

## **The Beginner's Guide to the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog**

**by Anna Wallace**

### **ABOUT THE BREED**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a large and heavy boned dog with incredible physical strength. Historically, the Swissy was bred as a draft dog to pull heavy carts, as a herding dog to move dairy cattle, and as a watchdog and family companion. The Swiss farmer needed a strong, multi- purpose dog capable of contributing to daily life on the farm. The Swissy is a very alert, strong and athletic dog who can out power most breeds of dog. The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is confident in nature and should never be shy and though athletic and very physical, the Swissy is also known to be very gentle with young children.

### **APPEARANCE**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a striking, tri-color breed with a short black coat with white and red markings. White markings should appear on all four paws and tip of tail, as well as on the muzzle, up between the eyes, on the chest and may or may not have white on or around the neck. Red markings appear on the legs between the black and white, over each eye, on each cheek and under the tail. They have a large, broad head with a soft, animated expression and dark brown eyes. They are heavy boned and rather large, with males ranging between 25 ½ and 28 ½ inches at the shoulder and females ranging between 23 ½ and 27 inches at the shoulder. Though there is no actual standard for weight in the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog, males tend to range between 100 and 130 pounds with females ranging between 80 and 110 pounds. Occasionally some Swissys are smaller or larger than these ranges. While the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Standard calls for a black, white and red dog, Swissys do come in other colors which include blue, white, and tan tri-color and red and white bi-color. On the blue tri-color dogs, blue replaces where black would normally be and tan replaces where the red would normally be. On the red bi-color dogs, the dog is solid red with white markings with a total absence of black coloring. Only black tri-colored Swissys can be shown for Championship titles. Their flews should be only partially developed, and thus the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog should be dry mouthed. They should not drool.

### **TEMPERAMENT and PERSONALITY**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a happy, jovial breed with an enthusiastic nature and strong affinity to people and children. They are strongly dependent on people and crave attention and physical contact. As youngsters, they can be quite boisterous and they do require steady and reliable training to develop manners and physical self-control. Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs should be very accepting of a non-threatening stranger. Whether that stranger is friendly or neutral, the Swissy should be happy and inviting on approach. The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog should be confident and comfortable in unfamiliar locations and be stable around strange noises and unfamiliar people. Swissys should be very accepting of other dogs and species.

Activity level in the Swissy is very variable. Swissys are capable of being quite athletic, but typically, that activity is seen in bursts. Most Swissys are active for short periods of time followed by napping. However, the Swissy adapts very easily to many different lifestyles. Swissys want to be with their owners and want to participate, and with that desire to be with their people, the activity level of the Swissy most often matches the activity level of the family.

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is an incredible watchdog. They tend to notice everything in their surroundings and are very quick to sound alarm. They will inform you of anything different in their environment, barking at anything that seems out of order. Faced with a threat, they will stand their ground and put on a show that will intimidate those unfamiliar with the dog. However, Swissys are not guard dogs. A Greater Swiss Mountain Dog should be very bite-inhibited. He should be reluctant to bite, doing so only under the direst of circumstances.

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a very dependent dog and one that needs a good leader to follow. A Greater Swiss Mountain Dog should welcome an authority figure. Given a qualified leader figure, the Swissy has a fairly submissive nature and is a willing worker happy to follow through with the tasks at hand. The Swissy does not do well in a home environment without a leader.

### **TRAINING**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is capable of pulling carts loaded with 3000 pounds or more, and with this strength, they require training from an early age to respect a leash and must be taught not to pull. They can be quite physical and boisterous and must be taught to have physical self control so as not to inadvertently injure a person.

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog should be very trainable. He should be willing and able to learn repeated behaviors. The Swissy responds very well to encouragement and positive training, yet should also be able to handle a reasonable correction. The Swissy is a breed that must learn proper manners, and learns best when instructed what to do, as well as what not to do. While Swissys require socialization to the environment around them, they should not require extensive amounts of socialization to be confident in unfamiliar environments or with unfamiliar people. They should be naturally confident, willing to try and do new things and meet new people without hesitation.

Swissys have various degrees of herding instinct, some with very strong drive and others with moderate drive. Strong herding drive pairs closely with strong prey drive, leading to a desire to chase small animals. Swissys should be taught from an early age to not chase small animals such as cats, squirrels and small dogs. Strong herding drive can also lead to games of chase and tackle with small children if not directed and trained properly.

### **GROOMING**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog has a short, easy care coat. They are not prone to mats or tangles, but do have a heavy double coat that is prone to shedding. They shed year round, with heavier bouts of shedding in both spring and fall. Regular bathing and brushing helps minimize shedding. Shedding blades, rubber curry combs, and de-shedding blades are the tools of choice for managing shedding. De-shed shampoos and conditioners also assist with controlling hair.

Most Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs do not like to have their nails trimmed. With this, it is important to teach a puppy to accept the procedure from an early age. Once one of these powerful dogs learns that it can struggle and get away with not having its nails trimmed, it will fight harder and harder to avoid it. Be sure to teach your Swissy puppy to not fear the process and that the rewards for nail trimming are wonderful. Ear cleaning and teeth brushing are also procedures best taught when a Swissy puppy is young.

## **GROWTH AND MATURITY**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a breed that grows very quickly, but develops and matures very slowly. There is no specific weight a puppy needs to be at a certain age, but as a general rule, a male Swissy will gain about 10 pounds a month until they are about 8 to 9 months old, and will then taper off tremendously and gain weight much more slowly for the rest of his maturity. Females gain slightly less. Full height may be reached by 15 to 18 months of age, but full substance is not reached until well into adulthood. Full maturity is often not reached until a dog is 4 or 5 years old.

