

Herding and the GSMD by the GSMDCA Herding Committee

Imagine raving about how your dog's instincts emerged when it was introduced to livestock and how thrilled you were to see it engaged in one of the jobs that it's ancestors were bred to do. Imagine your dog hardly able to contain its excitement when waiting to go into the field with livestock. Anyone who has ever gone herding, for work or just for fun, knows the magic that can be unleashed at a moments notice when their dog lives out its ancestral dream. There are many moments we share with our dogs that teach us what they are all about, and often these times happen in the field. There, they are free to do what comes naturally, and display the essence of their ancestral instincts and working ability.

To herd, your dog must set aside its manners and let its instincts take over. Teaching your dog when instinctual behavior is appropriate is usually the first step in introducing it to herding. Just about everything we want the dog to do in herding are behaviors that wouldn't make it a good housedog or allow it to pass the CGC test. From puppyhood on, we teach our dogs, don't run away, don't chase, don't bark, and don't nip. These are all appropriate behaviors in herding. In the dog's eyes, herding is legalized disobedience. But keep in mind, as you progress further along in herding, it's all about control and you and the dog must become a well oiled team, but at the beginning, it's more instinct than control. Some dogs have had manners drilled into them for so long they initially won't pay any attention to stock because they think they are being setup for a correction. With a little encouragement, they usually "turn on" when they realize that this instinctual behavior is acceptable under those conditions. They will easily make the transition from being a well behaved pet, to herding monster, and back again.

There are 3 categories of herding dogs: cattle, sheep, and boundary/perimeter. Cattle dogs, which the GSMD fits into, are the Appenzeller & Entlebucher, the Rottweiler, the Bouviers des Flandres, the Australian Cattle Dog, the Pembroke & Cardigan Welsh Corgis, the Catahoula, as well many others. Two examples of sheep dogs are Border Collies and Australian Shepherds. Two examples of boundary/perimeter dogs are the German Shepherds and Briards.

Cattle dogs require power, strength, assertiveness, and conditioning, combined with a no-nonsense attitude and plenty of heart. This doesn't mean that they are unable to herd other types of livestock, it just means that the sheep and boundary breeds are not as well equipped as cattle dogs for moving cattle.

Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs and owners, who would like to pursue the sport of herding and herding trials in the US and Canada, have a few options. The first option is the American Herding Breeds Association (AHBA). Owners of a wide variety of breeds founded the AHBA in 1986 in response to the increasing interest in herding activities. The AHBA was set up to help provide information in response to inquiries from those interested in herding and the herding breeds. The focus of the AHBA is on practical herding work. While recognizing that many individuals will not be in a position to use their dogs daily in practical work, the AHBA desires nonetheless that herding be taken seriously. The AHBA has an interest in all aspects of herding and the herding breeds, and the investigation of canine behaviors, which relate to herding ability. The goals of the AHBA are to promote an appreciation of the skills and value of the herding dog and to help provide information about herding breeds, herding training, herding behaviors and herding in general.