by Tom Griffith

The Wild Warriors

The ultimate hack-n-slashers: berserker NPCs

The berserker was a prominent figure in Scandinavian culture in the Middle Ages. In DRAGON® issue #3, a short article was written to place this figure into the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game as an NPC. That article, while containing many worthwhile ideas, approached the berserker from the idea that the name came from the idea of "bear sarking," a state of madness induced from wearing shirts made of bear fur. (This state was similar to lycanthropy.) This article attempts to include these fascinating people in AD&D® games as NPCs from a more historical perspective. Their use as player characters is limited because berserkers would not adapt well to cooperative adventuring, and their chances of survival may be low despite their extraordinary combat skills.

The Norse berserker

The berserker was a fascinating figure in Norse history up through medieval times. The name "berserker" was derived from a hero in Scandinavian mythology. Berserker, the grandson of the great eight-handed Starkadder and the beautiful Alfhilde, was known for his fierce battle madness and his habit of charging into battle with no armor but a shield. It was this habit of fighting in his bare sark, or tunic, that earned him the name Berserker (Baresarker). He had 12 sons by the daughter of King Swafurlam (whom he had slain in battle); all of his offspring inherited his temperament as well as the name Berserker. From these warriors came the wild, Odin-worshiping berserkers of history and legend.

In appearance and attitude, the berserkers were a menacing group of people. Typically, they were huge and strong but quite ugly. Considering cleanliness unmanly, they were proud of their unwashed and unkempt state. Surly and bullying, they were thought by many to be victims of mental imbalance. Their tendency to assault and murder at will kept most people terrified of these "beast-men." Even the bravest warrior would give way, if his pride and status would allow it.

Many Norwegian kings were fond of having a few berserkers among their followers as bodyguards and shock troops, and at times the kings gave berserkers to one another as gifts. As is frequently mentioned in Icelandic sagas, berserkers decided the outcome of many a battle.

The characteristic that set these people apart from the other warriors of their time was their famous berserker fury, the *berserkergang.* This state was induced by the berserker when he worked himself into a terrible frenzy by biting the rim of his shield (much as a dog worries a stick or rag), stomping his feet, and growling like a bear. A medieval chess piece found in the Hebrides (a common site of Viking raids) depicts such a warrior biting the edge of his shield. Once in this self-induced state, the berserker's eyes seemed to blaze with unnatural light, his body trembled, and his mouth worked up a terrible frothing. His face became swollen and purple. Once the berserkergang was upon him, he would rush forward, howling and making other animal noises.

While under the berserkergang, the berserker was reputed to gain superhuman strength and immunity to fire and pain, ignoring all but the deadliest wounds. The mere appearance of a berserker in this state would often drive his enemies away in terror. Personal safety was all but forgotten in the rage to kill; the berserkers would not stop until all enemies were dead or driven away. The orders of their leaders were either unheard or ignored. In this battle-madness, friends were sometimes forgotten or even mistaken as enemies. The price paid after the battle was that the berserker would be exhausted and helpless until well rested.

Berserkers as NPCs

In AD&D game terms, the berserker is a subclass of fighter based on the Viking berserkers of the Middle Ages. This subclass, which is related to the barbarian subclass and is unable to wear heavy armor or cast spells, has special abilities that compensate for its restrictions. The berserker is adept at direct combat to the extent of suffering in defensive and planning capabilities, and shares few of the barbarian's talents for survival. It is not unusual to find berserkers living among barbarian communities or (more rarely) among humanoid tribes, and they are occasionally seen in large groups, roving the countryside in search of battle. They are very rarely encountered elsewhere.

The berserker must have strength and constitution scores of no less than 15 each. His wisdom, charisma, and comeliness scores cannot be greater than 9. Berserkers receive no bonuses on earned experience, as they have no principal attributes. They cannot have more than one class. Table 1 has information on level progression for berserkers.

Humans and half-orcs are the only races which may become berserkers, and they are limited in level advancement only as per the fighter class in this respect. All berserkers must be of chaotic alignment, whether good, neutral, or evil. Like barbarians, berserkers speak only their tribal tongues and the common language of the area in which they live. Berserkers refuse to learn other languages, and disdain the arts of reading and writing.

