



Jennie Chen and Mouse

Herding with your Swissy

Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs were general purpose dogs on the dairy farms in the middle lands of the Swiss Alps. They were indispensable partners on the farm, doing their share of the chores. One of these chores in the early settlements was droving work, which means they helped the farmer move livestock around the farm, to pasture and back and to the market towns. The livestock used most was the Swiss Brown cow, with occasional goats kept also.

Swissies are upright herders. They are loose-eyed, but exhibit all the skills that make an excellent stock dog. This means they move stock while standing up, unlike the typical stalking herding style of a Border Collie or Australian Kelpie.

Swissies don't have the tight "eye" of the Collie or Kelpie, who use their unwavering predators' stare for control.

Natural herding ability is a vital component of the herding dog. It is difficult to mechanically train a dog who has little instinct. The instinct has to be there, to be refined and guided by training. Learning to trust that instinct is as important as learning "away to me" or "go by."

Most herding dogs are gatherers. This means they naturally run out to the head of the flock, group it, and move it toward the handler. Some are trained drivers, who also try to keep the stock grouped but move the stock away from the handler. Swissies, sometimes mistakenly thought of as drivers, in actuality have strong gathering instinct. Wearing, or moving side to side behind the stock to keep them grouped and balanced to the handler, is also fully present in today's Swissy.

Swissies are recognized by the American Herding Breeds Association as a herding breed. The AHBA offers herding trials to test your dogs skills. They offer titles from beginning (Herding Capability Tested) to advanced. Currently, the Greater Swiss Mountain Dog Club of America recognizes the second level offered by the AHBA, the JHD, as qualifying for the Versatility title and the Working Dog title.

The JHD test uses three obstacles: two panels at the far end of each corner of the arena and one centered panel, all with 12-foot openings. The handler and dog must go around one obstacle (panel) move across to the other and then proceed through the center opening. (This can also be done in reverse order.) The dog must then be stopped, the holding pen opened and the sheep moved into the pen and the gate closed. The dog must not follow the sheep into the pen. There is a time limit of 8 minutes.



So you want to earn a JHD

The best way to begin is to work with an experienced herding trainer. The trainer will be able to provide individual attention and instruction suited to your particular dog. The stock and the facility should be suitable for beginners as well as for those who have more experience. The lessons aren't necessarily private lessons held in one block of time, but usually involve several short sessions interspersed with rest periods. While the dog is taking a break, the owner can learn by watching other dogs being trained and can visit with other participants.

It's very important to make sure the trainer is experienced with many breeds of herding dogs. The Swissy herds differently than a Border Collie as they are upright (they do not "stalk") and loose-eyed (they do not fix their eyes on the livestock.) They also work very close. Training the Swissy style of herding requires a different set of techniques.

Although individual lessons are best, clinics can be very helpful, being fairly similar to private lessons but providing a broad overview of dogs in various stages of training. Some people get their initial start by having their dog take part in an organized herding instinct test. Instinct tests focus primarily on the beginning step of the first introduction of the dog to stock, but while they should be held in the setting of a clinic, often there is not time for very much individual attention. There are both all-breed tests and tests held by breed clubs for their own breed.

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