

The German Shepherd Dog

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Q. Could you send me as much information as possible about German Shepherds?

A. Beloved and admired all over the world as a symbol of courage, loyalty and devotion to service, the German Shepherd Dog (GSD) is as versatile as he is handsome. A guide dog for the blind, assistance dog for the physically impaired, police dog adept at tracking and apprehending criminals, search-and-rescue dog that finds lost children, military hero in wartime or your family's best friend, this breed has everything going for it, the perfect combination of brains and beauty that stands ready to be your partner, companion, protector or playmate. For the past 60 years, it has been in the top ten of American Kennel Club registrations, ranking third in 2008.

As dog breeds go, the German Shepherd is comparatively young, emerging in 1899 mainly due to the efforts of German Cavalry Captain Max von Stephanitz who developed the original breed standard, the ideal that describes how the perfect example of a particular breed should look, move and behave. Recognized by the AKC in 1908, it soared to popularity in the 1920s when Strongheart and Rin Tin Tin became stars of the silver screen.

With all it has going for it, this is by no means the dog for everyone. Because of its strength and physical prowess, an untrained GSD can be unruly, frightening and dangerous. Standing twenty-two to twenty-six inches tall at the shoulders and weighing between 75 and 95 pounds, it can be physically intimidating. Anyone who wants to own one should be committed to obedience training from early puppyhood. Not only will it make your pet manageable and build the bond you share, it will make for a much happier dog. Excelling in agility, tracking, herding and Schutzhund training—a sort of canine triathlon highlighting protection, tracking and obedience work—this is a dog that loves to have a job to harness its athletic ability and work ethic.

Prospective GSD owners also need to be committed to grooming, mainly coat upkeep. Although its coat is of medium length, this dog has an extremely dense undercoat that sheds year-round, requiring frequent brushing to keep the fuzz off your furniture, floor and family. The topcoat is harsh and shiny, either straight or slightly wavy, forming a protective shield while the woolly undercoat renders it virtually weatherproof and waterproof. That protective fuzz is “blown” twice a year, usually in the spring and fall, completely shed and then replaced.

Although black and tan is the most prevalent color combination, the breed varies in hue with most colors permissible, according the AKC. Although they are equally beautiful and noble in appearance, long-coated “throwbacks” and white German Shepherds are barred from the show ring.

Brushing your GSD once or twice weekly will not only cut down on shedding, it will maximize the health and beauty of its skin and coat as you distribute its natural oils throughout. Brushing also helps keep this dog clean so it does not require frequent bathing. A curved- bristled wire slicker brush works well at penetrating the dense coat, one section at a time all the way to the skin. Be careful not to use too heavy a hand with those wire bristles, causing an abrasion known as “slicker burn.” Other useful tools to keep that fur from flying are the shedding blade, a flexible round saw-toothed metal device with leather, wooden or plastic handles, or the newer de-shedding tools such as the Furminator that are extremely effective on dogs with thick undercoats. Don't forget to brush that bushy tail as well. When the dog is relaxed, it hangs like a saber but once he's excited or in motion, it's carried proudly like a banner.

If you bathe your Shepherd, brush the coat out first to prevent built-up shed hair from forming packed pockets in the coat. Use a mild shampoo and make sure to suds your pet all the way to the skin and rinse thoroughly so he will feel and smell clean. You may wash his face with a damp towel. Finish up with a conditioning rinse to keep static at bay and make that gorgeous coat lustrous and manageable.

Because this breed requires little in the way of trimming—in the salon we clean out the paw pads with our clippers and sometimes edge the ears with thinning shears—you can do the job at home if you get yourself a grooming table and learn to trim the nails and clean the ears yourself.

Known for its dignity and stature, the GSD does not give affection lightly and can be suspicious of strangers, but once you earn his friendship and loyalty, it will be yours for life.