



BMDCA Info Series

The Versatile Bernese Mountain Dog

2023 #2

Introduction ► Given the breed's origins as general purpose, working farm dogs and farmers' companions, it is easy to understand why Bernese Mountain Dogs are able and willing to participate in a wide variety of canine activities. While every dog will not be suited for or interested in every sport or event, many Berner owners and their canine companions enjoy diverse and fulfilling activities. The BMDCA Versatility Award celebrates the abilities and beauty of this marvelous breed. A Berner that earns a Versatility Award possesses both breed type and working capabilities, and represents the union of form and function. BMDCA Versatility Award requirements are:

- The Berner must be an *AKC Champion* and have earned a *BMDCA Novice Draft Dog* title.
- The Berner must have earned one of the other performance titles listed here - <https://www.bmdca.org/awards-titles>
- *The Berner's owner* must be a BMDCA member.

Agility ► As described by the AKC (<https://www.akc.org/sports/agility/getting-started/>), "Dog agility is a sport where you direct your dog through a pre-set obstacle course within a certain time limit. Courses typically have between 14-20 obstacles, which can include tunnels, weave poles, tire jumps, seesaws, and pause tables where the dog must stop for a set amount of time. At each trial you and your dog will race around the unique courses designed for that day. All of this is done with your dog relying solely on the cues and body language you use to direct them on course." In addition to being just fun, agility can work wonders for shy dogs or dogs that need more confidence.



Conformation ► Competition to become an AKC Champion is all about maintaining and improving the integrity and qualities of the breed. This pertains to breed type, temperament, and movement as related to the breed's purpose. Each AKC-recognized breed has a published standard. For Berners go to



<https://www.bmdca.org/breed-standard>. "The *AKC standard* for each *breed* originates with a 'parent club,' the *AKC*-recognized

national club devoted to a particular *breed*. Once approved by the *AKC*, a *standard* becomes both the breeder's "blueprint" and the instrument used by dog show judges to evaluate a breeder's work." (<https://www.akc.org/sports/conformation/get-started/>)

Drafting (also known as Carting) ► As farm dogs in Switzerland, Berners were best known for pulling carts laden with milk products from the farms to the villages. In 1991, the BMDCA introduced a Draft Test Program to help preserve the working heritage of the breed and enable Berner owners to earn BMDCA Draft titles. Dogs of at least two years of age and handlers must work as teams to complete a series of maneuvers such as might be encountered in everyday working situations. Draft Tests are judged on a pass/fail basis, and there is great camaraderie, enthusiasm, and support shown for every exhibitor. Training for Draft work should be approached with care and great consideration for the safety of the dog. Owners should seek experienced advice for both training and equipment. Watching Berners happily fulfill their working heritage at a Draft Test or in a parade is an inspiring sight. Participating with your own Berner is even better! For more information about the BMDCA Draft Program go to <https://www.bmdca.org/draft>.



Herding ► As farm dogs, one of the duties of the Bernese Mountain Dog was to drive livestock, for which this large, calm-natured dog was well suited. Additionally, they served as watchdogs around the farm and for the herds. Given this heritage, many Berners display herding instinct. Their style of herding is like other multi-purpose farm breeds and larger herding breeds. Berners are eligible to herd in programs offered by the AKC, American Herding Breed Association, Australian Shepherd Club of America, and the Canadian Kennel Club. (<https://www.akc.org/sports/herding/getting-started/>)



Obedience ► Berners can be excellent obedience dogs because, after all, they are working dogs. "Obedience trials demonstrate the dog's ability to follow specified routines in the obedience ring and emphasize the usefulness of the dog as a companion to humankind. The objective of obedience trials is to

For more information, please visit our website at www.bmdca.org.

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recognize dogs that have been trained to behave in the home, in public places, and in the presence of other dogs in a manner that will reflect credit on the sport of obedience at all times and under all conditions.” “Each level of obedience competition – Novice, Open, mastering a specific skill set, which increase in difficulty, before advancing to the next level.”