There is a tendency in most large breeds to brag about how much the dog weighs at a certain age, and because of that, it is not unusual to see puppies that are too fat. Supplements should be evaluated very carefully with balance in mind. Keeping a puppy's body conditioning under close control is the best method for helping your puppy grow to be a healthy adult. Once a puppy is 3 months old, for proper body conditioning, a puppy should have a distinct waistline and little "belly" with ribs easily felt without having to search for them. He should look a bit gangly and perhaps a bit thin, much like an adolescent boy. Because of the fast early growth, it is highly recommended to monitor food intake carefully. A puppy needs to be eating enough food, but also must not eat too much. He should receive enough play time and exercise to be well-muscled, but not forced exercise such as jogging or roadwork. Growing too fast, carrying too much weight, too much forced exercise, and pounding associated with jumping puts tremendous stress on joints such as hips, elbows and shoulders. Improper management can increase the potential for problems such as OCD, hip and elbow dysplasia.

## **HEALTH**

The most common health issues in Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs are distichiasis (extra eyelashes) and female urinary incontinence. Most often distichiasis is non-symptomatic, causing no issues for the dog, but in some dogs, it can cause irritation that must be corrected. Allowing a female to have at least one heat cycle before sterilization has been demonstrated to help prevent urinary incontinence in this breed, though certainly it is no guarantee to avoid the problem entirely.

Though far less common, the most debilitating disease found in the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is epilepsy. Seizure disorders can range from very mild to severe to life threatening. Epilepsy is believed to be genetic, however there are no tests available to the breeder to be able to eliminate this disease. Careful breeders research pedigrees to try to avoid the issue, but unfortunately there are no guarantees. The first signs of epilepsy generally occur between 1 and 5 years of age, and symptoms often increase as a dog matures and can be difficult to manage, even with medication.

Bloat/Gastric Torsion and Splenic Torsion are two life-threatening emergencies we see in the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog.

Bloat/Gastric Torsion is the more common of the two. The stomach twists and fills with air, cutting off blood supply to the stomach. Dogs will go into shock and die very quickly if this occurs. This is an emergency that requires immediate treatment. Splenic torsion involves the twisting of the spleen and is also a life threatening emergency. This problem is very rare in most breeds, but is not rare in the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog. Swissy owners should be very familiar with the symptoms of these two conditions and be prepared to seek medical assistance quickly.

Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs can also be prone to several orthopedic diseases prone to large and giant breed dogs. OCD of the shoulder, hip dysplasia, and elbow dysplasia are the most common orthopedic issues found in Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs. Care should be taken to encourage slow and steady growth in puppies rather than fast maturity and keeping a puppy in proper weight and conditioning is extremely important. These orthopedic issues develop as a combination of environmental issues and genetics. Because there is an element of heredity in these diseases, reputable breeders continue to work to reduce these issues by x-raying all breeding stock to screen for orthopedic issues. The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals is the leading evaluator of joint disease in the United States. Reputable breeders will certify breeding stock through the OFA (or other evaluating agency) before breeding.

## **EXERCISE**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a breed that requires a moderate level of exercise. As a young puppy, extreme exercise should be avoided. Too much exercise interferes with proper growth of bones and joints, however all puppies need some form of exercise and the lack of exercise can be just as detrimental as too much exercise. The best rule of thumb is to simply watch the puppy. The puppy that is up and active needs the exercise and the puppy that just wants to lay down should be allowed to do so. Care must be taken to avoid over stimulation as Swissys are natural "joiners" who want to be in the thick of attention. As an adolescent, exercise requirements will increase and increasing the walking schedule will help keep the young, active Swissy under control. At maturity, they do well with as little as a walk once or twice a day, but can also manage a much more rigorous exercise schedule. Walking, hiking, back packing, swimming and carting are all good opportunities for exercise to keep a Swissy in good physical condition. Not all Swissys are fond of water, so take care to introduce water at a young age in a very positive manner.

## **FEEDING**

Feeding the Swissy will vary from growth stage to growth stage. In a young puppy, care must be taken to avoid extreme fast growth and one of the best methods of controlling growth is to control nutrition. This extreme care must be maintained until the dog is over a year old and well on its way toward physical maturity. Weight control is very important. Most owners err on the side of allowing their puppy to be too fat and too heavy. It is recommended that you keep a close eye on body conditioning throughout the growth of your puppy. Ribs should be easily felt when you pet your puppy. You should easily be able to feel each bone on the spine. The majority of Swissys do very well on a quality kibble. The amount of food needed will depend entirely on the type/brand of food, the age of the dog, and the activity level of the dog. Many Swissys have also been proven to handle a raw diet very well. Each owner must find a balance between quality nutrition and what their budget will allow. Quality nutrition leads to a healthier dog and a healthier dog spends less time at the vet's office. As a general rule, Swissys seem to do best with moderate levels of fat and protein in a kibbled food. It is recommended to start your puppy on a schedule of feeding three times a day, moving to two feedings a day at adulthood. How soon you wean away from the third meal will vary with the volume requirements to keep the puppy in good weight. It is better to feed multiple small meals rather than fewer large meals and some Swissy owners continue to feed their adult Swissys on a three meals a day schedule.

## **SWISSYS AND HOT WEATHER**

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog generally does not handle heat well. Care must be taken in hot weather to avoid over exposure, which may lead to heat stroke. On hot days, be sure your Swissy has plenty of shade, has the opportunity to stay out of direct sun,

and has access to plenty of clean water. Most Swissys do much better inside with air conditioning when living in hot climates. Avoiding exercise during the heat of the day is extremely important.