirements for a GSMD are not extensive - brushing once or twice a week is usually sufficient to keep shedding of the coat under control. The GSMD undercoat, however, will shed significantly on a seasonal basis and may require additional attention at these times.

### **The GSMD in the Home**

The GSMD is a very social dog that thrives on being integrated into its family's life and home. To separate a Swissy from everyday "around the house" activities is a waste of a GSMD's rich and affectionate personality. As a large breed dog that is quick to grow but slow to physically and mentally mature, Swissys require a great deal of attention and direction from their owners in order to develop into healthy, properly adjusted family members and canine good citizens.

### **Housetraining a GSMD**

Each individual GSMD is different, but as a breed, Swissys tend to take to housetraining slowly. With consistent instruction by its owner, a Swissy will usually grasp the general concept of housetraining within a week or two of arriving at its new home, but will not be completely reliable in the house until many months later. In addition, when (not "if") a growing dog of this size has a housetraining accident, it can be a BIG accident. Patience and consistency are essential for the successful housetraining of a GSMD.

Many breeders and trainers recommend crate training to expedite the housetraining process. If used properly and judiciously, a crate is not cruel and, in fact, can provide a dog with a safe, relaxing refuge from busy, distracting surroundings. A dog will tend to not soil its own "den" if at all possible, and this trait can be used to teach a dog to only relieve itself in an appropriate area outside.

Swissys seem to have a higher incidence of urinary incontinence than some other breeds. A Swissy with incontinence is not resisting house training. This is a medical condition that requires veterinary attention and treatment.

### **Swissy Activities and Activity Levels**

Swissys require a moderate amount of exercise. Although they are a relatively massive "draft" breed, they tend to be uncommonly agile for their size and considerable stature. As multi-purpose Working dogs, they thrive on having a job to do. There are many different activities that Swissys may enjoy with their owners when they are sufficiently mature, including hiking, carting, obedience, herding, weight pulling, and backpacking.

It is important for a GSMD to have regular exercise. Given the dog's substantial size, structure and body type, however, moderation is definitely called for. Intense, high-impact activities -- like chasing after a bicycle -- are definitely a bad idea for a breed such as this, and owners should be especially cautious that young dogs with rapidly developing skeletal structures are not overworked or overexerted.

### **Character and Temperament of the GSMD**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog was originally bred to be a multi-purpose farm dog: To haul goods to market, to drive cattle from pasture to pasture, to watch over the farm, and to sound an alert when necessary. It is a breed with a working heritage and a working temperament to match.

Unlike some herding or sporting breeds, Swissys were bred to perform a number of different tasks well. As "generalists," they sometimes lack the natural aptitude to carry out individual tasks or commands with the same focus and single mindedness exhibited by some other breeds - such as a Border Collie intensely staring down sheep, or a Golden Retriever repeatedly fetching a ball or stick.

The GSMD's traditional role as a working dog, coupled with its bold nature, can make for a personality that is rich, complex and fun loving: Most Swissys are natural comedians and want nothing more in life to have a good time with their owners. However, the same Swissy that loves to play and rollick may also be quite willful and seemingly stubborn in some situations.

The GSMD is described in its AKC breed standard as a "bold, faithful and willing worker." By "bold," it is meant that the ideal Swissy temperament is robust and confident. Because the Swissy is a big dog with a characteristically bold personality, it is imperative that the members of a GSMD's human family are regarded as its "leaders," and that this is established when the dog is still young. A GSMD will grow to a considerable size and strength level at a relatively early age. It is necessary that a dog of this size, strength of will, and strength of body be secure and comfortable with its place in the family hierarchy. If the owner is not established in a leadership position, the dog will gladly take over that role - an ill-advised situation that can potentially lead to serious problems.

The GSMD's active, watchful mentality is constantly assessing situations, searching for that which is out of place or out of the ordinary. A Swissy will certainly let its owner know when something unusual or notable is happening. Although the job of "farm sentinel" was one of the GSMDs traditional roles, most Swissys do not have the intense guarding instincts associated with breeds developed primarily for protection purposes. As described in their breed standard, GSMDs should be "alert and vigilant," but not nervous or aggressive. This is a description of the "ideal" GSMD temperament, and different individuals within the breed may exhibit varying degrees of these traits.

### **Socialization and Training of a GSMD**

It is essential that GSMD puppies receive extensive socialization, allowing them to be comfortable and confident in a wide variety of situations. Organized Puppy Kindergarten (KPT) classes are an excellent place for puppies to develop basic training and social skills with dogs and people. Ample opportunities for socialization, however, must also take place outside of the controlled environment of the classroom or training facility in as many different locations and situations as possible.

The mastery of basic obedience commands is vital for a GSMD to become an integrated family member and well-adjusted canine citizen. Organized KPT and Beginning Obedience classes can provide a Swissy with a firm foundation of training. Given the considerable size and robust temperament of the GSMD, however, it is necessary for owners to make a commitment to consistent and ongoing training -- in the classroom, in public settings and at home. GSMDs respond well to training methods that are consistent, intelligent, fair, and firm but not harsh.

