

## Temperament of the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog: Bold, Faithful, and Vigilant

By: Jennie Chen, PhD

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a versatile breed with a grand presence and vibrant bark that turns heads. While these loyal companions make excellent pets, introducing a large strong-willed breed dog into our modern companion homes warrants some discussion. An encounter with your striking Swissy may be the only opportunity you get to make an impression.

With the breed's future and reputation in our hands, owners need to take some time to give temperament the consideration it deserves. A permissive and lenient view of temperament could prove detrimental to the breed in the long run.

Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs have already appeared on insurance non-binding lists, meaning that the breed is not covered by that specific insurance carrier liability based off of breed risk analyses. This is evidence that there have been incidents involving Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs with spotty behavioral histories, which could lead to being added to other breed specific exclusion lists. We don't want our companions to be uninvited to parties. As stewards of the breed, it is our charge to prevent future incidents through education and management of our beloved Swissies.

### What is Temperament?

In the dog world, most people refer to as temperament as the assembly of behavioral traits, preferences, drives, and hardiness that is born with the dog. It is hardwired into the dog's brain, and no amount of training will change temperament. A dog is born with the temperament it has. However, as responsible owners, we must train our dogs to manage the expression of his or her temperament.

We know that temperament is heritable, meaning that much of temperament is genetic. Behavioral genetics lets us develop breed characteristics and preserve behaviors we want - for example the herding style in border collies was selected for over many generations so that their offspring will reliably have those behavioral traits. Greater Swiss have been bred to have prey drive, some pushiness, desire to pull, affinity towards their owners, and a built-in alarm bark. By definition, they should also have strong nerves - meaning they stay confident when presented with something out of the ordinary. These are just a few genetic components to their temperament. With that said, what can you expect with a Greater Swiss Mountain Dog?

\* **A DOG THAT WILL ALERT.** In a typical temperament, you should expect a dog that is confident, alert, and often opinionated. A Greater Swiss is a curious breed, watchful of his surroundings, sounding off with a trademark Baroo to something that seems out of the ordinary. While Swissies have different thresholds for what is worth a Baroo, they will all put out an alert. Something out the ordinary could be furniture out of place, a plastic bag flapping in the wind, or people standing on the roof of a building. These are wrongs that their humans should take note of.

\* **BUT SHOULDN'T BE HYPER-REACTIVE.** There is a fine line between being alert and being reactive. Greater Swiss are sensitive to their environment, but too much sensitivity, paired with action, can show up as reactivity. Reactive dogs tend to have lower threshold for what is "barkable," and the trigger can be a variety of things such as certain objects, types of people, or other dogs. Desensitization to the trigger, plus relaxation training, can be beneficial in

preventing reactive behaviors. It is important to manage reactive dogs in public, since reactivity is often mistaken as aggression.

\* **A DEVOTED FAMILY DOG.** A Greater Swiss is highly devoted to his family, rarely straying far from his owners even off leash. Swissies can be considered velcro dogs, always wanting to keep a watch on their humans. Many will often want to be touching their owners at all times.

\* **NOT A TRADITIONAL “GUARD” DOG.** The Greater Swiss is a sentinel breed, a dog whose job is to stand and keep watch. They are accepting of strangers once properly introduced, and they may be suspicious of humans who do not fit what they think is normal, sounding off only with a loud bark. Greater Swiss are not what most would consider a guard dog. They are more of an alarmist - shouting to get your attention but ultimately only shouting with little to no further action. They watch and sound off to alert. Greater Swiss should be reluctant to bite with aggressive intentions.

\* **AN OPINIONATED DOG.** The opinionated Swissy can range in pushiness that may manifest itself in stubbornness. You ask a Swissy to sit, and he'll probably ask you why. You can ask a Swissy to perform an obedience exercise, and he'll probably come up with a short cut while doing it. When you inform a Swissy that he needs to back off when herding, he'll probably give one more chase with a smirk. In a home with consistent leadership and rules, the stubbornness is easily managed. A Greater Swiss may not be known for precision and speed, but he can be biddable once past their adolescence, giving the occasional stink eye when your leadership trumps his stubbornness. Biddable dogs learn and execute quite readily without any back talk. When it comes to a fun job, bid-ability and agreeableness seem to turn on like a light switch.

\* **A HERDING DOG (WITH PREY DRIVE).** As a droving breed, Greater Swiss have prey drive. They love the thrill of the chase, often herding each other around in play. They can also be sight sensitive, meaning they will lock onto a deer sprinting 500 yards away and give chase only to return empty handed. At home, they may herd humans and other animals. Unwanted herding should be stopped and redirected into more desirable behaviors. It should be noted that the veracity of prey drive can be rather off putting and frightening to the public. In the public's eye, a giant dog is in hot pursuit with a wild eye. Owners often know that this is merely in play, but given the laws of physics, there can be severe injury to other animals and humans due to velocity and weight. Great care and supervision must be given when Greater Swiss are in prey drive, as they will be deemed guilty if an accident occurs.