(<https://www.akc.org/sports/obedience/what-is-obedience/>)

Rally ► “AKC Rally® is all about teamwork. You and your dog navigate a course together, side-by-side, at your own brisk pace. You move him through a course with signs where he performs different exercises. The courses are designed by the Rally judge (10-20 signs per course, depending on the class level) that include various turns and commands such as sit, down, stay, etc. Unlimited communication from the handler to the dog is to be encouraged and not penalized. While touching isn’t allowed, you can use verbal commands, clap your hands, pat your legs and use hand signals to praise and encourage your dog.” There are three levels of competition in AKC Rally — Novice, Advanced, and Excellent. (Started <https://www.akc.org/sports/rally/get-started/>)

Scent Work ► It is a sport that mimics the task of working detection dogs to locate a scent and communicate to the handler that the scent has been found. Real-life detection dogs are trained to search for a variety of things—drugs, other contraband, explosives, human remains, currency, living humans (such as for Search and Rescue), and much more. AKC Scent Work takes this amazing working relationship and turns it into a fun game that any dog can play. The AKC provides Getting Started information on its website at <https://www.akc.org/sports/akc-scent-work/getting-started/>. Other organizations that offer scent work include the National Association of Canine Scent Work (NACSW™) and United States Canine Scent Sports.

Tracking ► Tracking comes naturally to all dogs, as their noses are many times more sensitive than our own. All dogs know how to follow a scent trail; we don’t need to teach them that. The challenge of Tracking is to teach the dogs which scent we want them to follow. Tracking Tests measure the dog’s ability and persistence in following an indicated scent when directed. There are four types of Tracking Tests and titles – *Tracking Dog* (TD), *Tracking Dog Urban* (TDU), *Tracking Dog Excellent* (TDX), and *Variable Surface Tracking* (VST). Each presents specific challenges. Tracking Tests are held throughout the US and Canada, primarily in the spring and fall. If you have the urge to spend time out in the fresh air with your dog, then Tracking may be the sport for you. (<https://www.akc.org/sports/tracking/getting-started/>)

Understanding AKC Titles & Events ► Titles earned in each of the competitive activities described are explained on AKC’s website. Title information, and their abbreviations, can be found at <https://www.akc.org/sports/titles-and-abbreviations/>. Other helpful information includes the AKC’s **Beginner’s Guide to Dog Shows** found at

<https://images.akc.org/pdf/events/conformation/GESHW1.pdf>.

Other Activities ► Berners and their owners also find vast enjoyment in numerous, non-competitive activities. One of the most fulfilling is canine therapy work. Bringing smiles or solace to those in hospitals, nursing homes, and schools, not to mention those impacted by disasters, is one of the most rewarding activities imaginable. To be a therapy dog, the Berner must have a suitable temperament and proper training. Also, most organizations require the dog and owner to obtain a **Therapy Dog** designation. Other activities that Berners and their families enjoy include hiking, backpacking, AKC Farm Dog Certification, dock diving, and more. Again, not every dog will be suited for every activity. Like humans, they will have their limitations and preferences.



Summary ► One of the valued features of the Bernese Mountain Dog is its versatility. The bond that forms between the dog and owner is significantly enriched as both find pleasure and success in shared activities and new endeavors. To find out more about these activities read the other **BMDCA Info Sheets** and network through the AKC, BMDCA, BMD regional clubs, local AKC all-breed clubs, and national and local event clubs. Attend events and competitions as a spectator. Talk to those involved in the sport or activity. If you think you and your Berner might like to try any of these activities, contact an organization in your area that can help you get started in a responsible manner. The BMDCA website provides contact information. And, have fun! There is a whole world of activities available to you that will enrich your life and that of your dog.

Words of Caution! A prerequisite for these activities is extensive early socialization, insistence on manners, and obedience training. These tools are a springboard for a mature dog’s success in these endeavors. **Also, young pups SHOULD NOT be expected or allowed to perform exercises that are detrimental to growing bodies.** And, while Berners can perform adequately in many activities, this is not a breed that has the speed, agility, or lightness of frame to compete with 45-pound dogs. Special care should be taken to avoid overworking and straining the Berners’ large bodies and heavy bones. Be responsible in what you ask this breed to do. They have lots of heart and will seek to please – even if it may be detrimental to their safety and soundness.