



## PAUSE FOR Paws

By Nancy Paule Melone, Ph.D.

### Celebrating Internationally – For the Sake of a Breed



One hundred years ago, a small group of dog fanciers, mostly dairy farmers from the Canton of Bern, gathered in a local restaurant in Burgdorf, Switzerland and founded the Swiss Bernese Mountain Dog Club. A century later, dog fanciers from all over the world gathered again in Burgdorf to celebrate those humble beginnings. Nearly 400 Bernese Mountain Dogs made the trip as well. German, French, Dutch, English, Finnish, Norwegian, Danish, Spanish, Russian, Polish, and Italian were among the languages spoken. For people who are not dog fanciers, it is hard to imagine spending your vacation in Switzerland at a big dog show. For serious fanciers, it is a once in a lifetime experience.

Surely, this was a celebration for the Swiss Bernese Mountain Dog Club, but it was also a celebration of many more things, including international friendships, world-wide collaboration in addressing the genetic causes of diseases affecting the breed, and the successful 100-year stewardship of the breed. The focal point of the celebration, however, was a tri-colored farm dog, bred to be the farmer's companion, to protect the farmstead from harm, drive the milk cows to and from the Alpine pastures, and to pull a milk cart to the cheesery where the milk would be made into the region's famous Emmentaler cheese. Gazing over the show grounds in Burgdorf at the hundreds of Berners parading about with their breeders, handlers, and owners, no one would have guessed that one hundred years ago the breed was on the verge of extinction.

The Bernese Mountain Dog has a special place in the hearts of the Swiss in the Emme Valley. The dogs, like the surrounding

mountains, have become a symbol of the region's beauty and sturdiness. Postcards with pictures of Bernese Mountain Dogs are displayed next to those of scenic views of Interlaken or Jungfrau. A Berner sleeping quietly under the table at a local restaurant is the norm rather than the exception. Most restaurants or hotels allow Berners as long as they are "well behaved." This reflects positively on the breed and on those who own the breed, since good behavior must be taught and reinforced.

The Swiss dog show reveals a casualness not found in U.S. dog shows. It is common for a dog to come directly from the farm to the show. Little or no grooming is done to the dog before entering the ring. The dog is shown "naturally." In contrast, judging is more formal than in the States. Each of the 400 dogs exhibited at this show received a written report and a grade of how closely the dog resembled an ideal Bernese Mountain Dog. In the States, judges generally do not provide written reports or grades. For those from North America, this was an invaluable educational experience.

A delightful event for spectators is "the breeder class" (see photo of the winner of this class for both days). In this class, a breeder shows the degree of consistency he or she has achieved in his or her overall breeding program by showing four related dogs from that program. Normally, the four dogs are shown with four handlers, but in the case of the winning team, the Swiss breeder showed all four dogs by herself. If you have ever tried to walk two dogs on a leash in one direction at the same time, you can appreciate the expertise that this woman revealed to the crowd as she moved all of her dogs effortlessly around the ring in perfect synchrony. It was a fitting symbol of the international community coming together in friendship and perfect harmony—just for the sake of a dog. ◀

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