

## Saint Bernards

**Discover the highs and lows of living with a Saint.**

*By Diane Morgan*

When you think Saint Bernard, think, “Avalanche!” Not an avalanche of snow, but an avalanche of dog—a 200-pound avalanche of fur, flesh and bone that will bury you in equal parts devotion and drool. Are you up for it?

Despite their continuing popularity as movie stars, real-life Saint Bernards are neither Beethovens nor Cujos, but sensitive, intelligent giants that need a special kind of owner. Of course, it can be said of every breed, “This breed is not for everyone.” But, because Saint Bernards are four times the size of the average dog, I’d say this statement is four times truer than usual. The great Saint also requires four times the experience, patience and determination of the average dog owner. And think four times before getting one. If you choose wisely, though, you’re hooked.

It’s easy to fall in love with a Saint. The noble expression, imposing size and steady demeanor of a well-behaved Saint Bernard is in itself an advertisement for this ancient, powerful and faithful dog. However, this ad can be misleading, for even the best-bred Saint is not an “easy dog.” Krys Pritchard, whose Trinity of Hope Rescue in Ottawa, Canada, rescues Saints, notes, “It’s not the drool, the hair or the size that makes the Saint Bernard a challenging breed for the average pet owner. It’s the function for which the breed was developed: to herd [and guard] livestock. The fact that 3,000 Saints are registered with the American Kennel Club [AKC] in the United States each year and that more than 1,000 are taken in by rescue groups [each year] is heartbreaking.”

Every element that makes the Saint a wonderful dog also makes it a challenge. Cooking up a great relationship between you and your Saint is a daring enterprise, and miscalculating the ingredients can be a recipe for disaster.

### Begin with the Saint's Heritage

The first Saint Bernards hailed from the Hospice of the Grand Saint Bernard de Menthon, a Swiss monastery located atop the Great Saint Bernard Pass. Switzerland is famous for mountains, snow, cows and tourists, and Swiss dogs have to be able to deal with them all. Mountain work takes strength, snow rescue requires perseverance, cow-herding takes brains and handling tourists demands patience. The Saint Bernard has each of these qualities in abundance.

**Mountain savvy:** The Saint’s job was not only to play meet-and-greet to the innumerable tourists and pilgrims who insisted on climbing the Alps, but also to rescue them when they (inevitably) got lost in the snow. It was said a Saint Bernard could smell a person 2 miles away in a driving blizzard, and detect and rescue someone buried under 9 feet of snow. In the 1800s, one famous Saint, Barry, was credited with saving more than 40 people. (See “Of Sainly Origins” on page 4.)

**Rescue instinct:** Breeder and rescuer Denise Greenaway of West St. Paul, Manitoba, Canada (Trusts kennel), adds, “Although they’re no longer needed for finding people lost in snow, generations of service have left the rescuing instinct in their characters.”

Indeed, when blizzards aren’t available, surf will suffice. When a California surfer wiped out on the beach, he had the good sense to do so in plain sight of several Saint Bernards, cavorting on the sand. “Instantly, all of the Saints went into rescue mode,” says Todd Williams of Santa Monica, California.

“Their ears perked up, they stopped what they were doing, and they seemed upset,” Williams says. “They knew that they were supposed to do something, but at first seemed unsure of exactly what. They quickly figured it out, however, and waded out to the surfer, who by that time had managed to struggle to safety anyway. One or two Saints tried to pull the surfer onto the shore by the arm; others just went along with the group. Mine? He rescued the surfboard.”

Although Saints are intelligent dogs, they are fairly slow to react and prefer to ponder their responses. This does not mean that Saints are “slow-thinking,” as some would say. It means they are considering all their options. This may take some time. Shirley Mueller of Butler, Pennsylvania, says, “Occasionally, our rescue dog, Whiskey, would get out of the

yard. He'd put his nose to the ground and walk slowly in a straight line until he bumped into something and had to make a left or right decision. He'd stop, think for a second, and make the turn. Then he would continue slowly until he hit something else. He was an easy dog to track since he didn't make much progress."

**Livestock guarding ability:** As all-purpose dogs, Saint Bernards made themselves as useful in the summer tending and guarding livestock as they were in the winter rescuing humans. This same herding and guarding behavior occurs today, although many people confuse it with aggression.

Pritchard explains: "Livestock dogs protect the herd by confusing predators. They disrupt the hunt sequence of the predator (or perceived predator) by specialized behavior, such as barking, wagging their tails, bowing, bobbing, blocking and lunge-barking. It is rare that a livestock dog will resort to actual aggression. Even today, a dog with herding instinct, when feeling itself or its family threatened, may offer these same behaviors to attempt to ward off the 'predator.' People mistake it for true aggression, and it's often the reason people give away their dogs."

Still, old habits die hard, and the Saint Bernard retains an affinity for livestock. Dawn Camp of Welcome, Maryland, says, "I owned a commercial goat dairy and my male Saint Bernard and our herdsman's Great Dane had the run of the farm. One time, one of our does was giving birth in a small barn. She had given birth to two kids (the usual number), but I knew there was another one coming," Camp says.

"Because the barn had a dirt floor, I took the two babies already born and put them on the grass nearby and went back to help 'mom' deliver the third," Camp continues. "When I brought her outside with the last kid, the two dogs had the first two cleaned off, dry and on their feet. What an identity crisis for the baby goats!"