

AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'...EXCEPT WHEN I AM
A Frank Discussion of Swissy Temperament and Behavior

Most Swissy owners will admit it was the large, striking, tri-colored appearance that initially drew them to the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog. That superficial attraction, however, soon morphs into a near addiction to the endearing and enigmatic personalities of our Swissies. We find ourselves laughing off their quirky yet trademark Swissy behaviors, as they make our dogs seem almost human in a way. At times we may risk humanizing them so much, we forget the true working DOG heart within. We do so at our peril.

We must remain mindful of the Swissy's historical roots as an all-purpose farm dog. While their job as draft, drover and guard dog has been "outsourced," the temperament qualities that made them excel in that role are still hard-wired into the breed's DNA. Those hallmarks can express themselves to varying degrees. Some Swissies are more wary, others may be pushy and bold, and some may have very high prey drive for example. That's the innate *temperament* with which we start. But no matter where our Swissy falls on that continuum, it is up to us to shape learned *behavior*.

It's simply not acceptable to excuse bad or dangerous behavior by claiming a "working temperament." First of all, our dogs are no longer those working farm dogs of a century ago. But even the farmers of old required a dog that was confident, stable and safe in the public square. It is why our AKC Breed Standard states "Shyness or aggressiveness shall be severely penalized." As their humans, it is our job to socialize, train and manage our Swissies, to make them well-mannered ambassadors of our beloved breed. Don't be embarrassed to admit you're having an issue and seek help. Otherwise, a badly behaved Swissy risks the reputation of the breed and can become a personal liability for their owner. We must proactively address these situations and stop making excuses for poorly behaved dogs.

The goal of the GSMDCA Temperament Committee, formed in Summer 2018, is to support the Swissy community by addressing temperament and behavioral challenges our dogs present, especially when they are in public venues. Unfortunately our breed has experienced an increase in reported incidents at dog shows over the last two years. This does not necessarily suggest that Swissy temperaments have worsened. In fact, we probably see fewer "sharp" dogs today than twenty years ago. As temperaments may have improved, however, perhaps we are becoming a bit more lax in our management of these dogs.

We tend to hear of these issues when they occur at dog shows, as they are witnessed by other fanciers in the breed, but the challenges we face are not unique to dog shows. Thus, the tools and educational resources we share will have everyday applications. In future issues, topics we might explore include:

- Socialization Best Practices
- Dog Shows: Managing Your Dog and Keeping The Peace
- Food Aggression and Resource Guarding
- Dealing With On-Lead Aggression

- Q&A With Long Time Breeders & Fanciers

“Could my Swissy be one of those?”

You must be your dog’s advocate, to protect him in situations that can escalate quickly. Maybe your Swissy becomes reactive around small dogs, large dogs, people wearing uniforms, or excited children. Yours would certainly not be the ~~first~~ only one. The first step is acknowledging that your dog exhibits a behavioral challenge.

Once you have identified you’re dealing problematic behaviors, please seek help. And ALWAYS start with your breeder. Not only does your breeder offer a wealth of information, from similar issues they may have tackled, it is critical that breeders be made aware of temperament and behavioral challenges observed in dogs produced by their breeding program.

Then, be prepared to put in extra work. If you enlist professional help from a trainer, try to find one that employs Relationship Centered Training™. If you find yourself asking, “is it the dog, or is it me?” that’s a good start! Chances are good it’s both. The most effective training begins with understanding your dog’s innate temperament and what is driving the behaviors. What fears or insecurities the dog may have in certain situations. What can you do to make your dog feel safe and more confident? Are you sending mixed signals to your dog? Instead of humanizing your dog, now is the time to think like a dog...your dog.

Finally, practice vigilance at all times. Watch your dog’s body language carefully. If your dog seems stressed or remotely reactive, just remove yourselves from the situation. In addition to your own dog, be mindful of surroundings. *“Is that other dog staring or about to get in my dog’s face?”* Redirect and move away! *“Is that family with the children rushing up to greet my dog who gets nervous around kids?”* Kindly but firmly tell them your dog gets too excited around young children and walk away, before they’re on top of your dog. They should thank you, of course, but don’t be surprised if you’re met with an eye-roll or snide comment in response. Just brush it off. You did your job and kept everyone safe.

Remember, as stewards of the breed we love, we’re in this together. As GSMDCA members, we pledge the following when we sign the Member Guidelines:

- 1) Whether at home or away, members shall conduct themselves as good ambassadors of the Club and of the breed by displaying good sportsmanship and safe, sensible behavior.

Members shall:

- a) Be diligent in properly handling their appropriately restrained GSMD/s to minimize being a nuisance, causing risk of trauma, or placing any person or animal in danger.
- b) Protect the name and reputation of the breed

Furthermore, members promise to “Educate themselves and others by seeking the advice and assistance of others, and offer advice, support and cooperation to fellow members.”

So if you see someone struggling with their GSMD, even if they appear blissfully unaware that their dog has some issues, offer a hand. Help them get the help they need. Because when one of us fails, it hurts us all...most especially, our wonderful breed.