



BMDCA Info Series

BMDs & Considerations For Responsible Breeding

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Introduction ► If you are thinking about breeding your Berner there is much for you to consider. Anyone can breed two dogs, but a responsible breeder must first acquire the relevant knowledge and skills. Then there is the planning for the upcoming litter, realizing the arduous work and significant expenses that are ahead. The responsible breeder is not swayed by sometimes tempting but probably irrelevant “breeding rationale” such as “she’s beautifully marked,” “she has such a great personality and it should be shared,” “breeding my dog would be a great experience for my kids,” “I can make a lot of money,” and “my dog has a fan club, and all my friends want one.” Rather, responsible breeders of pure-bred dogs, in this case Bernese Mountain Dogs, have a much higher standard, which includes, among others things, fully understanding the responsibility they bear to the future of the breed, the specific dogs they breed, the pups produced, and the lives those pups lead. The purpose of this *Info Sheet* is to provide the reader with an awareness of and appreciation for what responsible breeding entails. Given the breadth and depth of this topic, we can only scratch the surface. However, if you are researching BMD breeders and/or contemplating becoming a breeder, we hope to motivate you to value and acquire education, skill sets, competency, and meaningful relationships with others knowledgeable in our breed on the variety of topics encompassing responsible breeding.

How To Determine If A BMD Might Be Suitable For Breeding

► There are a variety of documents and resources that should be gathered and studied to determine whether a Berner is suitable for breeding.

You need to confirm that the BMD is AKC-registered without limitations that would prevent the litter from being eligible for AKC registration (<http://www.akc.org/reg/certificate.cfm>). However, just because the AKC has issued papers declaring the dog to be purebred and registered is not reason enough to breed. As BMDs have increased in popularity, many are now being sold “with papers” through pet stores, newspaper advertisements, online websites, and other potentially questionable sources. Many of these Berners are originally from puppy mills in Europe and the US, which are then sold through dog auctions to brokers, animal auction services, and other puppy mills. While many of these dogs are, or can be, AKC-registered, there is nevertheless concern by many in the Berner community regarding the ancestry, quality, and health of these dogs.

You also should obtain the Berner’s **AKC Certified Pedigree**, which lists the dog’s ancestry for three or four generations. It includes a wealth of information if one knows how

to decode the data provided. To assist you in the decoding process, the AKC website provides an illustrated sample. (<http://www.akc.org/reg/AKCpedigree.cfm>)

The *Bernese Mountain Dog Official Breed Standard* (“Breed Standard”) is another resource that the responsible breeder must fully study and utilize. This sets forth the ideal or “perfect” Berner in terms of general appearance, structure, gait, and temperament, as well as disqualifications. The official written standard for each breed is maintained by the breed’s parent club (for Bernese, this is the BMDCA). A copy of the *Bernese Mountain Dog Official Breed Standard* can be found on the BMDCA (www.bmdca.org) and AKC (www.akc.org) websites. Responsible BMD breeders critically analyze their stud dogs, brood bitches, and potential breeding partners with the goals of improving upon their dogs’ weaknesses, and maintaining or further enhancing their strengths. This is done through an understanding of the Breed Standard, pedigrees, genetics, and acquired knowledge.



“Picture perfect” does not always imply good breeding practices. Responsible and ethical breeders do what is best for the dogs and the breed, now and for the future.

Health certifications/clearances are another vitally critical part of determining whether a Berner is suitable for breeding. For Bernese, there are several health-tests and -certifications that responsible breeders are sure to complete, consider in their breeding decisions, and disclose to others through public databases. While responsible breeders often complete and share the results of additional tests (e.g., thyroid and Degenerative Myelopathy screening), the current BMDCA-recommended health and certification information for Berners is: AKC DNA profile, von Willebrand’s Disease, Hip Dysplasia, Elbow Dysplasia, Eye Clearance, and Congenital Heart Disease. (For a more complete discussion of *Sources of Health Information for BMDs* please go to the BMDCA website and click on the *BMDCA Info Series* to review this *Info Sheet*.) Responsible breeders obtain official copies of all the BMDCA-recommended documentation for the BMDs they are considering as breeding candidates and carefully evaluate and validate the information contained therein. There are additional health-certifications they may consider as well. Dogs without documented health

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evaluations should not be used in a breeding program. And, if a responsible breeder contemplates using a BMD with a health-test(s) where the result may not be ideal, the breeder will study and understand the possible implications to determine whether that Berner is breeding quality at all, and if so, what characteristics must be present in a potential mate for the breeding to be a responsible undertaking and ethically consistent with the intent of improving and protecting the breed.

