



# BMDCA Info Series

## Bernese Mountain Dogs And Herding

2009 #8

**Introduction** ► Herding can be a rewarding activity for dog and handler, an activity that brings back the heritage of the Bernese Mountain Dog. The Bernese, an all purpose farm dog from the heart of chocolate- and cheese-producing rural Switzerland, historically and to this day helps in the daily chores of these alpine farms. Duties such as rotating stock among pastures, bringing dairy cows and goats in twice daily for milking, supervising grazing and guarding the farm were among the daily chores. Aiding in the delivery of livestock, milk, cream and eggs to market were among the weekly duties. The skills required for some of these duties were also in demand by drovers routinely delivering cattle to town markets and by butchers moving livestock around their stockyards. Many Bernese are still performing some of these duties today. Many others possess the ability to work with and around livestock, even if only as hobby herders.

**Benefits Often Associated With Herding** ► While this list could be quite lengthy, some of the benefits include:

- American Herding Breed Association (AHBA) herding titles are among the titles that can be applied toward a BMDCA Versatility Award, Working Dog Award and Working Dog Excellent Award. Details can be found on the BMDCA website at <http://www.bmdca.org/pages/Drafting.php>
- Herding is a wonderful way to improve confidence in dogs. It gives them a purpose, a chance for success, an opportunity to challenge their minds and a way to please their handler.
- Herding helps curb problem behaviors by reducing boredom and provides good physical exercise.
- Herding dramatically improves the handler/dog relationship by working as a team to accomplish tasks and “master” the livestock. Successfully finishing a set of chores, whether in a trial or on the farm, gives a wonderful sense of fulfillment.
- Attending all-breed herding events and watching other breeds work livestock is a unique education in the diversity of working abilities and fosters camaraderie among dog lovers and herding enthusiasts.

**Other Things To Consider When Contemplating Herding** ► Like all activities, herding may not be the right activity for everyone. Other factors to consider include:

- Herding can be an expensive activity. Beginner handlers and dogs must take lessons from experienced trainers, and even advanced dogs and handlers seek occasional assistance and access to appropriate livestock.
- As with any canine activity, a certain amount of time and dedication is required to accomplish herding goals.



**Myths About Herding** ► When learning about something new it is always important to sort out fact from fiction.

***Myth 1:** To herd, the Bernese has to be a super athlete, capable of performing like a Border Collie and running like a Greyhound.*

A dog and handler team wanting to get involved in herding should have a certain level of fitness, but ability to run full out for an hour is not a prerequisite.

***Myth 2:** Only breeds that are members of the AKC Herding Group should herd.*

Herding is a very broad term. It encompasses the Border Collie with its large sweeping “outrun” in the hills of Scotland, the Australian Cattle Dog pushing cantankerous wild cattle into a corral, the Australian Kelpie backing 200 sheep in a crowded chute, the Rottweiler shouldering cattle into the butcher’s pens, the Samoyed driving a herd of reindeer for his nomadic owners along the Yenisei River, the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier guarding his flock on the craggy shores of Ireland and the Bernese Mountain Dog assisting the farmer to take two or three cows down the mountain road to the town market.

For these reasons there are different venues and opportunities to trial and show off our chosen breed’s abilities. The AHBA has several trial types, each geared to highlight different abilities. Each of these trial types requires a different skill level to compete, from basic training to advanced. There are also noncompetitive (pass/no pass) beginner levels for novice dogs and handlers.

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

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**Getting Started** ► Short exposures to “dog broke” livestock during the growth period of a dog is a good idea but is not a necessity. Starting an older dog or a mature dog with considerable social training can sometimes be difficult because, without realizing it, we often train the instinct out of our dogs by asking them to heel, watch us, and leave it, and not allowing them to distract or make independent decisions.



Finding a suitable trainer and appropriate livestock are of utmost importance. Ducks, sheep, goats and cattle are commonly used for training, sheep generally being the most available. For safety and the best learning experience it is best if schooled sheep are used. Never work unsupervised until you and your dog have attained a reliable level of skill. Choose a trainer that has experience with upright/loose-eyed breeds such as the Bernese (other examples are the Rottweiler, Bouviers, Belgians, Australian Shepherd and Bearded Collie; Border Collies are known as an eye breed). Your trainer should be open to all-breed herding.

Basic obedience can be helpful before starting on livestock but is not necessary. Some trainers prefer to teach obedience on stock while others prefer to see a good recall and lie down prior to livestock exposure.

Not all dogs have the instinct or natural desire to herd. While basic herding can be taught, higher levels of training require a natural aptitude, the discovery and nurturing of which can be most rewarding. Dogs will have varied initial reactions to livestock:

- The over exuberant dog will need several well supervised interactions with stock before learning some control.
- The nervous dog, perhaps appearing disinterested, often stays with the handler or grazes on manure or grass. This dog may need several exposures to relax and settle into the tasks being asked of it.
- The aggressive dog will need experienced handling. Aggression can be a result of fear or of the dog not recognizing the handler as its leader. An experienced trainer should be able to recognize the source of the aggression and recommend appropriate handling.
- The disinterested dog is sometimes hard to distinguish from the nervous dog, but the disinterested dog will remain that way.
- The natural dog will step into its new role with ease.

- The majority of dogs show some hesitation before exhibiting interest and venturing to control livestock.

For the most part dogs are natural gatherers, instinctively attempting to get around stock and fetch it back to the handler. Some dogs are natural drivers, preferring to settle behind the stock with the handler and push the stock forward. Both styles are accepted and encouraged. A dog that has mastered both is advanced level trial ready as well as being a valuable asset on the farm.

**Resources** ► Books and internet sites for further learning include:

- The herdingberners Yahoo e-list, <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/herdingberners>, comprised of herding Bernese enthusiasts and participants, many of whom have experience and knowledge in the field of herding. It is also a forum for contact information, trainers and other resources.
- BMDCA Herding Committee members are also available to help with information and to help locate trainers. To locate the current BMDCA herding Committee chair, go to the BMDCA website [www.bmdca.org](http://www.bmdca.org) and look up “officers, board members and committee chairs.” This information also is in the BMDCA’s magazine, *The Alpenhorn*.
- The AHBA’s website, [www.ahba-herding.org](http://www.ahba-herding.org), lists AHBA’s different trial types, levels and course requirements. Beginners may want to pay special attention to the Herding Capability Test (HCT), a title earned by passing two (2) noncompetitive legs of an instinct-level test, and the Junior Herding Dog (JHD), a title earned by passing two (2) legs requiring a foundation of training to complete tasks as laid out in the course description.
- There are various books and videos available on all-breed herding. Some trainers may recommend certain books or videos that best reflect their methods of training.
- There are several all-breed herding Yahoo e-lists that have members able to direct beginners and those seeking trainers.
- The American Kennel Club (AKC) has a herding trial program with several course types in which selected recognized breeds can compete <http://www.akc.org/events/herding/>. It is hoped that the Bernese will soon be among the breeds able to compete in these trials.
- The Canadian Kennel Club (CKC) has an all-breed herding trial program with several course types. Bernese are eligible to compete in these events [www.ckc.ca](http://www.ckc.ca).
- The Australian Shepherd Club of America (ASCA) has a herding trial program [www.asca.org](http://www.asca.org). Bernese are not eligible to compete in ASCA trials, however ASCA members support all-breed herding and are a source of information on trainers and all-breed herding enthusiasts in your area.