Like barbarians, berserkers use 12-sided hit dice, have a base movement rate of 15", and use the combat and saving-throw tables of fighters. They have the same ability to attack creatures struck only by magical weapons, much as barbarians are able to do. From 1st to 5th level, berserkers attack once per round; from 6th to 10th level, they attack three times every two rounds; at 11th level and above, they attack twice per round. Berserkers have the same saving-throw bonuses that barbarians have (i.e., + 4 vs. poison; +3 vs. paralyzation, death magic, petrification, and polymorph; +2 vs. wands, rods, staves, and breath weapons; and, +1 per four levels attained vs. spells). They are additionally immune to magical *fear,* such as cause *fear, scare, fear,* etc.

Berserkers refuse to wear any armor other than nonbulky furs or leather, and they use the normal defensive adjustments for high dexterity as opposed to the adjustments used by barbarians. Shield use is permitted. Berserkers absolutely hate magic other than that practiced and used by the clerics of their tribe, and they refuse to utilize magical items of any sort — particularly magical armor, shields, weapons, and protective devices. Berserkers have no use for rings, bracers, and similar "fine" decorations, and they avoid using well-kept weapons, selecting ones which appear to be "obviously" nonmagi-

Illustrations by Roger Raupp

Table 1
Berserkers Table

Experience level	Experience points	Level title	12-sided dice for accum. hit points	Armor class
1	0-3,000	Shieldbearer	1	10
2	3,001-6,000	Madman	2	9
3	6,001-12,000	Shieldbiter	3	8
4	12,001-24,000	Howler	4	7
5	24,001-48,000	Feyman	5	6
6	48,001-96,000	Rager	6	5
7	96,001-200,000	Hewer	7	4
8	200,001-400,000	Battlelord	8	3
9	400,001-800,000	Berserker	8+4	2
10	800,001-1,600,000	Berserker, 10th level	8+8	1
11	1,600,000-2,000,000	Berserker, 11th level	8+12	0
12	2,000,001-2,400,000	Berserker, 12th level	8+16	-1

400,000 experience points per level are required for each additional level above 12th. Berserkers gain 4 hp per level after 12th.

Table 2
Berserkergang Bonuses and Penalties

Condition	Bonus/penalty
For gnawing on shield or weapon	+20%
For being cornered	+20%
For each melee round after the first	+10%
For each friend or follower killed	+10%
If the berserker is alone	+10%
For each level of experience	+1%
For each hit point lost	+1%
For each previous berserk that day	-10%

cal. For protection in battle, berserkers depend on their gods and their personal prowess, and this strength of will affects their armor class.

A 1st-level berserker has a natural armor class of 10, but his armor class drops one point for each level gained thereafter. This armor class may be lowered by using a shield and by dexterity bonuses. Leather armor becomes useless at 3rd level and after, when the berserker gains AC 8 or better.

The arms usable by a berserker are: battle axe (two-handed), hand axe, club, dagger, hammer, knife, mace, morning star, scimitar, spear, spiked buckler, bastard sword, broad sword, falchion, khopesh, long sword, short sword, and two-handed sword. The battle axe and two-handed sword are used without a shield because they require two hands. A berserker will never use any sort of missile or thrown weapon, these being too cowardly to consider; they never use poison or flaming oil for the same reason. Berserkers initially learn six weapons of proficiency, have a -1 nonproficiency penalty, and may learn a new weapon at every odd-numbered level (3rd, 5th, etc.). They are unable to gain specialization with any weapon, as this requires a level of skill and finesse that berserkers cannot grasp. Berserkers, unlike barbarians, have no required weapons.

Berserkers have some of the abilities of barbarians, as outlined in *Unearthed Arcana,* pages 19-21. They are able to use the following primary skills: *climb cliffs and trees, back protection, leaping and springing,* and *detect magic* (the latter ability sometimes being sufficient to trigger the berserkergang in tense situations). No other primary skills are used, and berserkers have none of the barbarian's secondary or tertiary skills, as they care only for battle. Berserkers are often supported by their tribe to keep them in shape (and pacify them) when no battles are being fought. Though they cannot summon hordes as barbarians can, they gladly respond to such a summons.