\* **A DOG WITH A WORK ETHIC.** A Greater Swiss Mountain Dog has work ethic, and they easily find activities to enjoy. From herding, packing, drafting, water rescue, and coursing, they are happy to pick up skills outside of their traditional jobs. As a jovial breed with a signature smile, some are eager to work as animal assisted therapy dogs. However, the genetic suspicion of strangers can make it difficult for some Swissies to fully enjoy therapy work. These dogs may feel overwhelmed with stimulation and mentally exhausted having to be on alert to the constant flow of strangers. Less vocal Swissies with lower suspicion of strangers, a strong general affinity for humans, low reactivity, and strong nerves have the foundation for great animal assisted therapy dogs.

\* **A DOG THAT SHOULDN'T BE SHY OR AGGRESSIVE.** The American Kennel Club standard for Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs states that aggression and shyness shall be severely penalized. Due to the historic work environment, shyness would be highly detrimental for a Greater Swiss. Life on a farm is ever changing, and a shy dog, requiring constant coaxing,

would not fare well on an unpredictable and busy farm. For more information on Swissies and aggression, see “Noise, Not Aggression.”

**\* A DOG WITH “STRONG NERVES.”** You might also hear a concept called strong nerves. In humans, we refer to it as stress hardiness. Greater Swiss are not nervous dogs. They should not be coddled nor should they require coddling. Adult dogs should be able to encounter new environments without avoidance - but rather they may startle, alarm, recover, and investigate. They should not skitter away in fright. As with all other genetic traits, there will be variation in ability to handle stress within a litter of puppies. You will find that some puppies have weaker nerves than others, but this shall not prevent them from being wonderful pets or good canine citizens. Confidence training and proper socialization are key exercises that can prevent some of the problematic behaviors associated with weaker nerves.

#### **\*NOISE NOT AGGRESSION\***

While the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is an alarm barker, it should not be an aggressive breed. In some circumstances, Greater Swiss may get caught up in intra-sexual competition and get into a squabble, particularly when females are in season. This means that sometimes the intact boys will have a dispute fueled by sex hormones. The disputes are typically no more than a shouting match and masculine displays.

Unprovoked aggression towards humans is not to be expected nor is it a part of correct temperament for a Greater Swiss Mountain Dog. The Greater Swiss should be reluctant to bite, preferring to alarm bark at a safe distance while maintaining his ground. An aggressive Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is not desirable, nor is it practical on the farm. Aggression is certainly not desirable in our homes.

#### **\*TEMPERAMENT FOR WORK\***

You might often hear the term “working dog temperament” being used to describe the Greater Swiss. In the past, that description was used to define a dog that could handle stress, paired with controlled drive and work ethic. Today, you hear it being used incorrectly to describe dogs who are edgy or show signs of aggression.

Edgy dogs and aggressive temperaments are not necessary to pull a cart or to drive the sheep. Quite the opposite, edgy dogs are too much of a liability for a farmer, and dog/animal aggressive farm dogs would pose a risk to other animals. A Swissy needs to drive the cattle, not injure them. It is time to take back the definition of working dog temperament. A dog that works can handle stress, has controlled drive, and a good work ethic is a dog that can work. A dog that is edgy and aggressive is a liability.

#### **Being a Canine Good Citizen**

There will always be variation in temperament within the breed, and careful consideration must be given to what pieces of temperament will contribute to developing a confident and friendly Greater Swiss Mountain Dog. Within each litter of Swissy puppies, you will see different levels of these genetic traits on a continuum. You may prefer a little more of this and a little more of that to suit your home. Even with the most due diligence in breeding selection and puppy placement, temperament issues can take owners by surprise.

The first course of action when unexpected behaviors occur is to consult with the breeder and reputable trainer in person. The most common training programs for dogs exhibiting behavioral

problems is to implement the “nothing in life is free (NILIF)” concept, coupled with consistent desensitization to things that trigger misbehaviors. For many dogs, the misbehaviors are simply a case of lack of leadership, along with mismanagement. Swissies need guidelines, and without guidelines, they may devise their own set of rules that may include resource guarding, excessive barking, lunging at other dogs, and jumping on people. Even dogs with lovely, stable temperaments can find themselves in hot water if not given guidelines to follow.

## **Basic Skills**

When setting behavioral guidelines, there are two key skills that I teach to each and every dog.