### **Health**

Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs may be affected by many of the same health problems common to other large and giant breeds. These include Hip Dysplasia, Elbow Dysplasia, Osteochondritis Dissecans (OCD), Gastric Dilation-Volvulus (also known as gastric torsion or "bloat"), and relatively brief life spans. Health concerns, which are present in the general canine population, such as eye abnormalities, cancer and epilepsy, are also present in the GSMD breed. The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA), the Institute for Genetic Disease Control (GDC), the Pennsylvania Hip Improvement Program (PennHIP), and the Canine Eye Registry Foundation (CERF) are some of the organizations that are utilized by responsible breeders to screen their dogs for conditions believed to have a genetic basis. Hips, elbows, eyes, shoulders, and patellae are among the structures that are evaluated or registered by these organizations.

Conscientious breeders use the information obtained from health screenings and also research the health histories of their dogs' extended ancestries in order to make informed breeding choices. Pups produced by parents that are unaffected by genetically transmitted diseases are less likely to develop similar problems themselves. However, the most careful and responsible breeding practices can still produce unpredictable results. Even a puppy from a sire and dam that have been comprehensively tested may develop health problems.

Like many other large and giant breeds, GSMDs have relatively brief life spans. It is estimated that the average life span for a Swissy is 7 to 9 years, although dogs that have been taken at early ages due to bloat and other problems are included in this average. Nonetheless, it is very unusual for a GSMD to live past the age of 12.

### **GSMDs and Heat**

The GSMD was originally bred to live and work in the alpine regions of Switzerland. Because of the breed's characteristic large size, black color and thick undercoat, Swissys do not tolerate warm temperatures well. If the sun is shining, a Swissy can be affected by the heat even if the temperature is only in the high 60s and can fall prey to heat prostration or heatstroke if exercised for prolonged periods in hot, sunny conditions. During the summer months, walks and other exercise should be planned for either early or late in the day, avoiding the midday heat. Despite their dislike for hot conditions, GSMDs can do well living in warm climates as long as they are provided with a cool, sheltered place to escape from the heat of the day. In some areas, the only suitable daytime refuge for a Swissy may be inside an air-conditioned house.

### **Swissys and Children**

GSMDs tend to grow deeply attached to the members of their families, and this certainly includes children. Swissys usually enjoy the attention and company of youngsters if they are properly socialized with children when they are puppies and if the children are properly instructed to treat the dog with care and respect. It would be uncharacteristic for a properly socialized GSMD to purposely harm a child. However, young children should never be left unsupervised with a large dog of ANY breed, as the consequences of an accident are certainly not worth the risk. Due to its size and strength, a Swissy can easily knock a small child off his or her feet without even being aware of what has happened. Prospective owners with youngsters should also keep in mind that while their own children may become accustomed to the presence and stature of a GSMD, children who are visiting their home may be intimidated or frightened by a dog of this size.

### **Swissys and Other Dogs**

Swissys generally enjoy the company of other dogs and love to play in a rambunctious, rough and tumble style. This is especially true if they have been properly socialized with other dogs at an early age. As in any breed, dogs of the same sex that have not been spayed or neutered may not be tolerant of one another. Caution and common sense should always be exercised when making such an introduction.

### **Swissys, Cats, and Other Animals**

The prey drive exhibited by GSMDs seems to vary greatly from dog to dog. Some Swissys will attempt to chase down animals such as squirrels, rabbits, or cats. Others have prey drives that are not as highly developed, and are relatively unconcerned with small animals such as these. Many owners share their homes successfully with both cats and Swissys. In some instances, once the dog knows that the cat is part of its family "pack," the relationship between the two animals may gradually stabilize. In other cases, however, it may be necessary for the owner to teach the dog through consistent training that aggression or inappropriately rough play directed toward the family cat is unacceptable behavior. In any case, the initial introduction between a Swissy and a feline family member should be made gradually and patiently...and always under the supervision of the owner.

### **The Swissy Voice**

Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs have very loud voices, and they like to use them seemingly to express their mood or mental state at any given time. GSMD owners are familiar with the characteristic "Woo, woo, woo," of a Swissy that is excited about something that it wants. A Swissy that is sounding an "alert" to announce the approach of a stranger or some other unexpected situation will give out a loud, deep, booming bark. Swissys generally do not bark continually, although any dog can potentially develop this bad habit if they are left alone for extended periods or allowed to become bored on a regular basis. Even the occasional GSMD "alarm" bark, however, is quite substantial and can be disturbing to neighbors. The surrounding environment and proximity of neighbors must be taken into consideration by potential owners before acquiring a GSMD pup.

## **Researching the GSMD**

There are literally hundreds of dog breeds in the world, each developed to perform certain tasks and fulfill certain functions. No breed is the "right dog" for every family situation, and this certainly applies to the GSMD. To help you determine whether or not a Swissy would be a good match for your life and living situation, there are a number of sources that offer additional information about the breed, including books, websites, magazine articles and television presentations. Without question, however, the best place to get accurate information about the breed is directly from people who own Swissys and live with them every day: The members of the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America.

People who are researching the breed are welcome to join the GSMDCA as Associate members. Becoming a member of the GSMDCA is the best way to continue to learn about the breed and to make contact with owners and breeders who are committed to the preservation, protection, and improvement of these great dogs. The GSMDCA is a member club of the American Kennel Club and the recognized AKC parent club for the breed. Members receive the club's quarterly newsletter, The Swiss SENNtinel, and are kept informed about news and events pertaining to the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog.

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