The Breed History

The St. Bernard dogs are thought to have originated from crosses of Asian Molosser dogs (Canis molossus) that were introduced to Switzerland by the Romans. Local dogs, Augustine Monk's breed these dogs primarily in the main pass between Switzerland and Italy; later named the Great St. Bernard Pass. Documentation of their use as rescue dogs in the Alps dates to the late 1600s. In 1830, outcrossing to Newfoundland dogs was done to increase breed vigor because of extensive inbreeding. This resulted in the first of the longhaired subtype of the breed which turned out not to be desirable as the long hair trapped snow and ice. The breed was formally named in 1880. The original breed standard was developed in 1884 but some differences persisted in type between Swiss and English dogs. AKC recognition occurred in 1888. The English wrote a separate standard in 1887. The St. Bernard Club of America follows the original Swiss standard.

Breeding for Function

St. Bernard's were primarily used for draft, clearing trails in snow, and for herding. In the Swiss Alps, they became invaluable to the Monks, particularly at the Hospice St. Bernard de Menthon in the St. Bernard pass. Their life-saving role helped travelers safely traverse the treacherous mountain passes, and they provided search and rescue. They used their excellent tracking skills to find those lost in avalanches for example. No records were kept on how many lives were saved, but estimates run in the thousands.

Physical Characteristics

Height at Withers: Ideal height for female 25.7" (66 cm), male 27.5" (70 cm).

Weight: 110-220 lb (50-91 kg).

Coat: The coat is very dense, and the hairs lie smoothly down; hairs are strong but not coarse, short, and the tail hair is longer near the body than at the tip. Colors include red with white markings, white with red markings, and brindle with white. Red may be a brown-yellow without fault. There is a specified pattern of white with red markings, and brindle with white. Red may be lighter than at the tip. Colors include red with white markings, and brindle with white. Red may be the body than at the tip. Colors include red with white markings, and brindle with white. Red may be lighter than at the tip.

Points of Conformation:

- Longevity: 8-9 years
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- Points of Conformation: A powerful figure, this breed is noted for the imposing stature and massive head with an intelligent expression. The wide skull is characterized by strong cheek bones, marked stop, and a furrow runs over the midline of the skull, including the muzzle, wrinkles are present over the forehead, and the muzzle is square, with well-developed cheeks on both upper and lower lips. Usually the palate is pigmented black. The nose and lips are also black. Ears are high set and triangular in shape, floppy, with a broad base. The front margin of the pinna sits against the head. Eyes are dark brown, medium-sized and moderately deep set. The lower lids normally form a triangle and rest in an inverted position. The neck is strong, of medium length and the dewlap is well developed. The forelegs are large, and the forefeet are broad with toes well spread. The topline is level, though it gently curves down to the tail in the croup. The tail is long and long, straight to slightly curved. Limbs are straight, heavily boned and muscled. Dewclaws are undesirable and may be removed. Feet are large and broad, with good knuckling up of the toes.

Recognized Behavior Issues and Traits

- Inherited diseases include: Distichiasis, a condition where the eyelashes irritate the cornea and conjunctiva. It can cause secondary corneal ulceration. Reported in 1.6% of St. Bernards CBER examined by veterinary ophthalmologists between 2000-2005.

Dilated Cardiomyopathy: Saint Bernards are a predisposed breed for this condition, resulting in heart failure. Prevalence of 2.8%. Average age of clinical signs is 5.3 years. Unknown mode of inheritance.

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Corneal Dysplasia: Some Bernards can have an epithelial stromal form of corneal dystrophy. Reported in 1.67% of Saint Bernards CBER examined by veterinary ophthalmologists between 2000-2005.

Idiopathic Epilepsy (inherited seizures): Seizures can be partial or generalized. Control with anti-epilepsy medication. Seizures are reported in 2.6% of all dogs. Most dogs responded to synthetic vitamin D and oral calcium. Unknown etiology.

Multiple Ocular Defects: Rare disorder seen in Saint Bernard puppies. Characterized by microphthalmia, aphakia, and absence of the retinal pigment epithelium. Can cause secondary cataracts. Saint Bernards are predisposed to develop malignant osteosarcoma, usually in the right medial lobe of the liver. In a study of 25 dogs, all dogs responded to synthemic vitamin D and oral calcium. Unknown etiology.

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