Special abilities

As the berserker rises in levels, he gains special abilities. These are:

1. At 1st level, the berserker can go berserk (as described herein). He also has a +2 bonus to save against fire-based attacks of any sort (in addition to any

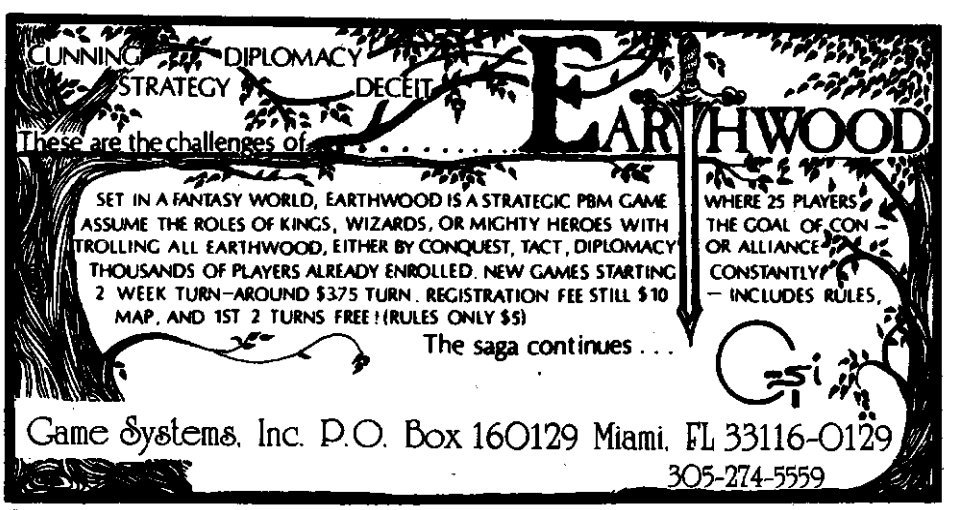

Table 3
Berserker Followers Table

Dice score	Result
01-60	See Table 4
61-80	See Table 5
81-90	See Table 6
91-95	See Table 7
96-00	See Table 8

other bonuses) and takes one-half damage from normal fires.

Additionally, the berserker has a 5% chance per level to *detect hidden and invisible beings* within a 30′ radius around him. Berserkers usually attack such beings at once. Nonliving objects which are hidden or invisible cannot be so detected.

2. At 3rd level, the berserker's chance of being surprised is reduced to 1 on 1d6.

3. At 4th level, berserkers can attack creatures struck only by +1 or better magical weapons.

4. At 5th level, the berserker is able to continue fighting while berserk (as described in the following section) until he reaches -10 hp, at which point he dies immediately. If his berserk state ends while he is at negative hit points, he collapses and loses 1 hp per round until he dies at -10 hp, unless he is given aid.

5. At 6th level, berserkers can attack creatures struck only by +2 or better magical weapons.

6. At 7th level, the berserker becomes immune to nonmagical fire. His saving throw against magical fire-based attacks gains a +4 bonus.

7. At 8th level, berserkers can attack creatures struck only by +3 or better magical weapons.

8. At 9th level, the berserker gains 2-12 special henchmen, as determined by the DM from the table in this article. A berserker can never employ hirelings, as no one will follow such a person willingly, even for large sums of money. Berserkers, however, are often hired as mercenaries or bodyguards.

9. At 10th level, berserkers can attack creatures struck only by +4 or better magical weapons.

10. At 12th level, berserkers can attack creatures struck only by +5 or better magical weapons.

The berserkergang

Going berserk is not an automatic ability for berserkers. A base 10% chance (modified as per Table 2) exists that a berserker NPC goes berserk when the DM deems the conditions are suitable for the arousal of battle-lust. Typical causes for this are: a direct threat to the personal safety of the berserker or his henchman, patron, or companion; a feeling of extreme helplessness; or a sensation of being strongly ridiculed. Additionally, any magical situation or effect meant to produce *fear* automatically calls for a die roll to see if the berserker enters the berserkergang. It takes only one melee round to go berserk, during which time the berserker calls upon his inner rage, bites on his shield, and so on. If a berserker lacks a shield, he may bite other objects, such as his weapons. If the berserkergang is not summoned, the berserker fights as a normal fighter. A surprised berserker has no time to summon his battle fury, though he may willingly step back (risking a free attack from opponents for that round) and attempt to call upon the berserkergang.

Though a berserker is not obligated to call upon the berserkergang in every fight in which he is involved, he will have a strong tendency to do so. Numerous

Table 5
Berserker's Demi-human Henchmen

Dice score	Character class and race	Level range	Number
01-15	Dwarven fighter/thief	1-4	2
16-31	Dwarven fighter	1-4	2
32-37	Dwarven fighter/cleric	1	1
38-42	Gnome fighter/thief	1	1
43-47	Half-elven bard*	1-3	1
48-52	Half-elven fighter/cleric	1	1
53-58	Half-elven fighter/thief	1	1
59-63	Half-elven fighter	1	1
64-79	Half-orc berserker	1-4	2
80-84	Half-orc fighter/cleric	1	1
85-95	Half-orc fighter	1-4	2
96-00	Half-orc fighter/thief	1	1

* If bards are not used in a campaign, then a cleric or shaman is received.

