



BMDCA Info Series

The Versatile Bernese Mountain Dog

2009 #2

Introduction ► Given the breed's origins as general purpose, working farm dogs and farmers' companions, it is easy to understand why Bernese Mountain Dogs are able and willing to participate in a wide variety of canine activities. While every dog will not be suited for or interested in every sport or event, many Berner owners and their canine companions enjoy diverse and fulfilling activities. The BMDCA Versatility Award celebrates the ability and beauty of this marvelous breed. A Berner that earns a Versatility Award possesses both breed type and working ability and represents the union of form and function. BMDCA Versatility Award requirements are:

- The Berner must be an *AKC Champion* and have earned a *BMDCA Novice Draft Dog* title.
- The Berner must have earned one of the following other titles: *AKC Companion Dog*, *AKC Tracking Dog*, *AKC Novice Agility Dog*, *AKC Novice Agility Jumper*, *AKC Novice Agility Preferred*, *AKC Novice Jumper Preferred*, *American Herding Breed Association Junior Herding Dog*.
- The Berner's owner must be a BMDCA member.

Agility ► As defined by the U.S. Dog Agility Association, "dog agility is a competitive sport in which a handler directs his/her dog over a timed obstacle course. Dogs race against the clock as they jump hurdles, scale ramps, burst through tunnels, traverse a seesaw and weave through a line of poles. With scoring based on faults similar to equestrian show jumping, dog agility



has become an exciting spectator event." In addition to being just fun, agility can work wonders for shy dogs or dogs that need more confidence. A variety of organizations, including the AKC, offer agility competitions and titles.

Conformation ► Competition to become an AKC Champion is all about maintaining and improving the integrity



and qualities of the breed. This pertains to breed type, temperament and movement as related to the breed's original purpose. Each AKC-recognized breed has a published standard that can be obtained by accessing the BMDCA or AKC website (www.akc.org). According to the AKC, "a breed standard is, by definition, the description of the ideal specimen of the breed. It is the word pattern breeders are striving to create in living flesh. It is the word pattern by which dogs are judged at shows."

Drafting (also known as Carting)

► As farm dogs in Switzerland, Bernese were best known for pulling carts laden with milk products from the farms to the villages. In 1991, the BMDCA introduced a Draft Test Program to help preserve the working heritage of the breed and enable Berner owners to earn BMDCA



Draft titles. Dogs and handlers must work as teams to complete a series of maneuvers, such as might be encountered in everyday working situations. Draft tests are judged on a pass/fail basis, and there is great camaraderie, enthusiasm and support shown for every exhibitor. Training for Draft work should be approached with care and great consideration for the safety of the dog. Seek out experienced advice for both training and equipment. Watching Berners happily fulfill their working heritage at a Draft Test or in a parade is an inspiring sight. Participating with your own Berner is even better! Visit the BMDCA website for more information about the BMDCA Draft Program.

Herding ► As farm dogs, one of the duties of Bernese was to drive cattle, for which this large, calm-natured dog was well



For more information, please visit our website at www.bmdca.org.

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suited. Additionally, Berners served as watchdogs around the farm and for the herds. Given this heritage, many Berners display herding instinct, although they have a different style and instincts than other herding breeds. Bernese are not eligible for the AKC herding program, but the American Herding Breed Association recognizes them as a multipurpose breed with herding background and allows them to participate in its program.

Obedience ► Berners can be excellent obedience dogs because, after all, they are working dogs. There are three AKC obedience levels – Novice, Open and Utility. Each includes a variety of specific exercises such as heeling, retrieving and jumping. Each dog is judged against a theoretically perfect performance standard. The real joy of obedience, indeed of all working events, is spending active time every day with your Berner, training and developing a wonderful working relationship. You strive simply to earn the various titles or to be



competitive with other participating dogs of many breeds. Regardless of your goals, each dog that meets the standard sports the same title after its name. The three titles are *Companion Dog (CD)*, *Companion Dog Excellent (CDX)* and *Utility Dog (UD)*. Dogs with UD titles then may continue to show in Open and Utility and strive for the UDX and OTCH titles. In January 2009, the AKC added three new “Optional Titling” classes – *Graduate Novice (GN)*, *Graduate Open (GO)*, and *Versatility (VER)*. The AKC also began the *Obedience Master Program*, which was developed to recognize consistently high scoring dogs.

You also may enjoy AKC Rally, which is intended to provide a link between AKC's CGC (Canine Good Citizen) Program and Obedience or Agility. There are three levels of competition in AKC Rally — Novice, Advanced and Excellent. Four titles can be earned in AKC Rally competition.

Tracking ► Tracking comes naturally to all dogs, as their noses are many times more sensitive than our own. All dogs know how to follow a scent trail; we don't need to teach them that. The trick of Tracking is to teach the dogs which scent we wish them to follow. Tracking tests measure the dog's ability and persistence in following an indicated scent when directed. There are three levels of Tracking Tests and titles – *Tracking Dog (TD)*, *Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX)* and *Variable Surface Tracking (VST)*. Each presents specific challenges. Tracking tests are held throughout the US and Canada, primarily in the



spring and fall. Bernese can track, some better than others, which is true of most working dogs. If you have the urge to spend lots of time out in the fresh air with your dog, then Tracking may be the sport for you.

Other Activities ► Berners and their owners also find vast enjoyment in numerous, non-competitive activities. One of the most fulfilling is canine therapy work.

Bringing smiles or solace to those in hospitals, nursing homes and schools, not to mention the families of “September 11” victims, is one of the most rewarding activities imaginable.

To be a therapy dog, the Berner must have a suitable temperament and proper training. It also is recommended that the dog and owner obtain a **Therapy Dog**



designation. Other activities that Bernese and their families enjoy include hiking, backpacking and more. Again, not every dog will be suited for every activity. Like humans, they will have their limitations and preferences.



Summary ► One of the valued features of the Bernese Mountain Dog is its versatility. The bond that forms between dog and owner is significantly enriched as both find pleasure and success in shared activities and new endeavors. To find out more about these activities read the other **BMDCA Info Sheets** and network through the AKC, BMDCA, BMD regional clubs, local AKC all-breed clubs, national and local event clubs. Attend events and competitions as a spectator. Talk to those involved in the sport or activity. If you think you and your Berner might like to try any of these activities, contact an organization in your area that can help you get started in a responsible manner. The BMDCA website provides contact information. And, have fun! There is a whole world of activities available to you that will enrich your life and that of your dog.

Words of Caution! A prerequisite for these activities is extensive early socialization, insistence on manners and obedience training. These tools are a springboard for a mature dog's success in these endeavors. **Also, young pups SHOULD NOT be expected or allowed to perform exercises that are detrimental to growing bodies.** And, while Berners can perform adequately in many activities, this is not a breed that has the speed, agility or lightness of frame to compete with 45-pound dogs. Special care should be taken to avoid overworking and straining the Berners' large bodies and heavy bones. Be responsible in what you ask this breed to do. They have lots of heart and will seek to please – even if it may be detrimental to their safety and soundness.