

Living with a Swissy

Written by Cilla Phillips

As with any breed, the key to understanding the Swissy is in considering the dog's historical function. During the Northern Invasions, the Roman soldiers brought with them large, mastiff-type dogs which were later left behind in various regions of the Alps. These dogs, in later years, evolved into the four Swiss Sennenhund breeds, of which the Grosser Schweizer Sennenhund, or Greater Swiss Mountain Dog, is the largest. For 2,000 years these dogs lived in the Alps, working side-by-side with their owners as helper and companion.

The Swissy is a utilitarian farm dog that specializes in draft work. No job on the farm is beyond his purview. He is the guardian of all who live there. He is a herder of livestock and it is his job to fetch the horse(s) when needed. Members of the GSMDCA have reported that their Swissys regularly check on crops, from tomatoes to alfalfa. I am also convinced that the Swissy considers it his job to provide the farmer with breaks from his toil by entertaining him on occasion with silly antics and to keep the farmer's face clean with regular sloppy kisses. Finally, the Swissy loves his job of pulling a cart. Once known as the "poor-man's horse," the Swissy pulled dairy and butcher's carts, and during wartime was enlisted by the military to help transport supplies and armaments over mountainous regions inaccessible by vehicle.

One of my favorite stories of the breed is about a dairyman's dog who had long pulled his cart on his regular delivery route. One morning, the farmer loaded his cart and hitched his Swissy, but feeling poorly, walked back indoors to rest for a moment and fell into a fevered sleep. His Swissy, after waiting a while, started his route without the farmer. When the farmer arose later that day, he found his Swissy waiting outside with an empty cart. He later learned that his dog had faithfully completed his route, stopping at every house and allowing his customers to help themselves to their orders.

The breed description above tells you everything you need to know about the personality of the Swissy. First of all, as the leader of his farm, a Swissy must instill confidence. He can be neither nervous or aggressive as both would prevent effective leadership. He is alert, vigilant and has a strong sense of responsibility and work ethic. He must be calm, intelligent and caring.

But what does all this tell you in the more practical sense? Being a leader among creatures and responsible for all his domain, the Swissy is a bold animal who insists on meeting the world on his own terms. He is extremely nosy and can be bossy. Rather than being a dog who will call you to come check on a curious situation, he is much more likely to want you to stay put while he makes sure everything is all right. Swissys thrive on their close relationships with all other creatures, especially their owners. This is not an animal who will be content to live in the back yard with only two meals and a pat on the head from you every day. He was born to work by your side and with other animals if possible. The Swissy is intuitive about your feelings and sensitive about his own. Any training must be carried out with positive, never negative, reinforcement. Although all dogs must be carefully monitored, you can rest assured that your Swissy, if typical, has no sense of wanderlust about him for who would watch after his charges if he strayed?

The Swissy's energy level is flexible. It might sound as if they must stay busy at all times, but remember that a lot of their time is devoted to guardian work, which entails lying about watching and listening. Likewise, the Swissy is fairly flexible in terms of the climate he can tolerate. Basically, wherever you are he wants to be, whether in snow, heat, or rain. But his owner should exercise common sense; if it is hot enough to slow you down, you should make sure your Swissy is taking it easier too. One other wonderful trait about the Swissy that bears mentioning is their wash-and-wear coat. No matter how dirty a mudhole they may find to play in, once they dry, the dirt falls off and their coat returns to its original glistening condition. Most Swissys carry no coat odor.

Of course, there are drawbacks to this breed. The first should be obvious by now. If you are a person who jealously guards your privacy and "space," the Swissy is not for you. Yes, you'll be able to quietly sit and watch TV or read the paper, but any activity that entails physical movement will involve the active participation of your Swissy, like it or not. As my friend and colleague, Sonja Pedersen, says: "Swissys are like VISA cards, they're everywhere you want to be."

The Swissy carries many of the typical large-dog health problems. We can only guess at the life-span as we have nothing but anecdotal records. We know that many Swissys are still healthy into ages of double digits, but I think that most Swissy owners would consider a life span of ten years an accomplishment. Dysplasia is, of course, an important consideration in choosing your dog. Probably the number one killer of Swissys is bloat. If you adopt a Swissy it is imperative that you familiarize yourself with this horrible condition and, like a fire drill, develop a distinct plan (in cooperation with your veterinarian) on what to do in case of its occurrence. You will not have a moment to spare. Most breeders and owners report that Swissys are unusually slow to housebreak. Suffice it to say that your puppy will need your patience and constant supervision during this period.

I hope that this introduction helps you familiarize yourself with the Swissy. Please don't hesitate to ask any questions you might still have. Feel free to talk to others in the breed and get many opinions. There is no better way to learn, except by owning one yourself.