1. **Bite inhibition** refers to the dog’s ability to control the pressure of his mouth and what his mouth goes on even at a young age. There is a long list of ways to teach bite inhibition, and you’ll need to find one that is best for you and your dog. The consistent theme in many of the training methods is that all fun ends if dog teeth touches human skin. Even in training, should a dog tooth touch human skin, fun ends. The dog gets to sit quietly while the human puts away the treats and toys to signal that training has ended. No more fun for at least a little while.

This is a skill that should be rock solid. Greater Swiss are extremely skilled at extracting pills that have been mixed into their food or hidden in treats. With such skill, we can hold Swissies to high standards for bite inhibition. \*Note: I do teach my dogs on a separate command to allow humans to handle their mouths and another command to bring to shore unconscious water rescue victims by holding onto a protected forearm.

2. **Impulse control** is the second key skill for a well-behaved dog. The concept of impulse control is that the dog should be able to override natural impulses that might be naughty behaviors. One example of impulse control in action is having the dog sit and wait to be released prior to sticking his face in dinner. You’ll want to find a way of teaching impulse control that works for your dog and apply it to many different situations. You ultimately want to teach your dog that complying with your wishes will lead to better rewards than whatever he wants to do. We’ll discuss some situations in which impulse control will come in handy.

## **Out on the Town**

By virtue of being a striking rare breed, you and your Swissy are automatically enrolled as ambassadors of the breed. A meeting with your dog may be the only time someone encounters a Greater Swiss Mountain Dog in person, and the impression that your dog gives the public will be lasting. To ensure that your Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs remain good canine citizens, here are some points to keep in mind.

1. Keep excess barking to a minimum. Teach your dog a “quiet” command when there is no reason to bark. Once your Swissy is satisfied that you are alerted of a problem, he will typically cease barking. If he continues, the “quiet” command can be used. We might find the sound of the Swissy bark to be soothing background noise, but it can be disturbing and stressful for neighbors.
2. Curb vocalizations when out in public. Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs can be quite a talkative breed, especially towards people they are eager to greet. Grunting, yodeling, singing, mumbling, and even what sounds like yelling are part of the Swissy vocabulary. Owners must keep in mind that any of these sounds can be misinterpreted as aggression by the public. Teaching your Swissy to offer alternative behaviors when he

has something to say or preventing the vocalization trigger are two ways to help your talkative Swissy appear more approachable.

3. For a breed that has an innate desire to pull, a powerful lunge can pull a human to the ground or knock over other people. No matter the motivation behind a lunge, it will be viewed as an aggressive behavior that is difficult to erase from the public's memory. Make sure your dog is always under control. When you sense a lunge trigger, you can position yourself so that your dog cannot gain leverage to lunge by holding the collar high up on the neck, remove your dog from the situation immediately, or put your dog a sit or down position asking him to practice impulse control. This may be difficult to do in a social situation, but you must prioritize the safety of others above social pleasantries.
4. When a Greater Swiss sees a group of dogs playing chase, he can go into prey drive and have a little fun. The problem is that your Greater Swiss may be many times larger than the other dogs and pose a serious risk of injury. I am not the only one who has been rammed into or stepped on by a Greater Swiss, and it really hurts. That same type of force from a giant breed moving faster than the speed of sheep can inflict injuries on much smaller dogs and other people. The owners of the smaller dog will perceive your Swissy as being aggressive, and they will not want to play anymore. It may seem unfair to be prejudged, and it comes with the responsibility of having a giant breed. As Greater Swiss owners, we must be vigilant that our dogs do not get painted with a negative reputation due to mismanagement.

### **Challenging Temperaments**

The size of the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog makes it absolutely critical that we spend time training them to behave in the home and out in public. Even with the best intentions, there will be occasions in which the inherited temperament of a Swissy is difficult to train and manage. Luckily, not many Greater Swiss owners will be in that situation, and it is important to be understanding of those who find themselves in those shoes. Additionally, some behavioral problems could be due to other types of biological issue unrelated to genes, trauma to the brain, or some other medical issues. Even with the most consistent training, behavioral problems for those reasons will likely remain difficult to manage.

When there are signs of behaviors that are atypical of a Greater Swiss, reach out to the breeder, your vet, and a qualified professional behaviorist for help. I'm so very proud that the Greater Swiss has a wonderful group of owners and breeders who support others during difficult challenges. They can be a wonderful source of comfort and encouragement as you work with a professional behaviorist in person.

The Greater Swiss Mountain Dog is a hidden gem of a breed. They are loved for their creative antics, sassy opinions, and their steadfast loyalty. The future of the breed depends not only on our love for the dogs in our home, but also on our efforts to safeguard the breed that we cherish. It is our duty to ensure the longevity of the Greater Swiss Mountain dog and the correct temperament. With a great breed, comes great responsibility.

Jennie Chen is a holds a PhD in social psychology. During her graduate career, she studied human temperament and behavior in relation to hormones. Now she studies human behavior in the digital world.