



# BMDCA Info Series

## About Bernese Mountain Dogs

2009 #1

**Origins** ► Bernese Mountain Dogs (“Berners”) are one of the 150+ breeds currently recognized by the American Kennel Club. Named for the Canton of Bern, they are working dogs with origins in the farm areas of Switzerland. Historically, Berners were general purpose farm dogs. Their large, hardy frames and calm-natured, people-oriented temperaments made them ideal companions and watchdogs for the farmer. They were also used to pull carts and to accompany cows for short distances to pasture. While Bernese Mountain Dogs are wonderful creatures with a long list of attributes, not all Berners exemplify the best the breed has to offer. This is not a breed for everyone, and every dog possesses individual strengths and weaknesses. Before you decide to make a Berner part of your family, thoroughly research the breed, talk to reputable breeders and knowledgeable owners, and get to know some of the dogs themselves.

**General Appearance & Size** ► The Bernese Mountain Dog is a striking, tri-colored, large dog. They are intelligent, strong and agile enough to do the draft and droving work for which they were bred. Measured at the withers, dogs are 25 to 27 ½ inches; bitches are 23 to 26 inches. Weights of dogs and bitches generally range from 80-115 and 70-95 pounds, respectively.



**Temperament** ► By nature Berners are alert and affectionate dogs. With the training essential for ownership of a large working breed, Berners are generally gentle, easygoing and tolerant. They also are usually excellent with children. They are not prone to excessive barking unless left unattended for too long. Any large dog, even a Berner, should never be left alone unsupervised with small children or children unknown to the dog. They do not do well when isolated from people or activity. Behavior problems are likely to develop when they are deprived of considerable interaction with people. The breed is protective

but should not be aggressive unless provoked or threatened. While the Breed Standard specifies that they may be aloof to strangers, it also states that Berners should never be shy, although this tendency does run in the breed. Due to temperament concerns it is very important to expose Bernese to a wide variety of people, places and other animals, especially in their first year of life.

**Living Environment** ► Berners need to live where you are and should be inside with the family. They do not do well as kennel dogs and should never be tied outside and left. Bernese are farm dogs by heritage and, as such, need exercise to stay fit mentally and physically. Small fenced yards should be viewed as a place of convenience and safety but not as a place for adequate exercise for this moderately active breed. A minimum of 30 minutes of moderately vigorous exercise daily plus several trips outside daily are adequate for some Bernese. While there is considerable variation in the needs and dispositions of Berners, some may require considerably more than this minimum amount of exercise to remain both a fit and pleasant companion. As you would expect with their heavy coat and rugged appearance, Bernese love the cold and snow. But both their size and heavy black coats make these dogs susceptible to heat stroke. Berners do best in a climate-controlled environment during hot weather, especially if not acclimated to warm temperatures. Activities during the hotter months should be confined to the coolest times of day. With respect to fencing, generally Berners are not jumpers or climbers but do require a sturdy four- or five-foot fence to keep them safely on your premises. Be advised that many breeders will not place a dog in a home that does not have suitable fencing. And, yes, Berners do like to dig!

**Versatility** ► Berners are a highly versatile breed. Dogs and their human companions enjoy competing in conformation, obedience, agility, tracking, herding and carting. Berners also make wonderful therapy dogs, bringing cheer to others. Individual dogs will be serviceable for these various activities depending on their aptitude, structure, character and temperament. Not every Berner will perform well in every event.

**Grooming** ► The Bernese Mountain Dog is a double-coated breed. Shedding is considerable. Berners cast off their coats seasonally with the exception of intact females, which cast coat in conjunction with heat cycles. If hair in the home is a problem this breed is not for you. A Berner’s coat is relatively easy to maintain. A periodic bath and frequent brushing will maintain a neat appearance.

For more information, please visit our website at [www.bmdca.org](http://www.bmdca.org).

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**Training ►** Basic training is a necessity for all dogs and especially large breeds such as the Bernese. It is recommended that youngsters attend a puppy kindergarten/socialization class between four and six months of age. This should be followed by a first level obedience program before the dog reaches one year old. All training should utilize positive techniques. A well-mannered dog is a pleasure and the owner's responsibility.