Table 4
Berserker's Human Henchmen

Dice score	Character class	Level range
01-05	Bard*	1-3
06-30	Barbarian	1-3
31-55	Berserker	2-5
56-69	Cleric/shaman**	1-4
70-00	Fighter	1-6

* If bards are not used in a campaign, then a cleric or shaman is received.
* * Humanoid shamans are received only if the berserker is a half-orc.

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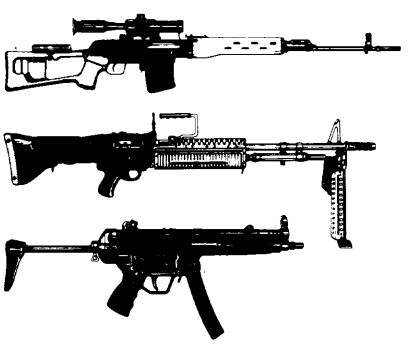

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Table 6
Berserker Mounts

Dice score	Mount	Number
01-35	Centaur	1-3
36-71	Hippogriff	1
72-87	Griffon	1
88-00	Pegasus/wyvern/ dragonnel*	1

* Applies to WORLD OF GREYHAWK® fantasy setting only; also depends on the berserker's alignment

Table 7
Berserker's Minor Creature Allies

	Berserker's alignment		
Dice score	Chaotic good	Chaotic neutral	Chaotic evil
01-50	War dog	Wolf	Huge ravens (2)
51-75	Black bear	Gorilla bear	Worg
76-80	Giant owl	Giant otter	Ogre
81-90	Pseudo-dragon	Al-mi'raj	Galltrit
91-00	Faerie dragon	Firedrake	Ice lizard

Table 8
Berserker's Major Creature Allies

	Berserker's alignment		
Dice score	Chaotic good	Chaotic neutral	Chaotic evil
01-05	Brass dragon*	Shen lung*	White dragon*
06-10	Storm giant	Mountain giant	Ettin
11-30	Werebear	Wereboar	Werewolf
31-75	Moon dog	Verbeeg	Hill giant
76-00	Weretiger	Korred	Giant troll

* Roll 1d4 +1 to determine the age category of the dragon. It will, of course, possess no treasure.

advantages and disadvantages come with the berserkergang. The advantages include:

1. The berserker gains a +2 "to hit" bonus on all hand-to-hand combat attacks.
2. The berserker is immune to psionic attacks and to all forms of *charm, fear,* and similar will-force attacks. These magical attack forms are listed in the wisdom table on page 7 of *Legends & Lore.*
3. The berserker gains a +2 bonus to initiative rolls.
4. Subtract 1 hp from all damage a berserker takes from each single attack made against him. This represents the berserker's ability to ignore his wounds and continue fighting.
5. Due to the horrible aspect of this ability and the berserker's appearance while berserk, all opponents of zero level and those having less than one hit die must immediately check morale when viewing an enraged berserker, or else flee.
6. The berserker feels no pain or exhaustion while berserk, becoming immune to spells such as *symbol of pain.*

The berserkergang includes these disadvantages as well:

1. The berserker cannot withdraw from melee or parry blows while berserk, and he remains berserk for as many rounds as he has constitution points — even if the opponents are slain, at which point the berserker attacks the nearest living being on a 10% chance. Otherwise, he continues to attack fallen enemies until the rage passes.
2. The berserker is immediately exhausted (as per rules in the *Dungeoneers Survival Guide,* pages 21-22) after going berserk, and cannot go berserk again until completely recovered. He thus suffers a -4 penalty to all attributes, saving throws, and combat abilities ("to hit" and damage rolls); his movement is reduced to 11", slightly slower than a normal walking man. Recovery can only be made after an hour of complete rest and a successful constitution check; this reduces the penalty to -2 until another two hours of complete rest and another constitution check bring the berserker to full power. Constitution checks are made using the modified constitution scores for the NPC.
3. Because of the noise they make and their mental condition during the berserkergang, berserkers cannot hear any orders, suggestions, or warnings from their companions while in this state.

Berserker henchmen

Use Tables 3-8, along with the ranger followers tables (see the *Dungeon Masters Guide,* pages 16-17) to determine a berserker's special henchmen. Use Table 3 to substitute for the ranger followers table at the top of the first column of page 17 of the *DMG.* Roll only once on Tables 6-8.

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