Temperaments are affected by genetic predisposition as well as environmental factors. In other words, character traits can be hereditary. If a dog is shy, aggressive, a fear biter, hyperactive, or uncontrollable, it is not of sound temperament. This type of dog can be a serious legal liability. Dogs of unsound temperament can produce the same in their offspring. Dams, especially, if they are neurotic or anxious, can pass along undesirable traits to their offspring. Again, the obligation of a responsible breeder is to evaluate temperaments of the sire and dam for suitability so that the Bernese "is self-confident, alert and good natured, never sharp or shy. The Bernese Mountain Dog should stand steady, though may remain aloof to the attentions of strangers." (Source: **Bernese Mountain Dog Official Breed Standard**)

A frequent question is about the age at which Berners may be bred. Ideally the suitability of BMDs for breeding purposes should be assessed after 24 months of age, when all of the health-tests can be completed, and the dogs have begun to fully mature. (The OFA elbow and hip dysplasia tests cannot be completed until the dog is two years old.) Unfortunately, some breeders are disregarding recommended breeding practices and are using younger and younger dogs, some of which do not have health clearances. This has the very real and dangerous potential of increasing the odds of producing pups with inherited genetic diseases, which can be both costly and heart-breaking. New breeders and puppy buyers must do their parts in striving for medical and quality-of-life improvements, and helping to make meaningful gains in longevity. Expediency for the sake of puppy production is just plain wrong and could negatively impact the breed for generations to come.

The Roles Of A Responsible Breeder ► It is impossible to cover here everything that a responsible breeder knows and does. The importance of education, commitment, and ethics are paramount. Very simply, and, at a minimum, responsible breeders:

- ❖ Formulate sound breeding goals for a particular litter or longer-range breeding program;
- ❖ Select the stud dog or bitch with very specific, well-constructed criteria in mind;
- ❖ Orchestrate breedings and whelp litters with knowledge, skill, financial resources, and appropriate medical assistance as required;
- ❖ Provide required postpartum care and handle medical problems as they arise;
- ❖ Provide required early puppy care including weaning, immunizations, parasite protection, and socialization;
- ❖ Prepare and execute well-constructed sales contracts and handle AKC registration paperwork;
- ❖ Evaluate and place puppies in responsible forever homes, educate new puppy owners, and prepare new owners' puppy care instructions that include the importance of

entering BMD health information into the Berner-Garde open database (www.bernergarde.org);

- ❖ Understand and fulfill life-long commitments to their puppies and buyers after placement, including taking back any BMDs they have bred for any reason at any time;
- ❖ Help other want-to-be breeders and those new to the breed.

Evaluating And Placing The Litter, And The Purpose Of Contracts ► Responsible, knowledgeable breeders are very good at evaluating their litters in terms of the Breed Standard, what they see relative to their particular breeding goals and/or bloodlines, and the puppies' particular personality traits as they are emerging. Puppy temperament testing may be part of this process. They are also good at reading prospective owners and selecting good homes. Responsible breeders will take considerable time and effort to meet with prospective owners and their families to ensure that this is the right breed for them, understand what pursuits they would like to enjoy with their Berners, be sure that the families will be responsible owners and that the placements are good for all involved, answer their questions, invite them to meet the dams and puppies, and the sires if they are there, etc. And, many times, the responsible breeder is best at selecting the specific puppy for the new family based on his or her knowledge of the individual puppies and the prospective buyers.

Part of the discussion with the prospective buyers should be a review of the sales contract. The contract should be in writing and specify such things as the sellers' and buyers' names and contact information; terms of the contract (i.e., provision for initial veterinary health check, return-of-puppy provision, requirements for AKC registration, spay/neuter agreement, expectations for puppy obedience training, etc.); timeframes for performing the terms of the contract; purchase price; the dog's identifying information, including that of its parents; what should happen to the dog if the buyer cannot take care of the dog in the future, etc.; executing signatures; and, signatures of witnesses. While the sales contract is to provide a record of the transaction between the seller and the buyer, it should provide protection for the dog being sold so that it cannot, in turn, be sold or given to others who will not take care of and/or have its best interests in mind.

Next Steps ► Becoming a Berner breeder, or simply breeding one litter, can have significant consequences for the dogs involved, puppies produced, puppy buyers, and the breed's future. Seemingly insignificant decisions could have far-reaching impact on health and longevity advancements that have taken years to achieve. Savvy people buying fine art, antique cars, or other precious possessions dedicate the required time and effort to ensure their investments are worthy. Surely your beloved family companion, and offspring you will breed and sell to others, warrant the same investment in terms of education, commitment, and ethics. Please become knowledgeable and engage a highly principled and competent BMD breeder/mentor who can guide you along the way. If you are a member of the BMDCA, please take advantage of the **BMDCA Breeder Mentor Program**, and if you are not a member, please consider joining. There is much written on the topic of successful breeding, genetics, puppy rearing, and more, so study away. *The Alpenhorn* regularly prints articles on this topic and subscriptions are available to all. (www.bmdca.org/pages/bmdca_pubs/BMDCA_Alpenhorn.pdf)