**Longevity and Health Issues ►** Sadly, every breed has its health issues, and Bernese are no different. The average life of a Berner is slightly more than seven years, although some individuals are still going strong at ten and beyond. While most Bernese breeders are working hard to improve the health and longevity of the breed, it is important for buyers to be aware of the potential problems and heartbreaks, which have both financial and emotional implications. Health issues impacting the breed include hip and elbow dysplasia, cancer, bloat, sub-aortic stenosis, autoimmune diseases, skin and coat problems, thyroid disorders and eye disorders (PRA, cataracts, ectropion and entropion). The BMDCA and its affiliate Berner-Garde aggressively support ongoing research pertaining to the Bernese Mountain Dog. Visit our website and review the wealth of health information that is provided.

**Cost ►** When determining whether a Berner fits within your budget, you must consider both the purchase price and the costs associated with maintaining the dog. While purchase prices will vary, companion (pet) puppies generally cost \$1,200 or more. Show- or breeding-potential Berners are in the range of \$2,000 and up. Ongoing maintenance costs include routine vet care, food, training, crate, toys, grooming tools and supplies and more. If a dog becomes critically ill or requires surgery, expenses for treatment and hospitalization can be substantial – many times the purchase price of the dog. Pet health insurance is available and should be considered. Additionally, home or yard improvements – such as a fence – may be required. All of these factors must be taken into consideration when evaluating the economic suitability of this breed.

**Locating A Bernese Mountain Dog ►** While not rare, Berners tend to be scarce. With their short life span, limited time to produce and soaring popularity, the current demand for Berners exceeds their supply. As has happened to other breeds, the puppy mills and brokers are now trying to exploit the Bernese Mountain Dog. **Never buy a purebred puppy from a pet store! Do your homework and be an informed buyer.**



To help protect the breed and ensure that you obtain a quality dog in terms of health, lineage and temperament, it is critical that you identify and work with a responsible breeder. Breeders and buyers alike have an obligation to ensure that a sound, healthy animal is placed in the right home. A responsible breeder will:



- help you determine whether the breed is a good choice for you;
- make sure you understand the nature of the breed and the breed's health issues;
- seek to be a lifelong support system for you in the ownership of your dog and endeavor to help you be a responsible Berner owner;
- remain interested in the health and welfare of the dogs he/she produces throughout their lives;
- before the purchase of a pup, provide you with a contract covering all purchase requirements including future requirements (showing, breeding, neutering, genetic screening, etc.);
- try to answer all of your questions – and no question is stupid.

A responsible breeder is your key to success in finding the puppy that is right for you. Breeders who sell through brokers generally do not assure that their pups go to good homes and often do not even know where the puppies wind up! As such, they cannot know how their puppies fared through life and typically do not have family histories to guide them in making better breeding decisions.

**Resources and Contacts ►** The BMDCA offers breeder referral assistance as do many of the regional BMD clubs. The **BMDCA Online Breeder Referral** program is a resource where BMDCA breeders list recently born litters and upcoming litter announcements. The **BMDCA Breed Stewards** program is a network of BMDCA members who are experienced breeders and owners and have volunteered to make themselves available to talk with you, answer your questions, and assist you in your search for a breeder and a puppy.

There are many excellent breed books that include:

- **The New Bernese Mountain Dog** (Sharon Chesnutt Smith)
- **The Beautiful Bernese Mountain Dogs** (Russ & Rogers)
- **The Bernese Mountain Dog** (Julia Crawford)
- **BMDCW Berner Baedeker** (BMD Club of Watchung, Inc.)

**In Summary ►** Deciding to buy a Bernese Mountain Dog, or any purebred dog for that matter, should never be a spur-of-the-moment decision. Be an informed, responsible buyer and owner. Please plan ahead and be VERY patient. It may take many months to obtain a Bernese puppy out of a well-planned litter by a conscientious, reputable breeder. A well-bred dog from a quality breeder is worth waiting for. Bernese Mountain Dogs are exceptionally special. Please help us to safeguard their well being so that future generations of Berners and their owners can find mutual enjoyment. This magnificent breed is counting on you. And so are we.